
Historical Adventure
GOLDEN FLEECE
APRIL
Swords and Mongols
by Murray Leinster
• ALL STORIES COMPLETE •
THE QUEEN'S MERCY by Victor Rousseau
20¢

"Yea? Thou knowest of Damara? Then tell, lest this blade of mine slip down and spoil a slave for the Mongols."

Drawn by Harold W. McCauley for *"Swords and Mongols."*

GOLDEN FLEECE

HISTORICAL ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

APRIL 1939 Vol. 2 No. 4

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Drawn for "The Queen's Mercy" by M. Brundage.

These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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The sight of the foremost lady . . . brought me instantly to my knee. For she was Queen Mary of England.

by VICTOR ROUSSEAU

***Illustrated by* M. BRUNDAGE**

CHAPTER I
The Queen's Mission

WHEN I cut the long notch against the shorter ones in the woodwork of the wainscot of my cell chamber, I realized with amazement that I had been just six months a prisoner in the grim Tower of London. But for my daily tally, I had lost all count of time, so hopeless seemed my prospects of enlargement.

Somewhere within those massive walls lay the nine-days queen, Lady Jane Grey, and her youthful husband. Elsewhere, according to report, the Lady Elizabeth, Queen Mary's sister, whom she had hated bitterly all her life.

And, in her palace at Whitehall, Queen Mary reigned, with her bloodhounds, Bishop Gardiner of Winchester, and Bishop Bonner of London, already loathed and execrated for her cruelties against those of the Reformed Faith.

The block was busy in those days. I could see the crowds gathering about it on Tower Green from the slit in my stone walls almost daily. That Lady Jane Grey would go to it, and the Princess Elizabeth, too, seemed a foregone conclusion.

Six months I had lain in the Tower. That I had not been brought to trial, I attributed to the fact that there was no evidence of treason against me, for I had sided neither with Queen Jane nor with Queen Mary. But once, in the reign of the late Edward Sixth, my late father, moved by curiosity, had attended a meeting of the Reformers, and listened to a sermon by Master Miles Fenwick, who denied the transubstantiation

of the elements in the Mass. Though we retained the ancient faith, that incident had been enough to mark me down when Mary rose to power.

I sighed as I made the long notch that completed my six months' tally, and wondered how many years I would be left to rot within those walls, or whether the block and the axe would be my fate.

The cruelties of Mary, her reported infatuation for Philip of Spain, with whom she was in treaty to marry, had reached me through the babbling of Tower attendants. I had heard, too, that all Kent had risen against her, under the leadership of Sir Thomas Wyatt, who had been an intimate of my father's, and I hoped that the bloody Queen would be dethroned, and the Lady Elizabeth become Queen of England.

For my father, Sir Amyas Knyvet, had been a kinsman of the Boleyns, her mother's family, and once, when I was a boy, in old King Harry's day, he had presented me to the Lady Elizabeth in her apartment at Whitehall Palace.

She had extended her hand graciously to me, and, as I knelt, I saw with admiration her shapely head, with its masses of red-gold hair, and her face, not beautiful, but animated with all the charm of girlhood.

"So this is your son Kenneth?" she asked my father. "Marry, I see him in you, line for line."

"I trust Your Highness sees more," replied my father. "For here and now I pledge him to be your loyal servitor."

How could we guess then that King Harry's son, the sixth Edward, would die in boyhood, leaving the succession contested between Mary and Lady Jane Grey, a poor child who was but a tool of the ambition of others?

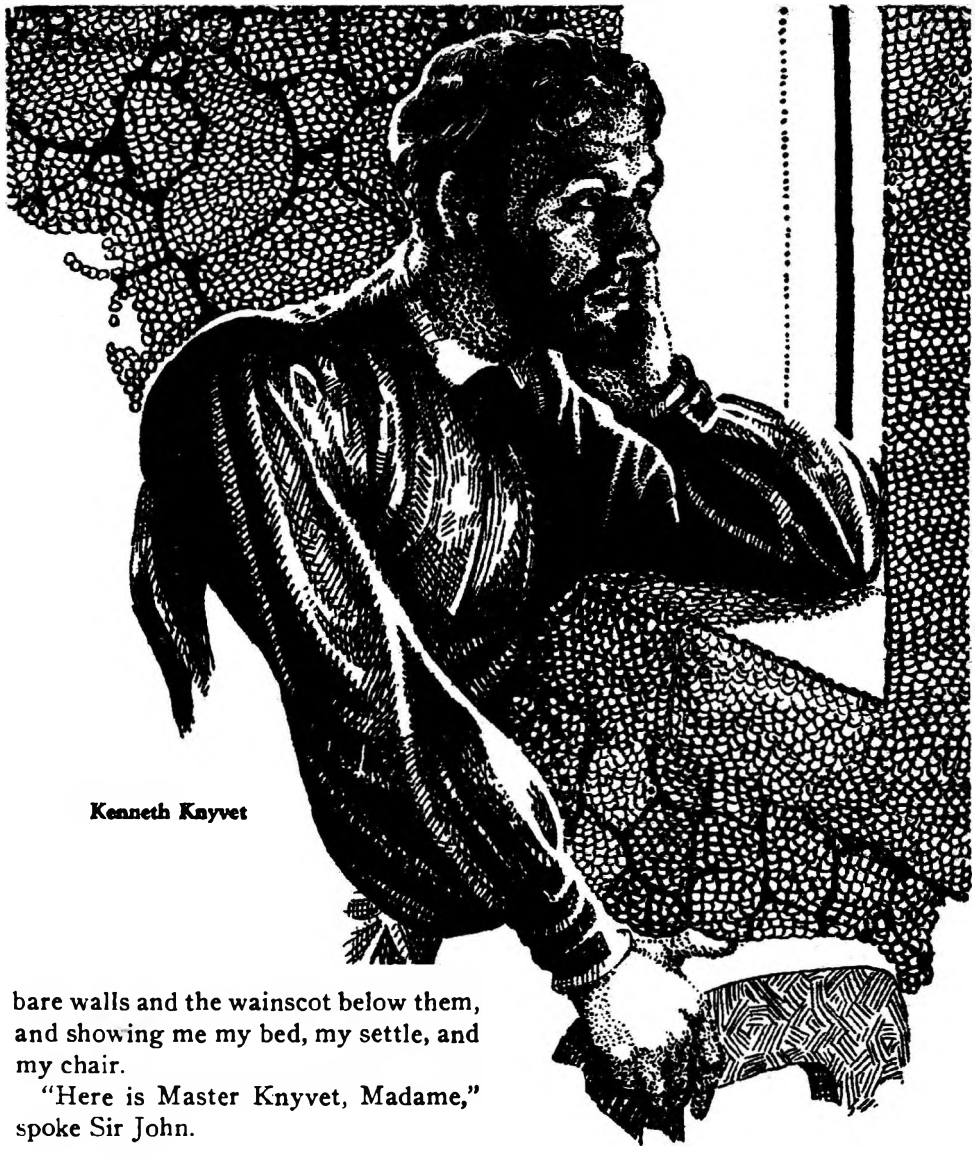
MY EYES had grown dim from the darkness of my cell. There was an aperture in the wall, too small for a man to squeeze through, but wide enough to admit the wintry blasts that made me huddle in my cloak. I rose from my settle, went to it, and looked out.

It was a raw, blustering January evening; and great flakes of snow were falling softly. Sheer down, eighty feet down, I saw the sentries pacing the courtyard. Beyond it were the mighty battlements, and, beyond these, the dark flow of the turbid Thames, with the houses of Southwark on the further side. Spanning the river, I could see London Bridge, the only bridge below Kingston, and the houses upon it, leaning crazily above the river. I saw a movement as of troops upon the bridge, but my eyes were too dimmed for me to distinguish anything clearly, beyond the Tower walls.

The snow was drifting down more thickly. The short winter day was wearing to a close. I had candles and tinder-box, but my mood was for the darkness, and I sat looking out through the little aperture. Lights were springing up along London Bridge, and dotting the black masses of Southwark. But the darkness in my cell was like that in my own heart.

Then suddenly I heard a key thrust into my door, and it grated open. "Master Knyvet!" called a voice. And then, "Make lights quickly, varlets!"

I recognized that voice. It was that of the stern Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir John Brydges, and, wondering why he should have come to my cell, and half-filled with hope, I turned. Almost in an instant flints were struck, and my candles were alight, flickering upon the



Kenneth Knyvet

bare walls and the wainscot below them, and showing me my bed, my settle, and my chair.

"Here is Master Knyvet, Madame," spoke Sir John.

I STARED like an oaf as two ladies, two men in bishops' robes, and a third man, wearing a long, furred gown, came into the chamber. But the sight of the foremost lady, clad in sombre black, with fair hair piled up under a white wimple, brought me instantly to my knee. For she was Queen Mary of England.

I had never seen the Queen at close quarters before. Something less than forty years of age, she was not so harsh of feature as she had been said to be. There was the sternness of her father, old King Harry the Eighth, in her commanding features, but there was also a brooding melancholy, the memory of years of oppression at her father's court,

and of her mother's forced divorce.

The maid-of-honor who accompanied her seemed unknown to me. Black hair bound back beneath her hood, dark eyes that met my own with a proud and sombre gaze. It was the presence of the three gentlemen that filled me with astonishment almost as great as Mary's.

The man in the furred robe was Renard, the Spanish ambassador, and the Queen's chief adviser. The two prelates were old Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, and a red-faced, ruffianly-looking man, Bonner, Bishop of London.

"Rise, Master Knyvet, rise!" said Mary, in her deep man's voice. "This is no court. I thank you, Sir John. You may leave us for the space of a half-hour."

And with complete composure she seated herself upon my settle, her maid behind her, and the two prelates one on either side.

"Well, Master Knyvet, you marvel to see us here?" asked the Queen. "Be assured I know of you and your treacheries, sir."

"Madam," I answered with some heat, "I protest you never had a truer subject than myself, for the news of the late civil strife had barely reached my home when Lord Maidstone was sent to arrest me."

It was young Lord Maidstone who had come with a troop of horse, before my servants had time to offer any defense—he to whom my father had once lent five thousand pounds, yet unpaid.

"Marry, Master Kenneth, I may come out of season," he had said, "but I hold a warrant for your arrest, issued by the Lords of the Council."

He had tugged at his little beard, and I knew he was thinking now that the five thousand pounds need never be repaid.

Of this, of course, I said nothing to the Queen, who made no reply to my protestation, but fixed her dark, sombre eyes upon my face, as if hardly aware of me. She was brooding; she seemed to me all fire, but like a fire that has failed to flare up, and is smouldering within itself at glowing heat.

"MADAME," said Bishop Gardiner's grave voice, "perhaps I might be permitted to inform the young man as to the purpose of Your Grace's visit."

"Ha, yes! Hark, Master Knyvet, would you seek your enlargement from the Tower?" Mary asked me.

"So far as a true man may, who has committed no offense against Your Grace," I answered boldly.

"You may tell him, my Lord Bishop," Mary addressed Gardiner. At that moment I saw the maid-of-honor looking at me strangely. She was reading my face, as I had been studying the Queen's, but for what purpose I could not divine.

"Well, Master Knyvet, I shall come to the point quickly," said Gardiner. "There is a detestable traitor in Kent, by name Sir Thomas Wyatt, who was, I think, known to your father."

"My father knew many gentlemen about the court," I answered.

"Aye, but a crony of his!" Gardiner shook his finger at me. "Well, Her Grace, to avoid civil strife, has consented, much against her inclinations, to parley with this traitor, sending a letter to Sir Thomas at his camp at Rochester tomorrow, by the Lady Catherine Pelham here."

Catherine Pelham! I knew the maid

now. She had formerly been an attendant of the Princess Elizabeth, so that her presence here with Queen Mary amazed me.

"The advent of the Lady Catherine will convince Sir Thomas of our good will," continued Gardiner blandly. "And yours, as the son of Sir Amyas Knyvet, will confirm that impression in the traitor's mind. The letter delivered, you will be free to return to your estates, unattainted. How say you, sirrah? Do you ride with Lady Catherine tomorrow, escorted by two men-at-arms?"

I seemed to see a faint signal in the girl's eyes that I should accept the offer. But I had no idea of refusing. After six months in the Tower, liberty was very sweet.

"I'll go, if it be her Grace's command," I answered.

"Good," nodded Mary. "Well, Excellency?" It was to Renard, the Spanish ambassador, that she turned.

But at that moment a knocking sounded at the door, and Bonner, opening it—for it had been left unlocked—disclosed Sir John Brydges and two guards with flambeaux standing outside.

Bowing deeply, I watched the procession leave my cell, the door of which was locked on me again. My mind was awhirl.

Why had the Queen of England visited me in person? Why had I and the Lady Catherine been selected for a mission along roads that were beset by marauders?

Then somehow into my mind there came the picture of the Princess Elizabeth, as I had seen her years before at Whitehall—the Lady Elizabeth, now languishing in the Tower, under threat of the block. And in my heart I cursed the bloody Queen, who was making me a tool of statecraft whose purpose was obscure to me.

CHAPTER II
Ambuscade

IT WAS hardly light when the two guards came to conduct me to the office of the Lieutenant in the courtyard. In the raw, chilly air two horses, one with a man's, one with a lady's saddle, were being led up and down by grooms, their breath coming from their nostrils in gusts of vapor. In the Lieutenant's office was Lady Catherine Pelham, in riding-habit, standing, fingering a switch.

"Here is the letter, Lady Catherine," said Sir John, handing the girl a long paper, heavily sealed. "Your task, sir," he said to me, "will be to ensure that Lady Catherine reaches Sir Thomas with this paper intact.

"Now listen closely. His Grace the Duke of Norfolk has gone out to engage the enemy, if it must come to a fight. You will find him encamped this side of Rochester. He has been informed of your advent, and will give you all facilities to approach the traitor. The letter delivered, you will conduct the Lady Catherine back safely, and make your report, bringing whatever missive the traitor entrusts you with. You understand? Then here is your sword, sir!"

He smiled grimly as he handed me the weapon, scabbard, and belt that had been taken from me when I entered the Tower. I quickly strapped them on me. Also he gave me two pistols, telling me that they were primed, and for use in case of attack by ruffians along the road. These I thrust into the pockets of my greatcoat.

Two men-at-arms, in hauberks, with swords and great arbalests slung from their saddles, were waiting on horseback. Lady Catherine and I mounted the two other horses that were being held for us. And so the four of us rode out through the broad black arch known as the Traitor's Gate, and across the green in front of the White Tower, which was crowded with citizens, watching a company of the London train-bands exercising.

A number of culverins and four big bombards had been drawn up but the troops seemed untrained and half-hearted. Far in the distance church bells were clashing discordantly. Out of the crowd a man burst, a fanatic of the Reforming Church, wild of aspect, his long hair streaming about his shoulders.

"Woe to you, minions of tyranny!" he shouted. "Woe to Rome and Spain, and to our bloody Queen!"

We four rode past, ignoring him, crossed the green and approached the entrance to London Bridge. A challenge and the countersign, and we were walking our horses over London Bridge, between the crazy houses, and the jewelers' shops, while the inmates flocked to the doorways and watched our progress with sour faces. One man shouted a curse upon Philip of Spain, but others hushed him, and so we passed on into the swarming mazes of Southwark.

It was in the very heart of it, in a narrow street blocked by a wain with two huge horses that the attack occurred.

Six men, in leather jerkins, leaped at us, three from either side of the street, and attacked us with long poniards.

SO SUDDEN was the surprise that it caught me, at least, totally unprepared. My own assailant was a tall, fierce fellow of the Reforming sect—I could see that from the desperate look upon his face. Happily he thrust so wildly that the point of his poniard merely ripped the shoulder of my doublet, and next moment I had drawn and thrust him through the throat.

He fell back, vomiting blood and curses. But my horse, rearing, all but unseated me, and, before I could regain control of it, had bolted between the houses, whose occupants had suddenly disappeared, and down a deserted alley. By the time I could regain command of it, I was alone, in the silence and the falling snow.

I spurred my beast desperately around the bend of the alley, and then I saw that my two men-at-arms were putting up a good fight, for the blows of the poniards seemed to glance harmlessly off their armor, while two of their assailants lay stretched upon the ground.

But apparently more men had joined the company of the assassins, for the two were beset on all sides. And, as I watched, I saw the Lady Catherine dragged bodily from her horse by a fellow of enormous stature, swung upon his own, despite her ineffective thrusts with her little dagger, and carried away.

I had no time to hesitate. The two men-at-arms seemed to be holding their own fairly well. My own duty was toward Lady Catherine, and the precious document she carried. I galloped furiously in the wake of the fellow who was abducting her. Suddenly his horse stumbled over the rough cobbles and fell, and I leaped from mine and engaged him as he rose, while Lady Catherine stood panting by.

He towered over me, and he had a

sword as well as a poniard. Cloak over the left arm, he came at me in the approved style, and showed himself no mean swordsman. For a half-minute our swords slithered and swung, gliding in and out like serpents.

Court-trained, I could have sworn it—but my father had taught me the mastery of the sword too long for six months in the Tower to have destroyed it. I had him at the end of that half-minute. My sword went under his guard and pierced his chest, and I heard the point grate upon his backbone.

He dropped in a heap, the sword and poniard fell from his hand, and he looked up at me with the piteous eyes of the dying.

"Master Knyvet!" he whispered, as I bent over him.

"So you know me, do you?" I asked.

"That paper—fool! It is not what you think it is. Possess yourself of it, if—if you wish the Lady Elizabeth well, for it means her death-warrant. I—" he gasped for breath, and the blood poured from his lips—"I joined those wretches to thwart them. That paper—see that it be not delivered—"

He groaned, stretched himself, and died. I looked up at Lady Catherine, who stood huddled against a shop-front, her face white with fear. But it did not seem to me to be fear of the danger through which she had passed.

"That paper, Lady Catherine," I asked her, "are you sure that it is safe with you?"

"Safe enough, Master Knyvet—and it stays with me," she answered coldly.

OUR TWO men-at-arms had killed four of their assailants, and the rest had fled. They came galloping back to find us, and shouts of relief broke from their lips as they discovered Lady Catherine and myself beside the dead man.

We rode on. Once in the open country, there was little to fear from ambuscades. But I wondered who the dead man had been, and why he had warned me of some plot against the Lady Elizabeth, whom I had sworn to serve when I was a boy.

And the attackers—why had they wanted to get that paper so much?

Lady Catherine rode beside me, her face averted, and we exchanged hardly a word. So along the old Roman Way, through squally weather and a thickening fog, and on through Southfleet, where we stopped for a stoup of French wine apiece, and some bread and cheese.

On again, while the weather grew viler, and the sleet beat in our faces. It was beginning to grow dark soon after three o'clock, and I saw that there was no chance of getting anywhere near Rochester that night.

"We must tarry somewhere overnight," I said.

Lady Catherine flared out at me. "I say our orders are to reach the Duke of Norfolk's camp, and we halt not till we get there," she answered.

"We cannot ride with you at night over these roads, for the countryside is full of marauders," I answered. And, in fact, we had passed several farm-houses, burned and stripped by the robbers who infested that part of Kent.

"Master Knyvet speaks the truth, Mistress," said Hubert Jones, one of the two men-at-arms, a dark-faced, scowling fellow. "We dare not take you along these roads after dark. But there is an inn at Shorne where you will lie comfortably, and, in the morning, we shall reach Rochester speedily."

"I say I have my orders and will press on," the girl cried.

"And I have mine," I said, "which are to see that your letter to Sir Thomas Wyatt is delivered. Therefore, we lie at the inn at Shorne."

She gave me a furious look, then shrugged her shoulders. And now, as we rode on, the trot, trot of a horseman behind us began to be heard. He rode steadily, apparently bent upon keeping us at the same distance.

"Rein in," I commanded, "and let us see who the fellow is."

As we stopped, he stopped, then came on again slowly, stopped again, out of sight in the fog, yet near enough, I thought, for him to hear us.

"Ride on, fellow, and show yourself!" I called.

There was silence, and then horse and rider came into view. A little wizened countryman, riding a steed that was evidently not his, for the trappings alone showed that it belonged to a man of quality.

"Where go ye, gentles?" he quavered. "I am bound for Canterbury, but it is ill work traveling at night, and your company would make me feel assured. I have a horse that I am bringing back from Maidstone, and these brigands would slit my throat for it."

"We go to the inn at Shorne," I answered. "If you wish, you may ride with us."

"That do I gladly," he answered, "for I am a peaceful man, and unaccustomed to arms." And he fell into a trot behind us.

A mile more, and a stretch of hornbeams appeared beside the road, and a long building with lights. It needed only the bush hanging over the door to show that this was the inn. And so we all reined in, and I hammered on the heavy knocker.

THE sly-faced landlord who opened to us had a pistol in his hand, ready to present it.

"Put that away, fool," I cried. "Here are we five, a lady among us, seeking food and shelter for the night."

I pushed the door open and entered, followed by Lady Catherine and our two men, Jones and Clynes. The landlord's fat wife and a dark-faced serving-wench appeared from a rear room.

"Your pardon, sir, your pardon," stammered the landlord. "There be so many thieves and marauders in these parts since the rebellion began, that I scarce dare open my door to anyone. Also my victuals are poor."

"What you have will serve," I answered. "A room for this lady, and the best at your disposal. And serve her supper there."

The landlord's wife, with smirks and bows, came forward and escorted Lady Catherine up the stairs, a candle in her hand, while the landlord ushered us into the room behind the great hall, and the dark-faced wench began laying a passably clean linen tablecloth.

A joint of boiled beef, with turnips, and flagons of ale refreshed us. Having seen the landlord's wife carry her supper up to Lady Catherine, I fell to with the rest. The little man who had joined us gobbled his food furtively. I distrusted him, for all his protestations. And, looking at Clynes and Jones, the men-at-arms, who had laid aside their hauberks and were rapidly getting drunk, I believed that they

"Know you the nature of that letter the Lady Catherine carries to Sir Thomas Wyatt, Master?"

were a pair of thoroughpaced scoundrels.

I was uneasy for Lady Catherine. I was disturbed about what the dying man had said to me, that the paper meant the Lady Elizabeth's death-warrant. I was convinced now that I was being used as a tool in Gardiner's statecraft, and that, whatever Lady Catherine knew, she would tell me nothing.

Moreover, the drunker they grew, the more silent Jones and Clynes became, and when I see a drunken man silent, I distrust him.

Finally, without a word, the little man arose and left the inn. I waited for a moment or two, then followed him. It was pitch-dark outside now, but I could hear our horses stamping in their stable.

Then suddenly there sounded the gallop of hoofbeats, and I had a dim vision of the little man, bent double

upon his horse, and riding hard in the direction of Rochester.

"Halt or I fire!" I shouted, convinced now that some treachery was at work. And, as he only galloped harder, I discharged one of my pistols in his direction.

He was already too far away; the ball missed, and then there was only the distant sound of his horse's hoofs, thudding along the road.

CHAPTER III
Rogues and Traitors

THERE sounded a hiccoughing behind me, and, turning, I saw the man Clynes, a sandy-haired Londoner, and the landlord behind him, staring in affright at my still smoking pistol.

"The knave has fled," I said. "What his game was, I know not, unless he is spying for someone."

"Pooh, it is nothing," answered Clynes. "A countryman, afraid of us, probably, and thinking that we should cut his throat for that horse of his. Master Knyvet, a few words with you."

I waved away the landlord and went into the great hall of the inn, ensconcing myself beside the wet, smoking logs that filled the chimney. Stretched out on a settle was the other guard, Jones, a black-haired Welshman, apparently dead drunk, and snoring. Squatting beside me, Clynes looked into my face with an impudent grin.

"Know you the nature of that letter that the Lady Catherine carries to Sir Thomas Wyatt, Master?" he asked.

"What I know about it is no business of yours," I answered.

He stroked the stubble on his face. "Yet it might very well become the business of both of us," he answered. "Know you that old Gardiner would pay almost the value of the crown jewels to ensure that the letter is stolen on the way?"

"You seem to know a lot about it," I retorted.

"And why not," he replied coolly, "seeing that I am one of the Tower guards? A man picks up a bit here and a bit there, and so it goes. It may be that there is more to that letter than you dream of."

"It may be," I retorted, "but that is not my business."

"And think you that you can trust to the Queen's promise to enlarge you, once that letter is delivered? I tell you," he cried in a sudden passion, "that letter was meant to be stolen on the way. That was the purpose of the attack upon us in Southwark. And, if Jones and I refused to play that game, it is because we can see a better profit for us.

"Look at it this way, Master Knyvet," the rogue continued. "Suppose that there were five thousand crowns to be split among the three of us, on condition that the letter is handed over to certain parties. Would you prefer to take your chance of death on the block, or to take your share of the five thousand and seek the nearest boat for France, and safety?"

I had the most intense curiosity as he spoke in these parables, and yet the leering, familiar attitude of the rogue made me want to strike him down. I pretended to reflect, waiting for him to commit himself further.

"That letter in our possession," he continued, "means five thousand crowns from those who would not willingly see the Princess Elizabeth sent to the block. But we must take possession

of it and depart at once, or—it will be the Southwark ambuscade over again."

"What," I cried, "has that letter to do with the Princess Elizabeth?"

He laughed derisively. "I see you are a very innocent lamb, Master Knyvet," he answered. "Come, to earn the money forthwith, it is only necessary to take the letter from that little shrew upstairs, and to depart. Have it as you will. But let me have your answer, yea or nay. Will you stand in with true men who would save the realm of England, or go to your death like a fool?"

"On the block?" I cried.

"No, now!" he bawled, springing to his feet.

I UNDERSTOOD naught of all this, but my anger overcame me. "You rogue, you damned rogue!" I cried. I struck him in the face and sent him reeling back.

In a trice he had whipped out the sword that hung at his belt, and lunged so fiercely at me that I was forced to leap aside to escape his thrust. Then, as I engaged him, I found myself at play with a good, resolute swordsman, such as I had not expected Clynes to be.

At the same instant the second fellow, Jones, who had evidently been shamming drunk, and must have been listening to every word of our conversation, staggered to his feet, drew his sword, and then came at me from the other side. I was forced back, hard pressed, with the two blades pointing at me. Neither was quite my equal, but Clynes was the better of the two, and my life seemed to measure itself in seconds as I thrust and parried with my back against the wall.

Then fortune saved me. As the two made at me together, the man Jones stumbled over the heavy andirons, and at the same time Clynes momentarily relaxed his guard, his elbow jogged by his companion's fall.

I had him then. I thrust, and my sword passed through his doublet and buried itself to the hilt in his body.

He screeched once, a horrible bubble of blood came from his lips, and then he was down, writhing in his last agonies. I had to bend my sword almost double—luckily it was of Toledo steel—before I could withdraw it to meet the second rogue, Jones. I saw the men flinch, but my blood was up, and I was in no mood for further parley. Seeing which, either maddened with fear or fortified by avarice and desire for the gold crowns, Jones came at me with great slashing strokes that the edge of my finer rapier could parry only with difficulty.

But this was brute force, not swordsmanship, and I had been trained in the new Italian style. The issue was never in doubt in my own mind. A thrust—a slash—a thrust again, and I had got through the sweep of Jones' heavy blade, and pierced him through the throat.

He dropped and died without a cry, falling across the still writhing body of his companion. So there I stood, panting, my blood-stained sword in my hand, and the landlord, paralyzed with fear, gibbering in the doorway between the two rooms. His wife came running in, saw the dead men, and set up a wailing, throwing her apron over her head.

"I have nothing, nothing," babbled the landlord, flinging himself upon his knees before me. "Only three crowns in

the drawer, for last month I had to pay the Queen's taxes, and likewise taxes to Sir Thomas Wyatt. Take them in God's name and begone, else this is like to be a hanging matter for me."

"Those two men were rogues, who deserved their fate," I answered. "If any man question how they came by their death, you may say that Master Kenneth Knyvet slew them on the Queen's business."

And, as he knelt, still gibbering with fear, I called to the dark-faced maid, who was wailing in the kitchen doorway, "Bring a candle and conduct me to the lady's chamber! Hurry, hurry!"

I WAITED, while she stumbled over settles and benches in her eagerness to obey me. I must have looked a fearsome object, with my dripping blade. In fact my long imprisonment, the strange mission that had been assigned to me, and the killing of the two rogues had combined to throw me into a sort of frenzy.

The landlord came running up, and snatched the candle from the maid's hand. "This way, sir, this way," he chattered. Somewhere above me I heard Lady Catherine's door open softly.

"You will not harm the lady, Master?" whined the landlord.

"I am here to protect her, fool," I answered. "Light the way upward, and tell her that I must have an immediate interview with her."

He went up the stairs ahead of me, tripping and stumbling, and I followed him to the top of the flight, and saw a gloomy corridor in front of me. At the end of it was an open doorway, in which, looking as composed and calm as ever, stood Lady Catherine

The landlord, still half-crazed with fear, shouted, "He has slain the two men-at-arms, Mistress, and demands immediate speech with you. In God's name, give him everything you have of value, and let him begone."

"Everything save one thing, and, again, one thing more than he may expect," came Lady Catherine's quiet answer.

I hurried forward and shouted over the landlord's shoulder, "Lady Catherine, this matter is too urgent for play of speech. I must talk with you instantly."

"So?" she returned. "But you have had the whole day to talk with me. Think you to gain possession of what hath been entrusted to me?"

"No, Lady Catherine, but—"

The frightened landlord had ducked back between my legs. I stood facing the girl alone. I saw the beauty of her even then, the straightness of her features; behind her, through the open door, a bed, and a table, from which the supper dishes had not yet been removed.

And then, as I ran toward her, suddenly a pistol appeared in Lady Catherine's hand.

Without the least warning, she aimed it straight at my head, and pulled the trigger. I felt a violent concussion on the temple as the room resounded with the force of the explosion; the candle that the landlord held behind me suddenly became a wavering halo about the two of us.

I heard the landlord screech, I felt my knees give under me—then I was aware that I was lying upon the floor, half-way across the threshold of the room, unable to stir hand or foot, with the girl standing over me.

I WAS almost unconscious, and yet I had a dim sense of Lady Catherine dragging me into her room, and then I saw her bending over me as I lay upon the floor, the same look of awful composure in her eyes.

The room, dimly lit by two candles, showed her in the wine-colored dress. The pistol, discharged, lay upon the table. In the girl's hand was now a little dagger.

Downstairs the landlord's wife was still wailing hysterically, the shriller voice of the maid chiming in. There was a dull pain in my temple. I placed my hand to it, still half-conscious, wondering how I had survived, and I felt the slight groove in the flesh that had been made by the glancing bullet. It was hardly even a flesh wound, but the impact of the heavy missile had temporarily paralyzed me.

I felt the blood dripping down my face, but I was rapidly recovering my faculties, and I could move my hands and feet again. Lady Catherine wiped my cheek with her kerchief.

"So, Master Traitor, you have killed my guides, and thought to steal the letter?" the girl hissed at me. "You stand in the shadow of death—yes, for I will dispatch you instantly with this dagger if you make a move."

"It was those two men who were the traitors, not I," I answered, feeling my tongue thick in my mouth. "I am bound by my pledge to see that that letter is delivered to Sir Thomas Wyatt—"

But I fell to wondering how a proposal from Queen Mary to discuss terms of peace could send the Lady Elizabeth to the block.

"I say you are a traitor," she cried hotly. "Think you I did not know how many are eager to use this letter? That was why it was my determination to push on to Rochester tonight. Why did you slay our two men-at-arms?"

"Because," I answered, "they proposed that I should procure the letter from you, and divide five thousand crowns which would then be given us."

She blanched and drew back. "Treachery everywhere!" she muttered. "What then? How know I that you speak the truth?"

I told her of Clynes' statement that the letter was meant to be stolen from us on the way, which had been the occasion for the attack on us in Southwark, also that the five thousand crowns had been offered by the partisans of the Lady Elizabeth. "In God's name what is in that letter?" I demanded.

"As to that, I think you know," she answered coolly. "A proposal for a treaty between Queen Mary and the traitor, Wyatt. Well, I shall push on at once."

"Lady Catherine, will you put your trust in me, and permit me to help you?" I asked.

"Trust you? How can I trust you when I know not what your designs are?"

"Nevertheless, you must trust someone, or you are undone," I replied, sitting up and wiping the blood from my cheek. "Let us get our horses and ride without delay for Rochester."

With this I drew my second, undischarged pistol from my greatcoat, and handed it to her. "Here is my guarantee of faith," I said.

She looked keenly into my face, then suddenly helped me to my feet.

"Enough, Master Knyvet, I will trust you to convey me to Rochester," she said.

I got upon my feet, The effect of the

concussion was passing away, and I felt as strong as ever.

"Then let us get our horses and ride without delay," I answered, fingering in my bag beneath my arm for a gold piece with which to pay the landlord.

But, even as I spoke, my heart sank, for, trot-trot, I heard a troop of horsemen riding along the road.

CHAPTER IV
Death Strikes

WE HURRIED down the stairs. The landlord's wife was still shrilling hysterically in a corner, the landlord, cringing as he saw me, took a step forward as if to speak with me, then seemed to change his mind and stopped. The two dead men lay in a red, ghastly heap beside the fireplace, in which the wet logs were still sending up a smouldering blaze.

At the sight of the bodies, my companion seemed to lose her composure for the first time. She uttered a little cry, clutched my arm, and looked into my face in appeal.

Trot-trot! The riders were coming fast along the road. Would there be time for us to get our horses from the stable and make our escape? That question was answered the next moment, for, as we darted toward the door, there came a sudden gallop, and six or eight men drew up outside the inn.

They saw us instantly in the light that streamed out, and shouted triumphantly. In another instant they were off their horses and pouring pell-mell in at the doorway. Half of them were gentlemen, in rich, rain-stained cloaks —no common marauders these. The other half seemed to be varlets.

"Ha, Lady Catherine," shouted the foremost, "ye know what we have come for. Therefore yield it up to us and go free and unharmed, wherever ye will."

He was a young lordling, insolent in demeanor, and a little flushed with wine. He came on confidently; stopped at the sight of me, standing with sword drawn, ready to meet him; then his eyes fell on the two dead men, and he blanched and uttered an oath, "S'death, what have we here?"

He drew back as I lunged, and I whispered to Lady Catherine, "Out the back way! Get your horse from the stable and ride!"

Next moment the lordling had recovered his self-possession, and we were hotly engaged, the others crowding on behind him, but they were unable to pass him without destroying his stand, and thus placing him at my mercy. Among them suddenly I recognized a face that made my head reel.

"Well met, Lord Maidstone!" I cried.

It was he whom my father had befriended, and who had arrested me, coming against me among the others, like any common thief. "Have you come to return the money that you borrowed?" I shouted.

"Knyvet!" he shrieked. But he did not press forward, and all the while the front lordling and I continued our passes. Once the point of his sword pricked my doublet. And then I had him with a quick disengage, as they term it nowadays, and my point went through his shoulder.

He staggered, and fell back into the arms of the man behind him, momentarily upsetting him. I cast a swift look backward. Lady Catherine was still standing by me; she had made no attempt to follow my instructions. But

behind her I had seen the landlord, creeping toward me, armed with a heavy fagot that would have brained me.

As I turned upon him like a flash, he dropped it with a cry, and ran, screeching, back toward the rear of the inn. But that turn of mine had lost me my hold of the door. Three more gentlemen were almost upon me, their varlets behind them. Yet so fierce was my onset that, seeing the wounded lordling leaning against the jamb and gasping for breath, they hesitated.

I saw Lord Maidstone, his little black beard outthrust, standing with blade at the parry.

"Do what I bade you!" I cried to Lady Catherine sharply. "I will hold the stairs, and, if they get the letter from me, it will be from my dead body."

This much to make my assailants think the letter was in my own possession, and to divert their attention, and enable Lady Catherine to escape. But to my dismay she cried:

"I left the letter upstairs, where I had hidden it!" And darted past me, and up the dark stairs behind.

I LEAPED back just in time again, for three swords were at my vitals, and behind the swordsmen were the varlets, wielding clubs. I thrust, leaped back, and ran for the narrow stairs, where a man might hold his own for a while. I heard Lady Catherine running into her room above.

My assailants were all young men—Lord Maidstone, the oldest of them, barely thirty—and doubtless deeply enmeshed in matters political. I was still uncertain what their purpose was in attempting to obtain the letter, but now all my mind was set upon the necessity of protecting Lady Catherine in her possession of it.

I was mad, I think, for I raved and taunted them as they stood at the foot of the stairs, watching the shadow-play of my weapon upon the wall. "Go get him, my lord Maidstone!" I heard one of them say. But he drew back, and suddenly two of them were upon me, their points thrusting upward, and for a moment I thought I was pierced, as a blade flashed past me.

Then the blade of the second man caught in my doublet, and, before he could withdraw, I had thrust fiercely at him. A very miracle of dexterity saved him, for he let his sword fall and flung himself backward. Instantly, as his companion attempted a disengage, I parried, and, with a quick riposte, pierced his arm above the elbow.

And I stood there, taunting Lord Maidstone to come on, and seeing the little huddled group in the light of the room below.

"Take him, varlets, take him!" Lord Maidstone roared.

"Take him yourself, my lord," panted the man whom I had wounded in the arm.

But they remained there, scowling, and then I saw the man whom I had wounded in the doorway coming slowly toward us, the blood dripping from his shoulder.

"Parley, Master Knyvet," he called. "We mean no harm to you or Lady Catherine, only that letter for Sir Thomas Wyatt we are sworn to have. Five thousand crowns for you, on the honor of a gentleman, if you surrender it, and the money is in my saddlebags. By the Rood, man, has Bloody Mary

bewitched you, that you would die for her?"

"That letter you shall never have," came Lady Catherine's high, clear voice, and I was conscious of her standing a foot or two above me. "Well fought, Master Knyvet," she cried. "These men be rogues, not honest gentlemen. Aye, my Lord Maidstone," she went on in ringing scorn, "on whose side are you playing, traitor that you have always been? What, are you content to let the others die, while you look on?"

The taunt went home, and he came on, mad with rage, rushing at me furiously, so that I was hard put to it to defend myself. He was a traitor, I knew, to every cause, but he wielded an honest sword. He drove me back to the next step, and the next, and I heard Lady Catherine's coarse, heavy breathing almost in my ear.

Then, with an adroit twist of the wrist, I disarmed my opponent, sending the sword flying from his hand. He tumbled to the foot of the stairs, shouting. And there I stood, facing the four of them again, two of them wounded, and my confidence rose higher.

Then one of the varlets yelled, and I saw a heavy footstool in his hand. He flung it; it caught me in the chest and knocked me breathless.

AT THAT instant, all seemed lost. Yelling curses, the whole pack rushed me. I was still trying to regain my foothold on the greasy, slippery stair when I heard the roar of a discharged pistol above me.

I saw Lady Catherine bending over me, the smoking pistol in her hand. And the varlet had slipped to the bottom of the stairs, with a blue hole in his forehead, and nothing much to the back of his head, and he would never speak nor move again.

That seemed enough for our gentlemen, one dead, two wounded, and three more varlets scurrying to and fro like rats at the foot of the staircase. In another moment they had vanished.

"We must get away from here," I cried to Lady Catherine, "Your window, Mistress!"

I pulled her back up the stairs with me. But already I could hear the stealthy movement of feet on the back stairs of the inn. And, at the turn of the passage, beside Lady Catherine's room, I ran into the varlets, and guessed that the gentlemen were not far behind.

One of the foremost varlets swung at me viciously, but his club only grazed my shoulder. Next instant my sword was buried deep in his vitals, and, with a shriek of pain, he dropped. The others howled and bolted. I turned to Lady Catherine.

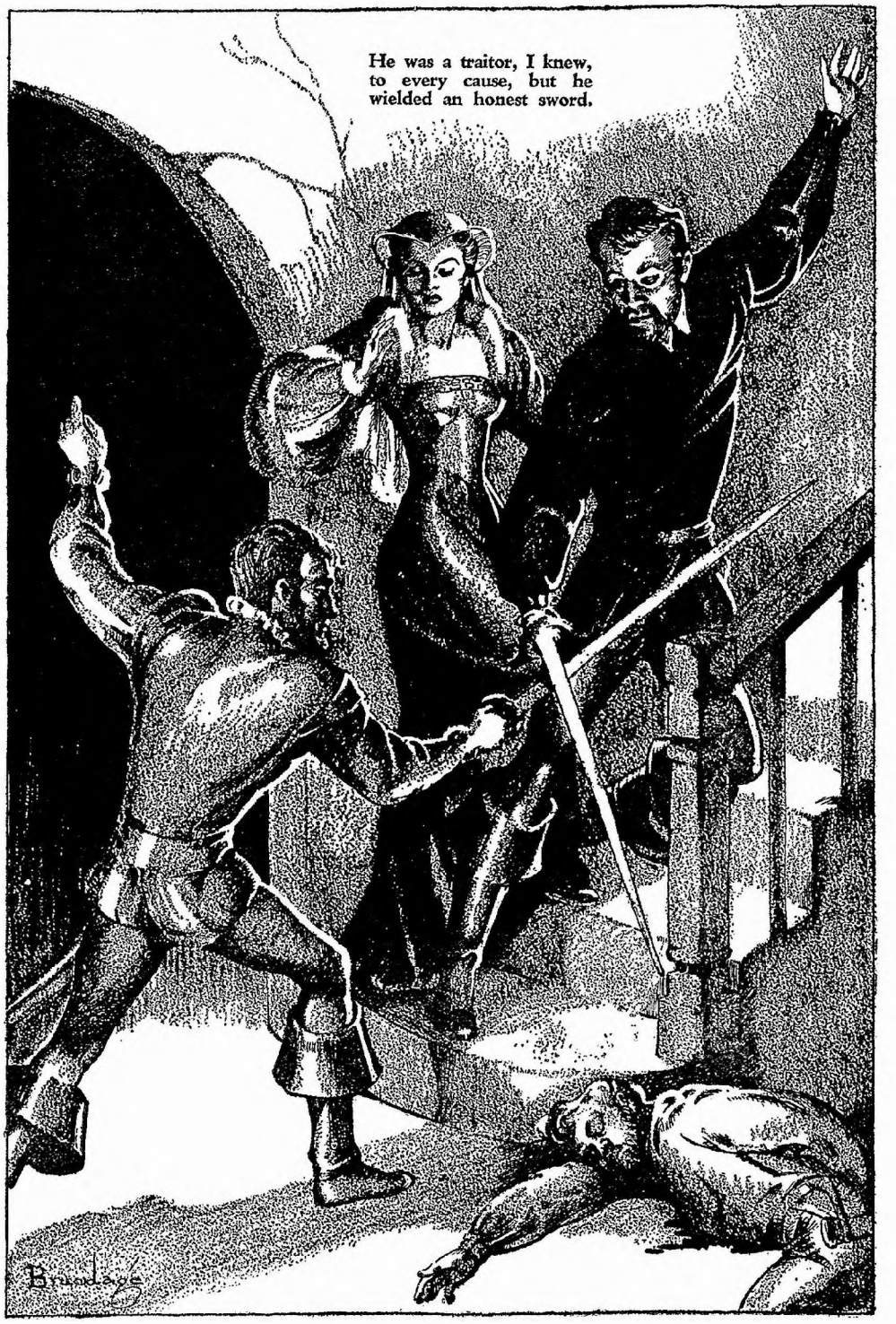
"You have that letter, Mistress?" I asked.

She nodded, pointing to her bodice.

"Then into your room, in heaven's name, and drop from the window!"

I pushed her inside, followed, and bolted the stout oaken door behind us. I ran to the window and looked down. To my consternation I discovered that there was neither vine nor tree accessible. The inn was built on the side of a hill, apparently, and the wooden walls ran straight down to an enormous well. Dark though the night was, I saw that there was no possibility of landing anywhere save in several feet of icy water.

Lady Catherine, beside me, had taken in the situation, too. "Well, we are un-


He was a traitor, I knew,
to every cause, but he
wielded an honest sword.
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done," she said. "That letter—I shall destroy it, if they overcome us. But it is vital that it be delivered."

I wondered for the tenth time what the letter contained, and how much Lady Catherine knew about its contents; whether she was a willing or unwilling tool of Gardiner.

But this was no time to wonder, for a thunderous blow upon the door indicated that our attackers had begun the final stage of their assault. It was evident that a heavy log of wood was being used against us, for at each thunderous blow the stout door quivered.

A PAUSE. A voice called, "Hark, Lady Catherine! We, as you know, mean you no harm, and shall let you go at once if the letter is delivered, but the man must pay. He shall pay—by God, he shall pay! Will you come out like a man, Master Knyvet?" he called. "Or do you think a woman's farthingale shall protect you?"

That was Lord Maidstone's voice. I made him no answer. We stood within the room side by side, I sword in hand. I had no fresh priming for the useless pistols.

The thunderous attacks upon the door continued, and at each blow it shivered upon its hinges. Then a crack appeared in the light of the candle, running almost from top to bottom, and through it I could see the two varlets wielding the log, the wounded men, Lord Maidstone, and, at the bend of the passage, the landlord, with a candle in his hand.

I ran to the candle in the room and extinguished it. In the darkness there would be a better chance of overcoming the varlets, unacquainted as they were with weapons of skill. But it was evident that the party were bent on securing that letter at any cost.

Crash! The door rocked upon its hinges. Another assault, and one of the hinges broke. Now the door swung crazily, with a space at top and bottom, and a fierce shout of exultation went up.

To rush out would be impossible, but I could still hold that doorway, wait for the door to fall. And then I discovered why they had drawn off, and the meaning of the shout of exultation. For one of the varlets came back into my vision, and I saw that he was carrying one of the great arbalests, or cross-bows, that had been on the saddles of Clynes and Jones.

Helpless to open the door, had I tried to, since it had stuck fast against the jamb and the floor, I saw the fellow coolly set up the instrument on its stock, and proceed to wind up the mechanism. In its groove I saw the square bolt, or quarrel, ready to shoot me down, so soon as the door gave—a deadly weapon, more dangerous than a pistol-ball.

Shouting, two other knaves swung their bulk against the door again. The first blow hardly budged it, but the second sent it flying inward, completely off its hinges.

I cried out, and flung Lady Catherine to the floor. And then, before the man with the arbalest could aim, I hurled myself into the midst of the little group, rendering the man with the arbalest powerless to shoot for the moment.

Lord Maidstone rushed at me. Our blades crossed; he began giving ground. I was shouting madly, he was now cool and collected, and he repeatedly seemed about to lay his guard open, yet always

managed to foil my thrusts. He was the best swordsman of all of them, and I was so engrossed in thrust and parry that for a moment or two I did not understand what his purpose was.

Then I discovered it. He was giving ground before me, so as to lead me directly in front of the arbalestier, who stood with the great bolt in the notch, and finger trembling on the trigger.

The rest had fallen back, and were watching me intently. But at that moment there sounded the hoofbeats of other horses without, and I heard the landlord screaming:

" 'Tis Wyatt's men, God ha' mercy upon us! I saw the red cross on their sleeves!"

I WAS almost in front of the man with the arbalest when I saw my danger. I leaped aside as he pulled the trigger, and I felt the wind of the great quarrel as it rushed past my head, and there came a great crash as it collided with the stone wall of Lady Catherine's room. Then, as Lord Maidstone turned and fled, I thrust at the knave with the infernal machine, and he dropped yelping, and went sprawling along the corridor in his own blood.

Next moment knaves and gentlemen alike were gone, and I was standing beside Lady Catherine, breathing hard, and listening to the sounds of fighting outside the inn.

I heard the troop of horsemen ride up to the inn door, the mad gallop of our late adversaries into the darkness—it seemed that they had got free. Then roars in the hall below, "A Wyatt! A Wyatt!"

I shouted back—but what, I know not. And I took Lady Catherine by the hand, and we descended the stairs together, to find the landlord, his wife, and the wench gone, and the hall filled with a troop of lusty young men, with arms in their hands and red crosses upon their sleeves.

One of them, who was armored, came running forward, and doffed the steel casque that he wore. "Mistress, I am Sir Harry Courtenay, and we have been awaiting you," he cried.

"I remember you, sir," she answered with cold composure.

"You are the Lady Catherine Pelham?"

"Yes."

"You are unharmed? And what you brought with you is safe? Now God be praised. We heard that Lord Maidstone had gathered a troop of men to take possession of it, whereby our enterprise had been placed in jeopardy. With that in his hands, he could have made himself the chief power in the State, owning allegiance neither to Queen Mary nor to the Lady Elizabeth, the accursed dog!"

"You should have taken him," said Lady Catherine.

"A pest on him and his men! Who could find them in this darkness? They got their horses and slipped away. I fear we shall encounter more mischief from them. Your name, sir?" he addressed me.

"I am Kenneth Knyvet, son of the late Sir Amyas Knyvet, lately released from the Tower, in order to accompany Lady Catherine to Sir Thomas's camp, he and my father having been friends. But we were to have had safe-conduct from the camp of the Duke of Norfolk."

"Oh the Duke, the Duke!" he scoffed. "That part will not be necessary, as you shall see tomorrow. We hold all north-

ern Kent, and London will rise at our appearance as one man against Queen Mary. I have had the honor of presentation to your father, sir. Come, let us begone!"

CHAPTER V
The Letter

WE RODE hard, but dawn was in the sky before the town of Rochester came into sight, with the remnants of its Roman walls, and the river Medway winding through it, spanned by its single bridge. Just outside the walls were the tents of Sir Thomas Wyatt's levies, toward which we pricked our horses. Some half-mile distant I could discern another line of tents, the camp of the old Duke of Norfolk, who had come out to fight for Mary, unless terms of peace were arranged.

The faint cries of the sentries on either side were audible as we rode toward Sir Thomas's camp. The lines were so near each other that it was evident a collision might occur at any moment, and the restless stir on either side showed that this was anticipated.

Challenge and countersign, and we were passed through Wyatt's lines, then we dismounted outside Sir Thomas's square tent in the midst of his encampment, and a page was announcing us.

He came out, a thin, gaunt, sparsely bearded man, with a certain fanaticism in his aspect, and stared at us; but, at the sight of Lady Catherine, he doffed his hat and bowed.

"Madame, you have it?" he asked. "Then your arrival is the best fortune that has come to me since I was compelled to take up arms against the Queen, to prevent this Spanish marriage."

Lady Catherine smiled coldly. "I have it," she answered. But I could see that she looked troubled. And I had a still stronger suspicion that treachery was afoot. That Lady Catherine was not only a tool of Gardiner, but a willing tool.

Indeed, in those days it was difficult for a man not to play the traitor, so shifty and complicated was the political scene. But I wondered what was the secret, and I was beginning to doubt whether the letter contained any such proposals for a treaty as Gardiner had pretended to me.

And I saw Lady Catherine glance at me in the old furtive way, as if she had forgotten our fight together at the inn, as if she distrusted me again. Once again, she was playing a game that was obscure to me.

In another moment, four of Wyatt's officers, summoned from their tents, had arrived in his marquee. The young officer who had come to our rescue at the inn briefly described the fight.

"And you killed all these men?" Wyatt asked me.

"I had that good fortune," I replied.

"This gentleman is Master Kenneth Knyvet, the son of Sir Amyas Knyvet," said Lady Catherine.

Sir Thomas's brows unbent. "I knew your father," he said to me. "He was a good friend of mine. Therefore I trust his son in all things." And he gave me his hand.

He had a charming manner, and that simple gesture of his made me his man. I was ready to serve him to the death against the bloody Queen—save for my promise to return.

"Enlarged from the Tower for the time, but on parole, so that he might

accompany me," Lady Catherine continued.

"And he understands—?" began Sir Thomas.

"I am afraid that Master Knyvet's sword is sharper than his wits," said Lady Catherine tartly.

SHE went on, in that measured voice of hers, "I can vouch for this gentleman's courage and loyalty, but on which side he stands, I do not know. And I am the most wretched woman alive, Sir Thomas," she went on, "seeing that my brother lies in the Tower, in grave jeopardy of his life."

"Aye, but take courage, Mistress," answered Sir Thomas. "We shall save him, and all who lie there unjustly, and Bonner and Gardiner shall feel the keen edge of the axe, and the reformed religion shall be restored. Take courage. And now—the paper?"

Lady Catherine drew it from her bodice, a long piece of vellum, heavily sealed. "Her Royal Highness, the Princess Elizabeth, whom I have attended since her imprisonment, but with some liberty of movement, entrusted me with this," she said, "to deliver it to you, as you already know."

It was my turn to stare at Lady Catherine. She was lying in the most deliberate way. Nothing about Gardiner, no hint that the letter contained proposals of peace from Queen Mary! Lies, lies! I could not understand.

"Ha! Well, now we shall see," said Wyatt, and broke the seals upon the letter. Holding it up to the pale sunlight that had begun to creep into the tent, he read aloud, for the benefit of his officers:

"To our right trusty friend and counsellor, Sir Thomas Wyatt, greetings from Elizabeth, the rightful Queen of England, seeing that our elder sister, Mary, was declared incapable of inheriting the crown by parliament, in the reign of our father, King Henry Eighth.

"Know you, Sir Thomas, that I lie in the Tower, in jeopardy of my life, having done no wrong. Natheless, if you advance swiftly and certainly, London will rise in your favor to the last man. I have already been in communication with several captains of the train-bands, and they assure me that not a man but will join our cause. And, when we are Queen of England, your services shall not be forgotten."

Underneath, in great black letters, the signature "Elizabeth."

Wyatt read the letter out slowly, while we all listened spellbound. But I gasped as I listened. If ever a document would send its writer to the block, this one would—even Elizabeth, sister of Queen Mary and heir-apparent to the throne. Never was a more treasonable paper penned.

This, then, was the supposed proposal for peace that Mary and Gardiner had sent to Sir Thomas Wyatt. But why? And why had Lord Maidstone and his men made such a frantic effort to recover it? And why the ambuscade in Southwark? My head whirled, and I could see nothing, save that Lady Catherine was playing some game of her own, and that I had somehow been trapped on a fool's mission. Aye, and that I was bound by the terms of my parole to Gardiner and the Queen.

I could see one thing — that Lady Catherine had lied—lied cold-bloodedly to Sir Thomas, in making him think that the paper had come from the Lady Elizabeth without passing through Mary's and Gardiner's hands!

SIR THOMAS WYATT refolded the paper and placed it in the pouch he wore beneath his armpit. "Well, gentlemen," he said exultantly, "this letter assures us of swift victory. Today we shall make a speedy ending of old Norfolk and advance on London, where we shall proclaim our Lady Elizabeth Queen."

He turned to me, as if suddenly remembering me. "Well, Master Knyvet, what is your pleasure?" he asked me. "If you be of a mind to join the forces of the Duke of Norfolk, you shall be conveyed thither under a flag of truce. If you are minded to venture all upon my victory, join with me. If you are a prudent man, you will take horse and fly for one of the coast ports, and there await the issue. If you need gold—"

I told him that I had a few gold coins left, that I had had in my possession since entering the Tower. I added:

"If you will allow me, Sir Thomas, I shall gladly serve under you, for I have no reason to love Queen Mary, and I am not certain whether my parole is valid, since I have been betrayed."

"You have been betrayed?" he demanded.

I blurted out, "I understood that this paper was a proposal for a treaty between yourself and the Queen."

At which they all went into a roar of laughter, and I saw Lady Catherine smiling at me, as if I had been a child. But Sir Thomas's face brightened, and he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Hark, Master Knyvet," he said. "This letter from our Lady Elizabeth, affixed to the doors of the Guildhall, will turn the last waverer in our favor. And, since I remember your father well, I offer you a post as one of my personal bodyguard. Natheless, if you prefer to place yourself in the power of Mary again, that is your affair."

I thought and made my decision in a moment. Since Gardiner had lied to me, I considered that my parole was no longer binding.

"I will join you, Sir Thomas," I cried.

"Well said," he answered, clapping me upon the shoulder. "You shall have no reason to regret it. Wolf!" he called to the page. "See that this gentleman's horse is fed, and that he himself has a meal, and sleep, until he is called upon. Today," he added, "in my opinion we shall find the road to London open to us."

THE sun had risen high in the sky, though its pale beams hardly pierced the fogs that lay over the marshes. From the little tent in which I rested I could see Sir Thomas's forces being drawn up in battle order. Trumpets were sounding up the hill, where I could see the Duke of Norfolk's men mustering also. That day, I knew, the fate of England would be determined.

I had not slept, from trying to puzzle out the mystery of the substituted letter. I had been watching the tent that had been assigned to Lady Catherine, but I watched it for hours, and it must have been about the hour of noon when I saw her emerge, and stand, as if irresolute, in the entrance.

I pushed aside the folding entrance of my tent and went toward her, across the soggy ground. The whole camp was in commotion. Men were buckling on swords and cuirasses, and testing harquebuses and arbalests, horses were being saddled, and I saw an equal stir in the lines of Norfolk. I saw Sir Thomas Wyatt standing among some

of his officers, but nobody paid any attention to me.

I went up to the tent. "Lady Catherine!" I addressed her.

Whether or not she had seen me coming, she started. "Well, sir?" she addressed me coldly.

"It is necessary that I have speech with you."

"It is not necessary."

"It is very necessary," I said.

"Well," she asked, turning away toward a little grassy mound behind the tent, "what is it that you would say?"

"That we are at cross-purposes," I burst out. "That the letter which Bishop Gardiner gave me was a fraud and a delusion. I have thrown in my lot with Sir Thomas Wyatt, because my parole was illegally exacted."

"Well, what is that to me?" she asked.

"I demand to know whether you had knowledge of the contents of that letter, why I have been treated as a dolt, when I have done my best to play a man's game."

I went on, "Aye, it was you who carried the lying letter. And I demand the truth."

"You fool," she said, with withering scorn. "Since you have cast in your lot with Sir Thomas, I can tell you now. Did you really think that Queen Mary was in treaty with him? And have you not wits enough to know that that letter is a forgery, of which the Lady Elizabeth has not even heard?"

She angered me so I could have shaken her. "So you are a traitress through and through," I cried. "A forgery! To incriminate the Lady Elizabeth! And why the trouble of delivering it to Sir Thomas, when all that was necessary was to deliver it to the Council in London?"

SHE looked at me as if I had been a child. "Because," she answered, with a derisive smile, "to constitute treason, it is essential, under the law, that a letter be delivered or sent, not merely found in an apartment in the Tower, where many prisoners have committed their secret hopes to paper, unharmed. That is why the letter was sent."

"And you," I said, "were the Lady Elizabeth's maid."

"Speak not of that," she cried in a harsh voice. "My brother lies in the Tower in jeopardy of his life. That being so, what is the Lady Elizabeth to me?

"Now I shall tell you, fool that you are! That letter was forged by one of Gardiner's secretaries, who hath a knack of imitating handwriting, and it was designed to bring the Lady Elizabeth to the block. Because I had been her maid, and your father had been a friend of Sir Thomas's, we were selected for the mission.

"It had been planned that the letter should be taken from me in the ambuscade at Southwark. So much I gathered, though it was not told to me. Since that failed, it is at least in Sir Thomas's hands, and will be taken from him—he will never let it go—it will be taken from him when he is captured. For England is more loyal to Queen Mary than you suppose, and this mad venture of his will fail.

"As for Lord Maidstone and his companions, and their attempt to obtain the letter, they blow neither hot nor cold, but are out for their own advantage. Had they obtained that letter, they would have dickered and bargained for higher rank, and money.

Therefore I fought beside you at the inn.

"Now, if Wyatt be captured, with this letter in his possession, I have Queen Mary's promise to enlarge my brother. Call me traitress, call me what you will, you understand the situation now."

Her bosom heaved, the strange calmness of her voice was in strange contrast to her emotion. "You smile!" she cried in sudden anger. "You smile, sir! What is the jest? Pray tell me."

"The jest, Mistress, is this," I answered. "When I was a boy I pledged my troth to the Lady Elizabeth, who is of my own family. And, had I had a sister in the Tower, who might have been enlarged by treachery, maybe I had acted as you have done. But now my sole desire is to see bloody Queen Mary flung from the throne of England."

"To which Amen!" she cried in a loud voice.

"Meanwhile," I added, "the best-laid schemes of treachery are apt to go astray. You plan to betray my Lady Elizabeth, and I would die for her. You and I have not the same purpose, therefore."

She caught my arm. "What will you do, then, sir, what will you do?" she cried.

"Keep my own counsel," I answered. "It seems to me, Lady Catherine, that we are in the hands of God, and must wait upon events."

I turned away. But I was resolved that Gardiner's forged document should never send my Lady Elizabeth to the block—even though it was years since I had seen her, and it was unlikely that she had any remembrance of me.

NOW I could see a stir in the royal camp. The old Duke of Norfolk had got his men marshalled, and a gap opened in the centre of them, revealing eight field-pieces trained upon us, a formidable battery. Added to which the forces of the old Duke, overlapping Sir Thomas's on either wing, appeared considerably stronger.

One of Sir Thomas's aides galloped up to me. "To horse, to horse, Master Knyvet!" he cried. "Sir Thomas has sent me for you, remembering your father. He and his bodyguard will, please God, bear the brunt of the coming battle."

I saw a page standing with my horse, and I ran to it and leaped into the saddle, leaving Lady Catherine staring darkly after me. I had neither cuirass nor helmet. I could see in a moment that Sir Thomas had amassed a considerable force of Kentish yeomen, with which he meant to break the Duke of Norfolk's lines. I rode to where he sat upon his mount, in the centre of our line, some fifty gentlemen drawn up about him, and took my place among them. To right and left I saw our soldiery, grim but confident, even though many of the peasantry were armed with nothing but scythes.

In the light of the early afternoon, I could see the royal troops advancing. I could see the masses of the royalist infantry, the white coats of the London train-band regiment, and, in the centre, the Duke's grim artillery, waiting to open up on us.

"Forward!" Slowly our ranks advanced, first a thin line of skirmishers, then two lines of supports. On the right, our Kentish horsemen were fuming at the delay. With Sir Thomas and his little band, I rode forward in

the centre, straight toward the guns, whose discharge, if truly aimed, would have wreaked havoc among us. I could see the Duke's gunners blowing their matches. And then suddenly a roar arose on the royalist left, and I saw the white-coated Londoners discharging their harquebuses and arbalests—not against us, but into the air.

Brett, their captain, and Harper, second in command, rushed forward, shouting, "A Wyatt, A Wyatt, we be all Englishmen!"

Instantly this defection threw the royalist ranks into confusion. A shower of missiles from our own ranks began to take toll of them, and our whole force rushed forward, or galloped with all its might, shouting and cheering.

None of the guns was fired. I could see the old Duke of Norfolk—he was uncle to two of King Henry's beheaded queens, and must have been eighty if he was a day—pulled bodily upon his horse. Then, with some half-dozen of his officers, he galloped from the field. And the two armies were intermingling, the royalists throwing up their caps and shouting for Sir Thomas.

Seldom was victory secured more cheaply, for we had lost but one man by a chance bolt, some twenty of the Duke's men had been killed, and the rest were with us, cursing the bloody Queen in London, and shouting for my Lady Elizabeth.

Guns, money, baggage, equipment, everything had fallen into Sir Thomas's hands as spoil of war. And only London lay between him and victory.

I heard him roar exultantly, "The day is ours. On the morrow we move on London. God save our Queen, Elizabeth!"

Ah, but I saw Lady Catherine beside me. She had ridden into the thick of the battle, and she sat her horse, that same inscrutable look in her eyes. What did it portend?

CHAPTER VI
London Bridge

I RODE at Lady Catherine's side among the horsemen who led the long procession, the footmen and the captured field-guns bringing up the rear. "Where will you go now?" I asked her.

"To London, to save my brother," she returned. "Where would you have me go?"

The presence of a woman among us was discomforting, and yet we could not leave her behind us, for Rochester was unsafe, once our troops had evacuated it, all Kent was unsafe and filled with marauders.

"I hear Sir Thomas intends to nail that lying proclamation to the Guildhall doors," I said.

"Whereby his downfall comes," she answered. "Hark, Master Knyvet, my brother's life means more to me than anything in the world."

"Lady Catherine," I said, "you speak as if Queen Mary still ruled England, whereas this victory has destroyed her last hopes of holding her throne."

"You think so?" she asked, giving me one of her dubious glances.

"I am sure of it. Sir Thomas will be received by the citizens of London with open arms, the Queen will join Bonner and Gardiner in the Tower, and your brother and the other victims of Queen Mary will be set free."

"You think so? I tell you, Master

Knyvet, we shall find the gates of London closed, aye, and this motley soldiery of Sir Thomas's will melt away like a dream. And you—what will you do? Even could you escape, can you hope to regain your lands? Ah, listen to me, listen to me," she pleaded, with a strange, moving insistence. "We have been good comrades, you and I, and we have sealed a pact that should have been friendship in that fight at the inn."

"Aye, Lady Catherine."

"Then trust Queen Mary. I tell you that this conspiracy will fail, and London will never open her gates to Sir Thomas. Let us enter the city, and inform Gardiner that his mission has been accomplished."

"If that forged letter be nailed to the doors of the Guildhall, or found in Sir Thomas's possession, it will send an innocent woman to the block," I said. "Have you no conscience, Lady Catherine?"

"Too much to let my brother die. Did I forge that letter, or was I anything but the bearer of it? No, I carried it to save my brother's life. Ah, well, you must go your way, and I must go mine."

She fell into a dark, brooding silence. And so we rode on, camping that night in Dartford, where bonfires burned, and all the inhabitants acclaimed us. The following day we pitched camp in Southwark, not far from the Thames.

Here we received messengers from across the river, who informed us that all was confusion in the Queen's council; it had hardly been possible to secure more than a thousand men to enlist against us. Press on, they said, and London would fall before us.

"And London Bridge?" asked Sir Thomas.

"They have raised the drawbridge and stationed a few men with a couple of culverins on the far side, but there are no guns in the gatehouse, and the defending force can easily be overcome by a sudden sally, and forced to lower the chains."

Sir Thomas drew me aside. "Time means all to us," he said. "Will you adventure on a reconnaissance with me tonight?"

"Aye, and gladly," I answered.

SIR THOMAS had a force of some two thousand men assembled under arms, together with the captured field-pieces when we two set forth into the bitter cold of the January night. It was strange to see the myriad lights of London across the turbid river, and the great mass of the Tower which I had come to know so well. And nothing but that slender bridge divided us from the city which seemed ready to drop into our hands like a ripe plum.

Silently Sir Thomas and I stole between the lines of houses, which were barred and shuttered. Not a light showed on the bridge itself, nor in the gate-house, which commanded the draw-chains, and rose, dark and squat, in the middle of the long, slender arch.

Huddling against the houses, we advanced, until the dark gatehouse stood before us. High up was a window. Sir Thomas leaped, clung to the sill, and gained it, and I followed him. The window was not even barred. It opened at our tug, and before us, in the faint light that came through, we saw the stairs that led down into the porter's lodge.

Cat-like, and sword in hand, Sir

Thomas led the way, I following him, until the glow of a low fire came to our sight. We stopped at the entrance to the lodge. There were the old porter and his wife, both fully clothed, but wearing their nightcaps, and nodding in their chairs, one on either side of the fire. And there was no sign of any troops in the gatehouse.

As I leaped down beside Sir Thomas, the porter and his wife started out of their sleep, and stared at us; the woman let out a screech of terror.

Sir Thomas brandished his sword. "On your lives be still," he advised them. "I am Sir Thomas Wyatt, and I have my troops behind me. One cry from either of you means death."

Muted with terror, they cowered in their chairs. I saw that there was nothing to fear from them, and swiftly we made our way out through the further gate, to which great chains were drawn up over winches.

Sir Thomas uttered a malediction. The chains were severed, and the drawbridge had been cut away for a distance of a dozen yards. And, looking across the black gulf beneath which the river rolled, I saw the dusky mouths of four gaping cannon, and an officer keeping watch with the guard. Neither force nor skill could enable us to effect an entrance into the city by way of London Bridge.

At the same moment they saw us, and the hoarse challenge rang out, "Stand and give the countersign, or we fire!"

"Sir Thomas Wyatt and the realm of England!" shouted Wyatt, mad with passion.

THERE followed a loud shout from across the gap. Almost in a moment I saw a gunner's linstock begin to smoulder. I dragged Sir Thomas back to where the old porter and his wife still crouched, terrified, in their chairs. By now trumpets were sounding from the other side, and the notes were being taken up by bugles from the Tower.

Then from the London side of the river the guns of the royal forces opened, from the White Tower, the Devil's Tower, and all the bastions, aimed, not at the gatehouse, but at our encampment on the Southwark side of the river, of whose location it was evident that the enemy had accurate information.

"Back!" I cried, as Sir Thomas stood raving like a man distraught in the porter's lodge. "We must go back. There is no advance this way."

With that he seemed to regain his self-possession. "Aye, we must go back," he answered. "We cross the Thames by Kingston Bridge. What matters a little more delay, when we have all England with us?"

So we crawled back, while the guns ceased to boom, and once more we stood outside the gatehouse. A cloaked and hooded figure was awaiting us there, and I recognized Lady Catherine.

"What said I, Sir Thomas?" she cried. "There is no approach this way. You are but wasting time. But do you send Master Knyvet as an emissary to the Queen, that bloodshed may be averted."

He tugged at his beard, staring at both of us, and Lady Catherine drew me apart and whispered:

"If he can be constrained to send you, tell her that her task has been accomplished, and the Lady Elizabeth's letter is in Sir Thomas's possession. So

shall my brother and yourself both gain your freedom."

"Aye, and the Lady Elizabeth?" I asked.

"What is her fate to you?"

"I am of Boleyn blood, and have pledged my faith to her."

"Hark, Master Knyvet," she said very earnestly. "It were better to trust to the Queen's mercy than to go with Sir Thomas into a trap, for his tatterdemalion army will melt away like snow in spring. Sir Thomas has that paper. Leave him to his fate. Save my brother and yourself."

Sir Thomas interrupted us with a loud cry.

"She speaks well," he shouted. "I seek no bloodshed. Do you go to Queen Mary, Master Knyvet, and convey to her my terms of peace. I must have command of her person, and of the Tower, that this Spanish marriage may be averted. After which, Her Grace shall find me ever an obedient and loyal subject. Go, take a boat from the wharves, make straight for Whitehall Stairs. Meanwhile I shall cross by Kingston Bridge, and you may meet me there with the Queen's answer."

I saw the dark look that Lady Catherine cast at me. She knew that I would never cease to work for Princess Elizabeth. And her brother's life hung upon the issue.

THE news that there was no passage over London Bridge had spread through our forces, and dispirited them. With London in sight, and yet barred, to many everything seemed lost.

Orders were issued for an immediate move up-river toward Kingston. Neither tents nor equipment were to be taken, only weapons and ammunition, and as much food as each man could carry in his pack, and four of the eight field-pieces that were light enough to keep up with the pace Sir Thomas meant to set.

"I shall await your answer here, if you make your errand a speedy one," said Sir Thomas to me, "for my troops will march more comfortably by day. But warn the Queen that, if you be not back well before dawn, I march without delay."

We descended some stairs to one of the dark and deserted wharves, and at one of them I found a solitary rowboat tied.

"In half-an-hour you should be at Whitehall Stairs," said Wyatt. "Inform the sentries that you must see the Queen instantly in my behalf. My terms you will remember—possession of her person and of the Tower. Now go, and God be with ye."

I unshipped the oars and began to pull out into the dark gash of the Thames, making for Whitehall Palace, not far from where the Tower loomed up. The guns had ceased to fire, but it was clear that the guardians of the Tower were on the watch. In the heart of the Pool lay a dozen or more foreign merchantmen, heedless of the civil tumult. And it was strange that one man, pulling a rowboat against the current, should hold in his hands the destiny of England.

It seemed like a dream to me, as I slowly made my way toward the London side. Once I was seen from the Bridge, and a harquebus cracked, and the ball went whistling past me, but then I was in the deep gloom of the

Strange that one man, pulling a rowboat against the current, should hold in his hands the destiny of England.

night, and the shadows cast by the great arches of masonry.

I was a young man, my comradeship with Lady Catherine at the inn had made her glamorous in my eyes, and yet I realized that our aims lay hopelessly apart. For only by the defeat of Wyatt, and the discovery of the forged letter, purported to have been sent by Elizabeth, could Lady Catherine hope to save her brother from the block. To do which, she was willing to be a party to the treachery.

And I, who had not seen the Princess Elizabeth in the past eight years, remembered her girlish face in Whitehall Palace, and the masses of red-gold hair, the shapely hand she had extended to me, and my boyish pledge of loyalty. Not even the glamor of Lady Catherine Pelham should force me to abjure that pledge.

I was nearing Whitehall Stairs now, and saw the great Palace looming up before me. Out of the murk I saw cannon drawn up, and sentries patrolling the wharves. Suddenly there came a sharp challenge.

I did not answer it, but continued rowing steadily toward the Stairs. I saw men aiming harquebuses at me, but I guessed they would not fire upon a single oarsman.

So I pulled the boat alongside the wharf and cried to the officer in charge, "I am an envoy from Sir Thomas Wyatt, and must see Her Grace the Queen at once."

And then I stepped ashore.

CHAPTER VII
Whitehall Palace

IT WAS not until long later that I learned of the terror and confusion aroused in London by the news that Wyatt's troops were on the Southwark side of the river.

Nor that a little after midnight, that is to say, an hour or so earlier, that Queen Mary had been called from her bed by Bishop Gardiner and informed that all was lost; her barge was in waiting, and she must flee immediately.

She sent for Renard, the Spanish am-

bassador. "Shall I go or stay?" she asked him.

"Unless Your Grace desires to throw away your crown," he answered, "you will remain here till the last extremity. Your flight will be known, the city will rise, seize the Tower and free the prisoners; the heretics will massacre the priests, and your sister, Elizabeth, will be proclaimed Queen."

The lords of the Council, hastily summoned, were of divided opinions. Only Lord Pembroke cried that he would defend her to the last.

This scene was happening in Whitehall Palace when I was escorted through the gardens beside the Thames, and in by a back way, to the great chamber in which Queen Mary sat, with the lords grouped about her.

My message had preceded me. I could see a sudden stir as I entered, all heads were turned to look at me in the candlelight; only the Queen watched me, impassive on her chair of state, till of a sudden she recognized me, and a ringing laugh of mockery broke from her lips.

"Why, 'tis Master Knyvet, the son of that heretic, Sir Amyas!" she cried.

"No heretic, Madame, though I was imprisoned in the Tower six months for a cause I wot not of," I answered.

"Ha!" she cried, with her fierce Tudor anger. "You question our justice, sir?"

"Not yours, Madame," I answered, "but that of some gentlemen who are present." And I looked about me, and saw the white, uncertain faces—Pembroke's, Courtenay's, Arundel's, Gardiner's, and the butcher-face of bloody Bonner, Bishop of London.

Standing easily beside the Queen's chair was Renard, the ambassador of Spain, who had advised Mary not to flee. He was wearing the same long, furred robe that he had worn when he came to my cell in the Tower, and his eyes were bent earnestly upon my own.

"Well, sir, that is not our present business," said the Queen. "You bring me proposals from that detestable traitor, Sir Thomas Wyatt?"

"Aye, Madame," I answered boldly, for I was desperate enough to be reckless. "He demands the guardianship of your person, and possession of the Tower, that your projected marriage with Philip of Spain may be avoided."

Loud cries of indignation rang through the room. I had never seen men so moved. Only Renard continued watching me with the same impassive expression in his eyes. I saw the Queen turn toward him with a helpless gesture. He bent, and whispered in her ear.

"Aye," she cried, "I will speak with Master Knyvet and your Excellency apart!"

SHE rose from her chair with great dignity, and moved into a little anteroom, Renard beckoning to me to follow him. I saw Gardiner step forward, and Renard wave him back. In another moment I was facing the Queen, and Renard was at her side again, as always. He was the personal representative of the Emperor Charles, her cousin, and perhaps nearer to her than anybody.

But of course I did not know that it was he who had persuaded Mary to remain at Whitehall, when hope had largely been abandoned.

"Well, Master Knyvet?" asked the Queen. "Think you that Mary of England would for one moment consider such proposals as you have brought to me?"

"Madame, I have but acted as a humble messenger of Sir Thomas," I answered. "My task is but to receive your reply and transmit it to him."

"What does he plan, if I refuse?" Does he think to storm the Tower? Does he think my guards and the London train-bands are traitors?" she demanded.

I was silent, and she went on, "How large a force does this miscreant command?"

"That, Madame, is not within my authority to answer."

"What? You speak to me of authority, you who were released from the Tower to carry Sir Thomas a message—a message—?"

She broke off in some confusion there, for she could see I knew what the contents of the letter had been, and that I was aware I had been used as a tool in Bishop Gardiner's statecraft. And then heaven knows what madness came over me, to speak as I did, but I bent upon one knee before her.

"Your Grace," I said, "my father and I were ever true servants of yours, and it was through the lies of a traitor, my lord Maidstone, that I was arrested and confined within the Tower. Belike, Your Grace, three-fourths of those who have been placed in the same jeopardy are innocent, and would rally around your throne. I am no man of Sir Thomas's; I have but obeyed the duty that was placed upon me."

Her face seemed to soften somewhat, and for the first time, beneath the set mask of middle age, I saw something of the charm and beauty of her sister, something that life had robbed her of, with its cruelties. I went on, reckless now:

"Madame, I know not whether it is my kinship to the Boleyns that was the cause of my confinement, but, when I was a boy, I pledged myself ever to be the loyal servant of the Lady Elizabeth ——not in any treasonable conspiracy, but so far as a man can serve a kinswoman in all lawful ways. Madame, release her from the Tower, rally your subjects around you, let there be a general amnesty, and I will return to Sir Thomas with the most joyous news in the world, which will bring the rebellion instantly to an end."

I had gone too far. I had meddled in statecraft. I saw Renard looking as black as thunder. He bent to whisper in the Queen's ear, but she stood aside from him.

"You are audacious, Master Knyvet!" the Queen cried. "And you have confessed more than enough to send you to the block — the gallows, rather, since you are not of noble birth. I should commit you to the common hangman forthwith, but that, I suppose, an emissary's person is sacred, even though he come from a detestable traitor like Sir Thomas Wyatt.

"Return, return at once, sir, and tell him that the Queen will not parley with him, but will meet him man for man and gun for gun! And look to yourself, when as you fall into our hands again!"

GARDINER was in the room, subtle and sly, moving toward the Queen. "Madame, since this man's mission remains in doubt," he said, "he should be returned to the Tower."

"No, my lord Bishop," she answered decisively. "He has come as an emissary from a traitor, but, nevertheless, as an emissary. I charge you to see to it

that he be returned safely to the place from which he has come." And, turning aside from me, she spoke in a low voice to Renard, whereat I knew that my desperate plea for the Princess Elizabeth had failed. And I preferred liberty with Sir Thomas to the stone walls and wainscoting that I had come to hate so during my six months' imprisonment.

The Queen spoke again. "Aye, we defy all traitors," she said. "We have returned that message. See to it, my lord Bishop, that this man be permitted to depart unscathed."

So I went back into the Council Room, facing the dark, scowling faces, Pembroke's, Courtenay's, Arundel's; and God knows that all of them had been traitors to Queen Mary when they thought Queen Jane's star was in the ascendant. I saw now that only a victory on the part of Sir Thomas could save my Lady Elizabeth.

I walked through the Council Room with Gardiner, and he accompanied me to the head of the stairs. And then I had like to have died, for a man rushed at me, sword in hand, and, in the darkness, I recognized Lord Maidstone.

God knows whether it was the five thousand pounds he owed my father, or some natural antagonism, but his face was distorted with rage as he slashed at me, and yet I could see he was looking over my shoulder, as if to signal someone, and had no intention of pressing his attack home. I leaped aside just in time as a dark figure, wrapped in a cloak, hurled itself at me, and I saw the dagger gleaming in its hand.

I thrust as I leaped, and pierced the assassin through the side, so that he dropped, flailing and moaning. And I backed into the bushes, and there was Bishop Gardiner at my side, protesting:

"No, no, my lord Maidstone, he hath Her Grace's permission to depart."

"Would you let such a detestable traitor go free, my lord Bishop?" shouted Maidstone.

"It is the Queen's command," answered Gardiner.

"Then rest assured that I shall be at the foot of your gallows when you are hanged, and then cut down alive for dismemberment!" Lord Maidstone shouted.

"Aye," I answered, "I think that we shall meet again."

And I went on with Gardiner, toward the Stairs. But, in the brief space that I had been in the Palace, London seemed to have come to life. Bells were ringing from church steeples, couriers were galloping to and fro. A squadron of horse was gathering in front of the Palace, and behind them was an immense, silent crowd.

Were they for Sir Thomas or Queen Mary? That I could not know until the matter was put to the issue.

I entered my boat, and rowed hard toward the Southwark shore. I had hardly dreamed that I should escape thus easily, after placing my life in jeopardy.

Half-an-hour later I was with Sir Thomas and his force upon the Southwark shore. I gave him the message that I had received from the Queen.

He tugged at his beard. "Then let the accursed woman perish!" he shouted. "You ride with us, Master Knyvet?"

"I ride with you," I answered. For I saw that only the success of Sir Thomas's enterprise would save the Lady Elizabeth from the block. And, if it failed, I meant to possess myself of that forged letter of Gardiner's.

CHAPTER VIII

The Ride on London

LOOKING back, as our column unwound itself from the houses of Southwark, I was amazed to see that not more than some fifteen hundred of our troops remained. The rest, disheartened, had stolen away in the darkness.

Lady Catherine spurred her horse beside mine. "Aye, and what did I tell you" she scoffed. "That this crackbrained enterprise must fail. Sir Thomas goes like a wild beast into a trap, and his tatterdemalion army will melt away like snow in spring. Now, if you have any sense, Master Knyvet—"

"What then?"

"I am ready to vouch for you, and say you have fulfilled your compact."

"And the Lady Elizabeth?"

"Let her die!" she cried violently.

"Yes," I said, "you have ever been a traitress."

She swung toward me in her saddle. "I am no traitress," she answered. "But, between her life and my brother's, I have told you which I choose. Leave Sir Thomas, leave him to ride to his doom. I will go with you wherever you choose to take me, and we will submit ourselves to the Queen's mercy when this enterprise has reached its end, its inevitable end."

"I shall ride with Sir Thomas," I said.

"You think to get that paper?" Her voice was bitter. "Ah, what is the good?" she cried. "Words, words, and we two must be enemies. Leave me, Master Knyvet, leave me!"

So I fell back a little from her bridle, and we rode on in silence. In my mind was the sole determination to get that paper from Sir Thomas, and save the Princess from the block. Of the issue of the approaching fight I, too, had little doubt, as I saw our little force steadily dwindling in the darkness.

The day dawned slowly, with the same wild, wintry weather, and a great splash of saffron where the sun should have been. A cold rain lashed our horses. There was a brief halt, perforce, to rest them. Then on again, until we entered the little town of Kingston, to find every house barred, and the town apparently deserted.

Stretching across the Thames, which was much narrower now, I saw the bridge. In the center, some thirty feet of it had been hewn away, and our approach was met with scattered harquebus fire from a small detachment of royalist troops upon the other shore. The guns were hurriedly brought up, and a few rounds dispersed our adversaries. There was a string of barges opposite, and three of our men swam across the icy water, attached ropes to them, and towed them over, placing them in position to fill the gap in the bridge.

From a sawmill, beams and planks were procured, and laid across, and within an hour or two a road was made of sufficient strength to bear the weight of our artillery.

IT WAS late afternoon when at length we assembled our forces on the north bank of the Thames. The crossing had been accomplished, but now barely more than a thousand men remained with us, desperate and proscribed men who preferred the risk of the enterprise to inevitable death upon the gallows. The weather was growing even wilder, a gale whipped the Thames, the road was a morass. Time and again the guns

stuck fast, and fresh horses had to be attached to drag them forward.

His officers pleaded with Sir Thomas to leave the guns behind, and press on without them. Everything, they told him, depended upon speed. But he, with dogged obstinacy, insisted that the guns should accompany us, and sometimes they would stick two or three times within a hundred paces.

Time was passing, passing, and I could see that Sir Thomas, having entered upon his desperate scheme, had become besotted. He was mad, perhaps we were all mad, a thousand men attacking the greatest city on earth. My madness, at least, had a method behind it. "Keep Faith," is my family motto. I meant to keep faith, at all cost, with my mistress in the Tower, though doubtless she had long since forgotten me.

Meanwhile, brooding and silent, Lady Catherine rode a good distance away from me.

None of us could guess what had happened at Whitehall since I had left, hearing Queen Mary's resolute defiance of Sir Thomas. As I learned later, there had been more disputations, and this time Lords Courtenay and Arundel joined Renard in their advice to her to remain.

Meanwhile, drums were summoning the train-bands to muster at Charing Cross. The conduct of Pembroke determined the decision of the young lords and gentlemen about the court. By eight in the morning ten thousand men were stationed along the open fields between Piccadilly and Pall Mall, and four squadrons of horse were in ambush at Hyde Park Corner.

Of all this we knew nothing, as we pressed steadily on, dragging the cumbrous field-pieces; all our horses, pressed into service as draught-beasts in turn, sweating and fatigued, and useless for battle.

Those guns, always those guns! Time and again Sir Thomas's officers implored him to leave them, arguing that the four pieces of light artillery would count for nothing unless London opened her arms to us. Always they were met with the same unyielding refusal. And time was passing.

There were now no more than eight hundred men in our little, desperate army. Lady Catherine still rode apart from me; she had not spoken a word to me since our last argument. We were all weary and spent for lack of sleep and food, and I think we all knew the doom that was at hand. All the future seemed as black as the moonless night through which we were now riding, our horses walking slowly, that our infantry might keep up with them, and everything splashed with mud.

And even our eight hundred was decreasing. Harper, who had played traitor to the Duke of Norfolk, and joined us, had ridden away, to win a pardon by carrying to Mary news of our desperate plight. Brett, the second traitor, had galloped south to make for one of the Channel ports. On through the second night—on toward London!

DAY dawned at last, in the same storm of wind and rain, and now we began to hear the faintly sounding bugles and thudding drums of the royalists, and knew that the issue was being set.

That faint, incessant rolling of the drums must have troubled the nerves of many among our little force. It rose, it fell, but it went on and on, and never

ceased. We were entering the outskirts of London now, mostly low, marshy fields, with here and there a farm, and here and there the country house of some nobleman. Wet, hungry, faint with fatigue, we rode through the village of Kensington, and up the hill from Knightsbridge, struggling on in a disordered mass.

Whether Sir Thomas believed that our appearance would be sufficient to win success, or whether he knew in his heart the doom awaiting us, God knows, but he made no attempt to form ranks. We horsemen were already some distance ahead of the footsore infantry, the guns were dragging on; we were nearing Hyde Park Corner when suddenly, with exultant shouts, Lord Pembroke's four squadrons of horsemen hurled themselves at us.

I strove to force my horse into the melée. But it was at our rearguard, our infantry, that the squadrons had hurled themselves, and now they were among them, cutting them down.

The resistance was of the briefest. Weary and dispirited, Wyatt's soldiers threw down their arms and cried for quarter. I shouted, and strove to get our horse into line for a charge. I cried, and waved my sword. But, to my amazement, Wyatt was spurring up the street.

He turned in his saddle. "On! On!" he shouted. "On to the Guildhall." And rode up the street alone.

There had still been the chance, I think, to have retrieved the day by a charge upon Pembroke's horsemen, for they were all disordered, and most of them engaged in taking prisoners. But Wyatt's fatal obstinacy had sealed our doom.

For, while the half of our horse would have followed me, the rest rode after Wyatt, and I saw that we must perforce follow him, in the last hope of arousing the city, leaving our infantry to its fate.

And there was Lady Catherine at my side, her eyes fearless and wide, and fixed on mine in a derisive smile.

I knew that she meant to see that forged document nailed to the Guildhall doors, or, in default, see that it was taken from Sir Thomas or his dead body.

I felt a surge of bitter hate against her. I shook my fist at her, and cried out. My cries were lost in the uproar, but I could see her smile of understanding as she spurred her horse up the street in Wyatt's wake.

So I followed him, and we left half our little army prisoners in the hands of the royalists.

SUDDENLY, from a hidden nook among the trees, a battery of guns opened, and the round-shot knocked four of our men and their horses into broken heaps. Wyatt, mad with desperation, spurred his horse straight at the guns, and we followed, cutting down the gunners, and sending the company in headlong flight.

But now on the right the London train-bands, in their white coats, were coming up, while the streets were crowded with citizens, watching our four hundred desperate horsemen, as if it had been a play.

Wyatt rose in his stirrups and waved his sword. "To the Guildhall!" he cried. "On! On!"

He saw the train-bands forming, and, to avoid engaging them, led our pitiful four hundred down toward Saint James. Here, however, the crowds pressed so

thickly about us that we were forced into separate ways. And, looking at them, it was impossible to say whether they were for Wyatt or for Queen Mary.

They were gaping, open-mouthed, at the sight of us, and I think hardly a man among them had any principle for either side. They were watching a show. Yes, I knew that. And I spurred toward Wyatt's side. He was a madman, but he should not take my lady Elizabeth to the block with him.

We were herded by the mob down a narrow street. When first I looked back, there might have been fifty of us, but presently there were but twenty-five. Through the staring muttering crowds we rode, and always close beside me was Lady Catherine. I knew her errand, and she knew mine.

That last ride had become a sort of comic tourney by the time we forced our way through the citizens who stood thick along Pall Mall. Not a man advanced, not a hand was lifted for or against us. Mute, gaping, they watched us, reluctantly giving way a pace or two when we forced our horses into their midst.

So on to Charing Cross, where I saw a company of archers fitting arrows to their bows, to aim at us. But the press was too thick for them to fire. Sir Thomas turned his horse aside and rode along the Strand, past Temple Bar and Fleet Street, and so we moved toward Ludgate, with only a tiny troop of our men following us, and the crowds pressing ever more thickly.

I wondered, and I wonder still what was in Wyatt's mind. Did he still count on London rising in his favor? We were like rats being driven into a trap, riding on and on, forced on by the multitudes who were swarming about us, eager to see the show out to its ending.

And so we came to Ludgate, and the gate was closed against us.

"AVAUNT, traitor, thou shalt not come in here!" cried Lord Howard, the officer on guard, as Wyatt hammered madly against the iron bars.

The crowd pressed still more thickly about us. We were ended now. I saw some of our troop leap from their horses and try to flee into the by-streets, but they could not force their way through the mob. Behind the Ludgate stood a troop of harquebusiers, with their fingers pressed to the triggers of their weapons, ready to fire.

"I have kept touch," said Sir Thomas, and slowly got down from his horse. He made his way a little apart, and sat down on a bench outside the Belle Sauvage Yard, and the dozen or so of us who still remained with him dismounted too, and we took up our stations about him, with our swords drawn.

My time had come now. I touched Sir Thomas on the arm, and, as he turned his vacant eyes upon my face, as if he did not know me, whispered, "Sir, that letter from the Lady Elizabeth—it must be destroyed. You would not send her to the block?"

"No," muttered Wyatt, "no."

But still he made no movement He was too far lost to recollect that it was in his possession. So I reached beneath his armpit and tugged at the pouch he wore there. And then, as I held it in my hand, Lady Catherine snatched it away from me.

She sprang at me with such vicious fury, that she all but got the pouch out of my hand. The strings of it came

She was desperate, she was at my face with raking claws . . .

apart, and there, on top of the documents, many of which were destined to send others to the block, I saw the forged paper, with the name of Elizabeth in great black lettering.

Lady Catherine tore at it, and a corner came away. She was desperate, she was at my face with raking nails, and I struck her with my fist upon the cheek, and sent her staggering back. There I stood, the paper in my hand, with Sir Thomas, witless as if he had become demented, seated upon his bench in La Belle Sauvage Yard, and the spectators thick about us, amazed to see a man and a woman fighting so desperately.

Suddenly someone shouted, "'Tis the papers of the traitor! Seize them!"

There followed a surge among the crowd, some pressing toward us, but others holding them back, and crying out that it would be well if all treasonable papers could be destroyed, that too much blood had already been shed in England. And, in the midst of the argument, Lady Catherine came at me again, and I dealt her a buffet that stretched her upon the ground.

The mob cried out angrily at me for that, but, God help me, there was nothing else that I could do. I tore the stiff paper in half, and I tore the halves across again, and then I tore each fragment separately, and let them float away upon the wind. So swiftly they flew, and so small had I torn them, that I knew they could never be recovered and patched together, and I had saved the Lady Elizabeth.

LADY CATHERINE was on her feet again, and stood confronting me, a red flush staining her cheek where I had struck her.

"Fool, fool!" she cried. "You shall go to the gallows for the knave you are! Friends," she cried to the populace, "that paper was from the Princess Elizabeth to this traitor, Sir Thomas Wyatt, making her privy to his con-

spiracy against our Sovereign Lady, Queen Mary!"

"Marry, then, how comes it that you rode with him, Mistress?" asked one of the crowd.

She made no answer, but ran to the Ludgate, and began to hammer on it. "Let me in," she cried. "I am on the Queen's business, and must be taken instantly to Whitehall."

Slowly, slowly the gate began to open. I watched, as if in some wretched nightmare, seated now beside Sir Thomas, and our steeds standing by, all our men gone, and the crowds pressing more and more closely upon us. Then the Lady Catherine was gone through, gone out of my life forever. But in my heart was a great joy, for I realized that I had played the part I had meant to play.

Well, from the first we had been destined to be enemies, and I should never see her again. And I felt an immense triumph that I had destroyed the forged document and outwitted Gardiner and the bloody Queen.

Through the mob I saw some of Pembroke's horsemen trying to force their way toward us. "Yield ye! Yield ye!" they were crying. And then, with one of those sudden shifts of feeling that seize upon crowds, the mob was threatening us and screaming death to the traitor.

Our horses had already been seized and led away. On foot, with my sword in my hand, I followed Sir Thomas, expecting every moment to feel a dagger in my back.

I think he knew not whither he was going, but he forced a passage through the crowd with his sword, Pembroke's horsemen still trying to reach us through the narrow streets. Back we went along Fleet Street as far as Temple Bar, which is the entrance to the city, and there a royal herald stood, tricked out in all his uniform.

He cried to Wyatt, "Sir, ye were best to yield. The day is gone against you. Perchance ye may find the Queen merciful."

For a few moments Sir Thomas stood motionless, while the crowd watched him; then he sighed deeply and handed the royal messenger his sword.

But a man burst through the crowd, raging toward me, as I was in the act of surrendering mine. "Death to the traitors!" he cried, and thrust at me And I recognized Maidstone.

At the sight of him a sudden fury filled me. I gave him point for point, while the mob fell back, some crying for the one of us and some for the other. But, as our swords clashed, I knew that Maidstone's double-dealing was over. I felt that supremacy a swordsman knows, when he has right, justice, and honor behind him, and a treacherous sword before.

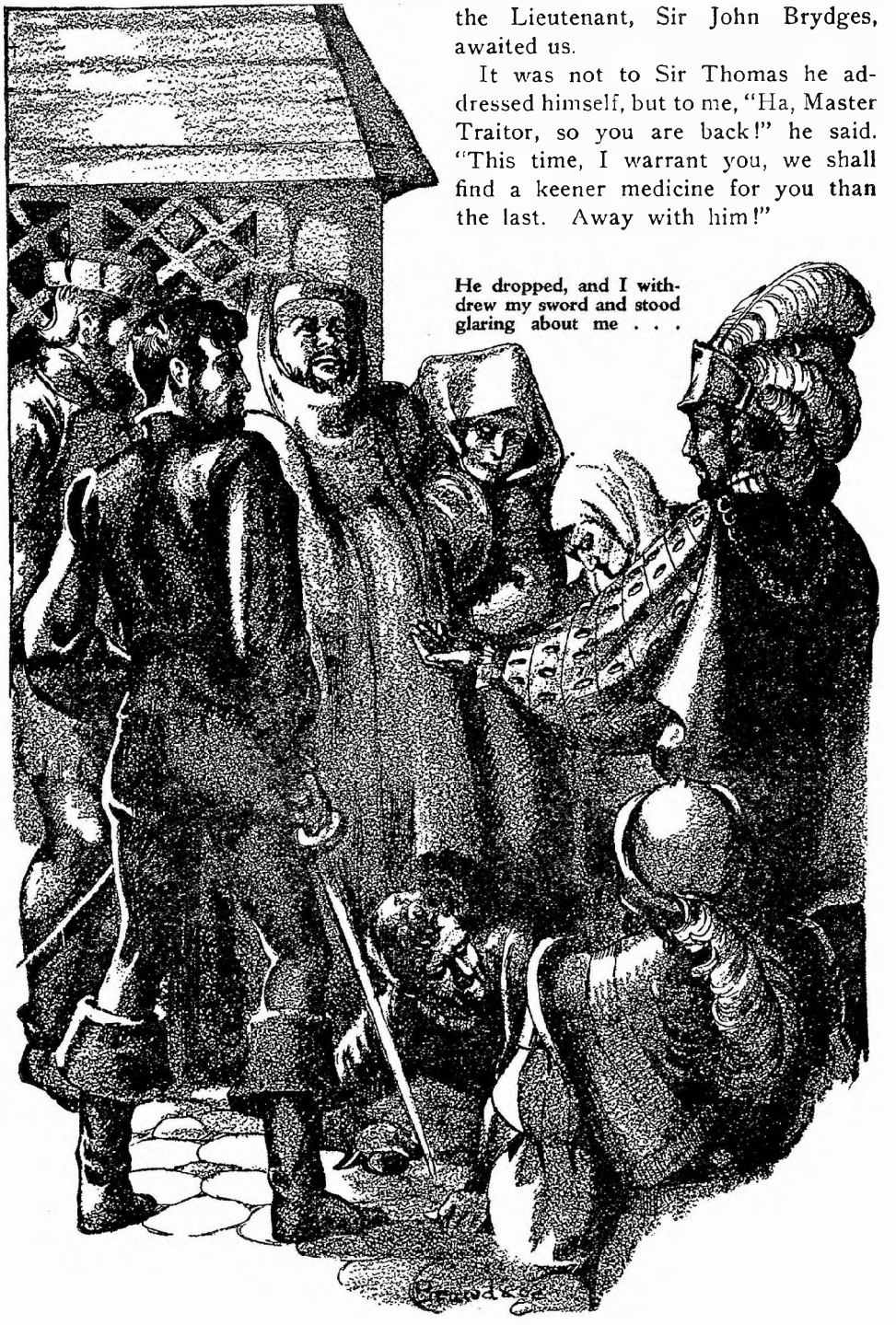
I clashed through his guard, and pierced him to the heart. He dropped, and I withdrew my sword and stood glaring about me over the body of the dead man. Then silently I reversed the weapon and handed it to the herald.

Next moment Pembroke's guard had burst through, and we were surrounded, and being led back through the Strand to Westminster. From a window in Whitehall Palace, they say Queen Mary herself watched us, and now the throng was all for her, and howling about us. And so to Whitehall Stairs, and thence by barge to the Tower, Sir Thomas and I.

We ascended the dripping steps, and walked between our guards to where

the Lieutenant, Sir John Brydges, awaited us.

It was not to Sir Thomas he addressed himself, but to me, "Ha, Master Traitor, so you are back!" he said. "This time, I warrant you, we shall find a keener medicine for you than the last. Away with him!"



He dropped, and I withdrew my sword and stood glaring about me . . .

CHAPTER IX

Prisoner of the Tower

IT WAS not to my own cell that I was taken, but to one of the dungeons at the level of the water, little better than an *oubliette,* and dimly lighted by a tiny opening overhead. Water dripped constantly from the walls. For bed, I had a paillasse of straw; for food, bread, water, and a little meat. Heat there was none.

And there I lay, while the weeks went by, awaiting the end. I knew that I must be tried by a petty jury before I could be condemned, but I saw no hope of an acquittal, and I knew that no explanations of State would even be allowed. I guessed that I was like to be tortured, to exact confession of the Lady Elizabeth's complicity in the uprising. But I was resolved that no word of implication should pass my lips.

For one long spell I lay there, alternately shivering and burning with fever, believing that my death was at hand, and that I should escape them all. But slowly I began to mend, and now I had nought to look forward to, save the half-hanging and the knife of the executioner.

Sometimes the face of Catherine would come before me, scornful, furious, and, though I knew I loved her, I would not have exchanged my fate for the lot that she had bidden me play. Day after day, night after night went by, hardly distinguishable in my dungeon, yet each morning I looked eagerly for the summons that would be the beginning of the end, even though it must mean first the rack.

I had faintly heard the joy-bells of London pealing for the royal victory. I wondered sometimes why my trial and execution were deferred. But for the most part I remained in a dull apathy.

The fellow who brought me my daily rations must have been under strict orders not to communicate with me, for he had never spoken a word to me —nor I to him. But there came one day—how long after my imprisonment began, I do not know—when, after setting down my coarse fare in the half-light, he stopped in the entrance, and stood looking at me, and grinning.

"What is the matter, fool?" I snarled at him.

"Eh, great news, Master Knyvet, great news," he answered. And, as I only looked at him in silence, he added:

"Lady Jane Grey and her husband felt the edge of the headsman's axe upon their necks some days agone, and this morning that detestable traitor, Sir Thomas Wyatt. Maybe there will be a score more, for the Queen's blood is up, they say. But for you common rogues the gallows, seeing you are not even knight, let alone of the nobility. Ah, and it is a pretty sight to see the gibbets, and the wretches dangling from them in Saint Paul's Churchyard, and on London Bridge. So perish all enemies of our Queen. Be prepared, Master Knyvet, for your time is short."

"And the Princess Elizabeth?" I asked. "Has that foul monster in woman's form put her to death likewise?"

"Treason, treason!" he roared. "Ask me not concerning secrets of State, but be ready to meet your doom. Ah, the rack will disjoint those pretty limbs of yours, Master Knyvet, and you shall be half-hanged, then drawn and quar-

tered. So die all Queen Mary's enemies!"

And he went out, leaving me to my reflections. At least, I thought, the end was close at hand.

THE news that Mary had permitted the execution of Lady Jane Grey, a girl of eighteen, who had been made queen against her inclinations, showed me that there was no spark of pity in Mary's heart, though Wyatt's execution was the natural penalty for a rebellion that had failed. For myself—no mercy, of course; yet why was I kept here?

I must have passed into one of the torpors that affected me, for suddenly I started up at the sound of a key grating in my cell door, and discovered that it was night again.

Guards stood there with flambeaux, and, among them, the Lieutenant, Sir John Brydges, who looked at me in his stern manner.

"Come, Master Knyvet," he said. "Your presence is required elsewhere."

To the rack, I thought, to the torture-chamber underneath the Tower. But I answered nothing, only gathered my cloak about me and limped toward the door, for I could hardly stand from weakness, let alone walk. As I moved out of that horrid place, a guard with a halberd fell into step on either side of me.

Yet I perceived that I was not being conducted down toward the torture-dungeon, but up a long, winding staircase, leading into a turret, and thence into a room. There, in the entrance, I stopped in amazement. The room, which was fairly furnished, was filled with a number of people, and warmed by a cheerful fire, which, after my weeks in the dungeon, was intolerably hot.

I saw red-faced Bonner, Bishop of London, and Lady Catherine, whom I had thought never to see again, wearing a cloak with miniver, another lady, Renard in his furred robe, and two gentlemen with dark faces and pointed beards, wearing big Spanish ruffs. And the Queen herself, leaning upon the arm of a Spanish cavalier, who wore an order upon his breast.

I knew him at first sight. It was her betrothed, Philip of Spain. I saw her glance up into his face with an expression at once so loving and so pitiful, so different from the harsh look she customarily wore, that my amazement only permitted me to fall upon one knee before her. And I waited, not even raising my eyes to hers.

"Well, sir?" That voice was harsh, the voice of the woman who had sent hundreds to their death, by the gibbet and axe, and at the stake. "Well, sir, touching on your murdering of my lord Maidstone?"

But that was the purring of the cat when it plays with its victim. Queen Mary had not come to the Tower to speak about Lord Maidstone.

"My lord Maidstone was a rogue, Madame," I replied. "It was to avoid repayment of a debt to my father that he persuaded the lords of the Council to arrest me. He tried to assassinate me on that night when I was sent as emissary to you at Whitehall Palace, hiring a bravo to dispatch me in the back, while he attacked me with his sword.

"Moreover, my lord Maidstone had it in mind to secure a certain document of State, not to place it at the disposition of Your Grace, but to use it

to further his own ends, whereby Your Grace's orders were jeopardized."

"Ha, you speak boldly, Master Knyvet! Well what of the commission with which we entrusted you?"

"Madame, I strictly fulfilled it, as I call Lady Catherine Pelham to witness. Natheless, had I known that I was being used as a tool by the Council"—I would not mention Gardiner's name—"I might have preferred the Tower."

"He—speaks—boldly," whispered the Queen in Spanish, to Philip, upon whose arm she leaned.

SHE turned to me again. "The Queen of England," she said, "looks not with favor upon a subject who betrays her, and joins the forces of a detestable traitor."

My anger overcame me. I had risen, I stood respectfully before her, but I would speak—I would speak, and afterward they could rack me and gibbet me if they chose.

"Madam, that was a forged letter," I said "Your Grace was betrayed by false counsellors." I had sense enough to say that, although of course Mary had been privy to the forgery. "And, even had I not Boleyn blood in me, I would be no party to sending an innocent woman to the block. Wherefore I fulfilled Your Grace's commission to the letter, and afterward acted as seemed best to me."

"How now? How now? Darest speak so to Her Grace?" stuttered Bishop Bonner. "Madame, this fellow's insolence overrides all bounds."

Now hitherto I had seen Queen Mary only as the stern-mannered daughter of old King Harry the Eighth, the very soul of a man embodied in a woman. And for a moment, as she knit her heavy brows in amazement at my audacity, I anticipated nothing but the utmost torture as my destiny. And then, to my astonishment, suddenly she began to weep.

Aye, and she clung the more closely to the arm of her betrothed, while he stood there with his attendant cavaliers, so much younger than the poor Queen, so obviously disconcerted by her reliance on him. For to him the English marriage was a matter of statecraft, and to Mary—well, she was a woman. I saw the ladies, Lady Catherine among them, looking at me aghast.

"Oh, I am tired," cried Mary. "I am tired of the plots, the treacheries that encompass me, the blood that I have been compelled to shed to save my realm. Guide me, my lord," she cried to Philip, speaking in English now, though he understood hardly a word of our speech. "Help me to be a mild and gentle queen, for all this was none of my desire. Let us go, my lord prince, let us go." She turned to Bishop Bonner. "Deal you with this man as I have required of you," she said.

And she passed out of the chamber with Philip, and the two cavaliers, and the lady who attended her. Only Lady Catherine remained, at a signal from Bonner. And we three remained there, hearing the tread of the royal party along the corridor, while two guards remained outside the door with halberds.

BISHOP BONNER strode to the door and closed it in their faces. He came up to me and stood surveying me as if I had been some queer animal, coarse, red-faced and yet not without a certain look of joviality and

Lady Catherine

good-humor. He was a bloody ruffian, and yet I had heard of this trait in him before.

"Master Kenneth Knyvet, if God ever created another fool so reckless as yourself, I have yet to meet him," he said. "You betrayed your trust, you committed high treason, and you dared to insult Her Grace to her face."

"Well, my lord Bishop," I answered, "you were doubtless aware that I was sent on a false mission, aye, and like to be assassinated before I had passed through Southwark."

He waved the reply aside as if it had no significance. And yet it seemed to amuse him, coarse ruffian though he was.

"Now listen, sir," he said. "Her Grace has been advised that enough blood has been shed to atone for Wyatt's foul conspiracy, and, since Philip of Spain hath arrived in England, she is in a merciful mood. You have had the narrowest escape I wot of, since you were to have been racked, as soon as sufficient evidence had been procured against another prisoner, and your evidence would have sent her to the block."

"I should never have opened my lips," I said.

He smiled as I had been a child; Bonner knew, if anybody did, the power of the rack.

"This, sir, is no matter of secret statecraft," he continued, "wherefore I may speak freely. Her Grace hath lately become reconciled with her sister, and it is deemed unadvised to pursue the matter further. And, since you have been pardoned for your share in that traitor's rising, and there exists nothing more against you, you are free to depart for your estates."

I could hardly see him then. My knees were weakened, but, through the haze that filled the room, I saw Lady Catherine smile kindly at me.

Bonner clapped me upon the shoulder. "You are a very fortunate young man, Master Knyvet," he said. "Come! Horses are waiting at the Tower gate, and you may be on your way so soon as you will."

As in a dream, not daring to believe, I followed him from the chamber, and the halberdiers followed us, and so we went downstairs until we reached the office of Sir John Brydges.

The stern features of the Lieutenant relaxed a little as he looked at me. He gave me his hand. "Good fortune, Master Knyvet," he said, "and see that you come not here again, for the Tower is no inn, and there be few ways of egress herefrom, save by way of the Green."

He meant the green space on which the scaffold stood.

And yet I could scarce believe that I was free, until I found myself standing beside Lady Catherine and a young man, with six saddled horses, and three attendant grooms.

"My brother," said Lady Catherine, and began to sob. "Fare you well now, Master Knyvet."

NOW here was the crisis of my career. For I forgot the young man and the grooms; I only knew that, if I left the Lady Catherine now, I should never see her again. So I took her hands in mine.

"It is hard to part after our comradeship, even though it was one of hostility," I said. "I go to my estates, three days' journey distant, and may never return to London."

"And I to my brother's" she answered, and looked about her at the silent streets, over which the dawn was just beginning to break.

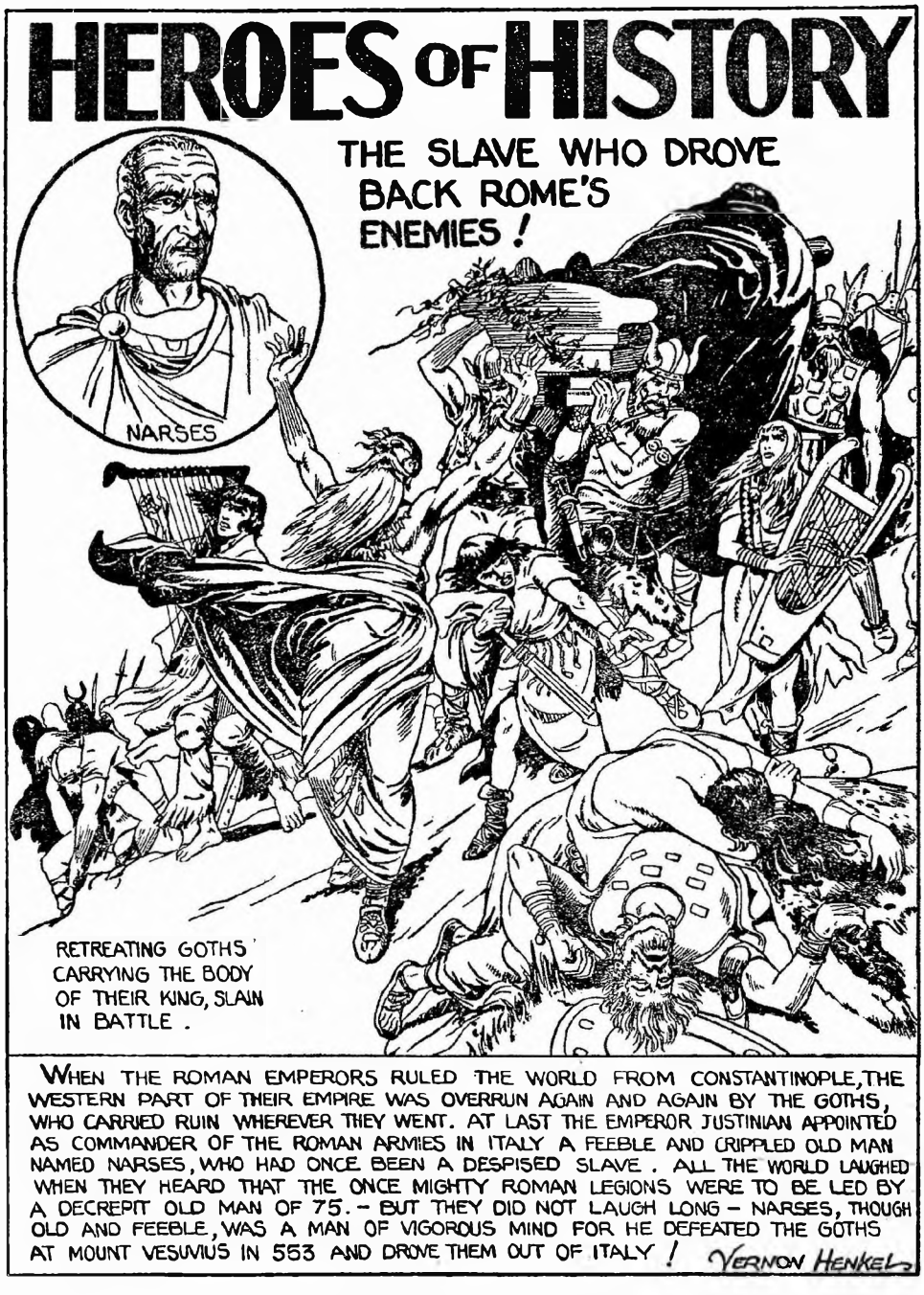
"Well, sir, and if I agreed with you—what then?" she asked.

"Ride with me, Lady Catherine, and your brother, too. Aye, let us ride together, as we rode with Sir Thomas."

"But not that way," she answered, shuddering. But I saw a sudden tenderness in her eyes, a sudden yielding, as if a mask had fallen from her.

"I love you, Lady Catherine," I said.

"And will you beat me, sir?" she answered. "Ah, Kenneth!" she added softly.



Let us know how you like this new feature.—The Editors

"Slay them, lads!" roared Peter, aflame with blood-lust. "Kill these devils and we have loot and to spare! Out swords! At them!"

by
MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrated by
H. W. McCAULEY

SWORDS AND MONGOLS

CHAPTER I

SNOW fell softly upon the Roof of the World from leaden gray clouds that seemed to hang no more than an arrow-flight above the trail. Everywhere there was an extraordinary hush. No wind blew. The snow-crystals floated down softly and covered up certain unsightly objects by the trail's edge. There was a donkey, gray and stiff, already half-buried. The drifting flakes made a paler coating over his angular hind-legs and bit by bit blended him with the pure white pall that covered all things nearby. A little farther on there was a man. He sat bolt upright, half-naked and agonized, astoundingly lifelike in his misery. But he was dead, of course. Most things were dead along this trail, because it was the year of our Lord 1220 and the Mongols had passed this way a year since, and there was nothing left living

which once had lived here. What few things yet moved obeyed the orders of the Destroyer, Ghengis Khan, King of Thrones and Men, or else they died. And unless they happened to be Mongols—the keen, wiry riders of Chepé Noyon or Subotai, or broadfaced Buriats or Kurgiz — even those who obeyed the orders of the Great Khan did not live long.

The two armed men who watched the trail, therefore, were anomalous. Their shapeless sheepskin clothing gave no clue of race, but neither of them had the slit-like slanted eyes of Mongols. Their faces were weather-worn, but though the eyes of the smaller man were brown enough, those of the larger huddle of sheepskins were blue.

They lay in silence, regarding the trail with the indifferent calm of men who wait without especial hope.

The big man yawned and shifted his sword for greater comfort.

"A-ah!" he grunted. "This quest of thine is folly, Peter."

"It may be," assented Peter, "but it was an oath. It was thy oath also, Hugh. And Damara is not slain."

"I did not trust him," rumbled the big man. "I do not trust him now. And our heads, and those who follow us, will not be fixed firm on our necks within a thousand miles. This is folly!"

But he settled himself more comfortably to watch the trail.

THERE came a vague, indeterminate noise from somewhere amid the drifting snow. The smaller man, Peter, held up his hand for silence. The sound grew slowly nearer. It was hard to say of just what it consisted. The soft shuffling of bare, weary feet. Panting breaths. Coughings, of men from the warm lowlands of Kharesmia—it was to be Persia in later days—dying slowly upon their feet as the thin, icy air ate into their lungs. And there were groans, perhaps, and mutterings which were akin to babblings, certainly. But there was no song.

A vague mass appeared through the misty veil of falling snow. Men. They came slowly onward. Some of them were clothed, and some were half-naked and blue with the cold. Some tramped resolutely, their heads bent. Some staggered. One fell, abreast the two watchers. He struggled to his hands and knees, and collapsed again. The others of the desolate train moved drearily aside as they passed him.

There came a slim figure, walking doggedly. It was more fully clothed than the rest. It held its head high. When it came to the fallen man it paused. It offered to help him upright again. The watchers heard but a muted murmur of voices, but the man in the snow shook his head resignedly. He lay still, the picture of exhaustion and despair.

That pause was holding back the mob. A murmur arose, with terror in it. Those beyond the youth pushed him on. Some few of them even managed to run a few dragging steps in their haste not to cause delay. The terrible, limping procession filed onward.

And then the guard came into view. It was one man, one man only, on a long-haired, shaggy pony, smaller than the horses of Europe. A broad, squat, fur-swathed figure, riding negligently with a slender lance slung behind him.

That rider saw the man lying in the snow. He moved, and the red lacquer of his armor showed beneath his furs. The lance came around. He did not spur his horse. It moved on at the same even walk. But the rider did rein

in at the fallen man. There was a choking cry as the lance went home. It drew back and went home again. Three times.

The rider raised the lance-tip and went on at the same even, leisurely walk behind the hopeless mob of foot-sore men.

Up on the hillside something like a struggle was going on. The big man had unslung his bow and strung it before Peter realized the purpose of his movement. But he seized his companion in a savage grip.

"Fool!" he snapped in a whisper. "What is this?"

There was a choking cry as the lance went home.

"I'll kill yon Mongol," rumbled the big man angrily. "He slew that poor devil—"

"Fool!" snapped Peter again. "Kill him? These captives have lost all spirit and *we* could not take them! They would go on to the next horse-post station and bleat that their guard was killed by arrows from the hills! Then the guard there would come—"

"We can slay that guard also!"

"Fool!" snapped Peter for the third time. "Thou knowest the Mongols! They would slaughter every living thing within a hundred miles! Can we beat off the Mongol horde entire?"

THE big man subsided furiously, rumbling. The pony-mounted guard faded away in the mist of falling snow.

The faint, indeterminate sound of the trudging captives died away with him. The two who watched the trail, scowling, seemed to forget it. Which was as well, because there were many such trains of hopeless ones in that year of our Lord 1220. The armies of the Destroyer, Ghengis Khan, had invaded Kharesmia. And having invaded it, the Mongols did not only conquer it. They destroyed it. The handsomer women they kept alive — for a time. The stronger men they worked to death at their siege-engines. Other men, and children, and women too old to be desirable, they butchered. Only a very few folk were spared and sent back across the Roof of the World to Karakorum, and they were artisans who made things such as no Mongol was ever able to contrive. They traveled in just such hopeless trains as these, too dispirited to attempt flight. It would have been hopeless in any case. The Mongols had slaughtered not only human beings; but even the wild beasts were few and shy and half-starved where the Horde had passed.

Slowly the leaden skies grew darker. The gray twilight of the Roof of the World deepened into darkness. The two who watched the trail arose, half-buried in snow, and shook themselves free of the clinging stuff.

"If more such convoys come," said Peter, "we could not tell Damara in the dark."

The big man grunted an assent. The two of them attacked a steep slope. During their climb Peter was silent, but when he had reached the top he said abruptly:

"It is my thought that we shall never find Damara in this fashion."

"Good!" grunted the big man. "Then we stop this folly and look to our own heads?"

"No!" snapped Peter. "I begin a greater folly. I become a captive of the Mongols."

"Hah!" growled the big man. "Mad and ever yet more mad! I'll break thy head for thee yet."

But he made no move to carry out his threat. They forced their way through the feathery snow for half a mile or more. Then an abrupt declivity, a silent greeting by a bundle of sheepskins which was a man on watch, and they half tumbled and half slid down into what should have been no more than a dream. It was an encampment of some forty hard-bitten ruffians neither dead nor subject to the orders of the Kha Khan who was Lord over Life and Death and Master of Kings. On the Roof of the World, in the year 1220, with Kharesmia being turned painstakingly from a populous empire into a grazing-ground, the existence of such a force was something close to sheer impossibility.

CHAPTER II

BUT many impossible things happened in those days. When the Emperor Muhammad of Kharesmia marched northward to meet the Mongols, it had seemed impossible for him to be defeated. In his army were four hundred thousand men, and the Mongols had had a march of twelve hundred miles to reach his dominions. The Emperor Muhammad felt so confident of success that in his train he carried the Georgian Princess Thamar to be married to his son Jelel-ed-Din. A bride of such beauty would be a suitable reward for the bravery Jelel-ed-Din would doubtless display. And the

Kharesmian prince did display that bravery in full measure. But the army of the Emperor Muhammad lost one hundred and sixty thousand men in its first battle with less than one-fifth of the Mongol horde. Bokhara was taken and sacked within three days of the appearance of the Mongols before its walls. Samarkand fell in exactly two weeks.

Within two months of the appearance of the first Mongols in Kharesmia, the Emperor Muhammad was a fugitive in full flight across three kingdoms, being hunted by two *tumans* of Mongols under Chepé Noyon and Subotai. Jelel-ed-Din was fighting desperately with armies that melted away about him, careless of such things as rewards for valor, seeking only to preserve his life and lands. And the Princess Thamar had vanished from human sight in the welter of captives which were regarded by the Mongols exactly as so many domestic animals. This, it was said, annoyed the Mongol Khan. He would have added her either to his own harem or to that of one of his generals. And that was nearly an impossibility, too;—that even the most vagrant fancy of the Destroyer should not instantly be gratified. But the most impossible thing of all was the exploit of Peter Fletcher and his companion Hugh.

They had come into Kharesmia with a party of Persian merchants led by Damara. He had encountered the pair in Antioch, though no man and least of all themselves could have told why they were wandering in the East. He'd proposed a splendid coup to them, no less than the raiding of the treasury of the Emperor Muhammad. They had raised a guard for Damara's merchant-caravans, Peter bullying the Oriental swordsmen into the use of longer and straighter swords as well as the habit of using the point in addition to the edge, while Hugh hammered into the archers the practice of drawing their bows to the ear instead of the breast only. That guard, they and Damara considered, would be a good nucleus for the force needed to raid an Emperor's treasure-house and make a hard-riding escape afterward.

And the approach of war seemed to fit in with their plans. The caravan-guard of ruffians expanded into a troop of two hundred as hard-bitten fighters as a man could desire. It joined the army of the Emperor Muhammad, and Peter and Hugh and Damara counted on seasoning it with a little fighting, rewarding it with a little loot, and then carrying out their original plan when they had a close-knit and veteran force at their backs. They, like the Emperor Muhammad, could see little more than pleasurable fighting in the inroad of this Mongol Ghengis Khan. But like the Emperor, they learned better.

THEY lost one-fourth of their number in the first battle, which cost the army of Kharesmia one hundred and sixty thousand men. They lost a few more, hanging on the flanks of the Mongols before Bokhara. They left Samarkand with the Emperor himself, but by this time Peter and Hugh realized what the Mongol invasion actually meant. Damara had been left behind in Samarkand. When Samarkand surrendered and the fall of the Empire of Kharesmia was a self-evident fact, the looting of the Emperor's treasury was less their objective than the saving of their own lives from the ruthless butchery of the Mongols. But there was a matter of an oath they had taken with Damara.

So, while all other men fled before the Mongols, Peter led his dwindling force toward them. He fought four times against Mongol patrols and learned one very useful bit of information about their strategy. A Mongol force, defeated, ran away only to bring a greater force to avenge it, so that the only way to escape utterly ruthless and utterly merciless pursuit was to destroy every Mongol who knew of their existence. And by the time they had assimilated that necessary policy, there were just forty men left of the orginal two hundred, and Kharesmia was a desert with festering heaps of ashes and corruption where cities and human beings had stood. The forty men who followed Peter were the only men under arms, not Mongols, within half a thousand miles about. And naturally, they did not expect to live.

When he led them up into the mountains Hugh murmured, but the men came grimly. They expected to die, yet under Peter's headship they would see fine fighting beforehand. When he camped them dangerously close to the caravan-road that led twelve hundred miles over the Roof of the World to Karakorum, they settled down watchfully. They thought, perhaps, that he intended to raid one of the treasure-caravans carting the loot of Samarkand back to the *yurts* and *urdus* of High Asia. Yet when he let first one, and then another go by unmolested, they murmured not at all. They had come to have a blind and unquestioning faith in him—and there was not one of them who now had home or wife or kindred surviving to divide his loyalty. They were dead men who happened also to be grim fighters, and they waited to see what price Peter would exact of the Mongols for their lives.

As Peter and Hugh, then, half stumbled and half slid down into the hidden encampment, Peter was greeted with the wide, admiring grins of men who follow without any reason save blind faith. There was horse meat cooking upon tiny, smokeless fires. Peter had learned from the Mongols this trick of letting one's commissary department carry one. There was mare's milk. There was a little—a very little—barley. The best of it was brought to the two leaders.

Like sensible men they ate hugely. It was only after the first fine edge of hunger was taken off that Hugh grunted.

"AAH! MY belly groans! Now, Peter, this fine scheme of being made captive by the Mongols?"

"Thou also," said Peter, and grinned. "The truth is, Hugh, that we swore an oath to stand man to man with Damara and he with us in the matter of the Emperor's treasure. Eh?"

"True," growled Hugh. "And the Emperor's treasure being gobbled up by the Mongols, and Damara being enslaved with the rest of Samarkand, we are freed from that oath and good riddance. I did not trust the man!"

"Thou art free, it may be," conceded Peter, "but I am not. And therefore I go to find Damara among these slave-caravans. It is true I had a better plan, but since I must go alone, I go into the horse-post station two leagues up the trail and say that I wandered from those who guarded me, and beg food and the high honor of licking the feet of whatever filthy Mongol herdsman chooses to kick me—"

Hugh growled angrily.

"Thou must go alone?" he snapped wrathfully. "Stand up and I will bash

"Thou must go alone?" he snapped wrathfully. "Stand up and I will bash thy head in!"

thy head in! I come with thee, or else—"

"Well, then," said Peter equably, grinning again. "I tell my plan. Thou, Hugh, art an ape. A mighty, red-haired ape, and I am thy trainer. And we travel that I may display thy tricks before the Great Khan of these murderers. Wherefore we need not be guarded, and—"

"I an ape!" roared Hugh.

"Aye," grinned Peter. "Such an ape as these Mongols never saw before.

Now hearken! We leave Ali in command of these our men, with orders to risk nothing but to keep us in sight. And we take those crimson-dyed sheepskins we looted three weeks agone, and—"

His voice dropped a little in his earnestness as he sat cross-legged, like a Mongol himself, making an occasional gesture while Hugh listened dubiously. Hugh demurred frequently as the plan unfolded, and complained bitterly that he would not be able to carry his bow, but at last he gave a sheepish and grumbling consent. Yet when Peter called an especially hard-bitten Kharesmian warrior from his campfire—the man having been a tailor in early days—Hugh still grumbled and growled.

But it was, nevertheless, a plan he

could find little flaw in. The Mongols were abysmally ignorant save of cattle and of fighting. They were brutal, they were murderous, and in all matters save war they were gullible. And, in addition for the success of the plan, the caravan-trails carried other traffic than merely the trains of hopeless prisoners, trudging toward unending slavery in the *yurts* of their brutish conquerors. There were also couriers, bearing falcon tablets and the dispatches of the *orkhons*—leaders of the Horde—and there were learned men of Ugur, useful as astrologers, and Cathayans for secretarial duties, and gray-robed Nestorian priests from the now-conquered country of Wang Khan to make magic upon suitable occasions. These traveled the post-routes of the Khan over the Roof of the World. and with them there were now and again Armenians, greatly daring yet timorous, and Thibetans hastening to join the Horde, and sometimes Jews trudging the Great Khan's way behind one or two donkeys laden with stuff for barter. These were subject to pillage at will, but they throve by trade under conditions which would seem to make all trade impossible.

IN THE year of our Lord 1220, however, impossibilities seemed to have changed about and become the commonplace. And so the coming of a foot-sore, whimpering man with a great red shambling beast behind him, held fast by a tethering chain, was accepted at its face value by the sleepy Mongol guard of a dozen men in the horse-post station on the Kara Tau. From the Kara Tau this road wound east and northward to the Gate of the Winds, and beyond that it threaded its way through mountains and across wide plains to Karakorum, the mud-built city which was the capital of Ghengis Khan. Therefore, strange things were to be expected upon it. True, no man had ever seen such an ape before, taller than a Mongol and walking with a shambling gait. It had fur like that of a sheep save for its redness, it had glaring blue eyes which stared from a mask-like, woolly face, and it wore parts of the clothing of men, with its crimson fur showing through the rents. No man had ever seen such an ape before, nor heard such uncouth cries as it uttered. But the ape and its master were on the way to Karakorum. Therefore the Mongol horse-post master sleepily ordered that they be given food, and shelter in the sheds where the captives lay. Then he went back to sleep, and ape and master picked their way among the freezing, half-starved artisan-slaves on their way to High Asia—and death.

But, weary as they seemed, the ape and its master were in no haste to sleep. While the ape squatted on its haunches and peered suspiciously about, its master tried to talk through chattering teeth. He whimpered of his sufferings to those who had ten times as much to wail of. Few answered him. All were half-frozen. Some were dying. None were more sheltered from the softly drifting snow than the Mongols considered proper for domestic animals.

But the ape's master whimpered and babbled on. And presently he was talking of a great man called Damara, who had admired the tricks of his ape in Samarkand. A great man, a high officer, called Damara. And had none heard of him?

A voice said scornfully, in fine Arabic:

"Damara? Damara? Yea, I know the man! A merchant. A coward. A trai-

tor! A thief! He passed by this post-station no later than today."

Peter Fletcher shifted his position. The great ape followed closely, shambling among the prone bodies in the snow beneath the shed-roofs. Peter bent down and grunted in English:

"'Tis a little cocklebur, a lad!" Metal scraped softly, as if a dagger had been jerked out to be held at someone's throat. Peter went on softly in his own Arabic. "Yea? Thou knowest of Damara? Then tell, lest this blade of mine slip down and spoil a slave for the Mongols!"

TEETH seemed to lock, in the darkness of the sheds which sheltered the shivering slaves. The voice said defiantly:

"Strike, then!"

And Peter grunted softly to himself.

"Ah! I know thee now, lad! Today, when one fell beside the trail two leagues hence, a lad offered to help him rise. That showed spirit as this defiance shows. Was it thou, lad?"

The locked teeth loosened. The voice of the youth said grudgingly:

"Aye."

Peter squatted comfortably beside him. The huge red ape loomed up on the other side. Peter explained in English:

"'Tis the lad, Hugh, who would have helped that poor devil the guard butchered. He hath spirit. It were a pity to slay him—or send him on to whatever hell these devils of Mongols come from."

"Art a fool," grumbled Hugh. "Twice over. Wring from him news of Damara and let us begone."

But Peter grinned in the darkness.

"Lad," he said, "we be men who fought for the Emperor Muhammad. But two furlongs distant, we have forty armed men not yet subject to the Mongols. Now do you cry out to the guard and babble this, and mayhap they will give thee a gnawed bone for reward—after slaying us."

A pause. The figure of the huge red ape grew tense. The youth gasped softly:

"Take me with thee, soldier! Oh, take me with thee! I beg thee by Allah! Let me but have a sword—"

Peter grunted again.

"We have no room for children," he growled. "I spoke to urge thee, because I like not tortures. We seek Damara. Where then is he?"

The youth seemed to swallow. Then he spoke through clenched teeth.

"If it be to slay him, know that he is riding upon a dromedary, because he is wounded. He goeth to the Great Khan to reveal to him knowledge of the treasures of Antioch and Jerusalem and Tiflis. For earnest of this he strove to secure the Princess Thamar as a gift to the Great Khan when Samarkand surrendered, and it was then that a sword slit his thigh. Two hours before darkness he passed us slaves. Go, then, and it may be he will be in the next horse-post station, where thou mayest slay him."

Peter stood up.

"Aye, we go." He seemed to finger the dagger in his belt. "Wilt give the alarm as we go,—for the reward of a gnawed bone?"

The youth cried fiercely:

"Slay me and be sure of silence! I care not, if I may not go with thee from these dogs of Mongols."

Peter laughed softly, looking at the

huge figure of the ape. The ape rumbled and growled in its throat.

"Hah," said Peter, chuckling. "What sayest, Hugh?"

"I bash thy head in," growled Hugh, "if this lad goes not with us!"

"Fool!" said Peter, grinning. "We both be fools. Come then, lad, and walk softly."

THE snow had ceased, now, but there were vagrant little eddies of wind beginning to stir fitfully. As the trio moved cautiously from the sheds in which the captives lay exhausted and like logs the duty-men of the Mongol guard were talking in their guttural speech to one another. They stared off into the darkness with an air of stolid weather-wisdom. These winds presaged to the Mongols a storm such as they knew in High Asia, a *buran*, a black snowstorm, in which only folk like Mongols could live, and only such mounts as the shaggy ponies of the Altai Thur would not freeze hard as stone.

Peter, too, knew the signs of bad weather. Little murmurings came from the darkness of the mountains high overhead. Already wind-devils tore at those high peaks, shrieking. Presently they would come down and fill the passes with a strangling fog of ice-crystals and go screaming among the desolate mountain-flanks. When this came about the captives Karakorum-bound would die, and the guard who guided rather than watched them would shrug, and yawn, and go comfortably to sleep in one of the felt *yurts* of the horse-post stations. When the storm ended he would go leisurely back to the ravaged plains of Kharesmia for another allotment of artisans to herd into the passes again.

Half a mile from the horse-post station, Peter caught the youth by the arm as he stumbled.

"Walk!" he growled. "We have no room for weaklings!"

"I—I am no weakling!" gasped the youth fiercely. "If I fall, leave me!"

The great ape slung the slim figure to his shoulders without a word. It seemed to Peter that he uttered a grunt of surprise.

"Hoh! Thou'rt—"

But he stopped, and went on without another word. And Peter trudged beside him, watching behind for a sign of alarm at their departure, and planning busily ahead.

But there was no alarm. The watch of the Mongols was sluggish and indifferent. They would have watched cattle with more care, because cattle would serve as food for the armies of the Great Khan. Captives were domestic animals of lesser value, and there was more than a superfluity in the cities yet unravaged because yet unreached. And there was no danger of their captives' escape. There was nowhere for them to escape to. All Kharesmia was a desert. All the mountains were stripped of game. A captive who fled the slave-caravans was a captive who died—unless he tried to pilfer food from a horse-post station, and then he was tracked down and slaughtered with dispatch.

So there was no alarm, the more especially with the coming of the *buran* so near. Peter and Hugh and the youth went on, and their footprints behind them were blurred by dancing eddies. With the coming of the storm they would be blotted out altogether.

THEN the stamping of ponies and a low-toned hail. The bivouac of the

forty had been moved to be near the adventuring of their leaders. Little fires of dried dung warmed the interior of sheepskin tents, and Peter led briskly to one of them. Hugh put down the youth he had carried and muttered briefly in the lad's ear.

"Feed him," said Peter abstractedly. "He will not have been overfed, I think. And let Ali come to me here. We move tonight and ride far before the dawning."

"In the *buran?*" demanded Hugh.

"Why not? It would hide the trail of an army, let alone forty men who need concealment. And we are hard enough to endure a little cold!"

Hugh grunted, looking at the youth they had brought from the captive train. He was half-starved and thin and frail. When food was brought to him he ate voraciously, but with a peculiar daintiness. He did not look up while the two or three under-officers of the forty came to the tent and received Peter's orders in the bastard Arabic of Kharesmia. He paid no heed as Mongol ponies squealed outside on being caught and saddled, or while men tore down tents and made ready for the second move of the night with the matter-of-fact celerity of old campaigners. The youth ate.

"Haste!" said Peter impatiently. "They come for this tent. Canst ride?"

"Aye," said the boy with more than a hint of defiance. "And use a sword, too! In my country even women ride better than the Turks."

Hugh chuckled. Peter half-smiled.

"How old are thou, cockerel?"

"Sixteen," said the boy defiantly, "and my father trained falcons for the King of Georgia, who was father to the Princess Thalmar. I ride hard, soldier!"

PETER grinned even while he shook his head disparagingly at the boy's slight figure. In the year of our Lord 1220 one was a man at sixteen. It was necessary, because at forty one was elderly, and at fifty old indeed.

"I will give thee to the care of two troopers," he grunted. "They will aid thee somewhat, but not to the peril of their own lives."

Hugh growled unexpectedly.

"Nay, Peter. The lad rides with us. He hath spirit. Give him a sword. At least a dagger! It is my will. And he hath not warm clothing. He shall have somewhat of my sheepskins. This ape's dress warms me enough."

Peter looked at Hugh, so he did not see the hot flush on the boy's face, nor his frightened glance at him.

"Soft-head," he grunted. "I swear, Hugh, thou'rt fool in proportion to thy bulk! Thy clothes? He will be lost enough in mine! Come, lad."

It was no more than five minutes later that the cavalcade rode off, and it was a motley crew indeed. Peter and Hugh rode on ahead with the lad between them. And behind them trailed forty men upon Mongol ponies —shaggy small beasts, astoundingly sure-footed—and beside each one there was a spare mount, and there were twenty extra horses besides. Those last were laden, though lightly, with such few supplies as they had gleaned behind the Mongols, and the trivial loot they clung to through all vicissitudes.

And now the *buran* struck, in a screaming wall of needle-sharp snowflakes and a wind whose utter frigidity cut through even sheepskins. The noise it made was desolate and despairing. Bare skin exposed to it grew raw; was shredded by the razor edges of the snow. Each breath drawn into a

man's lungs stung and hurt like fire, save when he flung his arms before his face and breathed through the odorous sheepskin fleece of his garments. Peter leaned over to shout in the lad's ear, warning him of this. But the boy had lifted up his face and was crying loudly:

"We should follow the trail! We can slay any we come upon, and we will not miss the horse-post!"

Peter thumped the lad warmly upon the shoulder.

"Good lad! We turn now!"

The boy shouted again, fiercely:

"I have traveled many days. I know how these posts be contrived. Let me go with thee to slay Damara."

And Peter grinned in his sheepskins as he bent his head to the blasts that tore at them. The cocklebur thought they planned to slay Damara? Let him think so, then. Peter himself did not care overmuch for this matter of Damara's turning traitor merely because of capture. But then, Damara had gone into Kharesmia with the two Englishmen to make a raid upon the Emperor's treasury. There was no code ready-made to fit the case. A soldier should not betray his employer to another employer of soldiers. That was not proper. Even thirteenth-century soldiers' ethics condemned that. But, on the other hand, Damara and Peter and Hugh had privately declared war upon the Emperor Muhammad, and stratagems were not to be too much decried. Such faithful service in battle as they had given to that Emperor was simply so much to his gain. What Damara had done was a matter for his own honor, even if Peter would never have thought of doing it. But Peter and Hugh were bound by oath to help him. They would rescue him from these Mongols and debate the fine points later.

SNOW beat upon them like a solid wall. Wind tore at them with freezing, clutching fingers. Cold seeped through the thick sheepskins like water through a bank of earth. They grew stiff in their saddles. Their lungs burned. Sheer breathing was a torment. For unending, age-long hours they fought their way. It was madness to fare forth in such an icy tempest. To essay a journey of fifteen miles was stark lunacy. Even Mongols on the business of the Khan would not be guilty of such folly. . . .

And faintly, through the screaming of the *buran,* there came the tinkling of bells. A rider, a Mongol, came reeling toward them upon a shaggy pony, still half-masked by clinging snow when he was only five yards away. A courier of the Khan, as the bells proved. He raised his arm and shouted and drove on.

Hugh killed him. And the youth struggled out of his saddle and fumbled in his garments for the falcon tablet that proved his errand while Peter swore furiously at him for the delay. But then the youth fought his way back into the saddle and the cavalcade went on, the leaders a hundred yards ahead.

And there were more long tortured hours yet, before the faintest of gray light appeared all about them. Then the youth pointed through the thick mist of screaming snow. There were the clumsy felt *yurts* of the horse-post guard and the sheds for hay and barley. This was a larger post than the previous one; the seat of a *daroga,* the governor of a district of the horse-post. There would be many men here, besides Damara.

IT WAS no easy matter to make the arrangements that had to be made,

in the screaming tumult of the storm. The three leaders turned their horses and floundered back to the following men. By signs—seen only of the nearest—Peter turned them from the trail. Floundering, gasping, freezing, he herded his troopers into the slight shelter of a vast heap of boulders where the wind was lessened to a mere icy gale. Here they were probably no more than three hundred yards from the horse-post station, but in the tumult of the *buran* there was no danger of discovery. No man, not even a Mongol, would be abroad in such a blizzard if he could stay within. Peter's voice roared orders, and Hugh's stentorian bellow repeated them.

The men were to dismount. Every man to huddle between two horses for the warmth of their bodies. No shelters to be made. Two men to the trail as watchers, to be relieved every five minutes lest they freeze to death. If the leaders were pursued on their return, the men would know what to do.

It was still more than half dark. Dawn was a faint graying of the blackness, no more, and only the eerie luminescence of the snow distinguished the world from the dark figures of men. Air and sky and ground alike were dirty, sordid gray. The earth, as a sole demarcation, showed a lesser smother of swirling snow than the air above it.

Peter and Hugh saw their orders obeyed. They turned and floundered on foot back to the trail again. As they reached it, something clutched at Peter's foot. It was the boy, stumbling, who had grasped at him as he fell.

"I—I come," he gasped when Hugh hauled him roughly to his feet. "I have traveled long upon this road. I will show thee. . . ."

Peter's cold-stiffened features cracked into a grin at Hugh. Hugh rumbled in his throat. The two of them, then, put shoulder to shoulder and forced their way against the blast of the *buran*, with the slighter figure of the boy struggling desperately to come after them in the lee of their bodies.

It seemed an hour, and was actually nearly half of that before the dark *yurts* of the Mongols loomed up as shadows. There were six of them, and their windward sides were caked with the *buran's* burden of snow. Huge tents, they were, braced about their walls by a lattice-work of poles which held the heavy felt as firm as masonry against the storm. To leeward the felt itself was visible. And to leeward were the doorways. They were closed by stiff curtains, lashed down, but the three smelled the transient reek of pungent smoke and even more pungently stinking bodies. The Mongols were not a cleanly race. Then the icy breath of the *buran* blew away that reek and clutched at their very lungs to freeze them.

The boy clutched at Peter's shoulder

"Not here!" he gasped above the screaming of the storm, "They scorn all who are not Mongols, even traitors. His *yurt* will be small. Come!"

THEY fought their way past the first of the *yurts*. There were no figures on guard outside. There should have been no need. In such weather even cattle died, and assuredly no human being could survive save clad in such garments as the Mongols reserved for themselves alone.

A squat figure loomed, coming from the horse-herds. The boy lunged toward him, but Peter struck first. The Mongol died. The boy cried out in angry protest at having been forestalled in the killing, and Peter shook him wrathfully

"Hold thy tongue, cocklebur!" he growled. "We seek Damara."

The slim figure tensed with passion, then pointed. Some ten yards distant a smaller *yurt* stood vaguely visible in the half-light, its top bellying and bagging in the gusts of the *buran*.

"He will be there!" panted the boy. "All those of the Horde who are not Mongols are placed in such *yurts* as these."

Peter flexed his sword reflectively between his mittened hands. Hugh pulled out a monstrous curved *yataghan*. There might be Cathayans in the *yurt* with Damara, or those Urgese astrologers who traveled with their wide black hats and yellow cloaks in the wake of the Khan's armies. Such folk might need attending to.

But when they slashed the felt curtain at the door and leaped within, there was but one man visible. He crouched by a dimly smouldering fire with a stiffened leg stretched out behind him and carefully covered with filthy skins. He cringed at their entrance, and at Peter's triumphant roar of laughter he blanched. But then, as Peter clapped him roughly on the shoulder, Damara gasped, and choked, and at last grinned uneasily in response to Peter's guffaws.

"Hah! We have found thee, Damara!" grinned Peter. "How bad is thy leg? Canst ride?"

There was a little stir at the back of the tent. The youth darted forward like a flash, the dagger Hugh had given him flashing in the faint light of the fire. Hugh went to him, rumbling.

"A slave," said the boy fiercely, though his voice shook. "Shall I slay him also? My blade is at his throat!"

"Nay!" chuckled Peter. "Thou dost not understand, cockerel. Damara is a friend. There is an old oath that we three stand together. And we have come to rescue him from these Mongol devils. Canst ride, Damara? We have horses—"

The boy flung himself forward, his eyes blazing, his breast heaving.

"Thou'rt a traitor, too?" he demanded thickly and more fiercely still. "And lured me—"

"Hush, bantling," growled Hugh. "Hush! We be no traitors. If Damara hath turned his coat, 'tis his affair, not ours."

Now Damara saw the boy. He shook and went white. He licked his lips. And Peter said impatiently:

"Speak, man! Canst ride? If not, 'twill be a sharp business getting thee clear. Hugh and I can carry thee to the horses—"

"N-nay, Peter. I—I do not wish to go," said Damara, shakily. "No, I will not go. 'Tis true I have changed employ, but this Great Khan will overrun the world. I shall hold high office under him, when once I have speech with him. Ye know my tongue, Peter and Hugh. Ye know—"

Peter swore. His eyes grew cold.

"There be not many men, Damara, who hold to an oath behind the Mongol lines. We swore to stand with thee and thee with us. We have kept our oath. We are here to carry thee clear of these devils. I say we are here to aid thy escape, or die with thee in trying!"

Again Damara licked his lips.

"N-nay, Peter. Nay, Hugh. I—I will not go. I am safe. I shall be in high favor with the Khan. I shall have news to tell him—"

"Aye!" growled Hugh. "Of Antioch and Jerusalem and the treasures therein! ———!" He rumbled an oath

from the slums of the Orient and spat disgustedly. "Ho, Peter, let us go from this carrion! We are freed of our oath, assuredly!"

"Aye," said Peter grimly, "we are freed of it."

"I—I would speak a moment with this boy," said Damara in a sudden eagerness. "Such a young one as he would go far in the employ of the Great Khan. Lad, I would speak in thine ear."

Peter's face was dark as a thundercloud. He struck impatiently with the point of his sword at the dirt floor of the *yurt*.

"Speak, then!" He added in a furious irony. "I take it, Damara, thine honor will hold thee from reporting to thy Mongol friends aught of our good faith with thee!"

But Damara was whispering in the youth's ear, his eyes glinting as if in mingled fright and menace. Hugh watched the boy's face in amazement. The firelight showed the changes upon it. Fierce rage, then horror, and then a blaze of emotion Hugh could not even guess at. Suddenly the boy broke from Damara's grasp and went to the back of the *yurt*. He flung himself down on the ground.

"I stay," he said in a muffled voice, "with Damara. I thank thee, friends, for thy help. I stay and serve the Great Khan for the rewards I shall gain."

There was silence for an instant while the wind shrieked over the top of the tent. It seemed as if a sob came from the boy. But Peter was filled with a vast, an explosive, a terrific rage.

"Thou, Damara," he said savagely, "look well and gain high rank with many guards, because some day I shall tear thy traitor's throat out! And thou, lad—"

The boy sat up. There were blinding tears in his eyes. He half-screamed at them.

"*Go!*" The cry was fierce and savage and despairing. He sobbed.

Hugh tugged at his shoulder and Peter stumbled out into the storm again. Twice he halted irresolutely, and Hugh dragged him on, rumbling indistinguishably amid the screaming wind. Hugh seemed impelled to a terrific haste. He ploughed onward with mighty strides, and ever and again he turned to stare behind him, wiping the snow from before his eyes with his mittened paws to see more clearly.

SUDDENLY Peter began to curse, trudging through the snow with the wind thrusting angrily at his back.

"The fool! The coward! The poltroon! The foresworn!" he raged. "We fought through half a thousand miles to save him, and he is at ease and a traitor!"

Hugh gazed behind, and growled.

"I told thee wast a fool," he grumbled. "I did not trust Damara."

"And the lad," raged Peter, more savagely yet. "A lad of spirit! Of courage! Yet he but listened to Damara's foul mouthings and turned like a woman—"

"Hah!" grunted Hugh, staring behind. "They come, Peter! Damara hath set his devil friends upon us. Out sword! When they see us, we lead them to our men. Aye?"

"I slay a few first," snarled Peter, beside himself with wrath. "Hugh, that lad—"

"Umph!" grunted Hugh. "If that lad changed like a woman, Peter, it was with good reason. The lad is a woman.

I knew it when I picked him up to carry him.—Ah! Now to slay a few and then—"

The heavy curved sword he bore snipped off the head of a slender lance. Peter leaped in. The Mongols had come charging without order to kill two men. But with the screaming of ten thousand devils about and above and all among the mountains, the pair on foot let red blood flow from the leading horsemen, then leaped to the saddles in their places and charged savagely upon others of the men who came charging from the horse-post station. Yelling triumphantly, Peter and Hugh slew three before they turned tail and fled—to where their men were mounting, fitting arrows to their bows and waiting the labored charge of the Mongols.

"Slay them, lads!" roared Peter, aflame with blood-lust. "Kill these devils and we have loot and to spare. Out swords! At them!"

Out of their lurking-place came the forty in a merciless, arrow-swift charge. Arrows did spring out before them, unanswered. They were ready, warned, and raging. The Mongols were taken by surprise and armed only with their lances. Moreover, the snow left no room for strategy. It was a fight of sword and shield against lances, at first, with no speed behind the lances to make them deadly. The Mongols were at a hopeless disadvantage. They were even outnumbered. But at that there was some pretty fighting before the last of them was cut down.

THE light was brighter by a little when the forty moved upon the horse-post station. It was a necessary move, of course, because the only way to prevent pursuit by a strong Mongol force was to kill every Mongol who knew of their existence. Peter's face was set and grim. Hugh rumbled comfortably.

"I mind me now," he growled in Peter's ear. "We said naught of having men with us. Damara knew it not. He thought us alone."

"He will learn otherwise," said Peter grimly. "Art sure, Hugh, that the lad was indeed a woman?"

Hugh roared with laughter, then waved his arms as they thundered down upon the nearest *yurt* like an avalanche. No figure came out to face them, because the report had been of two men only, fleeing through the snow. The crunching of the ponies' hoofs was assumed to be the slaughter-party returning—if it was heard at all, what with the screeching of the wind and the vastly more entertaining matter toward in that same *yurt*.

Inside that *yurt* there was reeking smoke and filth and priceless rugs and embroideries looted from Kharesmia. And there were all of twenty men crowded about the smouldering fire of dried dung and thorns. Short, squat, greasy animals, these Mongols, clad in long wadded coats with hanging girdles, or in cloaks of the richest of looted furs. Some of them were hung with the jewelry of slaughtered women. All of them were befouled with grease and smoke and abominations unspeakable. They leered at a slender figure—straight as one of their own lances—which stood defiantly with tight-locked lips in the reeking tent of felt.

"But *noyon*—master—Lord!" cried Damara desperately, "I say she is the Princess Thamar, whom the Great Khan himself desireth!"

The *daroga*, master of horse-post sta

And then Peter and Hugh and their hard-bitten fighters came pouring into the *yurt.*

tions for a district, hiccoughed solemnly. He was drunken and foul and bestial, as all Mongols were entitled to be three times in each month by the Law of Ghengis Khan's own promulgation.

"That—*hic*—is as it may be," he pronounced owlishly. "But thou art not a Mongol, and all men save Mongols are liars. Also the Great Khan hath said that the women of Kharesmia—*hic*—are our slaves. Wherefore—*hic*—I will myself see how she compares with other slaves we have had, and after, my men—"

He staggered to his feet and reached out an amorous, filthy paw. And then Peter and Hugh and their hard-bitten fighters came pouring into the *yurt*. They wasted no breath in shouting. They struck in a deadly and a savage silence. To the stench of unwashed bodies and the reek of the dung-fire there was now added the thick, salty smell of spilt blood. To the howl of the tempest overhead there was now added the screech of metal on metal, and the panting breaths of fighting men, and now and again a shriek. And this was such fighting as no Mongol liked.

On horseback the Mongol was a good man even in a melee. On foot he was not so good. And without room for archery, nor a chance for trickery to gain advantage, the Mongols of the *yurt* fought desperately but with failing hearts. There was no room even for skilled sword-play, while the men who followed Peter and Hugh were men with blood lust hot within them, with defeat behind them and death before them, and filled with a desperate hatred. Against their swords the half-drunken Mongols could not stand at all. Even the soberer ones had short shrift. And when icy wind poured in through a slash in the felt of the *yurt* itself, and short squat figures went howling out into the storm, they were set upon by other and taller figures which met them with fierce joy and shut off their voices in mid-shriek.

THERE was but little fighting more within the *yurt*. There were only so many men to be killed. Then Hugh bellowed an order and led all save four men outside to search for other prey. Peter stood in the shambles he had helped to make with his bloody sword in his hand. His eyes were like very cold flames indeed. And Damara whimpered protests and pleas, and babbled hysterically copious explanations.

"Be silent!" said Peter grimly. He looked at the slim figure with tight-locked lips. "Lad," he said harshly, "they have stripped thee of thy sheepskins. We ride far. Take warm clothing from these." He kicked at a crumpled figure on the floor. "And arm thyself!"

The tight-locked lips unlocked.

"I have armed, soldier," said the defiant voice which had seemed that of a lad of spirit and much promise. "I have a dagger again. And I am a woman, soldier. These carrion would have made sport of me. But why should I choose thee rather than—these?"

"Art what I say thou art!" roared Peter. "Art a lad till we be clear of these devils! Thou hearest!"

He scowled until the defiant, stormy eyes grew queerly soft. Then the lad—girl — woman — smiled tremulously at him and bent down to salvage heavy furs from the heaps by the filthy *yurt* wall. Peter turned to the four men who remained.

"He hath a wound," he said grimly, jerking a hand at Damara. "Bind him carefully. Mount him, and wrap him warmly. Then wait."

He scowled again at the girl. She struggled into thick deerskin garments. A dagger clanked at her waist. She stared at him defiantly.

"And now?"

"Damara," raged Peter, "what did he say to thee, to make thee foresake us?"

"Forsake thee!" cried the girl angrily. "Nay! I had told thee he was a traitor! He whispered in my ear that if I departed with thee he would send his slave to the nearest *yurt*, warning the Mongols that the Princess Thamar fled with two armed men! He whispered that thou wouldst not believe me if I denounced him, and if he told thee I was a woman I would be sport for thee and all thy men! And he swore that if I remained I would be unharmed until I was given to the Great Khan himself! And I could save thy life, and I had a dagger. . . ."

Peter swore savagely.

"And then—"

"He and his servant seized me ere I knew it, and disarmed me, and the slave fled to the post-guard, babbling. . . ."

"That slave is dead," growled Peter, "and it is in my mind that Damara will be also, ere many hours pass. Come!"

He strode outside. Hugh came waddling toward him, grinning. He had a nasty sword-cut across his cheek, but he chuckled.

"Fifty men, Peter," he rumbled contentedly. "All dead. Two hundred horses. Food for weeks, and loot of arms and stuffs and wine."

Peter waved an arm.

"Five men down the road," he commanded. "Slay all who come along it. Five men yonder, the same orders. Now gather thy looters, Hugh, and mount these Mongols we have killed. We take two fresh horses for every Mongol, and no more. We leave no dead Mongol to tell of resistance to the Khan. When more of the devils come, they will find split blood and the post-guard gone. 'Twill seem as if they went forth to hunt down some poor devils who by accident were left alive. There will be no news or pursuit of us. The Mongols will wait for word of them."

Hugh grunted sardonically.

"Hoh! I wondered! 'Tis simple, with but a *buran* to live through and a thousand and a half miles to go. Oh, it is simple!"

HIS voice bellowed above the whining tumult of the storm. Men began to toil under his direction. Peter stared upward at the skies, and cocked his ear to the screaming of the wind.

"The *buran* eases," said the clear voice of the girl.

"Aye," grunted Peter. "'Twill grow worse later. And we cannot stay here. We are but forty. And thou—"

"I am the Princess Thamar," said the girl evenly, meeting his eyes. "My father was King of Georgia. My guards fought off this Damara when he would have seized me for the Khan as Samarkand surrendered, and I hid among the people."

"Aye," said Peter drily, "as the son of a trainer of falcons!"

"I was a lad, lest I be shamed," said the girl fiercely, "and a trainer of fal-

cons lest I be butchered. And I can ride with any of thy men, or thee, and I can die!"

Peter grunted again.

"We ride for Tiflis," he said briefly. "Some of us will live. Some of us will die. I shall tell my men thy father the king will ransom thee richly."

The girl said defiantly:

"He is dead. He died in battle. There will be no ransom. His kingdom is ashes, now."

"Nonetheless," growled Peter, "I lie lest I need to slit throats for thy safety. My men are hard men, lass, but I need them. Hugh can be trusted, and me—perhaps. But we be a hard-bitten crew. Yet it may be we will get with thee to safety."

The girl laughed without mirth as Hugh lumbered up beside her.

"And then what? Shall I serve wine to soldiers in a tavern? Remember, soldier, I was a princess. I am a woman without land or home or husband. I think it were easier to ride off in this *buran*—"

"Nay!" growled Peter. "There is Hugh, and here am I. We liked thee, as a likely lad. We like thee no less now—as a likely lad. And the three of us, with forty men behind us, will fare not ill as long as swords clash in this world of ours. Eh, Hugh?"

The girl suddenly put out her hand.

"In my father's country," she said suddenly, her voice very grim and fierce, "there is a castle, old and tumbledown. It is hard to come at, and it is small, and I think not the Mongols will ever come to it. High in the mountains it is, and there is but a tiny village near, and it is raw and bleak and harsh in all that country. But with forty swords a man could hold it and raid the fertile lands beyond the hills, and it is in my mind that one could live well there, fighting often, since my father the king hath died and his kingdom is overrun by the Mongols."

"Hah! A hold to fight from?" demanded Hugh keenly. "Water? Forage? Hard and narrow trails to reach it by?"

"Aye," said the girl. "A robber's castle, truly. I know the way. And I offer it to thee, soldier."

The wind screamed overhead. The *buran* was blowing to a minor lull, which might last half an hour. Then it would rise again to its real, screaming height of destruction, when no living thing could move and live within its scope.

"We must ride, Peter," growled Hugh. "Let us begone while the wind still blows to cover our trail. We should be past yonder mountain ere it is at its worst again. Then we camp, and thy folly is ended."

Peter laughed.

"Nay! 'Tis just begun," he chuckled. "We ride five hundred leagues, the lad hath told me, and come upon a little hold from whence we may fight the Mongols evermore. The lad hath given us a castle."

He laughed. Hugh looked down upon the girl. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Aye," he grumbled, shaking his head. "Aye! He was ever a fool, lass! Ever a fool! He hath taken this castle of thine?"

The girl smiled at him. She swaggered a little, in amazing similitude of a cockerel boy.

"Nay," she laughed. "'Tis not his till he takes it."

HUGH stamped away. He came back with three horses. Great masses of the knife-edged snow clung to the furs he had looted from some fallen Mongol. The forty hard-bitten troopers were formed up, now, ranged in the apparently undisciplined but actually well-designed formation of troops ready for a forced march with four spare horses to each man. The Mongol dead hung stiffly from saddles they would vacate beyond the first mountain-flank. What loot there was, and what provisions, loaded the pack-animals not too heavily. Snow flung past them in swirling clouds. The hoof-print of a pony lasted only while his hoof remained in it. The flying snow erased it instantly afterward.

The girl sprang to the clumsy Tatar saddle. Hugh put a great paw on her shoulder.

"Lass," he rumbled. "Peter was ever a fool. Hast given him a castle, and he hath taken it. But the poor fool knoweth not what else thou hast given him!"

The girl flushed. Then she flung back her head and laughed.

"But thou," she said chuckling, "thou must not tell, Hugh! 'Tis for him to learn of—and take!"

She wheeled her pony aside as Peter reached for her wrathfully. But she spurred forward and took her place confidently between the two of them when they led their cavalcade away from the horse-post station which now was empty of living men. The snow swirled past them and the wind screamed above them. The *buran,* the black ice-storm of High Asia, swept through the passes of the Kara Tau. Twenty yards distant, all things dissolved into a fleeting white mist. A hundred yards behind the cavalcade, there was no sign that it had ever been. The snow had obliterated the trail.

They swung off the post-road that came from the desolated plains of Kharesmia and led to the Gate of the Winds and thence to Karakorum. They rode steadily. When the grisly cargo some of the ponies bore was jettisoned, they went faster. Sheepskin-clad, alert, toughened now to be a match for even the Mongols in endurance, they began a ride of fifteen hundred miles through territory held by the horde that had reduced Kharesmia to heaps of ashes and corruption.

They rode hard, with the wind trying to strangle them and the cold to congeal their blood. Hugh scanned the way, worried, as best he could. It was needful to find a sheltered spot in which to bivouac through the rest and worst of this *buran.* Presently he turned relievedly to Peter, pointing. Then he growled.

Peter and the small slim figure were riding close together. Close together indeed. Their heads were merged as one. It was clear that Peter now knew that the Princess Thamar, in addition to a castle, had given him her lips. He was taking them.

"Hoh!" growled Hugh. He roared in Peter's ear. "Here we camp, Peter!"

Peter looked up. It was he who looked ashamed. The girl smiled at Hugh with eyes like stars.

"Fool!" grumbled Hugh. "Wert ever a fool, Peter! And there will be naught but more of this folly until the storm blows out." He paused, and laid a monstrous paw on the girl's shoulder. "Aye, lass," he rumbled. "Else I will bash his head in!"

Then he swung in his saddle and bellowed furiously,

"Dismount!"

Francois Villon

"Who is he? Where is he hidden?" he snarled.

FOR a second Rodger Alyard hesitated by the little cherry tree behind the garden wall. "Life's a fight," he muttered. "Only the daring deserve the fair." He glanced up at the grim frowning battlements of Castle d'Ivry, at the flashing lights reflected off many a polished cuirass of pikeman and arquebu-

Gives A Benediction

by GILBERT ELDREDGE

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

sier, guardians of this powerful stronghold.

He slung six feet of polished yellow yew-bow to his back, grasped his quarter-stave firmly in his left hand, and mounted the tree. Two lithe steps took him to the wall. He hitched his sword-belt to the right and gazed down over the garden.

There she sat, in the little rose arbor as she had promised. His heart stopped, then catapulted eagerly. In her shimmering apple-green gown she looked

like some forest nymph strayed from her woody kingdom. Golden brown hair that glinted red in the brilliant sunlight, cascaded over her shoulders and bespoke a northern heritage. Cherry lips relieved the dazzling whiteness of her skin. A low cut bodice revealed the curve of snowy breasts that swelled virginally. Ysabeau de Lore, scion of a noble house, now a ward, and virtually a prisoner of her lecherous stepfather. Alyard's hand on the stave gripped tight. A fierce love hunger shone from his eyes.

He looped long Hampshire legs over the rough wall and dropped silently, with woodsman's cunning, to the greensward. Slight as was the sound, she heard it and turned frightened blue eyes in his direction. Three quick strides and he crushed her in his arms. In the wrenching ecstacy of that embrace he seemed oblivious of the fact that for a simple Hampshire gentleman to be caught in a love tryst within these sacred walls meant death. Archers and arbalesters there were in plenty to pincushion his skin, and guards and men-at-arms to finish the work, while grim French noblemen turned their wrath on the girl. He gave no thought to the enormity of his offense nor to its consequences, but the girl seemed instinctively aware of both. Hoarse shouts brought him back to Paris and the garden of one of the most powerful nobles of the realm.

An arbalest bolt thudded to the ground at his feet. Desperately she pushed him from her. The tender lovelight faded from his clear grey eyes to be replaced by a hard flinty glitter. His face stiffened. His jaw set. Even his tawny yellow hair seemed to raise on his head like a crest.

"Run!" Her frightened eyes pled with him. "My stepfather is a hard man. He's sworn that I marry d'Estouteville tomorrow. He'll kill, torture you."

"Marry d'Estouteville—that old toad —tomorrow?" His breath caught, his

Only d'Estouteville stood erect, a long arrow embedded in his chain mail.

voice deepened in angry astonishment.

"Run! Run!" She stifled a scream. Two men-at-arms darted at them from the trees. Alyard reached for his quarter-stave against the tree, grasped it firmly with both hands near the middle. A quick step forward and he parried a sword thrust from a black-bearded seneschal. The stave whistled as it swung once around his head, straightened, and found its mark at the base of a brown neck. The man staggered and collapsed at his feet. He ducked low under the swinging blade of the guard on his left, twisted on his hips, and jabbed with the blunt end of the stave at the open throat. The man choked and stepped back. Again the whistling hum of the quarter-stave around his head, the solid thud of good oak on a pock-marked neck, and the man dropped like a poled steer.

"OH-H-H!" He heard Ysabeau's sharp intake of breath. He wheeled sharply. To his left stood Gilles d'Estouteville himself, his craggy, hawk-face fairly spitting furious malice. With him panted three archers leaning on their crossbows, resting after their run. "Shoot me that mad Englishman," he snarled. "Ysabeau, go to your room. Your father and I will settle with you later."

She sank back in the bower instead and watched with fear-filled eyes the half played drama before her.

Alyard had already dropped the quarter-stave, bent the long yew-bow across his left leg, and snapped the braided linen cord in place. From his sheath he pulled four cloth-yard arrows and with a single quick movement of the hand thrust them point down into the ground. The crossbowmen had fitted the four-edged quarrels in slot and were cranking their cumbersome weapons. In the time that it would take to name the four apostles slowly, the cord twanged shrill and high, like a swarm of angry bees—one, two, three, four times. Three archers clutched at shafts just above their gorgets. Only d'Es-

touteville stood erect, a long arrow embedded in his chain mail.

Alyard turned to the girl; kissed her lingeringly. "Meet me here tonight," he said quietly.

"I dare not. D'Estouteville's brother Robert is provost of Paris. Within half an hour the entire police of the city will be hunting you." She trembled a little in his arms. The thud of feet sounded along the wall, the clash of arms, and the patter of many men running.

"Tonight," he said, and kissed her full on the lips. His whole body quivered in sudden responsive ecstacy.

"Tonight then," she breathed, "although it means torture and . . ." For a moment she fingered his tawny yellow hair, then turned and ran lightly down the path.

Five strides took him to the wall. A high peach limb, a long swing, and he stood atop, crouching a little under the swarm of arrows and arbalest bolts that showered thick around. Twice more the yellow bow strained, the linen cord twanged sharply. Howls of pain and rage floated up to him. During the sudden scurry for cover, he dropped to the ground and was off like a streak through the narrow crooked streets built almost to the castle walls—a veritable tangled rabbit warren—crowded, swarming, turbulent.

THIS was Paris, the fifth of June, 1462—the feast of Corpus Christi, La Fête Dieu. The whole town, garnished and bedecked with green branches, waved like a forest. From every window hung rich cloths and tapestries to welcome the passage of the body of God. The two hundred churches and convents of the city were singing and saying their masses and the offices of the feast.

Alyard had been only partially able to shake off his pursuers. He darted through narrow alleys, twisting and turning, taking advantage of every stratagem, but still d'Estouteville and a half dozen archers hung on tenaciously. Near the cloister of St. Benoit he espied a reposoir, a temporary altar lovingly ornamented with silks and flowers and lighted tapers. Quickly he burrowed under the green branches and pulled a fold of eastern silk about his lank body. Through a chink he watched d'Estouteville and the hue and cry sweep past and turn down a side street.

It was sweltering hot under the little altar. He could see the colored processions along the Rue St. Jacques—the white-robed singing men, the children strewing flowers, the monks, friars, wardens, beadles, and court dignitaries; the thurifers with silver censers tossing clouds of white fragrant smoke; the rich cloth-of-gold canopies, and finally the Host itself in its precious monstrance.

At length the hot afternoon waned. Quickly he mingled with the swirling crowd. From the Mule Tavern across the rue St. Jacques came the sounds of careless voices and a rude stave of raucous song. Carefully he elbowed his way through the holiday throngs to the tavern. A gust of hot sticky air greeted him, heavy with the reek of spilt wine and stale ale. He pulled his hat well down over his face, found a deserted corner, ordered wine, and began planning his night's adventure. First he must get Ysabeau out of the castle to some place of safety. The simple statement brought a wry smile to his lips. Castle D'Ivry housed well over a hundred armed and trained retainers, had stood nine major sieges, and without artillery was considered close to im-

pregnable. The castle was alarmed and expectant. Alyard stood not only alone, but was a hunted man, a foreigner, a marked man.

"Life's a fight," he grinned feebly at the motto of his house. Another he had adopted for this campaign, "Only the daring deserve the fair," brought a grimace of exasperation. His face grew steely hard—his fighting face. "By the glory of God," he swore the mighty oath, "Ysabeau would leave the castle this night." She had told him enough of her stepfather's sadistic cruelty and that of his boon companion d'Estouteville to convince him of the necessity of haste. The marriage tomorrow . . . he ground his teeth. They must have suspected their former meetings and advanced the date.

SUDDENLY Alyard became aware of a man seated at the table beside him; a man whose stealthy coming had hardly awakened his forest trained ears.

"Kind sir, a share of your goodly wine," the stranger whined, leering sidewise from bloodshot yellow eyes. The man was of medium height, but thin to emaciation with a long razor nose above loose sensuous lips. Under his left nostril ran a puckered jagged scar. A high bald forehead sloped back to coarse black hair as though it had suddenly dropped below timber line. His long gallows face seemed a composite of all the rakes, bullies, sneakthieves, burglars, quacks, beggars, mummers, and rascals that infested Paris at that time.

Alyard shoved the wine towards him, repulsed by the man's appearance, yet somehow attracted by the strong elusive personality. The stranger seized the wine with a flourish, drained it at a gulp. Amused, Alyard called for a bottle of Beaune, only to see it vanish as before.

"Francois de Montcorbier, sometimes Des Loges, but to you, kind sir, plain Francois Villon, at your service."

"The poet?" Alyard started. Half of Paris was singing this man's verses, yet villainy had been newly coined from his name. Alyard grinned at the sorry apparition.

"Poet and Master of Arts," the man continued with a strange gleam in his yellow eyes. "Scholar in thieving and lechery; master in advanced burglary; champion cozener and picklock." He commenced a rollicking ballad full of thieves' argot and strange jargon but with an irresistible gusto in its perfect swing and rhyming.

"Hush!" Alyard silenced him with difficulty. "You draw attention to me. Half the police of Paris are on my trail," and he told the story of the afternoon in the garden. "Tonight," he continued, "I must get the maid to a safe place."

"Break into the Castle d'Ivry! What a conceit!" Villon blew through his nostrils and capered wildly with his heels under the table. Suddenly he stopped. "Archers! The watch!" He shot a quick glance at the door. "Quick! Follow me!" They dropped to hands and knees and scrambled under tables to the scullery, and out the kitchen door. Villon dived into a black dirty alley. Alyard followed, grumbling, "Crawling and ducking with a six foot bow and quarter-stave is tripping hard work." They crossed the rue St. Jacques and emerged in the shadow of St. Benoit cloisters by the stone bench under the great clock. Villon led the way along the wall. At a tiny door he inserted a key, and they tiptoed past a snoring old priest, up to an attic room under the eaves.

"You'll be fairly safe here. I'll be back in an hour," Villon said and left hurriedly. The room was evidently Villon's bedroom, dirty and frowsy, what Alyard could see of it in the dark. He peered through the tiny window at the stars. He felt suddenly helpless and alarmed. What if this mad rascally poet had gone for the police? Undoubtedly a reward had been offered. Something in the man's manner had inspired confidence, however, and he pushed the matter from his mind. Some sixth sense told him that Ysabeau was in grave danger and he fretted like a caged lion at his enforced inactivity.

IN AN hour and a half Villon returned. "The provost, the criminal lieutenants, the archers, and half the guard are poking their pig noses into every tavern, brothel, and lodging house on the left bank, searching for you." His hands shot out in swift vivid pantomime. He made a quick circling motion around his neck and choked and gurgled suggestively. For a time he danced and capered and threw his heels about the tiny room, snarling and spitting curses at the police. Suddenly he stopped; his wild mood seemed to change. "Come!" he said simply and led the way down-stairs.

Outside the darkness closed in on them—heavy, silent, mysterious. They moved swiftly through the narrow high-walled streets that Villon seemed to know so intimately. Twists and turns, until Alyard lost count, brought them in the deep shadows of fruit trees. Above loomed the grim silhouette of Castle d'Ivry—menacing in its solid frowning immensity. Two slinking shadows moved in the gloom of the trees.

"Gehon, prince of picklocks," introduced Villon jocularly. A stumpy broad-shouldered dwarf grimaced and blew softly through his sparse red beard.

"And Coline nimblefingers," continued Villon, indicating a thin scarecrow of a man. "Many a duck Coline and I poached from the city moat. He wasn't thin then. He, he, he," the poet shook with silent nervous laughter. "His belly swelled like a cask, aye, and wriggled and squirmed with live fowl under his long tabard."

"Hush, fool!" snarled Coline. "We've work to do."

"Double guards on the walls and a squad of archers hidden behind a rose bower in the garden," growled Gehon.

"Ysabeau! Did you see her?" Alyard asked anxiously.

"I saw no wenches," Gehon answered curtly.

Again Alyard looked up at the high black walls, noted far above the walls the narrow arrow slots that did service for windows, listened to the measured tread of the sentries on the protruding fighting top. The project seemed impossible. "No daring, no maid," he murmured. "Let's go."

THEY seemed to understand all the proceedings. A tall ladder slid silently against the wall; up went Coline with a rope about his waist. Alyard could see him gain the wall and like some human squirrel continue up the corner of a tower, holding by fingers and toes long hardened to this sort of work. He paused at a narrow window slot, tried the bars, then drew himself to a window above. His dark form balanced for a second, then squatted on a tiny ledge. The faint rasping creak of a file sounded for several minutes, then the straining grunt of a prying bar and

the shrill squeak of ancient iron hinges. The crouching figure flattened and hugged the wall. A moment later a rope dropped silently at their feet. Gehon made it fast to the tree trunk. Alyard seized the line and started up hand over hand like a cat. The window loomed above him, higher than he thought. Coline dropped a hand under his armpit and helped boost his wide shoulders through the narrow slit that served for window. Inside was some kind of a chamber, stone floored and inky dark. The window blackened and Villon stood beside him.

"Might be a candlestick or a silver cup at hand," he whispered. "Coline will wait at the window; Gehon below."

Alyard felt his way to the door following Villon's cat-eyed progress along a narrow hall to the main part of the castle, then through an antechamber and along another long corridor. They could see a faint light now and hear the low murmur of voices. Softly, as he would stalk a deer, Alyard approached the strange sounds. He applied his eyes to a crack in the door and recoiled in horror.

Ysabeau lay on her back, her body stretched tight across a low trestle, her hands and feet bound to iron staples in the floor. Most of her clothes had been torn from her and lay in a disordered heap on the stone floor beside the bench.

Alyard growled in his throat like an animal. He tried to fight down the wild red berserk rage that swept over him; fought to remain cool and steady. His clenched fist sought the sword at his belt. Villon's hand grasped his arm. "Wait!" he hissed. With infinite caution he began to open the door. Alyard quivered with impatience. Slowly, silently, the great door swung on its hinges. A massive oak and leather

Two slinking shadows moved in the gloom of the trees.

chair, inside and a little to the left, stood between the door and the two figures that stood over Ysabeau. Alyard began to crawl towards it, holding tightly to his sword to prevent a clanking.

A short black-bearded man removed the horn funnel from Ysabeau's mouth and stepped back. D'Estouteville set down the water jar and shoved his face close to hers. "Who is he? Where is he hidden?" he snarled. She moaned a little and shook her head. Blackbeard rammed the funnel back between her teeth and grasped her nose between thumb and forefinger. D'Estouteville lifted a large pipkin of water and again began to pour slowly.

"The question ordinaire," Villon hissed, his face working convulsively. "It's a form of torture for criminals. I've had water poured into me that way until my heart and bowels felt like to burst."

Ysabeau held her breath until her face darkened, then she choked and swallowed.

WITH a bound Alyard was on the pourer. His sword knocked the pipkin from D'Estouteville's hand. Raging like a wild man, in quarters too close for thrust, he brought the heavy sword-guard down hard on the ugly head. The man's knees buckled, his jaw dropped. Without a sound he crumpled at Alyard's feet. Villon had aimed a downward slash with his dagger at Blackbeard's chest, but the man had jumped back.

"Ho! The guards! A moi! A moi!" he bellowed.

At the sound Alyard spun on his heel. He thrust lightning quick at the heavy black beard. The man choked, spat blood, and slid to his knees.

Villon had already cut Ysabeau's bonds and was helping her to a sitting position on the trestle. Shouts and cries echoed through the halls. The clank of arms and the thud of many feet warned them just in time. Alyard dumped the bundle of clothes into her lap, seized her in his powerful arms, and darted down the hall.

"This way!" shouted Villon, and they dashed across the antechamber and down the long hall toward the window. Armed guards seemed to spring like magic from every direction. Two with drawn swords barred their way.

"Mille diables," gasped Villon, spitting curses.

No time now to draw a weapon or slacken speed. Alyard threw himself at their legs, twisting slightly in the air to protect Ysabeau. Down in a sprawling heap they dropped. Desperately Alyard struggled to his feet, thrust Ysabeau into Villon's arms, and jerked his sword. Two quick blows and the guardsmen were down again. From the corner of his eye he saw Coline and Villon slip a noose under Ysabeau's arms and a sling under her thighs.

Archers and men-at-arms with torches poured down the hallway. Again he bent the yew-bow, stepped out of the shaft of moonlight from the window, and dropped four arrows in quick succession to the right and left of the torches. Lights sizzled on the floor as guards scampered out of that path of death.

The window stood clear and empty. Alyard made it in two bounds, slung the bow over his back, pulled down his leather sleeves to cover his palms, and slid rapidly down the rope. The four awaited him under the trees. With one slash of his dagger Villon cut the rope. His nimble hands darted to his

pouch, produced twelve silver spoons. Four he gave to Coline; four to Gehon.

"Scatter!" he whispered. *"Sauve qui peut."* He gazed sardonically at Ysabeau in Alyard's arms. "Come! The Pomme de Pin is close, and the landlord's a friend of mine."

FROM behind them the castle erupted like a volcano, spewing forth a raging mass of guards, archers, and half clothed retainers. A hundred torches lighted the scene to a smoky yellow brightness. Hurriedly Ysabeau threw her clothes around her and they darted into the narrow street in the wake of Villon. "There they go!" A dozen watchers pointed them out. A shouting tumbling mob, half soldiers, half Paris gutter-sweepings, took up the chase. Deeper and deeper they burrowed into the Paris underworld, following Villon in a mad twisting panting dash. A shaft of light from a dirty window, a raucous ribald song, proclaimed the tavern. They elbowed their way towards a dimly lighted corner while Villon sped in search of mine host.

Ahead of them moved a swarthy little man who mumbled under his breath. Alyard caught a fleeting glimpse of dull metal falling, heard the tiny thud as it struck the floor. He stooped and retrieved a little leaden image of a saint with arms outstretched to form a cross. He touched the man in front of him. The fellow turned quickly, irritation showing in every line of his ugly thin-lipped face. His eyes, bright and commanding, bored through Alyard like a gimlet.

"Well!" he said harshly.

Alyard handed him the leaden saint. The man's expression changed. He grasped the tiny image as if it were of gold. His hand rose to his greasy hat and fastened it back in the empty place beside the eleven other leaden saints.

"The true cross of St. Lo," he gasped, then crossed himself hurriedly and mumbled a sheave of prayers. "Drink a stoup of wine with me," he continued harshly and sat himself down at a corner table.

A religious fanatic, thought Alyard. I'd best humor him. He helped Ysabeau to a chair across from the little man.

A hubbub sounded around the door. D'Estouteville, a bandage about his head, followed by a criminal lieutenant, a greffier, and a dozen archers, began forcing his way through the crowd straight towards Alyard's table. Inmates crowded back from them as though they carried a graveyard smell.

The lieutenant dropped a heavy hand on Alyard's shoulder. "You're under arrest," he added roughly. Triumphant malice gleamed in D'Estouteville's eyes. The greffier droned from a heavily sealed parchment.

FROM across the table watched the ugly little man, his thin lips tight, his eyes baneful.

"Hold," he said commandingly.

"What now, fellow?" The lieutenant turned angrily. His eyes caught the little man's greasy hat with the twelve saintly images of lead across the crown, the long swarthy face below. "The King!" he gasped.

"The King! The King!" An earthen bar-pot smashed on the rough stone floor as a slack-jawed tapboy stared dumbly. The noise ceased almost magically. Caps doffed; knees bent; wenches curtsied.

"Yes, the King! Surprised to see me here?" Louis asked harshly.

"I fight beside my man," she said quietly.

"But of a certainty no, your Majesty," the lieutenant stammered. Indeed he had no right to astonishment for the escapades of Louis XI in brothels and mean taverns were bywords of all Paris.

The lieutenant gulped, hesitated, gained a small composure. "The man is an Englishman, a criminal," he added hastily.

Ysabeau slipped her arms about Alyard's neck.

"A criminal! But that's different." This time the King hesitated.

"He has killed a dozen of your Majesty's subjects with that long yellow bow," d'Estouteville added, seeing a quick advantage.

Louis's eyes traveled to the six feet of polished yew wood on Alyard's back. "By St. Pol, 'tis more than my police have done." His face lined in quick hard decision. "Train me a company in the handling of the long-bow and you may have your freedom with a purse of gold to boot.....a very small purse," the miserly King added.

Alyard's arm tightened about Ysabeau. "Gladly, your Majesty. And Ysabeau?"

"She is promised to me," interrupted d'Estouteville.

"Forget the wench," commanded the King.

For answer Alyard bent the bow across his left leg, strung it, pulled his half-filled quiver around to the front. His face grew hard and bleak. Ysabeau jerked a dagger and ranged by his side.

"I fight beside my man," she said quietly.

The King eyed them with silent amusement. "Would'st battle the whole of France?" he queried.

"Life's a fight," said Alyard hardily. "I stormed the castle for the maid and I keep her."

"A most saintly daring," murmured the King. "You deserve the girl. Oliver!" he called. "Oliver le Dain!" A man came running. "Fetch a priest to the palace and prepare a wedding chamber."

The King beckoned the two and they followed him out through the low doorway. Over the heads of the archers Alyard caught a glimpse of Villon's baldish head. He drew a gold piece from his slim purse and spun it in the air. He saw a claw-like hand reach out and clutch the coin. An impromptu verse like a benediction followed them from the tavern and echoed along the narrow streets.

"King Solomon Was A Miner"

ALWAYS it has been believed that King Solomon's mines were fabulously rich. The fact is that they were of such low grade that if operated at present miners' wages the returns would not cover the costs of production.

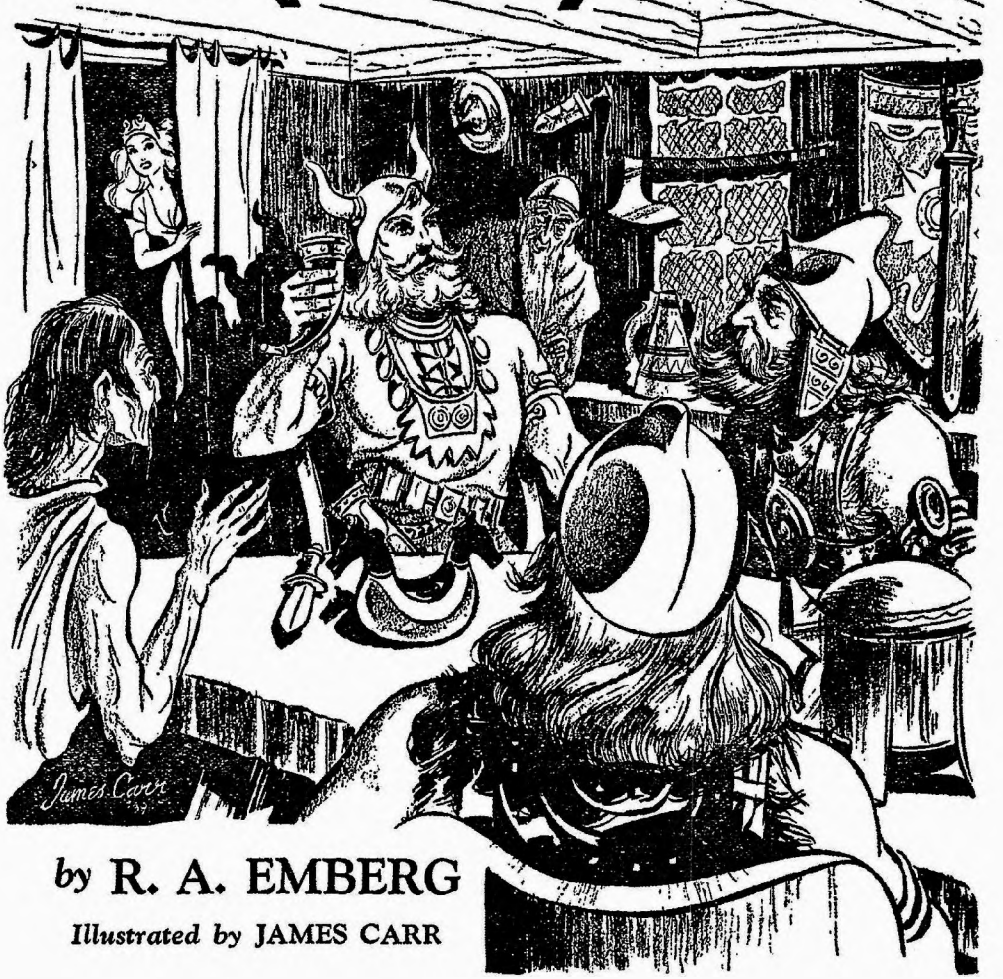
The mines were not easy of access. Many miles of barren desert had to be crossed. Water was a major problem. The country King Solomon invaded was full of savage tribes of blacks, who were continually on the war path. In order to insure water for the caravans to and from the mines, and for the working of the gold sluice-boxes, a garrison of soldiers had to be stationed at each water hole, or well, to prevent the blacks from poisoning the water.

King Solomon's sluice-box method of washing auriferous earth was very simple and quite similar to the present day boxes. For lining these sluice boxes King Solomon used sheepskins with the wool clipped to about three-eighths of an inch in length. Seven skins were used to each box. The top skin was removed each day and the other six moved to the top of the box, a new skin being added to the bottom. The skin that was removed was tightly rolled and sent to King Solomon's temple, where it was burned and the gold that had stuck to it in the sluicing box recovered from the ashes.

The top skins thus collected were called "The Golden Fleece."

—B. J. Knight—A. E. Branham

The Rune of Odin



by R. A. EMBERG

Illustrated by JAMES CARR

"Aye, the choice is in the hands of the All-father."

FIVE times had the earth made its circuit through the heavens since the beginning of the famine. For five years there had been no crops. No longer were the deer and bear to be found in the forests; even the wolves of the northland had vanished.

The customary sunshine of the summer was missing. True, the sun came up out of the eastern sea, but it was not the warm friendly sun of other years. It was now only a yellow ball, wan and feeble, casting pale shadows.

At Upsala, many sacrifices had been made to the gods that the land might again become warm. The first year oxen and horses had been given. The second and third years, Lapp and Finnish thralls, and the third and fourth, the altars ran red with the noblest blood of Svithiod. All to no avail.

The fifth winter had been worse than all. Snow fell constantly. Not wild swirling snow carried by howling blizzards from Finnmarken—just a soft hushed falling from the heavens—to pile up to incredible depths.

A MUD spattered horseman rode through the portals of stockaded Upsala to be immediately surrounded by a squad of men. Reining his horse back on its haunches, he raised a mailed arm in greeting.

"I am from Berig, King of Gothland, who comes to the sacrifices," he announced. "I bring a message to Donald, Drott of Upsala."

"Aye, we've been waiting you these many days," replied the Gate captain, "but we expected you to come by water; the Malar is open."

"Open here, yes, but there is ice in the narrows. We beached the ships and came overland."

The Gate captain mounted a horse and guided the messenger to the skaale of Donald.

Donald, middle-aged, strongly knit, sat on his high seat surrounded by his hirdsmen, among them, Svarte, chief keeper of the Aesir temple.

The messenger made a scant bow. The rivalry between the Swedes and Goths for dominance in the peninsula was intense, and the obeisance was more of a tribute to Donald's office as Drott of the Aesir faith than to his kingship of the Svear.

"You come from Berig?" Donald queried.

"Aye," the messenger answered. "Berig and a thousand carls will be here within the hour. He asks that quarters be ready for his host."

"He comes well boun," Svarte interrupted sourly.

"Berig is well boun wherever he goes," the messenger returned tartly.

"As befits the king of the Goths," Donald hastily added.

He gave orders to his hirdsmen who departed to prepare for the housing of the Gothic host, and the messenger was given meat and ale at a table well out of hearing of the high seat, leaving Donald and Svarte alone.

"And now, Priest, I will hear what you have to say," the Drott told Svarte.

"Know you then, Donald," Svarte was surly, "that last evening and far into the morning I stood by the waters of the sacred spring—and ever was the reading the same. Berig must go to the altar. Tonight, while he is a guest in this skaale I will prepare and minister to him a draught, and then, as he sleeps, I will carve a rune to Odin upon his breast."

"But why not the casting of lots as is the custom?" demanded Donald. "I like not this method of choosing a sacrifice."

Svarte's eyes narrowed apprehensively as he peered at Donald. Usually pliable to the priest, yet the king was a dangerous man to cross. And he could be stubborn. But the stake was worth the risk. Avarice was plainly written across Svarte's face. In the event of Berig's death on the Aesir altar, his gear would become the property of the temple.

"Hearken to me, Donald," the priest whined plaintively, "if the famine is to end, you must allow me to do as the gods command. If you do not, more evil will come upon us." Through half closed lids, Svarte cunningly watched the perturbed Drott.

Came a burst of shouting from without: "Berig and his host approach."

"We go to welcome him," said Donald. "We shall talk more later."

"BACK," cried the captain of the gate to the tattered masses of townspeople who milled about the entrance to the stockade. "Back! Back! Make way for the Gothlanders," and his men rode their mounts into the crowd, forcing the gateway clear.

To the clash of shields and the clank of mail, the Goths came into Upsala. Berig, a huge bear of a man in his late twenties, bearded and moustachioed, rode at the head of the column.

Donald and his hird spurred alongside in token of friendship, riding with the Goths to their quarters, and after seeing them properly housed, Donald and Svarte returned to the king's skaale.

"Priest, I like this scheme of yours even less now," said Donald from his high seat.

Svarte's forehead was suddenly beaded with an icy sweat.

"Donald," he defended himself, "the scheme is not mine. I simply read aright the message of the gods."

The Drott's eyes smouldered. A reply was on his lips when a hide curtain at the far end of the hall was thrown aside and Auda, his daughter, came toward the high seat. She was a girl of some twenty odd years, blue-eyed, fair, graceful.

"You interrupt important business, Auda," the Drott was curt, "what brings you here?"

"Forgive me, father, I thought you were alone." She cast a timid glance at Svarte; in all Svithiod, Svarte was feared. "I would speak of the alruna Lapp maid."

"Aye, what of her?" the king asked.

"She has been fey since yester even. I could not waken her this morning. But after Berig's host came, she roused and told me of a strange dream. She stood on a high mountain in Skane from where she saw the blood of a king sprinkled on the altar. Then the sun came into the heavens and the land was warm again with summer. The cattle grew fat, and deer and bear once more ranged the forests of Gothland and Svithiod—"

"Tell me, Auda," Svarte broke in eagerly, "did the alruna woman see the face of him who was laid on the altar?"

"Aye," the girl replied. "The face was that of Berig, King of the Goths."

"The gods have spoken through the alruna woman," Svarte shouted triumphantly, his swarthy face flushing.

"So it would seem," moodily returned Donald.

"The wench has earned the silver bracelet I promised her," mumbled Svarte as he paced the length of the hall. "Now to bend this stubborn Donald."

IN THE skaale assigned to Berig, Swen, aged Finnish thrall, long in captivity to Berig's house, polished the Gothic king's shield. He rubbed the gleaming metal with tallow and wood-ashes, keeping up a steady flow of talk. And Berig listened.

"And watch Svarte," Swen admonished. "I don't trust the priest. He has an evil fishy eye for all his holiness. Like father, like son, and I well remember his sire who was keeper of the temple before him. They had a saying in Upsala then, that to acquire wealth, was to face the priest from the top side of the altar. Berig of Gothland will do well to keep clear of Svarte."

"You're a calamity monger, Swen,"

Berig laughed. "Ever since we left Vestervik, you've harped on the danger I face at Upsala. Why should Svarte single me out from the other chieftains?"

"Why? Who is the wealthiest king in all Scandinavia? Who is famous for his war-gear, horses, ships, silver and gold? Is it Berig of Gothland or some petty savage from Norrland? Answer me that. Is not this Thing proclaimed by Donald one at which a sacrifice will be chosen from among the kings in order that the famine be lifted from the land? And are not the goods of the victim forfeit to the temple? And who is temple keeper? Is it not Svarte, the greediest man in Svithiod? Calamity monger or no, I feel it in here—deep," Swen tapped his breast.

"You're an unbelieving old infidel, Swen," Berig lightly replied. "Perhaps Svarte might choose you—hmmm, not a bad idea at that. Odin would give you welcome. Although a heathen, you've always held your place in the shield wall—and the all-father loves a stout heart."

"When I die, I die by my own gods, and I go to the heaven of my ancestors," growled the old slave. "No fear of Svarte choosing me. The earth is dripping with the blood of Finnish thralls these past five years. No. It will be a great one this time—and mark me, a man of wealth." He blew upon the shield and wiped away the condensed vapor. "Watch the priest well if you would again see Gothland. Those are my words—I stand by them."

Berig seemed little impressed.

Swen stood the shield on end. "I go with you to the council tonight," he asserted. "I have an eye for plots and a keen nose to scent them out."

IT WAS evening. Berig and a score of Scandinavian kings were guests in the skaale of Donald.

Everything in the hall was suggestive of a rude society and barbarous warlike times. The skaale was large, capable of feasting three hundred men. At one end of the main hall, a huge fire blazed on an open hearth, the smoke escaping through a hole in the roof. The rafters and walls were smoked to a deep rich brown and were hung with weapons and trophies. The center of the hall was open, but on each side were tables which in normal times had groaned under the weight of the heavy food and ale so beloved by the northmen.

Tonight, no huge banquet faced the guests. Seriously, the chieftains ate the scant food, drank the flat beer and discussed the forthcoming sacrifice.

Far into the night the discussions waxed and waned. Arguments ensued —swords were drawn and Donald was at his wits' ends to keep peace. Finally, he raised his hand and called for silence. Swords went back into scabbards reluctantly and the babble of voices ceased.

"Aesir folk," he began, "as Drott of the faith, I would speak to you. I have heard you discuss the cloud under which our land lies. Though now it should be spring, the snow does not cease. On all sides it is as high as the wall that circles Upsala. Above us is no warmth, no sun, no stars. Snow and cold only. Ice — death — hunger-death draw near. Babes suck at dry dugs and the people boil their leather gear and drink the broth. And not only in Svithiod, but over the entire land, starvation stalks. Even today word comes that the hungry thralls of Snor of Sala devoured their master.

"We have gold and silver, but it is of no use. We can buy no food because there is no food to be bought. The Frieslander merchants are fearful of ice and snow. They come no more to our shores.

"The people mutter. They say a great one must go to Odin to intercede. Svarte, reader of runes says the same thing. One of us," the Drott's eye swept the hall, "must go. And we leave the choice to Odin. Tonight, aye, at this very time, you will drink of consecrated ale, and Odin will choose from you while you sleep. On that one will he carve a rune, and that one shall be placed upon the altar before the people tomorrow. Men of the north, as Drott of the faith, I command that you drink of the ale that Svarte will pass to you."

"Ah! As I thought," Swen whispered to Berig.

"Silence," Berig retorted roughly. "You know not of what you speak. Svarte is of another world."

"Aye, but of Niflheim, not Asgard, King of the Goths."

"Hush."

The ale was passed. King after king quaffed deeply.

"And now the King of the Goths," leered Svarte, holding the brimming horn before Berig.

"Aye," Berig took it. "The choice is in the hands of the All-father." He drained the horn at a gulp.

"Your turn, Donald." The replenished horn was handed to the Drott, a shrewd move on Svarte's part.

The chieftains were aghast.

"Not the Drott," cried one.

"Aye, the Drott too," Donald replied. "He should be the last to refuse the trial. The gods may take notice of his advancing years and place their mark upon him!" His eyes surveyed the priest, and a chill, not entirely of the cold, crept up Svarte's back.

The thralls cleared the tables, turning them into beds, and the chieftains prepared to snatch a few hours sleep before morning.

Reserved for the more prominent were sleeping chambers in the sides of the hall. To one of these, Berig and Swen were conducted.

Swen took off Berig's mail and spread the sleeping skins. The Gothic king's eyes were heavy and Swen watched him anxiously.

In the hall, the fire died away to a bed of red coals—and the noise of men in deep slumber resounded through the skaale. Berig slept deeper than all.

DONALD of Svithiod could not sleep. He loathed the part he was playing. He loathed Svarte. Aye, the ways of the gods were strange. An ill defined suspicion of Svarte's motives plagued him. He dismissed it when he thought of the Lapp girl's dream. Ah! He had not questioned the girl. He would go to the women's bower and talk to her. Rising and stepping carefully to avoid snoring sleepers, he tiptoed down the side of the darkened skaale.

Swen, wide awake, on a bench near Berig's chamber, watched a furtive figure approach. In the dim light he did not recognize the Drott. It would have made little difference if he had. Berig's safety was uppermost in his mind. He moved softly from the bench to an elk-hide curtain that hung over the entrance to Berig's room. As he crouched in the dark, he drew from his belt a small hand ax.

Donald continued along the hall, stopping at intervals to reassure himself that he was not wakening his guests. When opposite Swen's hiding place, he stum-

Sven struck the king with the flat of the ax and felled him unconscious to the floor.

bled over a bearskin and fell toward the thrall. Swen struck the king with the flat of the ax and felled him unconscious to the floor.

The little yellow man listened to hear if any of the sleepers had been aroused by the scuffle. Aside from a medley of snores, all was silent. He shook Berig. The king of the Goths would not awaken. The drugged ale lay heavily upon him. Swen scratched his head. He couldn't carry the king. He was too heavy. Swen was old—he was also small. Rapidly, he mulled things over. Aye, that was it. Go to where the Goths were housed. Find Wulf, Lawgiver. Tell him. Wulf would know what to do.

He lifted Donald from the floor and placed him on the couch beside the drugged Berig. If anyone entered the room, his suspicions must not be aroused by finding the unconscious Drott on the floor.

SWEN left the skaale. Finding the Goths was difficult. It was pitch dark and the streets, or what answered for streets in Upsala—winding, narrow rabbit warrens—were knee deep in slush and mud.

After an hour of miry tramping, Swen knocked on the walls of a house where he thought the Goths were quartered. A score of men rushed into the street with drawn swords and axes.

Swen's heart leaped with joy. They were Berig's countrymen.

"Down weapons," he cried. "I am Berig's man. I seek Wulf."

"The frost devils take you," cried a red bearded Goth, "Why not seek him at decent hours instead of coming when men are deep in slumber, hammering like Thor. I've a mind to take an ear off, Berig's man or no."

"If you do," Swen barked, "Berig will take off your ugly head, but enough of this blathering. The king is in danger. Where is Wulf?"

The occupants of a nearby house, wakened by the clamor, came pouring out. Wulf was among them.

Swen told him what had happened.

Wulf donned his mail. To Eric Broken Nose, Jarl of Vestervik, he gave orders to have the men roused and boun, but to remain in their quarters.

"It may be, Swen," he said, "that you bounced your ax off some sleep-walking jarl that meant no harm. If so, Berig may have an explanation to make tomorrow, and, if the fellow is badly hurt, one less thrall who is too quick with his ax."

Swen ignored the grim joke. "The king is in danger," he repeated. "The priest eyed him like a troll, then drugged him. Why shouldn't he awaken?"

"We shall go see—you and I. We can get into the skaale unseen. We want no fight unless it is forced on us."

AFTER the chieftains had retired, Svarte waited in the stables until the skaale appeared quiet. He then entered and sought the chamber of Berig. The priest's entry was made shortly after Swen's encounter with Donald and while the Finn was hunting for the Goths.

With the sharp point of his dagger, Svarte cut two parallel lines on the hairy breast of the sleeper. The cuts were about four inches long and deep enough to start the blood flowing freely. The priest then returned to the stables, mounted his horse and galloped toward the temple.

SWEN and Wulf tiptoed into the king's skaale. All was quiet. Noiselessly, they made their way to Berig.

Everything seemed to be the same as when Swen had left. Donald still lay where he had been placed—beside the king of the Goths.

"I think we'd better lug this fellow off somewhere," Wulf said, indicating the figure of Donald, "then we'll keep watch for the remainder of the night. Things are not as they should be, but I don't want to call down Berig's wrath in case we mishandle them. Go find a place where we can put this fellow."

Swen was gone but a few moments.

"There's an empty chamber at the end of the hall," he whispered when he had returned.

Lifting the Drott, they carried him to the room—the same one from which he had departed to interview the Lapp girl.

Sharing the same bench, Wulf and Swen watched over Berig until a graying sky cast a pale light into the skaale.

A sleeper stirred. Wulf nudged Swen. "I'll leave now," he whispered. "I'll have a man outside as soon as I can. If the king doesn't wake, send me word."

Swen nodded.

Shortly after Wulf had eased out of the skaale, thralls came in, kicked the fire embers into life and put on fresh wood. Others began the preparations for the morning meal.

Swen again tried to waken Berig. After many shakes, Berig yawned, stretched and opened his eyes.

"I could swear by the gods, if my head is any sign," Berig grunted, "that I emptied too many horns last night. This flat beer of Svithiod is a potent brew," then suddenly remembering, "Swen, you old heathen, did you see any Odin marks on me—any carvings or runes?" running his hands over his body. "No, I can't find any. Now, old calamity howler, how do you answer that?"

Swen, not knowing what to say, made no reply. Who was the man he had hit with the ax?

DONALD greeted the chieftains with a constrained air. Above his right temple was a lump the size of an egg. And every few moments his hand would steal absent mindedly to his breast. He appeared abstracted and melancholy, this in marked contrast to the other chiefs who were in high spirits. They had all examined themselves thoroughly, but could find no trace of an Odin mark.

Auda was at the breakfast board to do honor to the visiting kings. From the glances thrown at her by Berig, it was plain to Donald, who watched both, that the King of Gothland found her good to look upon. And with a woman's intuition, Auda sensed the admiration in Berig's glances. Aye, he wasn't hard to look at either. It was the first time the girl had seen the Gothic king.

A tremor of fear ran through her as she remembered the sinister dream of the Lapp girl and the way Svarte had interpreted it.

Svarte, who had returned from the temple to wait upon Donald, marked the exchange of glances between the three. He shrugged his shoulders. "I trust," he said suavely, to Berig, "that the King of the Goths slept well last night; that the holy ale brought him pleasant dreams?"

"Aye, Svarte, indeed it did."

"And you feel fit this morning?"

"Aye. Fit for folk play or hewing."

A puzzled look came into the priest's eyes.

IT WAS mid morning. The dim sun was well up in the eastern sky.

At the Mora Stone, outside the tem-

ple, was assembled the miserable populace of Svithiod. The site was a natural amphitheater, several hundred yards in diameter. In the center was a space about one hundred feet in circumference, separated from the rest of the area by ropes. Inside the ropes were fourteen flat topped stones, twelve in a circle around two in the center. The twelve stones were chairs for the Law-Givers; the thirteenth was for the Drott; the fourteenth, grim, dark stained, was the Aesir sacrificial altar.

The people milled about. There were a score thousand. Thralls, dark of skin, eye and hair, slant-eyed and high cheek-boned, clearly of Mongolian origin, gave way before their blonde masters who crowded close to the ropes. Carls, bonder, stor-bonder, haulds, jarls and kings waited stolidly for the ceremony to begin. Sweden was tremendously populated, and despite the inroads made by famine and disease, a great Sacrifice and Thing drew immense crowds.

A murmur ran through the crowd. Donald, his hird, and the chief kings were approaching. The people gave way and the party dismounted from their horses. Donald stepped over the ropes and took a seat on one of the central stones.

"The Alsharjar of Svithiod and Gothland will take their places," he intoned.

Twelve graybeards seated themselves.

Next the keeper of the temple would be called. Expectantly, everyone waited. Ensued a breathless hush. Suddenly, with exclamations of surprise, the front ranks pressed into the ropes. Those in the rear craned their necks. Aye. Something was happening. Donald waved back Svarte, who looked perplexed. The priest hesitated and again started for the altar. Donald fixed him with steely blue eyes. "Back, Priest, back, I say. I talk to the folk first. After that—you," then facing the assembly, the Drott continued.

"Svear and Goths, had I addressed you yesterday, it would have been with heavy heart, heavy with the sorrows of my people. Today, however, I can talk to you with a lighter heart. A new time approaches for all.

"You know of the sacrifices we have made. How we have given of our horses, our oxen, our thralls, yet the gods would not be appeased. Many times has Svarte, keeper of the temple, consulted the oracles. Only recently have the readings become clear. The blood of a great king must be sprinkled upon the altar if summer is to come again.

"In this land there are many kings, but only two who can count a thousand score subjects, Berig of Gothland, and I, Donald of Svithiod. Plainly the oracles meant one of us. Nay, hear me out," as some of Berig's haulds, alarmed, forced their way through the press toward Berig.

DONALD held his arms aloft for silence and waited. The crowd milled, then settled down. Donald continued. "Last yule I made known throughout the land that a great Thing would meet at Upsala this month. My brethren, you are now assembled at this Thing. Shortly, a king will go to the altar and summer will come once more. That is why I say a new time approaches. For know you, folk of the Aesir, that Odin himself, came to my skaale last night. One eyed, gray bearded, dressed in cloudy kirtle, he came from behind an elk-hide cur-

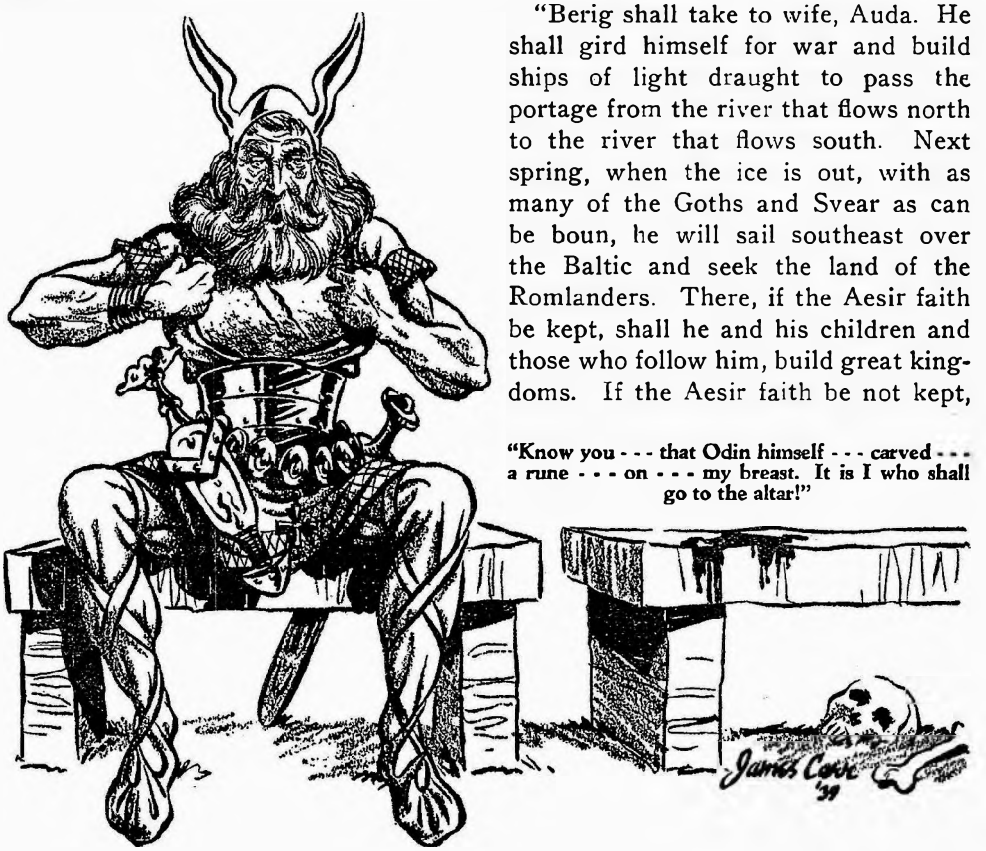
tain and with the spear, Gugne, carved unto himself a rune—on—my breast. It is I, Donald, who shall go to the altar!" With quick movements of his hands, the Drott tore open his tunic, and displayed to the gaping multitude, two dark, bloody scars.

"Odin told me of many things," he resumed, "among them the reason for punishing the Svear and the Goths. This I may not tell, but I may tell of other things: Odin's commands to the folk. Hear them then.

"The people have grown very numerous since the days of Njord. It is only a matter of time until many folk hewings will result from overcrowding. The land will not support the increasing numbers.

"Far to the south is Romland, a rich country. The winters are mild with little snow. There are rich burgs with tens of thousands of folk. There are fertile plains on which food grows in plenty—and many thralls to work them. There is gold and silver. There are skaales as large as all Upsala and on the southern sea there are many merchant ships laden with rich cargo. The Romlanders are not of the Aesir. Once, they were great warriors, but now they are weak, pitiful and full of sloth. Their men of war are slaves. A thousand of the Svear and Goths may well subdue ten thousand Romlanders and take to themselves their goods and lands. Hearken ye to the words of Odin.

"Berig shall take to wife, Auda. He shall gird himself for war and build ships of light draught to pass the portage from the river that flows north to the river that flows south. Next spring, when the ice is out, with as many of the Goths and Svear as can be boun, he will sail southeast over the Baltic and seek the land of the Romlanders. There, if the Aesir faith be kept, shall he and his children and those who follow him, build great kingdoms. If the Aesir faith be not kept,



"Know you - - - that Odin himself - - - carved - - - a rune - - - on - - - my breast. It is I who shall go to the altar!"

then shall the Goths perish from the earth.

"Domar, my son who is now in Finland, shall be Drott of Upsala and king of Svithiod when he returns."

Intently, the old Drott's eyes passed over the sea of faces before him. They came to rest on Svarte's bewildered, frightened countenance.

"Aye, Svarte," he said, with something of satisfaction in his voice, "it is a long journey to Asgard—I should have company. You have communed with the gods these many years—you shall go with me! Nay, let him not escape," he called as Svarte struggled in the grasp of two burly hirdsmen. "In his place as keeper of the temple, I appoint Sklar of Malar." The old king gestured toward the sacrificial stone, "and now, brethren, I ask Sklar to officiate at the altar in the first ceremony of his new office."

(NEXT MONTH: *"The Coming of the Goths"*)

THE EMPIRE BREAKERS

WHILE these tales do not pretend to be historically accurate, in their broad features they are as near the actual truth as any other account of the great Gothic trek from Northern Europe to the softer lands of the south.

That the Goths originated in Sweden is an arbitrary statement. However, many if not all historians incline toward this theory. Certain it is, in race and religion, the Goths were very close to the Swedes. The immense quantities of Roman trinkets found in Swedish burial mounds, the thousands of rune-carvings, and Swedish folk-lore, are indicative, at least to this writer, that the Goths came from the western shore of the Baltic and the adjacent islands, Gothland, etc. The southern part of Sweden today bears the name of Gothland. The title of the Swedish king is: "King of the Swedes, Goths and Wends."

The thread of kinship between the Goths and the Swedes is very evident in the Eddas. And Jordanes, the Goths' own historian, relates that his people came from Scandia, that is to say, the Scandinavian peninsula, to the European mainland in three ships under the command of a king named Berig.

The real history of the Goths begins about 245 A.D. when they were living near the mouths of the Danube. "The Rune of Odin," in which the hegira starts, is placed about the year 100 A.D., during the reign of Donald, the fourth Yngling Drott to rule at Upsala. That Donald was a contemporary of Berig is a liberty of the writer. However, from all data available, Berig, if he ever existed at all, must have lived at about this time.

The five-year famine and the sacrifice of Donald are part of Swedish folk-lore.

R. A. Emberg.

OCTAVE SEVENTY-FIVE

by VINCENT CORNIER

Illustrated by MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

THE HOWL of wind through mean streets and a rain that crashed like the explosions of stormcast waves, the clanking of cranes and donkey engines, winches rattling above the lugubrious moans of tug-boats in the river squall—those were the last sounds Alf Andleham heard in life. He listened and cursed them. They added to his sodden misery and, somehow, accentuated the curious depression that held him.

He had a premonition of his doom. He did not think of it as such—he summed it up as a hunch. He had a hunch that the coppers would get him for this night's job out at Richmond. Every time he had experienced such a numbing emotion, after some crime, he

had remarked it. And every time, sure as a gun, he was "lifted" and sent down for another stretch.

He halted, irresolute, at the mouth of the alley which opened on to Hackwell Rents, Limehouse. He had half a mind to nip into the *Fox and Grapes* and have a drink to lessen his depressed state of mind. Then he decided not to. His kit of tools was on him, together with all the plunder he had gathered in Richmond. Small silver articles filled his side-pockets, a gold watch and twenty pound-notes bulged his hip-pocket, and the amazing haul of jewels he had made was stuffed in the front of his wet cap. Like as not there would be a couple of "flatties" in the pub—generally were. And they got suspicious of noticeable bulges in Limehouse gents' wear.

The idea was to get the whole issue carefully hidden under his floorboards, then go out again.

Alf Andleham touched his cap front and felt the shapes of the gems secreted there. After their touch he forgot his forebodings — chuckled and thrilled. Perhaps, after all, it would pay to keep off the booze altogether to-night. To think over the readiest way of getting rid of those sparklers would demand a clear mind.

Real beauties they were! Maybe rubies — they glowed redly. Maybe opals — yes, more like opals, now he came to remember. But then, again, were opals red? It didn't really matter. His immediate concern was to get home out of this filthy November storm, then he could examine his haul at leisure. He walked on, but stopped almost as soon as he had started. Odd. He could have sworn that something had brushed all about him and plucked at his precious cap.

Yes! There it was again! Andleham's hair bristled with sudden fear and he gulped. Just like a blinking fish tugging at a line, it was—a queer jerking that no wind could do.

That cap of his was real "Limey." It had an elastic head-grip to hold it tenaciously. When a fellow had to run from the coppers a loose-fitting cap was dangerous headwear. Once blown off —and there was possible evidence of identification left behind.

No, it wasn't the wind. Wind had not the sickening faculty of beating about one's head like invisible velvet folds that . . . suffocated.

The strange unseen force altered. Andleham had just sufficient time to sense the threatening change before he was rendered oblivious to all things, always.

The plucking ceased and the ghostly velvet folded no more about his head. Instead of these there was a crashing fall of light in his brain and — death. Everything near to him went down in ruins. Bricks flew, glass broke in tinkling splinters and slates dropped in showers. Then a long roaring of breaking walls began, and Alf Andleham had that for requiem.

POLICE and firemen had to dig his body out of a hundred tons and more of rubble; that collapsed brickwork which had been the empty warehouse over the alley-way leading to Hackwell Rents.

Rodney Ogden of the *Daily Wire* arrived at the wreckage just as they came upon Andleham, and he helped, variously, until the remains were placed in a mortuary-car. Then he sought out Inspector Bulmers, whom he knew to be a garrulous good sort, always eager to fatten the news of the day.

"Have I got the name right?" Ogden asked, as an opening. "Andleham?"

"Yes, Andleham by name and 'andle 'em by nature," Inspector Bulmers grunted. "D'you know what they've found on him, already?" He told Ogden about the silverware, the watch, the notes and the burglar's kit, but made no mention of the "rubies" in the cap. "Y'see, he must have been doing a job only a few hours before he was killed. Probably coming home from it."

"Any idea as to where?" Ogden felt there might be some sort of a story in the manner of this thief's death.

"Well, I did hear that the watch is engraved. Y'know, a presentation piece —something about the so-and-so faculty of somewhere-or-other university giving it 'as a token of our gratitude and regard to Professor Hector Winslowe.' "

Ogden jumped as he recognized the name as that of one of the most important living physicists. He recalled that Winslowe lived at Richmond. Since he was a man with many of the habits of a recluse, it would probably be difficult to get hold of him.

"Sure Winslowe *is* the fellow's name?"

"Certain," answered Bulmers. "But if you'd like to nip along to the station you can tell 'em I've given you permission to—" He broke off as a sergeant approached and saluted. "Now, what, Summerson? What's that—his cap?"

"Yes, sir." Summerson held it out. "And look what he had stowed away in its front! Had a nice haul, eh, if he'd lived to enjoy it."

"*Phew!* Rubies, by gum!"

Ogden looked carefully at the seven big gems which Summerson passed over. He disagreed with the inspector's definition of them. They were more like fire-opals.

"Funny things to have been taken from a professor's house," Bulmers muttered. "Now, I wonder, had that bloke done more than one job? Can't imagine a frousty old scientist being the owner of them—can you, Ogden?"

"No-o-o," Ogden hesitatingly agreed.

Alf Andleham

Then ventured: "If they *are* gems, that is."

The police officers exchanged glances before taking the gems over to a light and re-examining them. They grunted, dubiously.

"Aye," said Bulmers," *if* they are! I'm inclined, like young Ogden here, to doubt it, now."

"Me, too," Summerson concurred. "Can't exactly explain it, but they—they're more like queer little glass globes of—something—"

"Precisely what I thought!" Ogden, too, was at a loss for an adequate description. "They're not gems so much as spheres, transparent spheres, filled with—curious light, don't you think? Like bottled fire-flies—*eh?*"

A FIREMAN came up to them. He appeared ill at ease and lit a cigarette, brushing lime and filth from his uniform.

"Another one of them bloomin' mysterious blow-ups," he said as he nodded at the mountainous rubble. "Gor', it's gettin' real queer! Four of 'em since July. No fire; not a bloomin' trace—an' still there's charred wood and even bricks what've bin through it."

"Through fire, you mean?"

"Yus. Anyway, just the sime as if they 'ad." He picked up a broken fragment. "'Ere, look at this." He pointed to well-defined calcinations on the edges of the brick, where it had split. "See? Exac'ly the sime as bricks go after they've cracked with a real honest-to-goodness blaze. An 'inferno' as you paper fellers calls it." And he grinned at Ogden.

"It certainly does look burnt," Ogden agreed. "Probably there's been a fire in this property years ago and some of the not-too-badly burned bricks were used in the new building afterwards."

"Not on yer blinkin' life, sir! It wouldn't be allowed. Inspectors wouldn't stand for it. You bet that these bricks has just got marked like this, tonight—*now*—just afore they tumbled down."

" 'Four of 'em since July,' " Inspector Bulmers quoted. "How d'you make that out? Four what?"

"Four separit cases o' collapsed buildings which 'as 'ad bricks and wood messed abaht like this little lot, Inspector. We chaps 'as our own weekly paper. Well, y'see, one or two articles have bin printed in it, written by experts—dealin' with this funny business. What can't be bottomed is 'ow all the signs of fire can be found on rubbish what 'as collapsed where no fire 'as bin, an'—" He stopped and carefully stamped out his cigarette. "Lumme, here's the chief. I'm off!"

Rodney Ogden made a mental note or two. That fireman's journal ought to prove interesting. Then there was something distinctly odd about the whole affair. Here in Limehouse, with this building apparently brought down by the wind and yet with marks of fire on its ruins, the dead man, and these seemingly precious stones, there was the beginning of a first-class mystery.

"Well, Inspector, if I might go on to the station—"

"Aye, lad. You hop off. Tell 'em to help you all they can. Let me know if there's anything else. 'Bye."

RODNEY OGDEN went to the police station.

"Yes, Professor Sir Hector Winslowe, F.R.S., has been robbed. He has just been on the 'phone. Little rabbit of a fellow, evidently. He didn't seem at all upset about his loss—said he'd identify his property in due course."

"About Andleham's death," Ogden said. "How did your 'little rabbit' take that news?"

The station sergeant meditatively pulled at his moustache. His face altered, slowly.

"You're a queer sort of cuss, Ogden! Now that's damned funny! It didn't strike me at first—but now it does!" He sat up. " 'Rabbit' be hanged," he said. "When I told him that the burglar had been killed just as he got to his own

house in Hackwell Rents, he laughed, quiet like, and said: *'Naturally'*—naturally, mind you! *'Naturally.'* Just as if he—he had expected it."

"A sort of sneer?"

"Yes! You've got it. A sneer. Damn it, Ogden, I shouldn't wonder if—if—"

"If what?"

"Oh, nothing. Silly of me. How *could* that professor have any hand in Alf Andleham's death and all that general smash-up? It isn't sense."

"But," said Ogden, as he turned to go, "it has touched your—police instinct, hasn't it?"

CONTRARY to what he had expected from a reputed recluse of testy temperament, Ogden found himself admitted almost at once to Winslowe's house.

The famous Sir Hector might have been a village shopkeeper, or a respectable artisan in second-best clothes, at first sight. Really he was disappointing: a tubby fellow, baldish and ruddy, with big calloused hands and a straggling, gingery moustache. It was only when he turned his peculiar, deep-set blue eyes on one that some indication of the man's intellect could be gleaned; they stared without appearing to see, as though their owner were deep in some thought of scientific import.

Had it not been that here was a man dubbed Knight and entitled to call himself a Fellow of the Royal Society, Rodney Ogden would have classified Winslowe as slightly mad.

"Regarding the recent robbery, I presume, Mr.—er—"—Winslowe looked at the card in his hand—"Ogden? Well, I can give you ten minutes. Please don't make it more."

Ogden sat for half of one of those minutes in complete silence. Winslowe appeared disconcerted by the steady pause. But Ogden did not care. He had allowed his intelligence to play on this problem all along the road from Limehouse to Richmond, and as a result he was now determined on an alarming course of inquiry.

"Come, come, Mr. Ogden—"

"Not altogether the robbery, Sir Hector." Ogden tried his hardest to let the inflection of those words convey more than he dared utter. He spoke coldly, meaningly. "I am much more interested in what has arisen since the robbery. In short, I think you ought to know more about the fate of the robber. Or, *do you?*"

"Now, what the devil do you mean by that?" There was much that was purest bewilderment in the scientist's tones, but something else which was not. "What should I know—details of the fate of *what* robber?"

"Of one Alfred Andleham, the sneak-thief who burgled your place tonight, sir. He lived in Hackwell Rents, Limehouse. Evidently he was nearing his home after looting you when, as the police have told you, he was killed—presumably by the collapse of a wall."

"Poor fool." The professor sighed, and lit a cheap cigarette. "A—a windy night."

"However windy a night it may be," said Ogden, "I fail to understand how a solidly built warehouse over an alley could collapse like that. Remember, the very fact of there being an alley-way there would prevent anything short of a typhoon being able to exert a full blast on the property."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Ogden, you're wasting that ten minutes."

"Oh, no, I'm not, Sir Hector. I'm

using it in my own way—in a way you scarcely expected."

"Damme, sir, you are impertinent. *What* paper do you represent?"

"*The Daily Wire.*"

"Do you want me to ring up your editor and ask for your withdrawal from my house? For that's what I will do if you don't—"

"I'm really not interested, Sir Hector. I am doing my job to the best of my ability. I am merely trying to trace a connection between Andleham's burglary and his death." Ogden was sure of himself now. Informed by that selfsame instinct that had informed the station sergeant of something else underlying the apparently simple facts, he knew with a vital certainty that this scientist had not been in the least surprised by the report of Andleham's death. More than this, he appeared frightened. And why should he be frightened?

"Good God, man! Do you—do you fully realize your imputation? Are you —you suggesting—"

"Suggesting nothing, Sir Hector. Please don't get excited. All I would like to know is this—what manner of things were those ruby or opal-like bulbs which Andleham apparently collected here tonight?"

"And what if I decline to answer your question?"

"Then I shall take it as being a duty, outside of all newspaper work, to ask the authorities to have them carefully examined. You see, Sir Hector, I was on the scene of the collapse almost within five minutes of its happening, and I helped to withdraw Alf Andleham's body from the wreckage."

"Well—*well?*"

"I noticed seven distinct and livid impressions, very like recent burns, on his forehead." Sir Hector had changed color, and his fingers moved nervously. "Later on, the man's cap was retrieved. Hidden in the front of it, just above its peak, were seven small globes. Now I wonder what they did to him to burn him like that?"

"What on earth *could* they do, man?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"If," Ogden went on, "they were responsible for those strange scars on Andleham's head, they might also be responsible for the curious calcining of bricks and timber in the wreckage of the warehouse. For, Sir Hector, although the disaster was apparently caused by the high wind, distinct traces of fire were found in the rubble afterwards."

WINSLOWE looked at the reporter queerly.

"Probably fires of long ago. Rebuilt property in which the best of the injured brickwork was taken for incorporation."

"That was my theory, but it was discounted. The L.C.C. people don't allow it. Besides, in two or three recent collapses of other properties—*not* on windy nights, sir—the same phenomenon of burning, where no fire had been, was reported upon. All of those other collapsed buildings, Sir Hector, were decayed and empty properties—and each collapsed at night, when it was absolutely certain that no human being was in or about them."

"The—the ten minutes are up, Mr. Ogden."

"And so"—Ogden got to his feet grimly—"is your dangerous game, Sir Hector! I warn you I shall ask for the opal things to be thoroughly investigated, and I shall continue to inquire until I discover what connection there

was between them and that collapse and Andleham's death."

He made for the study door. Sir Hector reached it before him. And Sir Hector smiled—a slightly threatening smile. It was Ogden who felt frightened now.

"Pray don't be in such an angry haste, my good Ogden," he said. "Come, sit down again—and I'll tell you all you want to know. It appears—ah—you have at least a trained brain. Do sit down! Really, I insist. Have some whiskey and a smoke?"

Slowly Rodney Ogden returned to the chair and sat down.

The professor had opened a case, velvet-nested like a jewel casket. It displayed ten more of the lovely iridescent red globes.

"Those are the same as the—ah—objects recovered from the body of Andleham, I presume?"

"Yes, Sir Hector. They are."

"Well, they're tubes." Ogden looked puzzled. "Exactly as one has tubes receiving radio transmissions, rectifying them, intensifying them, and so on—so with these. They are receptive to transmissions of the ultra-short and terrifically penetrative rays of—er—Octave Seventy-Five."

"Which," said Ogden with an attempt at good humor which he scarcely felt, "is so much Greek to me, of course."

"Imagine a piano's keyboard," went on the scientist irrelevantly. "You have the bass notes, the notes of low vibration, on your left hand as you face it, and the treble or high-vibrating notes to your right—eh?"

"Quite."

"Then imagine the piano's keyboard as typifying Nature's stupendous arrangement for the harmonies of its various radiations of force—a kind of keyboard of the Universe, with science sitting down to play it."

"Yes. That's a good illustration. I can follow your drift."

"*Right!* Then deep down on your left hand you have the slow and low-frequency, weakly penetrative rays of heat and infra-red. About middle C—say its perfect fifth and seventh, you have allotted the wave-band of visible light. Next, its octave and tenth provide you with the allotment of the ultra-violet rays.

"Remember, as your right hand creeps up this keyboard of ours, the rays are becoming fiercer and more dangerous as well as swifter and shorter. *So*—up you go, now, through X-rays, hard X-rays and the rest, to the highly penetrative and oddly mysterious radiations of Gamma and Cosmic—and both of these might be said to be among the very foundations of earth's primal plan; among her greatest and best-guarded secrets.

"Cosmic rays, for example, unlike others which proceed from the sun, come from *outside* the Universe. They pass through the icy depths of space to penetrate the earth's crust to an enormous depth.

"And, Mr. Ogden, even their mysteries are dwarfed by the rays of the succeeding octaves. In Octave Seventy-Five, for instance, I have discovered a range of radiated force which—in intensity, speed and deadliness—is simply miraculous. Even the mysterious Cosmic radiations cease to excite awe when considered in their relation with those of Octave Seventy-Five."

"*Deadly?*" Ogden queried, after a somewhat baffled pause. "You said that, didn't you?"

"I did! Whereas the Cosmic ray can

penetrate four and a half meters of solid lead, the rays of Octave Seventy-Five, I have proved, can pass through sixteen-point-three meters. And whereas the Cosmic rays can stun and eventually kill a—a tadpole, a young frog or a newly-hatched chicken, according to the volume employed, I have proved that radiations of Octave Seventy-Five can —can—"

SIR HECTOR stopped. Carried away by his task of explanation, he had swelled to the important role of a natural teacher. Brought by his own fervent words to the brink of an obvious confession, he was alarmed by his own folly.

Therein came Rodney Ogden's opportunity. In a few curt phrases he could have confounded the professor beyond all hope of re-establishment of poise. All he needed to have said was:

"I see—you have proved that the much more powerful radiations of Octave Seventy-Five can kill more than tadpoles, frogs and day-old chicks. In short, by deliberate experiment, you have satisfied yourself that human beings can be destroyed, and that at a distance, by emanations of your newly discovered force. You have, I take it, produced the veritable Death Ray at last? Alfred Andleham was your first victim—and you killed him only because he carried your strange 'receiving-tubes.' The four buildings which have collapsed since July were also selections for experiment. I presume that by some means you secreted 'receiving-tubes' in each, in turn, and then radiated your Octave Seventy-Five's ray—destroying them?"

But he kept the thoughts to himself, casually selected another cigarette and looked at Winslowe as though nothing surprising or incriminating had been mentioned. He wanted the whole story now more than an immediate denouement.

The scientist altered his mien in a second. He was suddenly urbane and sure of himself.

"Of course," he said, "I have a very long way to go in my researches, Mr. Ogden, but I can assure you already of one tremendous discovery." He waited a little while for Ogden's reaction to that, and marked it. Almost pompously he beckoned to the reporter to get to his feet. "Come along, Mr. *Daily Wire*—see the transmitting mechanism first."

Ogden exulted—this was an opportunity beyond imagining. His luck was definitely in—but in the middle of his exultation there came an uneasy sense of warning. The scientist was suddenly too anxious to share his knowledge. Nevertheless, he followed into a laboratory.

THE transmitter was disappointing. It resembled nothing more than an ordinary X-ray discharge equipment. Less imposing, in fact; certainly very much smaller. A horned globe of glass, a few cathode tubes, a chromium steel cylinder and a maze of colored wires—that was all.

Winslowe pointed across the laboratory to a tall and naked pole which was charred at its tip. The transmitter faced this pole.

"Have you got that box of tubes, Mr. Ogden?"

"No, I left them on your table—"

"Ah, you'll have to excuse me, then." Winslowe went for the case, and returned. "It's useless working without them," he said. "I want to show you

Brought by his own fervent words, to the brink of an obvious confession, he was alarmed by his own folly.

what happens when a volume of these new rays is emitted."

"Is there danger in—"

"Pah! None, absolutely none!" Winslowe was harsh and irritable. "Such nonsense"—and here he was on the defensive again—"is beyond me. Why should there be danger?"

"Well," Ogden tranquilly replied, "isn't it true that all ray discharge is dangerous, more or less? Even sunlight can kill, y'know."

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, you needn't get alarmed. As a matter of fact, these radiations of Octave Seventy-Five are more disturbing to the entities of space and time than anything else."

"Eh? Say that again, sir. Rays having effect on *space* and *time?"*

The strange blue eyes turned on him. Still indulgently, talking as though to a child, Sir Hector Winslowe softly answered:

"Both space *and* time are merely thoughts in the universal mind. The radiations of Octave Seventy-Five have the odd faculty of disturbing them. That's all!"

"But—but—"

"The most elementary principles of this subject would be far beyond your mental range, Mr. Ogden. I don't want to be rude, but you would not understand. Would you mind?" He passed one of the strangely glowing bulbs to Ogden and pointed to a clip at the top of the pole. "You're much taller than I am—would you slip that into the receptacle you see there?"

OGDEN'S flesh crept. Hesitantly he took hold of the "tube." If his first theory was tenable and correct: if a transmission of the rays of Octave Seventy-Five had been received by the "tube" in Andleham's cap with severity enough to kill him, here he was now placing himself in the same set of cir-

cumstances. If Sir Hector released this "Death Ray" of his—he might be killed as Andleham was killed. And it could all be explained away as "an unfortunate accident."

But he placed the tube on the stake, then laughed at himself for a nervous fool.

All that happened was legitimate experiment. No stealthy would-be homicide here. Only an eccentric little man with gingery whiskers, playing his laboratory tricks.

Winslowe flicked a switch and the transmitter pulsed with a green brilliance; there was a deep throbbing and the air vibrated with sudden heat. Then another lever was touched.

The tube on the stake moved as if a shot had struck it. It looked furious with swirling fire, and burning could be smelt as the woodwork round it charred. Professor Winslowe laughed and shut off power.

"That's all," he stated. "Not much doubt about force of radiation being transmitted and received, is there?"

"It's there all right," Ogden agreed, "but to what particular end?"

"Thanks for the open mind." Winslowe looked pleased. Then he said: "That little radiation, most probably, will have upset the time-spacing of some incident in a day as yet remote to us. Somewhere, in what we would call the dim future, some men, or maybe animals, will have found their concrete existences dissolving as the fabric of a dream."

"But—I—I simply can't begin to understand you, Sir Hector! How *can* Time be touched by——"

"How can the functioning of your brain cells, purely a chemical procession of cause and effect, be touched by the emotions we call fear, or laughter? I simply cannot explain to you. You are a Press reporter, Ogden, not a pure mathematician. We don't think in the same language, sir!"

"Then, Sir Hector—" Ogden's face went suddenly red—"you'll forgive me if I say, outright, I think it's all so much pure bunkum. I simply won't, and shan't, stomach it! Damn it all—it's not to be thought of——"

In his earnestness he had leaned forward and his upper body was now above the box which held the nine receiving "tubes." A devilish change came over the scientist.

"Not to be thought of—*eh?*" he snapped. *"Not to be thought of,* you say?" His hand darted to the transmission lever. "Then, damn you for an inquisitive fool, *go*—and experience it!" The lever was pressed. *"Go!"*

Ogden saw the nine tubes glow with radiance. Then he staggered back and sank into unconsciousness. And, after a few minutes, a haze grew on the floor where his body had been . . .

OGDEN awoke.

They saw him from the bluffs above the white long shoring of sunlit sands, awaken—this strange man who appeared to have been cast there by the sunny seas. So the people who saw him awakening hurried down to his side, to aid.

Four men and two women. To Ogden's bleared sight they appeared Elizabethans in dress and manner. Three of the men had small pointed beards and flowing hair, the fourth was a young golden-haired giant, hawk-nosed, clean-shaven of cheeks.

To Ogden their speech resembled his idea of what the tongue of Queen

One of the women brought him a beaker of aromatically flavored wine; he drank it, watching her—and slept.

Elizabeth's day might have been. It had a northern "burr" and singularly short-chopped vowel sounds with all ending consonants pronounced most clearly. Almost "actor talk" his dazed brain insisted.

Where was he? How had this come to pass? Where, now, was Winslowe and his damnable machine—where that laboratory in the big and isolated Richmond house—where was England?

For this was not England. Those bluffs above the serenity of the summer shore were alive with semi-tropical vegetation. Behind them were stone and timber built houses, Tudor in type of architecture. He had left England in the dark of a November night of fog and rain; here the sun burnt down on him from a cloudless sky. It was impossible.

"Who—who are you—people?" he asked weakly. "Where am I? *Where?*"

"I knew," said the suddenly exultant young giant, looking down at him, "that he was of our race!" Then he bent and lifted Ogden, and laughed. "Quiet, good fellow—you are hurt. Time can be, later, for all you wish to know."

Ogden blushed. Those wenches were looking at him as they might have regarded a little broken-legged boy. And he, considered a "fine figure of a man" in his twentieth century, seemed a puling creature in this stranger's grasp.

These women were such lovely things—again there was a distinctly medieval style of dress to show off their beauty.

Not Elizabethan. No, that would not serve. The Elizabethan period, to his knowledge, was not responsible for this delightful simplicity of their garb.

They wore semi-voluminous gowns of softest wool; the younger in dove grey and the elder in a clear deep sapphire blue. Their low-necked bodices were foamed about by lace. Some kind of small corsetting — a criss-crossing of tasselled cords binding these—accentuated their waists. Their hair was worn long and under small knitted caps; their shoes were quilted over thin, hard, leather soles.

He watched the men. Closely-fitting trunks and tanned leather baldrics were worn, long and open, over shirtings of the same fine lawn that the women displayed. Plaited belts, quilted shoes with heavier soles than the women's; the elder men with thin gold rings in their ear lobes; the younger man's neck tied about with a loosely arranged scarf held by the virgin-gold wire-weave of a Turk's-head knot.

They bore him into a house of cool wide rooms and low ceilings which abounded with amber-hued woods and glowed with flowers and long carpets and dyed skin rugs. The men put him to bed. One of the women brought him a beaker of aromatically flavored wine; he drank it, watching her—and slept.

Amyas Thirgasson, the giant, told him that he slept for two days. Admittedly the wine was drugged by a decoction of tansy, hemlock and poppy-heads, but he slept, apparently exhausted, beyond any length of influence that soporific mixture might have exerted.

Two days—and on the third, listening for hours to Amyas, who smoked a kind of churchwarden pipe and talked reverberatingly, with many a slow rumble of laughter, Rodney Ogden learnt of wonder.

IT appeared that this land was Greenland. *Nova Anglia,* they called it. And it also appeared that the time was somewhere about 2438 A.D. Octave Seventy-Five must have done all its in-

ventor claimed for it, and shifted his personal time-plane for some five hundred years into the future. Yet, *no*, not into "the future." Granted that all the theorists, and all the theories, of the Einstein calibre were right—*not* the future. He had merely been translated from one strata of endured time to another, since, according to scientists, all time, past, present and future, is coeval.

Just as a fly may enter a railway carriage at a platform as a train moves off; and precisely as that fly may begin to buzz about that compartment—carried in complete calm over a hundred miles of territory at forty, fifty, sixty, even seventy miles an hour—leaving the carriage at another station without any knowledge of the journeying in different space-planes it had made, so with Ogden's experience in these time-planes. Only *he* had knowledge. For hours now, Amyas had made him aware of the miracle.

"From what I can make of your tale," said he, carefully weighing his words, "you, Master Ogden, must be a man of the reign before the great Elizabeth."

"Oh, no, Elizabeth's reign was about fifteen - fifty to sixteen - hundred - and - three. I'm of the *twentieth* century—nineteen-thirty-eight."

"Yea! That is as I say," Amyas answered. "The Elizabeth I refer to would be a small maiden then. That was at the outbreak of the Seventy Years' War."

"Of *what?*"

Amyas's eyes regarded him with surprise. He repeated his last sentence and amplified it:

"The first year of the Seventy Years' War," he said, smiling. "Surely, Master, it had been well begun, even in your day." He sighed and filled his pipe. "I am reputed to be a good scholar," he said. "History—and that is a difficult subject, since most records are lost—is one of my chief studies."

It appeared that war had begun in Spain in 1936 and, one by one, most of the nations of Europe had been drawn into it. And, contrary to all that had been said by various "experts," civilization was not destroyed.

By some strangely final certitude of commonsense the belligerents contrived to isolate the different theatres of war, as they arose. It seemed, in final analysis, that mankind realized that something greater than internecine struggle impended, and reserves were deliberately kept to combat this, when it should come to pass.

It came out of the Far East, with a Japanese assault on China and Russia and India launched simultaneously with two cunningly maneuvred thrusts of power at America and Australia. The weakened Occidental nations were wellnigh conquered by their own stunned thoughts, at first. And, for nearly five years, Oriental troops succeeded in occupying half the world.

Then, with one accord, ancient enmities forgotten in one blood-banded brotherhood, the United States of Europe sent a common army into the battle, along the vast front which extended from the Carpathians to the Urals.

For half a century that struggle continued.

"It might have continued always," said Amyas, very solemnly, "had not the Creator, in His awful wisdom, put an end to His children's play."

RODNEY OGDEN questioned this. Amyas told him that a day came when the earth grew dark. The dark-

ness persisted for many days and a great wind began to sweep the structure of the earth.

And with the typhoons came wild earthquakes and tidal waves upon the oceans of the earth.

On the seventh day there was sound—a sound that split the rocks as a hatchet blade cleaves wood. A stupendous note of Heaven that shattered the mighty Himalayas to low rubble and wrought with intense heat to bring to roaring pools of molten metal even the foundations of the earth.

Men had said that in these days they heard the voice of God crying aloud, remote and mournful, beyond His tempests and the majesty of His dominion of destruction.

On the ninth day the sound that had shocked the earth and the darkness that had confounded it, ceased; and men knew no more of what had come to them, destroying them.

"Yet," said Amyas, as he put away his pipe, "our wisest sages are all agreed that Earth was partially destroyed by Eros——"

"The dark planet, running in invisibility between our globe and Mercury, eh?"

Amyas lifted his eyebrows and smiled.

"Oh, so you knew it existed, then?" Ogden nodded. "*So,* yes, the tiny one. It flew out of its orbit, taking those nine days to reach us, and plunged into the Indian Ocean between Madagascar and Java, filling all that space which had previously been fringed by India's southernmost shores, Malaya, the Western Australian seaboard and the Antarctic—from the Enderby to South Victoria Lands."

After a while Ogden asked a shaky question:

"Well, Amyas, and what do your records tell you about what happened after that awful catastrophe? Apparently some men survived."

"Yes. That is most true." Amyas pondered for a while to compress his tale to some order. "The planet, striking the globe, threw it from its axis. I have told you how, previously, the heat generated by the approaching disaster caused those terrible storms of wind and the mountains to fall and melt."

"Yes."

"Then, over all the lands of the earth that had been, the waters came pouring. Africa, India and Australia—the Americas, most of Russia and all Europe—lie under the ceaseless tides.

"Our world today consists of those lands which, in your day, were *terra incognita*—the Arctic zone. Our *Nova Anglia* is your so-called Greenland. Our colonists are now beginning to reap the rewards of their settlements and work in the territories you would have known as Baffin Land, Northern Alaska and Canada and the remote Northern Siberian Islands.

"Remember, the great heats melted away all glaciers and the 'eternal' snowcap from our lands. The new tilt of the earth's axis brought this newer, virgin continent into something like the climatic conditions enjoyed in semi-tropical countries of old. Our rains come in their season; our sun is almost perpetual—but the globe now being seven-tenths a sphere of water, we are tempered from extremes."

"Our London—Paris—New York—Berlin—Vienna—all *lost?*"

"For ever, Master, *Laus Deo!* They are the homes of fishes and the serpents of the deep—fitting doom for them, I say!"

"What have you" — Ogden's voice rose, angrily—"in place of them, then?"

Amyas Thirgasson got to his feet and stretched out his massive arms.

"Peace," he said, "most perfect human—*peace."*

In the time that followed Rodney Ogden learned much of this land of peace.

Amyas and the tall gold girl in the dove-grey gown, his sister Helva, took him about. He went northwards along the straight and stone-paved roads by coach. Relays of horses, as in the eighteenth century days of England, fed the stage. Warm welcoming inns and roaringly jovial company made the journey a fascinating thing.

The Thirgassons had clad him in the garb of their day. He passed in speech and soon in conduct for one of themselves.

He learned of the essentials of existence in this thawed-out territory that had been Greenland.

METALS, precious and otherwise, were in primeval abundance. The age-long glaciers, in their melting, had scuffed the land until most veins of ore were bared to sight, and took little finding and less working. Silver and copper were used for domestic ware. Gold was a substance for ornamentation and for coinage—as always. Platinum, iridium and palladium were "the doctors' metals."

Iron was scarce. Ships were of wood.

They were beautiful! Galleon-like, tall, at nights their stern lanterns threw squares of crimson, green and yellow fire in their wakes. In the day times, the sails boomed and thrummed diapason to the incessant harping of their rope-work. Tall lovely craft—and none of war.

Yet war was in that land of peace.

It appeared that the northern territories, and those of Siberia, Baffin Land and Northern Canada, were overrun by a savage race. Compounded of Japanese, Mongoloid and Russian strains—eventually absorbing into their mongrel scope the pure-bred strain of Eskimos and isolated families of American Red Indians—these morons were perpetually dangerous. They were squat, long-armed, bent of knees and shaggy. Ogden saw one captive, and thrilled to the certainty that here he was looking on a living representative of what in his day scientific folk called the Piltdown man.

This fusion of Mongoloid and Eskimo and Indian strains had set back the clock of racial progression to its first hour. These savages were primitives from the very birth of time. He said as much.

"Yea," said Amyas, laughing, "our wise men agree on so much. But, poor souls, they are really harmless. You see, Master Ogden, their minds are dark. When we wage war on them we do not seek to kill, so much as to capture—"

"What—capture scum like that!" Ogden shuddered and pointed to one, aimlessly shuffling about a building, plucking weeds and rubbish from its gardens. "A creature like that is better dead."

"Nay, not so, Master Ogden." The giant Amyas smiled and explained himself gently. "I said to you their minds are dark. When we take them in the frontier fights we feed them—they fight for food—we house them—they will risk life itself for a warm hole in the ground—and we train them in menial

decencies, as one does with a puppy dog."

"And with what result?"

"*Service,* Master Ogden. A dumb, warm, grateful but perfect service. Did they not teach you, in your mighty age of steels and wonders and winged machines, that the primal law of all humanity is 'thou, too, being man, must be my brother'?"

"I—I'm afraid not!" Ogden laughed, harshly. "The thing won't work. Never has. Never will."

"I," said Amyas Thirgasson, very softly, "am five hundred years older than you, Rodney Ogden—and Heaven has wept its fill above this globe of ours, between us." He paused and looked at his sister, Helva, standing by. Then his face flushed, and his cold eyes glowed. "What hast thou had, Master Ogden, in thy time with us, save service, brotherhood—and love?"

Rodney Ogden bowed his head.

THAT moment's reference to "steels and winged machines" made Ogden pursue another track. *How* did these people contrive to suffer life without such aids? Had they the radio? Had they internal combustion engines—oil, rubber, concrete, explosives?

All, Thirgasson said in answer to him, under control of the State.

And what was meant by that?

The tall galleons each carried radio of a simple form. The central ruling powers permitted this, under license. Remote territorial officers were also linked to headquarters, in *Nova Anglia,* by radio communication. On certain great occasions, either of emergency or proclamation, it was permitted to the people to gather in certain halls to listen to the broadcast voices of their rulers.

But no general transmission of any kind was sanctioned. Music was considered too perfect an art to have its effects prostituted by second-hand mechanical means. News was a thing, in this land, reduced to barest bones—as Amyas explained, their wise men, pointing back to the failure of the past civilizations, indicated the quick dissemination of all kinds of news, relevant and irrelevant, as being one of the main contributory factors of the twentieth century's fall from grace.

Ogden, recalling that he was a reporter, was both amused and annoyed.

Oil, in a crude state, was the fuel of various simple machines, these also being strictly limited and controlled by license of the State. It was held as truth that unlimited and illimitable machine-power had likewise contributed to the fall of previous civilizations.

Ogden put a question upon the subject of rule. How was *Nova Anglia* governed? Had it a parliament, a king, a royal family?

It had not — none of these, said Amyas.

Parliament, Amyas slowly contended, was a congregation of political units elected by that most dangerous and disastrous of means—public fervor and emotion. Of royalties and royal families there were none; accident of birth had ceased to count in its combat with incident of circumstances.

Nova Anglia was ruled by a Triumvirate. These were sages, doctors of law and economics and philosophy; men who had been trained from earliest childhood in the State colleges existing solely to breed governors.

Boys were selected in their childhood years and, by a rigid process of selection, continued through seven-year

stages of ever intensified education until they entered the final courts of jurisprudence and civil direction. Here, round about their fortieth years, they served one further ten-years practice of administration -- and ultimately, from the last handful of those who had passed every stringent test, three were chosen to command the State until their deaths.

"And — and you tell me that way *works?*"

"Even as Ancient Greece found it to 'work', as you call it," Amyas quietly answered, "so do we. Ours is an age comparable, exactly, with that of the Athenians at their noblest prime."

"Damn it all, have you had to get back to the dawn of history to—to succeed?"

"Has not each man to enter into greatest glory—even as a little child?" asked Amyas Thirgasson. "Can you not determine for yourself, Master Ogden, that, to use one of the saws of your day, 'First thoughts are best thoughts'?"

RODNEY OGDEN gave it up. He ceased to fret or argue. He accepted this marvellously joyful existence as his own, and wished for no other. Whenever he thought back to his own day he felt fearful and depressed. Surely no further accident of those amazing rays of Octave Seventy-Five could succeed against him? Surely nothing could pluck him back?

He wished to stay; he *had* to stay. This sister of Amyas was a greater lure than the peace of *Nova Anglia.* He loved her and knew that she loved him. Amyas, and the whole Thirgasson family, approved. If only he could remain—*remain*—for ever.

He tried to convince himself he would, and could. And to combat the uneasiness of his spirit, he threw himself more whole-heartedly into his new existence. He studied it.

Here, among them in this golden age, was a new Shakespeare—not alone, but the dominant spirt of a veritable brood

Helva

of poets and dramatists. Exactly as in the great days of Gloriana; precisely as the first Queen Elizabeth seemed to be fated to act as lodestar in a constellation, of brilliant writers, artists, poets and dramatists — so now. Here he heard Spenser once again, and clanked cannikins with a latter-day Marlowe, roystering, robustious. He heard again the cool nobilities of rare Ben Jonson; heard wonder speak in words as perfect to their task as bee-velvets to the bee.

Here, too, a Rembrandt had arisen—offset by the jaundiced gloom and majesty of a Velasquez. Here was the immensity of a Beethoven and there spun round him the monumental delicacies of a Chopin; the love-anguished cadences of a Schubert; the wizardry of Grieg.

Ogden sat by himself and made up his mind that of course this peaceful perfection of existence was the cause of the phenomenal abundance of genius. . . . But Amyas laughed and asked if Elizabeth of sixteenth-century England had lived with her giant-minds in peace?

"Nay, Master Ogden! Rather say to yourself, 'Here is full cycle!' Think back to ancient Greece and count your times, sir. From Homer and Pindar to Shakespeare . . . from Praxiteles to Rembrandt . . . from some forgotten singer at the courts of Athens to our singers and musicians: full cycle, Master Ogden—*full cycle*. Maybe the Creator hath turned the ring of life upon his finger, and—lo—its jewels gleam together . . . on our day."

OGDEN worked and laughed and ate and slept his fill, as joyous as a child. He learned to bind the leathers of books, to shape and dress timbers, stones and furs. He watched the women weaving cloth and took a hand at the dye-tubs . . . he played games and swam and went hunting.

In the long twilight evenings, he talked to Helva. It was June, and they were pledged to marry after the harvest was garnered. Their home was being built, and already its gardens were ablaze with flowers and soft with greenery.

Those evenings were velvety with languors and slow dreams. Helva would sit at his side, spinning, flirting outrageously all the while. And he would watch the glitter of little sparks as the puffs of floss-silk flew round the amber of the distaff, to be caught from the rushing wheel and turned to thread.

Sometimes—less often now—he recalled a place called London, and the roar of buses through its streets.

Then, one day, he felt a plucking all about him. It was like the bodily drag of a phantom hand. *He realized*—he screamed and fell.

For hours Helva sought for him—and wept, for he was gone.

THE station sergeant had followed up the line of his instinct. After Ogden's mysterious disappearance from Sir Hector's house — proved to have been thence, since the reporter's overcoat, gloves, hat and various papers were found in Winslowe's hall—he set to work. C.I.D. men visited Richmond.

Thereupon Winslowe broke down. He had been ill for a long time, said his physicians, and this nervous breakdown was to have been expected. No; it was absolutely useless questioning the scientist; his great brain had failed . . . he was mindless and impotent. Granted patience and careful attention by alienists, it was to be hoped that a complete recovery would be accomplished.

It was not until February of the following year that a pallid but mentally stable man got himself down to his laboratory to work with the instrument which commanded the radiations of Octave Seventy-Five.

For once, Sir Hector Winslowe had evaded his night nurse. No one knew he had left his rooms, and he was glad. With the return of his health and memory had come sanity. And, in sanity, he

writhed over the fates of Andleham and Rodney Ogden.

He had never, deliberately, intended to kill Alf Andleham; it was his own choice of the queer hiding-place in his cap for the "gems" that had brought it about.

Ogden's case was vastly different. The reporter's alteration in time-planes partook, now, of a criminal act. Sir Hector intended to rectify the position. He had perfect control over his apparatus; Ogden should be brought back from his five hundred years' journey.

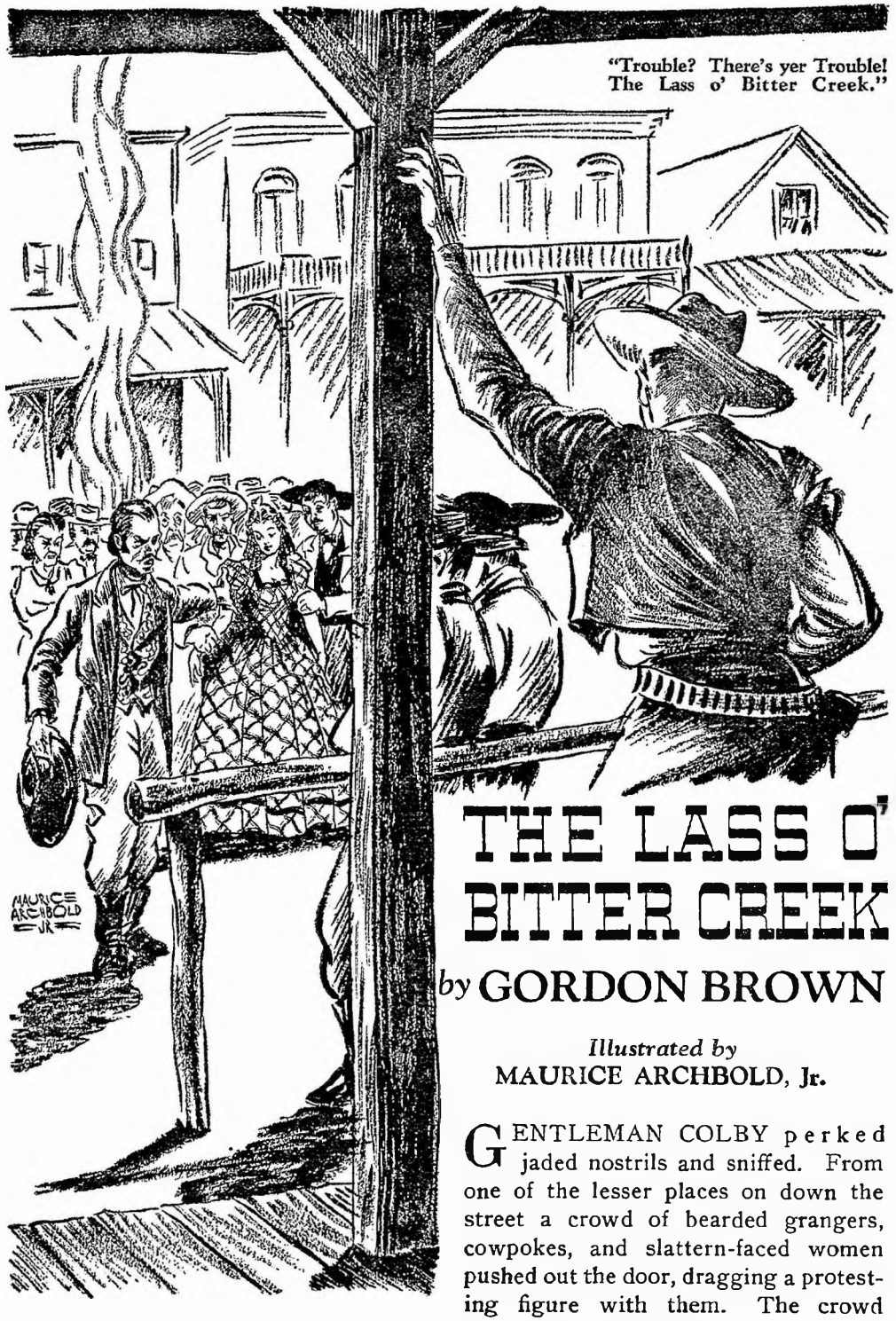
Unsteadily but confidently the scientist set to work. At ten past two on that icy February morning Ogden was brought back; and Ogden raged—gibbered in furious madness to find himself returned.

Winslowe cowered from him. Amazed by the younger man's almost demoniacal mien, he promised . . . *anything* . . . if only Ogden would tell him, calmly, *why* he raged.

Ogden took his chance. Throughout the night watches he sat and trembled and talked with the scientist.

Perhaps Winslowe found something irresistible promised by Ogden's accounts; they called it peace. Maybe scientific zeal influenced him even more. Maybe, again, some chord of deepest humanity began to vibrate in his withered soul as he listened to Ogden's mourning for the rare love he had lost, with his Helva. . . . Maybe Sir Hector feared to remain and face the charges that would arise over Andleham's death and over the destruction of those properties.

Whatever it was, full morning dawned to show its February light on further mystery. Both Winslowe and Ogden were now for ever missing from that isolated Richmond mansion; and a strange machine, wrecked beyond all hope of repair, was all that the authorities ever had to connect with Sir Hector Winslowe's final acts before his dissolution. . . . No more, ever, on this earth, in this time. . . .



"Trouble? There's yer Trouble! The Lass o' Bitter Creek."

THE LASS O' BITTER CREEK

by GORDON BROWN

Illustrated by
MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

GENTLEMAN COLBY perked jaded nostrils and sniffed. From one of the lesser places on down the street a crowd of bearded grangers, cowpokes, and slattern-faced women pushed out the door, dragging a protesting figure with them. The crowd tramped around a corner and disappear-

ed in the alley, from which huge, billowing clouds drifted out to hang above the little town like a tinted Paisley shawl. Smoke! And in it, Gentleman Colby smelled excitement!

Pulling the sorrel back from the hitch rail, he jogged down to where the smoke drifted out and turned in. The crowd formed a close-packed circle about a girl of perhaps eighteen and beautiful, brazenly eyeing her silent captors. To one side, but dangerously near, an iron kettle bubbled and sputtered its awful brew over a well-built fire. Gentleman Colby sniffed again. Tar!

Colby edged in, coughed, and touched a surly granger's shoulder. "What's the trouble, if I'm not buttin' in?" he asked brightly.

"Trouble?" the granger snarled, and pointed. "There's yer trouble! The Lass o' Bitter Creek. As troublesome a critter as ever went through a man's pockets!"

Gentleman Colby cocked an appraising eye in the girl's direction. And the appraisal reflected a vision he had fought away too many times of late; of a place by the side of the road, a cow or two, and a woman to make it homey.

"Why, she doesn't look so all fired troublesome," he mused. "I'd admire to say I've seen worse!"

The granger's blue jowls dropped in stark amazement. "Lige," he howled to the leader of the band, "Here's a cove as says she don't look troublesome! Seen worse he says!"

Lige stalked through the crowd, now turned and staring at this apparition bold enough to debate a lost cause so arrogantly.

"Did we understand you to say this heifer don't look bad?" he asked the gentleman sharply.

Colby leered across the glowering heads to the girl. "That's about the way I put it," he smirked through even white teeth.

The Lass o' Bitter Creek flicked eyelashes demurely.

"Ahem, gentlemen," Colby warmed to his subject, "it seems to me you people are takin' advantage of this girl. Harrumph! Offhand I'd say, from her looks, she don't know nothin' about stealin'. It ain't in her eye. A fair trial by jury would be the fair way to settle this. Put the evidence out front, I'd say, and show it to light of day."

"Gor-a-mighty! Did ye hear that?" the bull-necked leader blurted to the crowd. "Did ye hear what this pilgrim says?" His eyes rolled skyward. "A trial! And he means it!"

Gentleman Colby looked over to note the effect on the girl. Her long brown lashes shaded blushing cheeks!

"May I ask," Colby smiled, "what, if any, are the charges?"

"Stealin'," Lige roared. "Why thet strumpet—"

"Hold on there!" Colby stopped him short. "Stealin's a mighty high crime to be accusin' a girl that age of. Why, that lass wouldn't steal the hair off a dead man's head. Bein' modest is more to the point!"

LIGE and the granger conferred. The restless crowd sneered surlily at the gentleman, shifted uneasily, and waited.

Lige stepped forward, planted feet wide apart, and spoke. "Stranger, we ain't exactly havin' delirium tremens over a fool pilgrim buttin' in on a good chore and speakin' his piece. For all perfect things has a flaw, a scratch underneath the surface ye might say, that shows up mighty tremendjous sometimes when polished off in the smooth. And

lots o' times the other side o' the question makes interestin' small talk around a supper table, if fer nothin' else afterward. Now me and Henry has been sizin' you up and from yer looks we'd say you was a gentleman o' chance. Innocent ye says! Wal, they's ways o' puttin' yer marbles in the ring 'thout talkin'!" Lige stopped for effect.

"Now here's how our deal stacks up," he continued. "You to play Henry here a game o' poker. We the people, represented by Henry, puts the girl up fer our chips. You to put up thet sorrel. If you win, the lass goes free, pervided always o' course ye both shags out o' town afore sunup. If Henry wins, the pot biles again! And no argufyin' about the sorrel. Put out or take out, and speak yer choice!"

Gentleman Colby smiled. The Lass o' Bitter Creek sent a burning look over the crowd that worked wonders. That home, a cow or two, and a woman to make it homey were taking shape.

Colby appeared to study a moment. "Very well," he purred, "where do we play the game?"

"Why up to the Rimfire Saloon 'll be as likely a place as any," Henry answered belligerently.

"Then come on, boys," Colby lilted, the light of love in his eyes.

The humming mob swarmed out of the alley and up the street to the saloon.

Inside a space was cleared and the gentlemen went to work. Colby leaned in and stretched across the table. Henry drew three and raised the ante. Colby shoved a stack of blue chips in and laid down his cards. Henry bellowed hoarsely and called for a new deck. The game was on. The close-packed crowd simmered down; the swift lightning-like, yet casual plays lulled their senses. The feel of cards in Colby's long white fingers brought the surging desire to win as it always had before. That home, its cow or two, and someone to make it homey, were lost in the shuffle.

HENRY shifted uneasily. A low babble of voices down the bar came floating up to break the silence in the room. Another voice close by took up the murmur and the spell was broken. Henry was losing. Something rustled behind, the soft white hand of the Lass o' Bitter Creek disappeared from Colby's shoulder, and heavy boots shuffled together behind the rustle of silk. Colby glanced back. The girl was gone. The crowd edged in, intent only on the play. Gentleman Colby returned to his first love and reached for another card.

An hour passed. Two. Henry picked up his hand and laughed harshly, to send his dwindling chips out and spread cards on the green baize cloth. Colby met his three aces with a busted flush. Henry looked up snarling. Slowly his features contorted. His mouth opened. "Where's the girl?" he bawled.

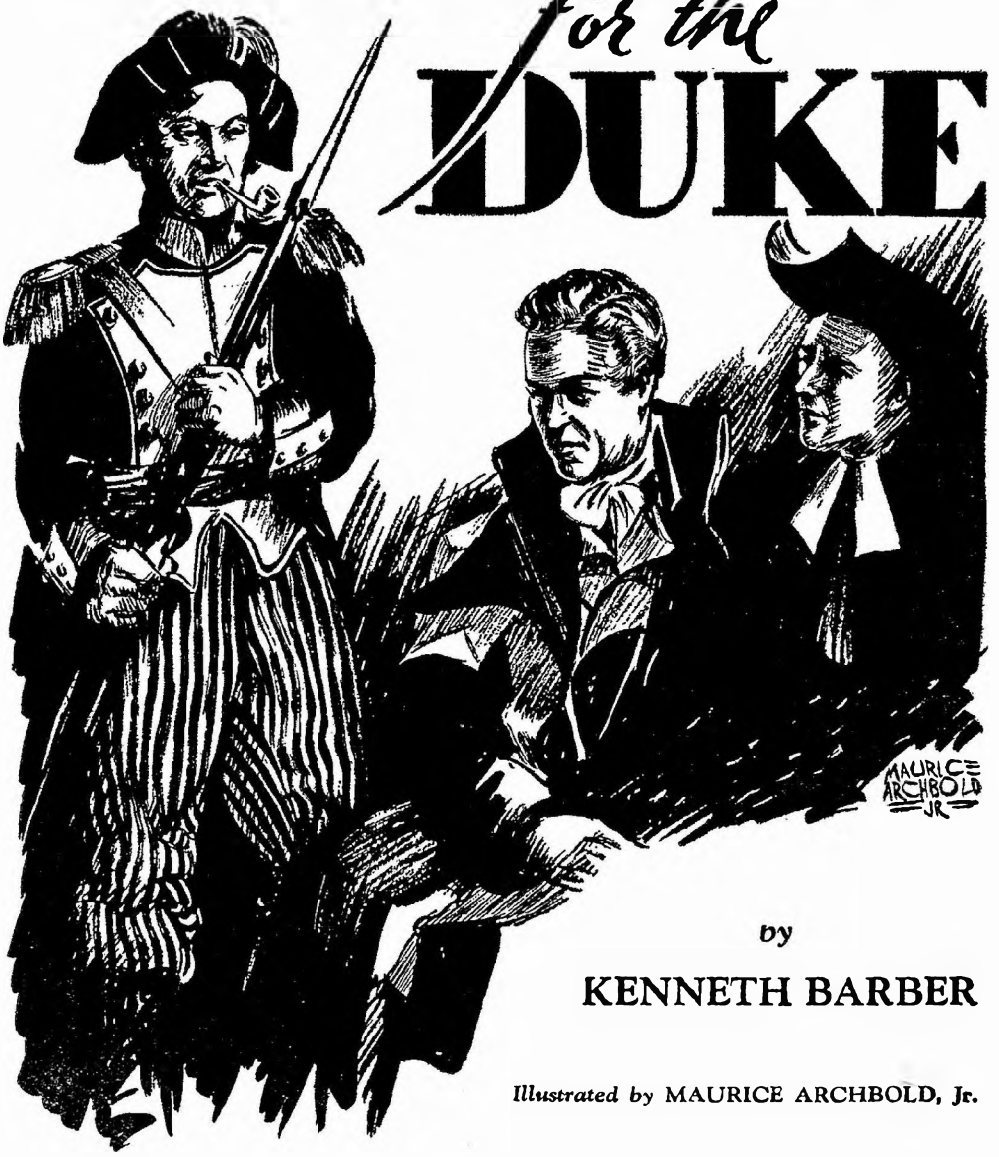
Mute faces broke into whispers, then howls. Colby reached instinctively for his derringer. The seething crowd surged toward the door carrying Colby along with its tide.

Outside, staunch citizens deployed, some running around to the alley, some beyond, some up the street. Colby disentangled himself and stepped over to look to the sorrel. Henry rolled off the crowd's outer fringe and bumped to a stop at the rack.

Eyeing Colby, he panted, "Guess you know what kind o' stealin' she specialized in, don't you?"

"Not horse stealin'?" Gentleman Colby gulped, and looked to the horseless hitch rail.

UNDERSTUDY for the DUKE



by

KENNETH BARBER

Illustrated by MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

THERE were two prisoners in the little gloomy and ill-ventilated cell; and, standing at the doorway, was a gaoler, clad in a ragged and dirty uniform of the Republic and smoking a disgusting clay pipe. He looked at the two men.

They were about the same height and build; but one was dressed in the garments of a priest and the other in clothes which, though old and badly worn, had once been in the height of fashion. Both were calm, but whereas the priest was serenely so, his compan-

ion's attitude was more in the nature of a contemptuous indifference.

The gaoler blew a cloud of pungent smoke from his pipe and spat out into the corridor.

"One of you has got to die," he said briefly.

He spoke with a blunt matter-of-factness that was quite devoid of malice, but which was far more horrible than any calculated cruelty would have been.

"I am afraid I do not see why." The more gaily-dressed prisoner—who answered, here at any rate, to the name of Dignon—looked coldly at the gaoler. "*Monsieur le curé* assures me he is innocent of any crime. As for myself, perhaps I cannot speak so surely, but certainly I have done nothing to merit death. Why must one of us die?"

The gaoler laughed, again with that horrible way of taking things for granted. Plainly this discussion of death was a matter of daily routine to him, and he seemed to think that the victim should see it in the same objective light as himself.

"I have my orders," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It should have been the Duc de Varennes; but as he's given us the slip, one of you must take his place. This Varennes, you see, has been a great nuisance to the Republic. Lord knows how many heads he has stolen from the guillotine! But Paris got too hot for him. So what does he do?" He grunted disgustedly. "He comes down here to Toulon and cheats *our* guillotine."

"How very unfortunate," said Dignon coldly.

The gaoler nodded, as though delighted that his prisoner should realise the trials to which good republicans were subjected. "He plays us the very devil of a game. We're not so smart in Toulon as they are in Paris; we don't fret if an aristocrat here and there slips through our fingers, for there's plenty more. But with this fellow it's a different story."

HE SEEMED to be waiting for encouragement; but Dignon was moodily studying his finger-nails, and the priest looked at him with stony disapproval.

"It's those Commissioners and Citizens and Lord-Knows-What in Paris that cause all the trouble," grumbled the gaoler. "They can't let well enough be. You'd think they'd be glad enough to be rid of their Duc de Varennes. But no! they can't rest till his head's in the basket. So they tell *us* to get it for them." He swore suddenly and filthily at the meddling Citizens of Paris. "They send down a Revolutionary Commissioner to see that we do get his head. And if we don't, as like as not our own would go instead."

Dignon looked at him with a sneer. "So we are to save your heads for you, I take it?"

"Someone has got to be the Duc de Varennes and go to the guillotine. And as the slippery devil escaped right through our fingers this morning, it can't be himself."

The priest said very gently: "But why us, my friend?"

"You were the nearest. You have the figure, too; that's important, you see. It's no good cutting off the head of some fat citizen when they all know that the Duc de Varennes was tall and slim like yourselves. And the face doesn't matter, for it never looked the same twice."

Dignon made a gesture of disgust.

"One would have thought you could have taken the trouble to choose someone a little more worthy of death. Not that life in your little paradise of Equality holds much for us. Still, in justice to the guillotine—"

"We had no time to choose. Besides, you are both well fitted enough to die, if it comes to that. The Republic has no love for priests." He turned sullenly to Dignon. "And as for you; you didn't exactly help us when the Duc de Varennes slipped past us this morning, did you?"

Then he seemed quite suddenly to tire of the conversation.

"That's how it is," he said with finality. "And you may like it or not, as you please. One of you goes to the guillotine in half an hour. If you can settle between yourselves, well enough. If not, *I* shall have to choose." And then, with a begrudging magnanimity, he added: "The other one goes free."

BOTH the prisoners were silent for a while after the gaoler had left them.

The priest stood facing the high barred window through which a miserable stream of light reached the cell, and his head was thrown back as if consciously to catch the light on his face at a more direct angle. It showed the rather prominent bones of his face, and the clear blue eyes that were at once a symbol of honesty and courage.

Dignon, though clearly not afraid, seemed to lack something of his peace of mind. But he said, lightly enough:

"It seems that one of us must die, my friend."

The priest inclined his head gravely, and Dignon laughed. "A common enough fate. Most of us come to it in the end; and the end is often early these days."

He walked a few paces about the cell. "But I must confess I would find the situation more supportable with a pinch of snuff." He looked inquiringly at the priest. "I don't suppose you could oblige a dying man, *monsieur le curé?* I have not my own box with me."

The priest took a box from his pocket and passed it across to the other. "A worldly failing of mine," he admitted with a smile. Then a frown troubled for a moment the serenity of that smile. "I wonder," he said slowly, "which of us will be taking snuff tomorrow."

Dignon looked meditatively at the snuff-box as if that would supply the answer. He said suddenly:

"So far as I am concerned, I shall die without regret. Death solves a lot of problems. Life only makes them."

But the priest shook his head. "You do not believe what you are saying, my son."

"Why not? Has life been so good to you that you hate to leave it?"

"Yes! I see much in life that I should be loath to lose. I love life because it is life; because it is movement, and feeling, and being. I have been happy on this earth, my son."

"You are lucky."

"Do not mistake me." The priest was gently reproachful. "I have been unhappy too. But unhappiness at least is life; and it is life that matters." He looked at Dignon with some pity, and much interest. "And you? Has life used you so ill, then?"

Dignon shrugged his shoulders. "No, *monsieur le curé,*" he said frankly, "it is I who have used life ill."

HE WOULD have said no more perhaps, but the priest's eyes invited confidence.

"There is little enough to tell. I am a failure; that is all—a failure," he added, "not only from the worldly view but from your view too."

He turned away from the priest, his head slightly lowered. Then, after a pause, he said:

"I have wasted my life. And needlessly! Because success did not come for the asking, I have wasted my years in a silly welter of self-pity. I dreamed, *monsieur le curé;* and because my dreams did not at once come true, I killed them."

"And your dreams?" The priest spoke with infinite care, lest his words should hurt.

Dignon laughed harshly, with a cruelty towards himself.

"Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! They were dreams," he said.

There was a silence.

"Not the mockery of it they are making now," went on Dignon. "Not hatred, and death, and anarchy. That is false; and I would fight it with all my power. I wanted to make them worthy of liberty before they fought for it; to teach them equality of spirit instead of jealousy and hatred. I had a talent for words"—he paused, hopelessly—"and because I met with laughter, and ignorance, and indifference, I killed it. I killed it with drinking and pretending not to care. Then it was too late; it would not come to life again; and I was left with nothing but a hatred of myself."

The priest spoke with deep understanding. "The world is very hard for dreamers, my son."

"I could have forgiven the world," answered Dignon slowly. "There was a woman I could not forgive. She laughed at me, and mocked my ideals. And instead of proving to her that she was wrong—I proved that she was right. That is why I hate myself."

THEN suddenly, as if regretting intensely his confession, he said, savagely:

"Now say you despise me, and have done with it."

The priest seemed to be in some difficulty. Perhaps he feared to give the advice that was so easy to prescribe and so hard to follow. Perhaps he asked himself what right he had to give advice at all or to deny the other's tragedy and minimise his ills. He fingered the girdle at his waist, as if his cloth excused his presumption, made it a duty, even, to speak his mind. And he said kindly:

"It is not for me to despise you; neither is it for you to do so. You are still young. Even if your dreams and ambitions are dead, you are alive; you can fight other battles; you can win."

"The repentant sinner," sneered Dignon. "I can redeem my foolish past, can I?" He shook his head bitterly. "You flatter me, *monsieur le curé.* I am not the man you take me for. I am weaker than that; self-hatred and self-pity have eaten too far into my soul. There is only one way I can atone for my wasted life."

"And that?"

"By a death that is not so useless as my life has been."

The sun, streaming with a sudden brightness through the miserable window, lent a grotesque emphasis to this talk of death. It was a reminder that outside was sky, and trees, and flowers: life—for *one* of them.

The priest upturned his face again

to the sun's rays, stretching out to its beatitude. Then he looked at Dignon compassionately.

"You are very generous, *monsieur*. But I will not let you sacrifice yourself for me."

Dignon turned on him with an attempt to belittle his own virtues. "I do not think of you, but of the world. A priest can be of service to it; I cannot. That is all."

"So much is true," said the *curé* slowly. "I *can* be of use to the world; there are souls in jeopardy that need me. But even they, I think, would wish me to give you at least an equal chance." He took a coin from his pocket. "Let us spin for who is to die. King Louis, it shall be me; the shield, yourself."

Dignon answered him with a sort of mocking contempt.

"I am not doing this to save your precious skin. I am doing it because I want to die." His voice rose quickly. "I *want* to die; don't you understand that? I am not making a sacrifice; I am even selfish if you like. But since I wish to die and you do not, then in God's name why argue?"

"Because I do not believe that in your heart you do wish to die."

"Is it for you to say what I want? Leave me to judge that, and meddle with your own affairs. You wish to live; you have said as much. I do not. That finishes it."

The priest shook his head obstinately; and Dignon turned on him with furious impatience.

"Listen to me! This is the peace I have been longing for, the end of my

"Very well, then. Since I cannot let you die for me, it must be this way . . ."

misery and despisement. Oh, yes! I have longed for death often enough. Now, when it is so easy, you deny it to me, you snatch it away. What right have you? What *right,* I ask you?" He paced violently up and down the cell, stamping and gesticulating. "I will not have it, I tell you. It is I, and I alone, who shall die!"

Throughout this demonstration the priest had remained imperturbable and calm. He took the coin between his finger and thumb. "I will let you take a chance. That is all I can do."

For a moment Dignon hesitated. Then he said, in a cool voice quite different from that in which he had raved and stormed:

"Very well, then. Since I cannot let you die for me, it must be this way. . . ."

He drew his clenched fist back deliberately and sent it smashing into the face of the priest, who crumpled up in a heap on the floor, a trickle of blood running from his cut lips and cheek.

When the gaoler came he was still unconscious. "We have settled," said Dignon, grimly. "Our good priest is having a little sleep. I . . . shall have a long one."

THE priest had recovered when the gaoler came to free him, but he was white-faced and weary. His eyes asked a mute question.

The gaoler nodded. "He's dead. Went to the guillotine as brave as the best of 'em. I'll swear he touched all the ladies' hearts—though they daren't show it."

"He was a very brave man," said the priest, slowly. "He sacrificed himself for me, because he thought I was more use on this earth than he was. May God make me worthy of that sacrifice!"

THE gaoler laughed gruffly. "More use than he was! That's a fine story he told you!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my friend, that *Monsieur* Dignon, as he called himself, was none other than the Duc de Varennes himself, the man we were after."

"Dignon . . . Varennes?" The priest looked at him in astonishment.

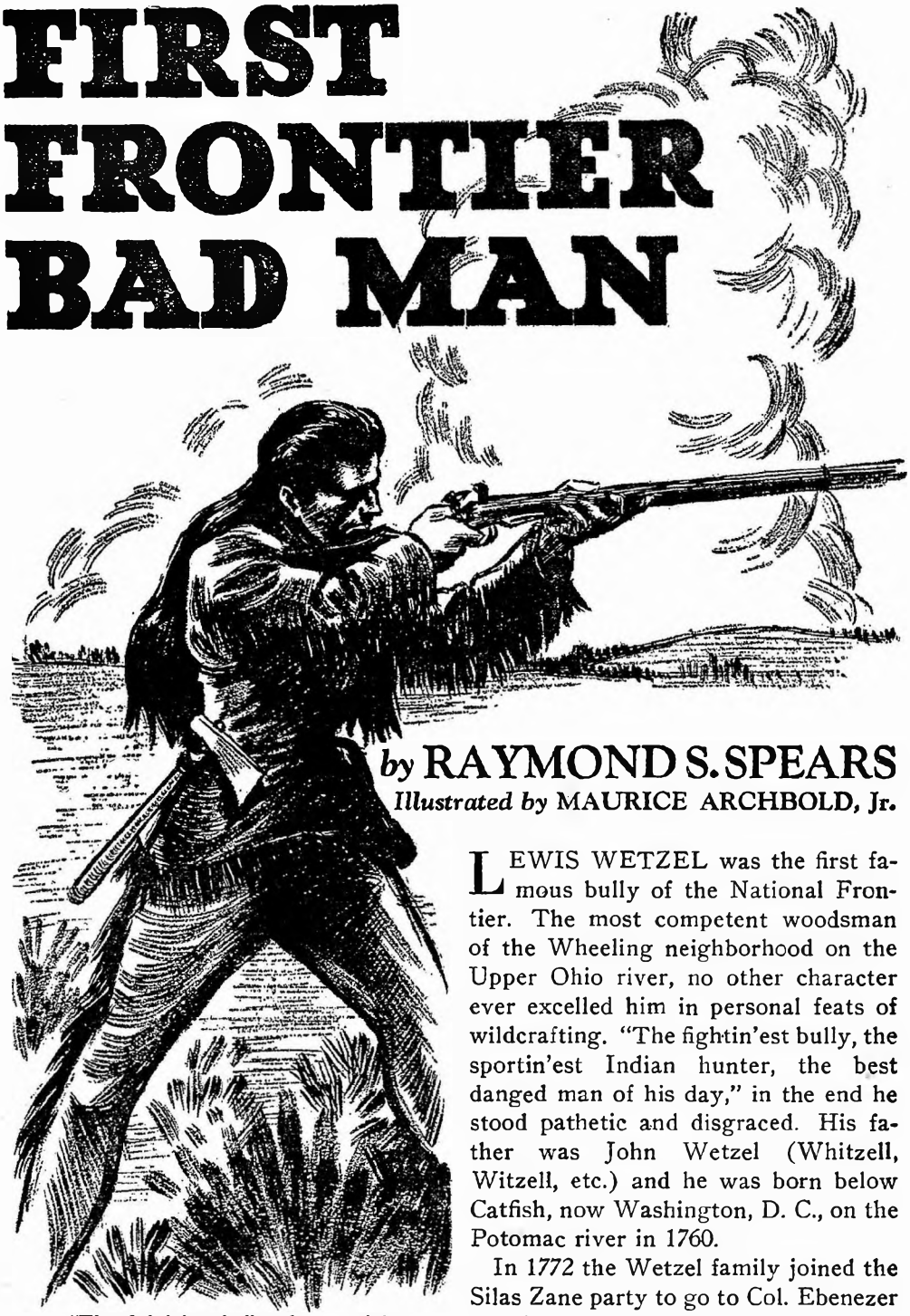
"That's right. The man who escaped was a decoy. We caught the real man"—he laughed—"by mistake. So he died, my fine priest, not because he thought you could be any use, with your preaching and prating, but because he was too much the confounded aristocrat to let another man die in his place."

The priest was still unconvinced. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Sure! He told us himself at the guillotine. And if that don't satisfy you"—he plunged a hand in his pocket and drew out an object—"what about this? 'E.V.' on it; Edouard Varennes; and a coronet. Anyone would know that a man with that in his pocket was the Duc de Varennes."

Slowly the priest nodded. "Yes, yes, of course . . . anyone would know." He looked suddenly away. When he turned again he glanced at the silver box in the gaoler's hand, and said: "I wonder, would you grant me a pinch of this snuff before I go. I am in need of it; and I lent my own to a friend—a very noble friend—who did not return it."

FIRST FRONTIER BAD MAN



"The fightin'est bully, the sportin'est Indian hunter, the best danged man of his day."

by RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Illustrated by MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

LEWIS WETZEL was the first famous bully of the National Frontier. The most competent woodsman of the Wheeling neighborhood on the Upper Ohio river, no other character ever excelled him in personal feats of wildcrafting. "The fightin'est bully, the sportin'est Indian hunter, the best danged man of his day," in the end he stood pathetic and disgraced. His father was John Wetzel (Whitzell, Witzell, etc.) and he was born below Catfish, now Washington, D. C., on the Potomac river in 1760.

In 1772 the Wetzel family joined the Silas Zane party to go to Col. Ebenezer Zane's Fort Wheeling, lately built, where a thousand acres of rich bottom

land waited each family, the prize acreages on Mingo Bottoms. John Wetzel led the way to the head of Little Wheeling creek. When the company stampeded there Wetzel's saddle girth broke; and, with his friends, he lost his way when he tried to short-cut. The bottoms were all claimed when he reached the fort; so taking up a hill-claim, he became a meat hunter instead of a farmer. His four sons became hunters, too.

The land was alive with deer, elk, buffalo, bears, wild turkeys and other game from squirrels to wolves. Money was in the meat and skins, but hunters took their lives in their hands every trip out they made. In 1774, John and Martin, his eldest son, were hunting. Lewis went out of the cabin at dawn, and a gunlock clicked—he saw an Indian top-knot—the flash of powder in a pan. Lewis ducked back, but the bullet hit his breast bone. Two Indians grabbed him and his eleven-year-old brother, Jacob, and kidnapped them. Two days later they raised a sunken canoe hidden in McMahan's creek, and that night camped far north of the Ohio.

Lewis Wetzel's fortitude, despite his wound, won Indian admiration. The captives slept between the warriors, a rope over them. At Big Lick, the boys escaped, taking spare moccasins and a rifle, Lewis' first own weapon, a flintlock, of course. He practiced till he could stand with his back to a tree, the weapon unloaded, run fifty yards at top speed, stop, turn and shoot—hitting a target center, till then an unheard of feat.

WHEN in August, 1777, Mingoes, Shawnees and Wyandottes, with painted renegades drove the settlers to the Kentucky Stockades, Lewis Wetzel was on the firing line at Wheeling, his mother also shooting. A handful of settlers won against hundreds of raiders. Wetzel, 17 years old, had come to full stature, dark of complexion, sharp featured, his black eyes famous for their flash; lithe and wiry, 5 feet 9 inches tall, he weighed 140 pounds.

When Col. Crawford led an army of eager scalp hunters into the Indian country north of the Ohio, emulating Capt. Williams' raid on the Mission Indian towns, Lewis Wetzel went along. The warriors ambushed and dispersed the raid, Crawford was captured and tortured. Wetzel escaped, but Thomas Mills abandoned a horse and asked Lewis to go back for it.

"Bad business!" Wetzel warned, but they went and found the animal tied to a tree. Mills started to run to the animal. Wetzel warned him.

"Hold on; let's see about this!" but Mills seized the line.

An ambush blazed away, and Mills dropped dead. Wetzel killed the Indian who jumped to claim the scalp. Instead of five or six Indians breaking cover, two score warriors took after Wetzel, who stepped lightly. The race, one of the most famous of the Ohio valley, was the most surprising in the history of the Revolutionary period. In a half mile all but the fleetest Indians were left behind in the tall timber. Six warriors were put to desperate efforts to overtake the fugitive whose black hair was bundled in a knot on his head, the prize scalp of his race.

When Wetzel heard pounding steps close, he turned like a rabbit in the air, came down with his rifle leveled, drove a bullet into the wide chest of his pursuer, turned and fled the pursuer next behind, yelling the battle cry of:

"Lewis Wetzel! Lewis Wetzel!"

Then within a few rods Wetzel, screeching his name, again turned in the air, came down sliding backwards and killed the next Indian. And this he carried on until the last Indian in the chase clapped his hand to his mouth and with loud yells of dismay fled to tell the warriors that Lewis Wetzel was the Devil and his gun was always loaded. And Wetzel turned back to pick up his scalps at $100 per, the bounty on Indians on the Frontier at Wheeling.

Having been paid, he swaggered around, his sweethearts, who were legion, taking down his hair and combing it, jet-black and reaching in waves to his knees. Carousing, shooting in matches, wrestling, drinking, Wetzel alternated meat killing, Indian hunting, and sprees in town. Every autumn he slipped into the Indian country alone with his powder-horn full of fresh loads, solid lead bullets run in hot molds, and a supply of rifle-hammer flints, his knife sharpened and his tomahawk ready for business. His black hair freshly combed, his sweethearts kissed fond farewells, even after Indians were no longer legitimate game he defied the protective laws meant to save them from unnecessary extinction.

IN THE summer of 1786, retaliation of Indians for vengeance exacted by relentless Borderers, brought raids to the Mingo Bottoms and outskirts of Wheeling clearing. Major McMahon of Beech Bottom raised twenty hunters, including Lewis Wetzel, to hunt the miscreants. When north of the Ohio, they found fresh Indian signs, the company all headed for home but Wetzel.

"I'm not going home like a fool," he declared, "with my fingers in my mouth, now that we've found Indians. I'll get a scalp or lose mine!"

Sharp cold night came on. Wetzel dug a hole in the ground, built a fire in it, broiled a chunk of meat for supper, and when the moisture was all steamed out of a cover of sand thrown over the bed of coals, he wrapped his blanket around him, and, huddled over the warm earth, slept soundly. All the following day he hunted Indians.

The warm smell of a streamer of smoke led him to a camp where two blankets, a small kettle, and a smouldering fire-pit were promising. Ambushed, Wetzel awaited his quarry. At sunset an Indian came, beginning supper. Another Indian came, and the two ate. Afterwards, the two laughed and sang, telling stories—careless of noise and blazing firelight shimmering high on the tall timber trunks, flickering on the broad leaves. About 9 o'clock, one Indian took a flaming torch to go watch a salt lick for deer. The other rolled up in his blanket to sleep. Just before dawn, Wetzel—sorry both Indians weren't there—crept in to stab the sleeper to the heart. "I didn't use the tomahawk because the hunter would have heard the blow!" he said.

Thus Wetzel came in with a $100 scalp to jeer the frightened McMahon and his band of hunters! Wetzel taunted and mocked the bravest as well as the most cowardly bullies of the Frontier. Those who dared resent, he crashed on their backs, bitten, gouged and pummeled mercilessly; in a land where bushwhacking was the common, accepted practice, none even dared try to get him in that way. Boy and man, warned by the flash in the pan, or the click of a setting lock, he ducked and dodged bullets like a loon, a helldiver or a grey wolf, slyer than the slyest Indian.

WETZEL scouted for Gen. Josiah Harmer, frontier army commander at Pittsburg, from 1785 on. Several soldiers disappeared at Wheeling, and Wetzel was sent to solve the mystery. The men went up Wheeling creek hunting, and never returned. Wetzel took a bag of parched corn and jerked venison, and followed up the creek trail to the gorge where steep walls, dense cover and wild turkeys prevailed. Hidden in the brush at dawn, Wetzel, imitating a flock of turkeys coming down from a tree roost, shaking brush, uttering *put-puts,* and flapping wings. Presently he spied the tall feather of an Indian's top-knot coming to kill a turkey gobbler. Wetzel shot him through the head. He was an old grey warrior, cunning, brave and alone, and his cave contained the weapons and uniforms of the lost soldiers.

General Harmer was negotiating with the Indians, seeking peace. Wetzel's father and a neighbor went hunting deer for a winter supply of jerked venison. They loaded a canoe and dropped down Middle Island Creek, starting up the Ohio, hugging the shore to gain speed in the reverse eddies. Near Capitama they were fired on from ambush. Wetzel was hit low in the body.

"Lie down!" he told his companion, and paddled out of range, dying.

Lewis Wetzel swore vengeance. Harmer summoned Indian Chiefs to Fort Harmer across the Ohio from Marietta. When Chief George Washington, a renowned peaceful Indian, came dressed in big-talk regalia, Wetzel ambushed him on the trail to the fort.

"The Chief rode away scratching his back as if he'd been stung by yellow jackets!" Wetzel said.

The Indian rolled off his horse, dead, at the fort. Harmer ordered Wetzel's arrest. Wetzel fled, and when Capt. Kingsbury caught him at a shooting match, Major McMahon and other good fellows freed him. Gen. Harmer learned Wetzel was on Muskingum Island at Hamilton Carr's, and a boatload of men caught him in a drunken stupor. Preparations to hang him began, but Borderers threatened Civil War if Wetzel was hanged for killing an Indian. All Wetzel asked was a tomahawk and to be turned loose in a circle of Indians!

While Harmer procrastinated, Wetzel lay in chains. He begged to be allowed to exercise; his ankle irons were removed, and he was put under a guard in the fort clearing, where he raced up and down, a little further away each dash—and finally jumped into the woods. Wetzel claimed his closest call from Death was that night, while swimming the Ohio in the heavy handcuffs.

IN 1789, the challenge to Wetzel's supremacy was echoed. Conrad Mayer claimed to be the best, The Bully, now. Wetzel was hunting up Wheeling creek when just as he shot at a deer, another shot smoked. A dog ran to the victim and Wetzel kicked it away. The owner charged in, the men fought nip-and-tuck. Wetzel won. It was Conrad. They shot at targets, ran races, jumped—perhaps the greatest duel of bullies—and Wetzel won. The two shook hands in "eternal friendship." Then they went to Mayer's home and found the cabin burned, his parents dead and his foster-sister an Indian captive. The two Borderers took the trail and came upon the raiders' camp. The girl sat weeping by the fire, and the two pursuers slipped up, tomahawked a renegade painted white, killed four Indians and rescued the girl, a most famous Ohio valley exploit.

Staked out, wrists and ankles each bound to a peg, the doomed Wetzel waited in the drag of the slow night.

Wetzel went alone on his annual autumnal Indian hunt, after due celebration and having his hair combed. He woke up an Indian captive on a pole, carried into Sandusky Towns like a deer. The Champion bully and Indian still-hunter was at last subject to an Indian Council's mercy.

"This man is brave," an old Indian whose son Wetzel had killed said. "Let me adopt him instead of my son!"

Many voices rose in opposition: "Wetzel would make a bad son!" The opposition prevailed; the captive was condemned to die by torture at the women's hands. Staked out, wrists and ankles each bound to a peg, the doomed Wetzel waited in the drag of the slow night. A knife slit the back of the wigwam. The old Indian cut Wetzel loose, restored the Bully's weapons and, mounting a horse, led Wetzel over the Divide and waved him to go home. When the Indian turned his back, Wetzel shot him dead.

"He made me walk while he rode," Wetzel said. "That's a good horse, too!"

The boss Indian killer! Men celebrated with him, but all his sweethearts, the girls of Maysville, Wheeling, Pittsburg, from the Alleghenies to the Mississippi, scorned him. No man dared speak, but women's taunts drove him down the Ohio to Spanish New Orleans. There he resumed his popularity with women, and the husband of one of them tricked Wetzel into a dungeon, where he suffered in chains for nearly a decade, till at last word of his plight won interposition from the United States government, and he was brought to Philadelphia, where he took the trail over the Allegheny mountains into his old stamping grounds on the Upper Ohio. He was neither forgotten nor forgiven, though he was faded and breaking from the years-long privations of the dungeon cells.

Joining John Madison, brother of James (president-to-be), while looking over lands for a speculation on the Lower Ohio, he robbed an Indian cache of supplies. Surprised, they were attacked. Madison was killed, but Wetzel made his escape.

A has-been now, Wetzel joined Philip Sikes, a relative, and settled east of Natchez in the wildest part of the country, where he died, his race run in forty-eight years. But he had not lived in vain.

WHEN General "Mad" Anthony Wayne was sent to avenge the tragic disaster of Sinclair's defeat, he took conscripts from the dives of the Ohio towns and trained them into whooping, charging demons; their "slouching gait became an elastic tread." No army in the history of America was ever better trained according to the needs to come. One feat of every man in the army astonished and delighted the frontiersmen; Wayne taught nearly a thousand men to start running with empty flintlocks, load at top speed, turn in mid-air, and come down facing back, to shoot to hit targets on the tree trunks they had started from. This was Wetzel's contribution to the feats and history of his day.

When Wayne found the Indians at Fallen Timbers, they were pitch-forked out of their ambush, shot as they ran and cleared for all time out of the tall timber of the old Virginia Northwest, the land where Lewis Wetzel had ranged in the heydey of his daring, skill and fame. From the height of his good name he crashed to the depths of disgrace—a great man brought down by his ingratitude to an enemy for his life.

The Round Table

AN OPEN FORUM FOR OUR READERS

Ariadne may have been forgotten by Theseus, but not by her modern audience, as witness:

Just finished reading your last edition of GOLDEN FLEECE . . . CONGRATULATIONS!

I have read all of Mr. Clason's mystery stories but this "Ariadne Speaks" beats anything he has ever written. Get more from that fellow and please remain a good friend to H. Bedford-Jones! You've got a swell mag . . . just keep it HISTORICAL ADVENTURE . . . pure and unadulterated. Best of luck.

Ruth E. Schulze, Germantown, Pa.

Let me congratulate you on the story "Ariadne Speaks" in the February issue. I think it is the best story I have ever read in GOLDEN FLEECE and shows a background of historical research and study for which most authors do not take the time. I'm sure it will appeal to many lovers of HISTORICAL ADVENTURE, and we will be looking forward to a sequel for surely you will not leave Ariadne and Theseus Now.

Edward Allen, Elmhurst, Ill.

At last a magazine devoted solely to HISTORICAL ADVENTURE! I'll be a devoted reader as long as you keep away from the modern bosh. Your "Ariadne Speaks" was sheer beauty.

Marjorie Bennett, Los Angeles, Cal.

I want to congratulate you on your magazine which is informative about history, in addition to being interesting—so that one does not feel as if time were wasted after reading. . . . I liked particularly "Ariadne Speaks," which struck me as being very beautifully written—almost like poetry—and yet a very clear story. I would like to see more like this. Good luck to you.

Robin McKown, New York, N. Y.

The editors of GOLDEN FLEECE are to be congratulated on adding Clyde B. Clason to their list of contributing writers. As an ardent admirer of Mr. Clason's work in the field of detective stories I was most interested in his story of ancient Greece (Crete), "Ariadne Speaks" in your February issue.

As was to be expected, I enjoyed Clason's story very much and was only disappointed in the fact that it did not go on and on. I suspect that Mr. Clason has more to tell us of the interesting adventures of Ariadne and Theseus and I hope to see more of them in forthcoming issues.

Herman Gould, Brooklyn, N. Y.

"The Bath of King Minos" will shed further light on the ancients just as soon as we can crowd it into an issue of GOLDEN FLEECE. (You have no idea of the difficulties the editors have in keeping the stories within the bounds of 128 pages. They want to overflow all over the place, but we have an over sized shoehorn and a blue pencil to stuff them back in with.) It does sound as if the really ancient peoples must have been pretty clean with all their baths. You know Crete had astoundingly modern ideas on sanitation and plumbing. The much later Mongols of Murray Leinster's fine story, "Swords and Mongols," on the other hand, were probably as afraid of water as many a small boy of to-day would be if left to his own devices.

Just discovered GOLDEN FLEECE and what a magazine! You now have another steady reader anxiously awaiting the March issue.

Would like to see some more horse yarns by Kenneth Wood and adventure stories by Don Wimmer. . . . Wishing your magazine every success.

Ann Anderson, Philadelphia, Pa.

Our old friend Anonymous writes from Chicago:

Another line or several on the February issue. Your complete novel by Bedford-Jones was most outstanding and the best one of the issue.

Also enjoyed the shorts—"Thunder Bolt," "Ariadne Speaks," and "Mojave Gunpowder." "Thunder Bolt" was particularly good.

Your illustrator, Maurice Archbold, Jr., is one to hang onto. He's got something. The illustrations for "Ariadne Speaks" are his best in the issue. Your Miscellaneous Department rather fulfills my hopes of its being a permanent idea. "The Big Thicket" was most absorbing. My work deals with the territory surrounding this thicket; and I have friends who can tell a great deal more of this jungle-land. It's a fascinating place, this state of Texas. Keep up the good work.

Coincidence department: We have two characters this month (one off-stage) with the good old-fashioned name of Amyas. Does anybody ever wear that name now?

Last evening I read "Mojave Gunpowder," in the February issue of GOLDEN FLEECE. Then a little further over, I ran across your statement in regard to the Spanish used in that particular story. Mr. Eldredge, the author of the story, has given us a dandy yarn—it's too bad that it was spoiled by the very thing he was trying to use to give it a true atmosphere. Yes, the Spanish. To one who reads, writes, and speaks the language of the Dons, it just about ruins the story. And, odd as it may seem, there are many millions of people in the United States who know enough Spanish to see the many palpable errors this story contains. In addition, there are many more millions of people, in the countries south of the Rio Grande, to whom Spanish is their native tongue. Every country south of the United States uses Spanish for their national language, except one country. That one country is Brazil, in which Spanish is not the native tongue. They speak Portuguese. It is really surprising how avidly a magazine like GOLDEN FLEECE is read in those Spanish-speaking countries, too. I know, because I have direct contacts in those countries. As an illustration, I correspond regularly with the Rector of a boys' "Manual Arts High School" in one of the larger cities of Colombia, and he is always asking me to send him more magazines for his boys to read; they have a four year course in English, and he finds magazines such as yours of great help in their classes.

From a careful perusal of the story, it is quite evident that Mr. Eldredge has made quite some research, or has lived in Southern California and is familiar with some of its history. It is quite evident, also, that he knows little of the Spanish language. It is possible, and in many instances quite probable, that all these errors are not those of the author, but of the typesetter. For your edification, and for the author's benefit, I will point out the most glaring, starting with the beginning of the story.

We lack room for the harrowing details, so must omit them.

It's just too bad that authors won't submit their scripts to some one who knows the language they are trying to use in their stories. They could save many errors, and make a much more presentable story—and it wouldn't cost them anything but a little postage at the most.

Frank Morris, Los Angeles, Calif.

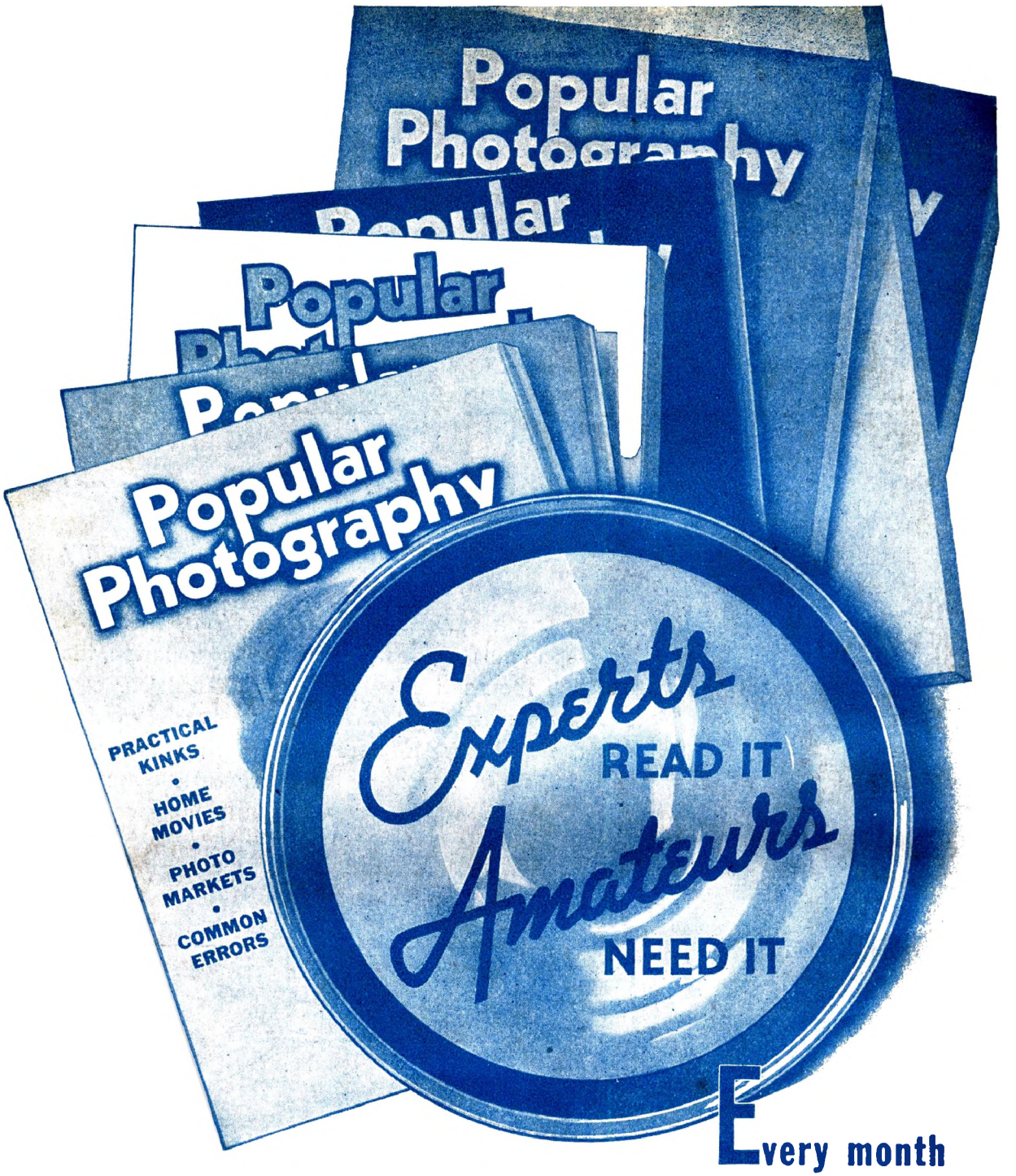
Amen, says we, but the really painful thing about this is that our friends betrayed us. We *don't* know Spanish; they claimed to, and seem to have added touches of their own. We, coming down with the flu, didn't much care if the characters spoke Choctaw, but we'll know better next time.

Somebody's very interesting and appreciative letter about "Tomorrow at Ten" has gotten away from us, but the author's comments are at hand:

This is to thank you for your kindness in sending me the two originals from the "Tomorrow at Ten" illustrations. Because I had spent considerable effort in writing this yarn I was gratified to find its tone so effectively sustained by Mr. McCauley's pictures.

HISTORICAL ADVENTURE has a special fascination for many readers; and it seems to me that interest is heightened by frequent illustrations. I found the horse story most entertaining. As for Ariadne—Theseus *did* throw the bull around Athens—but isn't that just like a doll? Why couldn't she let bygones be bygones?

Robert Griffith.



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