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Short Stories

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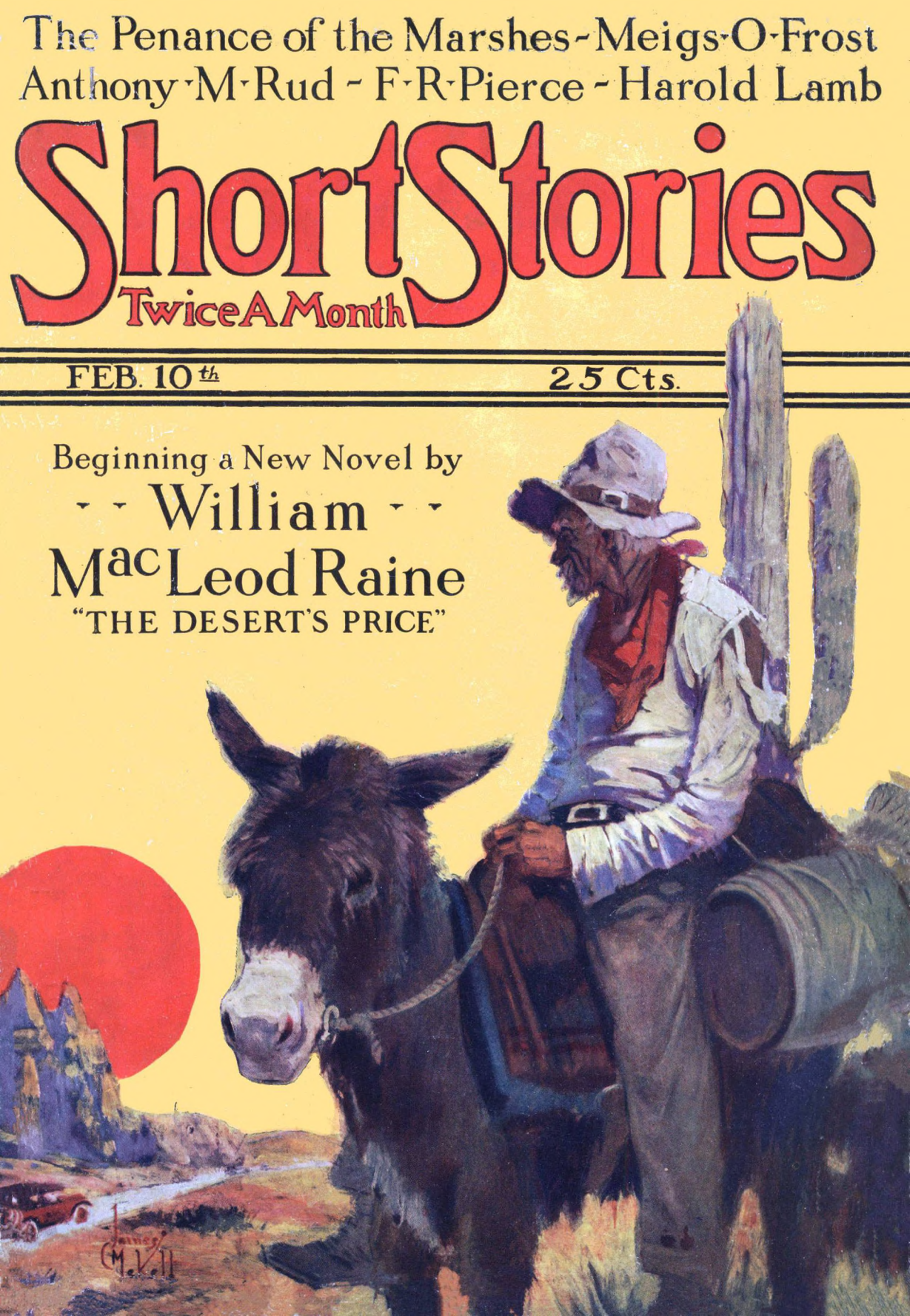
"THE DESERT'S PRICE"



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The American Tobacco Co

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Just a few strokes of your pen—and you can end your quest of years for a perfect smoking tobacco—drawing dividends for life in unalloyed pipe-satisfaction.

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But through the *Humidor Sampler* you get a liberal "get acquainted" quantity of each for $1.50

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Send no money. Just sign and mail the coupon. That will bring you the Humidor assortment direct from our factories to your den. When the postman brings the package, deposit $1.50 with him, plus postage.

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Address.....

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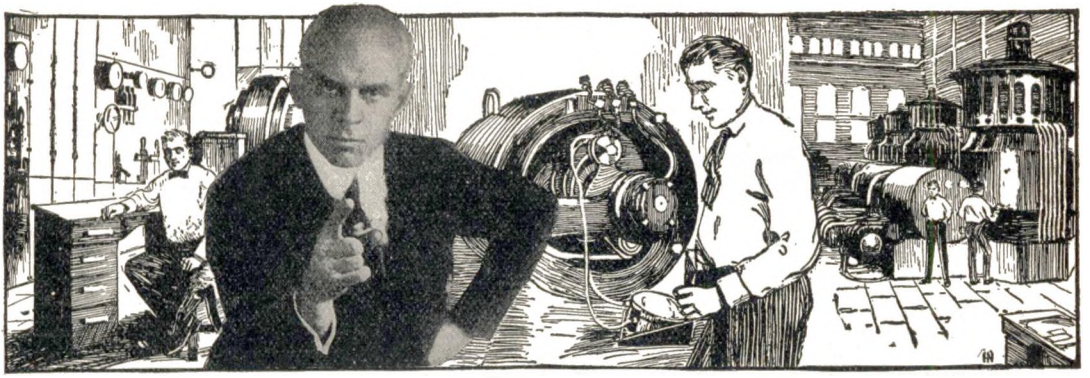

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It's a shoe that can't run over, no matter how much wear you give it.

Step into a Crawford Dealer's store some day soon and try on a pair—maybe two or three.

You don't have to buy.

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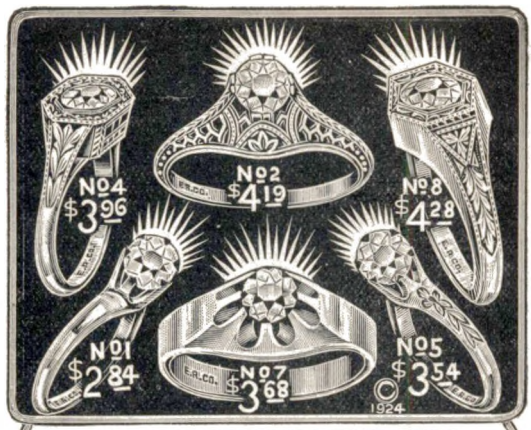

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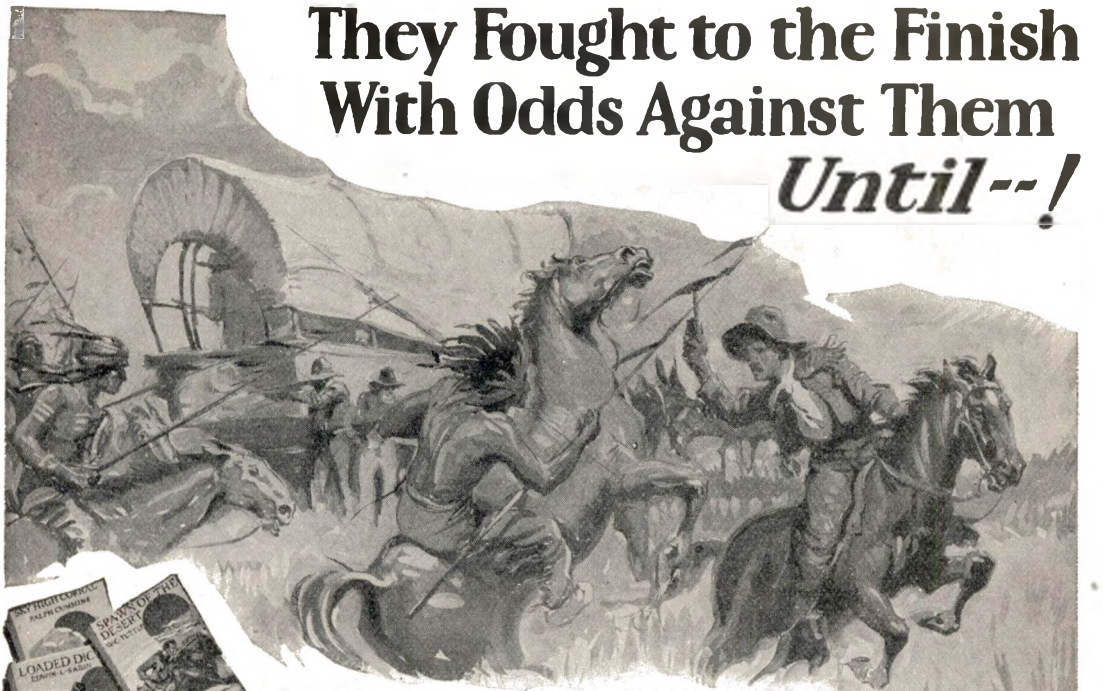
They Fought to the Finish With Odds Against Them *Until--!*



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"Just because I wear cowboy clothes and ride and shoot like a man," said Wilcat Nell, "I guess there's a lot of talk about me going around, but from now on I help dad in this feud, and you can take that home to the boys at Keystone Ranch." And Wildcat Nell swung her heavy rawhide lash across the ranchman's shoulders. He could feel the blood rush into the welt where the stinging lash had cut through his shirt. Wildcat Nell——! but read the rest for yourself in "Apache Valley," one of the many daring stories in these twelve bully books. A thrill on every page.

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You may send me the 12 volumes of Western Stories by Hendryx, Tuttle, and other famous authors. I will pay the postman only $1.98 (plus few cents delivery charges). It is understood that I may return these books, if I desire, within five days and receive my money back promptly.

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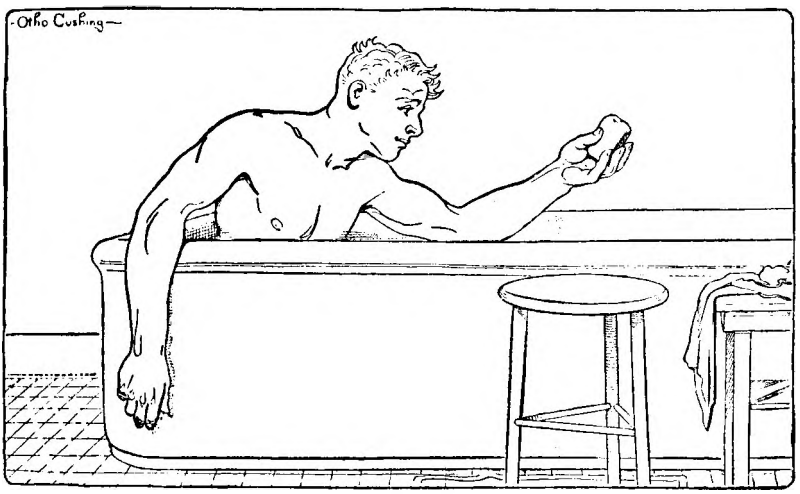
To men who bathe in hope instead of lather



There are Ivoryless men in this country!

There are men who still go along from day to day deep-sea-diving in the tub for a sunken, slippery parallelopiped. When they finally retrieve it and rub it heartily against their manly frames, it reluctantly deposits a thin, sticky coating that they, in all innocence, think is lather.

We want the attention of these men for ten seconds.

We want them to understand that real lather—Ivory lather—is a three-dimensioned product particularly distinguished by thickness. It develops as quickly as pride after a twelve-foot putt. It disappears in the rinse like a platform after election day.

And when the Ivory cake slips its moorings, it remains on the surface, to be recaptured on sight without a search warrant.

Give these matters a thought, Gentlemen. They have much to do with the change from the Saturday night duty to the daily morning luxury.

Procter & Gamble

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99 44/100% PURE IT FLOATS

ALL the fees from a Board of Directors meeting couldn't buy a finer cake of soap for face and hands than Guest Ivory, the new cake of Ivory made especially for the washstand. Just the right size for either the right or the left hand. Five cents.

February 10, 1924

ShortStories

Vol. CVI., No. 3 Whole No. 436

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR — D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

A GREAT EXPERIENCE

IT SEEMS to us that a great many people seem to mistake modesty for just plain stupidity. Take the man who comes back from some wonderful experience, a treasure hunt, an exploration trip, a world war and says, "Oh, it didn't amount to much," or "It was a pretty fair little war while it lasted" and who doesn't say much of anything else. He is heralded by the newspapers for his cool nerve and his modesty. Man of action he undoubtedly is, but also, we think, probably so unimaginative a chap that he would be pretty stupid company. But with all he has been through has he really felt the experience? As Walter Bagshot the English economist, once wrote, "To a great experience one thing is essential: an experiencing nature. It is not enough to have opportunity, it is essential to feel it."

We are not trying to make a case for the man who draws the long bow; we are making the plea for a richer, fuller understanding and enjoyment of your own experiences. In other words we recommend a conscious development of your observation. Send the man who, as Bagshot says, has "the understanding nature" to the next town and he will see a world of interesting things, and will have learned more of life and human nature, than some men would if you sent them around the globe. Not long ago we talked to a boy who had "bummed" his way pretty much around the world. He saw America then shipped for Japan. "Yes," we said, "and what about Japan?" "Well," he replied, "I tried the famous Japanese beer, but it wasn't so good." That was his only impression.

We all want to travel, to have great experiences, but there's no use if we don't go with mind and heart open like the Kipling soldier:

"For to admire an' for to see
For to be 'old this world so wide—"

THE EDITOR.

CONTENTS

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Postpaid in United States, and to all Possessions of the United States, and Mexico . . $5.00
Postpaid to all Foreign Countries 6.50
Postpaid throughout Canada 5.50

THE DESERT'S PRICE

The Story of a Cattle Country Feud

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "Sand in His Craw," "Man Size," etc.

GRIM, PURPOSEFUL AND DOMINATING AS THE DESERT ITSELF, THE MCCANNS AND THE STARKS DWELT ON ITS BORDERS. AGE-LONG FEUD SMOLDERED BETWEEN THEM, AND HATRED ITSELF BRED OF THE DESERT. BUT EVEN AS THE DESERT HAS SOFTER MOODS, SO INTO THE LIVES OF THESE HARD-RIDING MEN CAME OTHER ELEMENTS, AND A STORY IS UNFOLDED OF STRUGGLE, PERIL, TRIUMPH AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS THAT IS FULL WORTHY OF THIS GREAT WRITER OF WESTERN FICTION

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE JORNADA DE LA MUERTE

FROM the bench where Wilson McCann had drawn up his horse he looked across the shimmering desert. Ribbons of heat, reflected from the burning sand, danced in an opalescent atmosphere. The plain was a mirage of shifting color undulating like the Sargasso Sea in summer.

Beyond the level waste were sun-drenched lomas in the draws of which patches of shadow rested, welcome to the spirit in a landscape so flooded with light. Up one of these arroyos he would ride to the Frio River country where his father, Peter McCann, was lord of the Middle justice, the High and the Low. Against the horizon were the sharp-notched peaks of the Sierra Mal Pais, harsh and dry in the unsparing light of this rarefied air.

The young man regarding the panorama sat at loose ease in the saddle. He had shifted his seat so that one foot was lifted from the stirrup and the other supported part of his weight. The dark brown face was hard, with lean jaw set tight. Nothing of the thoughts behind were mirrored in the inscrutable gray eyes.

Unmoving, he sat for many minutes. The desert held for him fascination. All his years he had lived on the edge of it and he still found there an unsolvable riddle. It was the dominating influence not only of his own life but of that of all living near. At times he hated everything it stood for—drought, starvation and bleaching bones, fierce struggle, temporary victory, certain and final defeat. None the less it was a magnet to his thoughts. What was the mystery of its enticement? How could he find the key to its hidden meaning? He wanted to read what was written in a language beyond his ken.

Jornada de la Muerte had come down from early days as the name of the desert. Those who lived on its border rarely used the Spanish designation for it. To call this sand stretch the Journey of Death would have been a concession to sentiment and to dread few cared to make. Painted Desert was the word these grim, taciturn men preferred.

But the Spanish name was well chosen. For everything within reach of its dry

winds fought for existence. Vegetation was tough, saw-toothed, stinging. Each moving creature had developed highly its means of attack and defense, its barbs and poisons and chameleon-like deceptions.

The desert set the conditions for men, too, young McCann thought bitterly. To survive he must have in him something of the tough skin of the cholla, of the poison of the sidewinder, of the pouncing lust to kill of the wild cat. He must endure heat and thirst and hunger or he must perish. He must conquer nature and his fellow man or succumb.

Through the stillness of the drowsy land a shot rang out sharply. McCann listened, intent and crouched. In this wilderness of desolation the explosion might mean one of many things: a man in a hill pocket, his back to a rock wall, flinging defiance at a circle of enemies; a bullet flung from ambush and a sprawled figure huddled on the dry sand; a pilgrim lost and panic-stricken; or the mere wanton exuberance of a *vaquero*.

A second and a third shot followed, at intervals evenly spaced. It was a distress signal, a call for help.

McCann drew his revolver and fired into the air to let the one in need know that help was on the way. Then, swiftly but without panicky haste, he turned and rode along the bench. He guided his horse through the chaparral with the skill acquired by long practice, adroitly avoiding the catclaw and the prickly pear.

Presently another shot echoed down the ravine up which he was moving. This was meant to direct him, McCann guessed, and he fired once more for reassurance to the one in distress.

"Go to it, Jim-Dandy," he urged, and put his horse at the steep incline leading up from the arroyo.

The cow-pony climbed like a cat, starting small avalanches of rubble each time a hoof dug into the loose ground. The muscles of Jim-Dandy's shoulders stood out like ropes as the animal plunged up the bank.

A gentle slope led from the edge of the arroyo to the base of a hogback which rose knobbily like emaciated vertebrae of Mother Earth's spine. The quick eye of the rider searched for and found a way up. With a rush the horse went at the ascent, sure-footed as a mountain goat. It clambered up the last twenty feet of rock-rim on the run.

From the summit McCann looked down on a small grassy park. This was old Jim Yerby's place. He had settled here in what seemed to this young fellow prehistoric days, because of a spring that not even in the most arid years dried entirely. On the opposite slope of the valley a cluster of live oaks had taken root and become great trees. Among these nestled a low adobe cabin.

In front of the hut a woman was standing. She had in her hands a rifle.

The side of the hogback fell precipitously to the edge of the valley. Jim-Dandy took the decline by zigzag diagonals, slithering down on all four feet and on its haunches.

On safer ground, the rider looked across the little park and discovered that the woman was young, almost a girl, slender and graceful of figure. As he came closer, the impression of youth and dark good looks became more definite. He wondered who she could be.

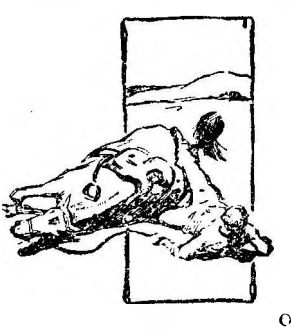
"Jim Yerby's hurt," she said, waiting for no introductions. "He's broken his leg. Horse fell on him."

While she elaborated the facts the young man's train of thought still clung to her. What was she doing here? Where had she come from? How did it happen he did not know her, since residents were few in this end of the county and he was acquainted with them all?

McCann followed her into the cabin. It was a one-room shack, rectangular, with two small four-pane windows. A man lay on a home-made bed in one corner of the room. He was a little, wrinkled fellow in blue overalls, gray-haired, with small, quick, beady eyes. The blue smoke of a cigarette curled up from his fingers.

"'S matter, Jim?" the newcomer asked.

"Done bust my laig," the old-timer answered nonchalantly. "My damned broomtail fell on me. Got scared at a diamond back."



"When?"

"Yest'day evenin'. About two, I reckon. In Dry Canyon. I seen a bunch of wild hill cattle an' was trailin' 'em when the bronc piled me."

"Couldn't get on yore hoss?"

"It lit out for home. I'd kinda liked to 'a' gone, too, but I didn't get to go. No,

sir. I laid right there on them rocks three years till Miss Julia come along an' seen me."

"It must have been awf'ly hot," the girl said gently.

"Tur'ble hot, an' me dry as a cork laig. I sure got good an' gaunted. It et into my patience consid'rable, but I hadn't no engagements that wouldn't keep. That country up there is ce'tainly filled with absentees. My prospects looked bilious when Miss Julia drapped round this mo'ning an' said 'Howdy?' to me. I disremember ever spendin' a night an' a day so dawggoned long. Hotter'n hell with the lid on up on that ledge after Mr. Sun got to goin' good. Looked like it was gonna be fried gent for supper."

"No water bag, Jim? Wasn't that kinda careless?" McCann asked.

"All of that, Wils. An' that ain't but half of it. I'd run outa the makin's. Might as well have been a *'No se permite fumar'* sign painted on one of them rocks."

He was a garrulous old fellow and the reaction of relief from the long hours of helpless waiting—hours during which he had not known whether life or death was in store for him—loosened his tongue and lifted him to a mood akin to gaiety. He had broken his leg, of course, but he had not come to the end of the passage. Yerby was inclined to be jubilant about his escape. There would be plenty of time in the weeks when he was tied to a bed to cuss about the leg.

Chapter II

"Who is she?"

WILSON McCANN was no spendthrift of words or of time when action was the order of the day. He stepped outside the cabin, took some water from the olla, and washed his hands.

This done, he examined the broken leg and made preparations to set it temporarily until a doctor could be brought. Life in the saddle carries with it obligations that make every rider a potential surgeon. McCann found some boards from the top of an old box and whittled them down for splints while the girl was runumaging in Yerby's war bag for a clean cotton shirt. This she tore into strips to serve as bandages.

"Ready, Jim?" the young man asked.

"Sure, Wils. Right damned now."

Yerby endured without a groan a few minutes of intense pain. The perspiration stood out on his forehead in tiny glistening beads, but no sound came from between his clenched teeth. He had the primal virtue of the frontier—courage to endure quietly torture that would have set many a city man screaming. This is the common heritage of all living creatures that dwell in the barren lands. The rough, hard life toughens and gives stamina.

When the amateur surgeon had finished, Yerby relaxed with a sigh. "I reckon the lid woulda come off'n my private can of cuss words if you hadn't been here," he told the girl, grinning cheerfully.

She had suffered with him during the ordeal, but the hands that had helped McCann had not trembled. "I know it hurt a lot," she replied. "Now I'm going to wash your face with cold water. You'll feel better then."

As soon as she had gone out of the cabin to get water from the olla, the younger man fired a question at Yerby. "Who is she?"

Into the black, beady eyes of the old-timer a gleam of humor flickered. "Boy, ride yore own range. Ain't this young lady done saved me when I had a through ticket for Kingdom Come? You go read yore story books an' see how it always comes out after that."

"You durned old alkali, you knocked the bark off the first live oaks ever grew in this country. Methusaleh would be a good name for you. Come clean. Who is she?"

"Nothin' to that. Nothin' to it at all." Yerby sputtered. "I'm a well-preserved, middle-aged gent, as them matrimonial papers say. Sensible young ladies like her don't aim for to rob the cradle to get a husband. You go 'way off an' grow up."

"Well, who is she?"

The old-timer slowly blew smoke rings toward the ceiling. "My, this li'l boy's a regular parrot. Don't know hut one sentence, looks like. Course I don't blame him none. She's ce'tainly a mighty easy young lady to look at. But no use him lookin'. He's clear outa the runnin' before he ever starts."

"Why am I? She isn't married?"

"Not fur's I know."

"Or going to be?"

Yerby looked at him reproachfully. "Sure, she's going to be. Ever know one like her that wasn't when she got good an' ready? All the footloose men this end of the county are going to find business up her way sure as you're an inch high."

"You haven't told me yet who she is."

The old man looked at him and grinned

with friendly malice. "She's Miss Julia Stark, daughter of old Matt Stark, who's such a close friend of you and yourn."

Over the eyes of young McCann a curious film of blankness passed. His face set to harsher lines. There was a slight narrowing of the lids. Of course. He might have known it. Who else could she be except the daughter of the arch enemy of his house, that daughter who had been away to school in Los Angeles half a dozen years? During that time he had not seen her. The last glimpse of her had been a characteristic one. Astride a bareback horse she had flashed past him, a stringy thirteen-year-old girl, all long legs and flying black hair and big dark eyes. It was hard to believe that wild little hoyden grown up into a beauty. He remembered her a pert and saucy minx, brought up wholly among men except for an old Mexican cook. Once, in a gust of temper, he had heard her swear like a sergeant. She had been used to having her own way, and when she did not get it there was a breeze in her neighborhood. On that particular occasion he had been the disturbing cause of her anger. Even then there had been war between the McCanns and the Starks, and it had pleased him to score one against the enemy.

His instinct now was not to let her know just yet who he was. He did not search for the reason of it. The feeling was enough. It was clear she did not recognize him. Five years had transformed him from a gangling boy to a man. No wonder she did not know him.

"Unless you want a rookus in the house better not tell her who I am, Jim," young McCann suggested. "She's a sure enough pepper box when she gets to going good."

Yerby chuckled. He, too, had his memories of her. "Tha's right, Wils. I dunno as there's any use startin' anything. She'll find out soon enough, anyhow."

The girl returned with a basin of water, a towel, and a piece of torn rag for a wash cloth.

The old-timer protested. "Now looky here, ma'am, I'm a heap obliged to you, but I can wash my own face an' not trouble you."

"No, you lie there and rest. I want to get your fever down."

"It won't gimme a fever to wash my face, will it?" He was embarrassed at this superfluous attention, especially in the presence of another man. "I been doing it a right smart time without a valley."

"Off an' on—for a hundred an' how many years, Jim?" murmured the younger man.

"Hmp! I'm fifty-seven, if you want to know. An' I never was sick a day in my life. You young sprouts think——" Jim became sputteringly inarticulate.

"I like mature men myself," Miss Stark announced, and sat down on the edge of the bed prepared for business.

Before Yerby could muster effective opposition a soapy rag was traveling over his face. It filled his mouth when he opened that orifice to reject this kindness.

"Wash him good behind the ears, ma'am," advised McCann solicitously.

"You go to—Yuma!" retorted the indignant homesteader.

His nurse took charge imperiously. "Better go out and take the saddle off Mr. Yerby's horse. I put it in the corral."

McCann went. The horse was a square-built shortbacked bay with a barrel body. Out of the corner of an eye it watched the man in shiny leather chaps who was approaching. Nothing can look so innocent as a cowpony before or after a spree of misbehavior. This one drooped languidly on three feet and the edge of a fourth upturned hoof.

"You pinkeyed cayuse, do you know what you've done—broke yore master's leg? If I was sure you knew what it was for I'd whale you good. Here, stand still, can't you? Whoa, there! I'm only takin' off the saddle."

The bay jerked up its head, tried to pull away, and otherwise manifested evidences of wholly unnecessary fear. When saddle and bridle were at last off, it flung up its heels and went flying round the corral.

Meanwhile Miss Julia Stark was asking her host a question.

"Who is he?"

"Fellow from over the Frio way. I get them young riders all mixed up," he answered evasively.

"One of McCann's riders?" she asked quickly.

"Well, now, he might be, at that. *Quien sabe?*"

"I don't remember him."

"They're always driftin' in an' out. Mostly their homes are under their hats."

"Yes," she agreed, not wholly satisfied with this explanation. She had an im-

pression that she had seen him before and ought to remember who he was.

McCann appeared in the doorway. "Expect I'd better go for Doc Sanders now," he said to the girl. "Unless you'd rather ride home and have one of yore boys go for him. Maybe that would be better."

"No, I'll stay. But I wish you'd stop at the Circle Cross and tell my father I won't be home till late. He'll get to worrying. Tell him not to send for me. I'll come back with the doctor."

On the brown face of the young man was a faint sardonic grin. In not letting her know who he was he had built a trap for himself. He reflected that he would be as welcome at the Circle Cross as a June hailstorm in a grain raising country. But he had to go through now or drag his tail.

"I'll stop on my way," he promised.

Chapter III

"MEET MR. WILSON MCCANN"

THE sun's rays streamed down the arroyo through which McCann and Doctor Sanders rode. By the time they came to a sight of the desert, long shadows were stretching across from the lomas. The porphyry sierras were less starkly bare. Soon now the ball of fire behind the riders would be disappearing in a hill crotch of the horizon.

McCann drew up. "I reckon here's where we part, Doc. See you later."

Doctor Sanders, a small plump man in a land of lank giants, gave him the valedictory of the plains. "So long."

The McCann country was well to the south, that of the Starks straight through the hill gash ahead of the horsemen. The doctor deflected, to follow a trail leading sharply to the right. His companion pushed into a small gorge in front of him.

The Flying V Y and the Circle Cross ranches were twenty miles apart, but distance could not obliterate the hatred of the owners. They had been close friends once. Peter McCann and Matthew Stark. In their youth they had side by side chased Texas brush-splitters over the salt grass bumps. Together they had followed the westward tide of migration to Arizona. In their hours off duty they had frolicked as side partners at the round-up camps and at the small *tendejónes* of the border towns. On the Chisholm trail they had night-herded the sleeping or the browsing cattle, hearing each other's voices as they crooned lullabys to the restless beasts. Their comradeship had been a byword in the country where they were known.

Into their lives a girl had come, Jessie Farwell, daughter of the cattleman for whom they both worked. This in itself might not have driven them apart, though they were heady youngsters. But the camp-fire raillery of companions and the whisper of an unbiquitous friend had sown seeds of distrust. They quarreled.

Stark won Jessie for his bride. The years passed, and each left both men more prosperous, more powerful in the community. Their enmity was known of all men even before their political ambitions and their financial interests collided. On opposing tickets they ran for sheriff and McCann was elected. Their wandering herds overlapped. The punchers of each took up his employer's grievance. They clashed over water holes, over calves wrongly branded by mistake. Charges of rustling were bandied back and forth, at first out of animosity rather than any seriout belief in their truth. Trouble followed. There were gun plays and long distance fusillades meant to intimidate rather than to kill.

Then, dramatically, the curtain rolled up for a scene of grim tragedy. A Circle Cross rider was found lying face down at the bottom of a cut bank. He had perhaps been dry-gulched, shot from ambush, but this was not sure. Who did it nobody knew, but at the Stark ranch suspicion flew straight to the Flying V Y. This had been less than two weeks before the afternoon when Wilson McCann rode through Tincup Pass to carry word to Matthew Stark that his daughter would not be home till late.

When young McCann reached the summit of the pass, the gulch pockets of the mountains were glowing opaline and the peaks above were fire-tipped crags. Even as he rode out of Tincup the fires began to die down. The rainbow-hued sea that flooded the sky became less vivid till the deeper shades predominated, merged into a purple haze, finally lost distinction in dull garnet tones. Soon darkness would fall over the land, wiping out harsh and gaunt details. The stars would come out,

innumerable and close, and moonlight would magically transform plain and mesa.

In the last of the sunlight the windmill and tank of the Circle Cross flashed heliograph signals at the rider. He was descending into a valley. Before him were checkerboards of irrigated grain and pasture meadow centering around the houses of the ranch. Back of these was a wide stretch of unfenced open range running up into the hills.

Cattle were browsing in the valley. Leisurely a rider was moving across the plain toward them. All was peaceful as old age.

Directly in front of McCann's horse a spurt of sand flew. The crack of a rifle shot echoed back from the walls of the pass.

Instantly McCann's brain registered impressions and moved him to coördinated action. Someone had fired at him. The V-shaped sand spurt told him the attacker was almost dead ahead. With only a revolver against a rifle, Wilson McCann was as helpless at this range as a child with a popgun. He swung Jim-Dandy as on a peg and spurred for the shelter of a large boulder beside the trail. Before he reached cover a second explosion boomed.

McCann dismounted and stood beside his horse. The second shot made it plain the first could have been no chance bullet. Coming out of the pass, his figure had been clearly silhouetted against the skyline. He had been recognized beyond question.

For long minutes he waited, every nerve keyed to tension, eyes and ears alert for any sign of movement in the mesquite. It was a trying business, this crouching inaction, a test of the steely quality of his nerves. The ambusher might be circling round to get at him from the rear. There might be two of them. The only course open to him was to let developments occur.

Out of the painful silence came sounds the trapped man knew at once—the thud of galloping hoofs, of a horse crashing through the brush. He stood a moment, stomach muscles tight, to make sure the man screened in the chaparral was not charging him; then flung himself, foot not touching the stirrup, into the saddle and lifted Jim-Dandy in a stride to swift pursuit.

In the gathering dusk they raced toward the ranch-house, Jim-Dandy gaining with every reach of the hoofs. The rider in front looked back, not once but half a dozen times. McCann could see him urging his horse and knew that he was spurring in a panic of fear. Down the valley slope they flew, the pursuing rider hard on the heels of the other's horse.

The ambusher had forgotten that he could use his rifle. He was in terror of the swift Nemesis riding him down. He shouted for help as his horse plunged into the open space in front of the big adobe house. Even as he threw himself from the saddle men appeared out of the gloom to join him—one, two, three of them.

The third came out of the open hallway of the house to the porch. He was an elderly man, big and rangy, bow-legged and still strong, with hard eyes in a harsh leathery face. This was Matthew Stark.

"What's the rumpus?" he asked in a heavy voice. Then, with a flirt of a brown hand toward the farther rider, "Who is this fellow?"

The pursued man was on the porch, near the entrance to the gallery. The rifle was clutched tightly in both hands. He was breathing heavily.

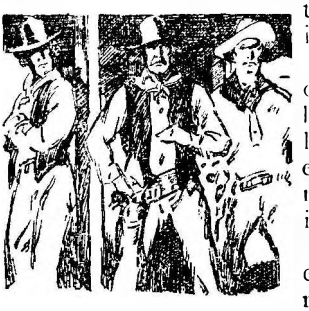
The puncher from the Flying V Y moved forward from behind Jim-Dandy. "Meet Mr. Wilson McCann," he said hardily, and there was a jeer in his voice.

All those present knew him, but in the darkness, screened by his horse, they had not recognized him. His announcement made a little, ominous stir. Competent hands moved quietly to be ready for an emergency.

The owner of the Circle Cross looked at him steadily without speaking. The others waited for him to give them their cue.

"What are you doing here?" Stark demanded at last, abruptly.

"Why, I came to bring a message—two of 'em, in fact, Mr. Stark." The answer was low, unruffled, and carried a suggestion of mocking insolence.



Stark glared down into a face bold and reckless, the cool eyes of which met his unwinkingly.

"Not interested," the old man retorted bruskly.

"Still, I'll deliver 'em now I'm here. First is that yore no-'count jayhawkin' son bushwhacked me up there in the pass an' skedaddled to save his hide after he'd sent a coupla blue whistlers at me."

The cattleman turned to his son. "How about that, Jas?"

There were weakness and vice in the face of young Jasper Stark, slackness in the jaw. He answered sulkily. "I didn't aim to kill him—shot to warn him to turn back."

"That was why you fired at me again while I was makin' for cover, was it?" McCann asked with a little skeptical laugh of scorn.

"Tha's a lie. The second shot was when you plugged at me."

The rider from the Flying V Y unbuckled his belt and handed it to Matthew Stark. "Look at my gun an' see who's a liar. All the chambers are loaded."

The old man broke the revolver, examined it, and returned it to its owner. "Don't prove a thing. Like as not you reloaded it."

"While my hoss was hittin' the high spots tryin' to catch that lobo wolf," the son of Peter McCann suggested with obvious sarcasm.

Stark carried the war into the enemy's country. "You got a nerve to talk about bushwhackin' after what you did to pore Tom McArdle," he burst out angrily.

The young man's answer was instant. "Tom McArdle would be alive today if he hadn't died till a Flying V Y rider killed him."

"Don't tell that to me. I know you an' all yore lying breed," Stark flung out bitterly.

"I'm tellin' it to you, Matt Stark," the man at the foot of the porch steps steadily replied.

"An' I'm tellin' you that I'd as soon put faith in a yellow coyote as in any McCann ever born. An' I'm sendin' word to Pete McCann that there's a day coming when I'll settle with interest a-plenty for what he did to McArdle. Now fork that fuzzy an' light out. I don't want you here."

"What about that gunplay up in the pass?"

"It goes as it stands. The boy's story suits me."

"Different here, an' I'm liable to tell him so when we meet again," McCann said boldly.

The old man's eyes blazed. "Like to tell him now maybe?"

The Flying V Y rider looked from Stark to the men waiting tensely for the word or the lift of a hand that would serve as an order to begin hostilities. His lip curled in an ironic smile. "Not now, gentlemen."

"Then hit the dust *pronto.*"

"Don't get on the prod, Mr. Stark. I haven't onloaded that second message yet. It's from yore daughter."

"From Jule?"

Wilson could see that the old cattleman had been struck to instant apprehension.

"She sent word by me to tell you that she'd be home late. I saw her up at old Jim Yerby's. He's broke his leg. The doc's on the way there now. You're not to send for her, Miss Stark says; she'll come with Doc Sanders when he leaves Yerby's place."

"Does Yerby need any help?"

"I'll look out for him. I sent word to the Flying V Y to have a pack hoss with my plunder an' some grub sent up. You don't need to worry about Yerby none."

McCann swung without any haste to the saddle, glanced coolly from one to another of the watchful silent men, and headed Jim-Dandy toward Tincup Pass. He jogged away into the gathering darkness, not turning once to make sure that swift impulse would not send a bullet flying after him.

To the men of the Circle Cross, still watching him as he disappeared, there came back the taunting rhythm of a cowboy song.

"Roll yore tail, and roll her high,
We'll all be angels by an' by."

Chapter IV

At the Yerby Cabin

HIS message delivered at the Circle Cross, McCann rode through Tincup Pass and dropped down into the desert. He took a short cut across one corner of it. Jim-Dandy labored across a waste of white silt so finely powdered that the hoofs left no track. From this the horse climbed to a mesa lit by far stars so deceptively that the freakish shapes of erosion took on weird effects of hobgoblin land.

He came upon a lonely sheep ranch. It was the Gifford place. The corrals, the shallow feed troughs, the long, flat sheds emerged from the darkness like ghosts of reality. The rider left this behind and wound into the hills.

Doctor Sanders was smoking a pipe in front of Yerby's cabin when McCann dismounted. He was a picture of indolent placid content. The doctor was wont to say that he could do nothing, that is could refrain from all activity, better than any man in Arizona.

"How's Jim?" the horseman asked.

"He's taking a little nourishment Miss Julia fixed up for him. Says he wishes now he'd broke both legs so as to keep her here longer. He acts plumb satisfied. Claims he always wanted to read a book. Figures every fellow ought to read one some time or other. He aims to read his now. Got any books at the ranch, Wils?"

"Some."

"Well, you round up a good easy one for Jim—all about lovely soft-eyed señoritas and husky he-men lovers. He's certainly going to read a book if it's the last thing he ever does. How'd you come out at the Circle Cross? I see they didn't scalp you."

"No," McCann said dryly. "They sent a messenger to meet me."

The doctor's sparkling eyes guaranteed attention. He guessed that something interesting had occurred, and he was a born gossip. Wherefore he waited silently, sure that he would soon find out what he wanted to know.

"Jas Stark shot at me an' lit out. I followed him lickety split to the ranch. We had a few pleasant words, the old man an' me."

"Shot at you! He didn't. How come he to do that?"

"You're as good a guesser as I am, Doc. I kinda gathered that maybe he doesn't like me—him or old Matt either."

"They don't like you a lick of the road, you or any of your kin. But shooting! Who started it?"

In a few crisp sentences McCann told the story. The doctor listened, absorbed. Was this the beginning of the end? Would the smoldering feud break into open warfare, bitter and tragic? If he knew the McCanns—and he thought he did—they were not the kind to take this challenge tamely. They came of fighting Irish stock, upon which had been grafted four generations of American frontier life. There were likely to be reprisals.

Even now both camps were waiting tensely for the signal to begin hostilities openly. The death of Tom McArdle had brought them to the point of war. But the doubt as to who had killed him had made for delay. Matthew Stark had hesitated to give the word. He did not want to see any of his lusty young riders buried in the small graveyard on the hillside. While he brooded, willing to let events shape themselves, Jasper had fired a wanton shot that might be the first of hundreds.

The doctor rose and, with a sigh of resignation, knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He saw busy days and nights ahead of him. Once before he had lived in a feud district and knew what it was to have riders come racing for him on horses lathered with sweat. Sanders preferred his pipe and his fireside and his easy chair. Well, it was in the hands of the gods, or rather of two grim, hard men with too much of the desert fierceness in their blood. He was a pawn in the game they played, just as were the rollicking boys who would ride out laughing to meet death at the lift of a hand.

"No use telling you so, of course, but it's all wrong, Wils—this putting yourselves above the law and killing so free and easy. It's sure enough bad medicine."

"Have I been killin' anybody free an' easy, Doc? Better speak to Jas Stark about that, hadn't you?"

"I'm not meaning you, Wils. But someone shot Tom McArdle."

"None of our outfit, Doc. You don't mean we had anything to do with it?" The eyes of the range rider were bleak. They thrust at Sanders a warning to keep off dangerous ground.

The doctor withdrew into himself. He had already said more than anybody else could safely have done. As physician to the whole community, allied to neither faction and necessary to both, he could be bolder than most men. But he knew when to stop.

"No, Wils. Nothing like that. But you know how the Starks feel. They're holding it against you boys of the Flying V Y."

Sanders knew by the other's face that they were no longer alone. He turned, to see Julia Stark in the doorway. She stood slim and straight, her black eyes flashing.

"Who else would we hold it against, Doctor?" she asked curtly, looking straight at the younger man.

There was a thin, ironic smile on the brown face of McCann. He murmured, with the soft drawl of insolence to which he sometimes reverted, "Nobody else would have dry-gulched him, would they?"

"What d'you mean?" the girl demanded.

The man in chaps said nothing, but he

continued to give her that mocking smile. It was the doctor who answered at last.

"Tom was quite a boy for the girls, Miss Julia. Folks say—some folks do—that maybe someone who was jealous or wanted revenge might have laid for him. Of course, that's just talk. I don't know a thing about it, myself. Chances are nobody does, except the fellow who did it."

The girl's dark eyebrows gathered in a frown. "First I've heard of it—that Tom was so fond of the girls. And if he was—if he did like them—is that any crime, any reason why someone would want to kill him?"

"I reckon you didn't know Tom very well," the doctor said judicially, with intent to hold an even balance between the Stark and the McCann. "He was a top hand and sure could ride the buck. Good looking as any fellow I know. Likable, too. But a mite wild, Miss Julia, by the stories I've heard."

"I don't know anything about that. I never saw him but once." She swept defiant eyes over the rider. "But I don't believe a word about a private enemy killing him."

"You wouldn't," agreed the younger man.

The implications of his smile stirred her anger. Stiffly she changed the subject. "Did you take my message to my father?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did he say?"

"I didn't wait to hear, me being in a hurry."

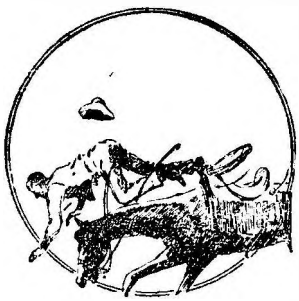
She did not understand the hint of sardonic mockery in his tone and manner. None the less it annoyed her. She turned and walked into the house.

Those outside heard Yerby take up again the thread of his conversation with her.

"No, ma'am, I reckon there never was a savinger human than Mrs. Dubbs. Down in that Yuma country I usta wonder could I live till night come it was so dawggoned hot, an' that woman would set around the stove cookin' up a mess of stuff so's not to lose any of the heat—an' all the fuel she could use in a hundred years right there in sight free gratis, as thet old sayin' is."

"Yes," the girl assented, her mind fiercely busy with thoughts of the young man outside who could smile so hatefully that it meant more than words.

"I recolleck oncet on the calf round-up I was ridin' a blue roan for the Hashknife outfit. Them days I was some bronco peeler. Well, this broomtail I was on stepped in a prairie dawg hole an' bust me up so the boys had to leave me at the Dubbs place. I like to a-starved to death before they rescued me."



"And now, poor man, another female has you at her mercy. No wonder you feel so worried. Did Mrs. Dubbs have a temper, too?"

"No, ma'am, she didn't. An' I ain't worryin' about yore temper none. I'm in luck. Y'betcha! Sittin' high, wide, an' handsome. All I'm scared of is you'll go home an' never drap in to see how the old man's makin' out."

"Well, I won't." She added, by way of explanation, "I mean I won't forget to come again."

"You're whistlin', ma'am. If I know when you're comin' I'll sure be waitin' for you in full war paint. Don't I hear that Flying V Y boy chinnin' with the doc?"

"Yes. Want to see him?"

"I reckon. Before he goes."

Julia made things snug for the night. She arranged the blanket so that he could pull it up in the chill of early morning. She put water on a chair beside the bed.

"Hope you'll have a good night and sleep well," she said.

"I'll be fine an' dandy," he assured.

Outside, the girl spoke indifferently to the night. "Mr. Yerby wants to see you before you go."

Since Doctor Sanders had just been explaining that he intended to stay all night with his patient, McCann was justified in assuming that this impersonal remark was addressed to him. He went into the house.

"How they stackin', old-timer?" he asked.

"I'll make a hand yet. What's worryin' me is I've got to lie here like a bump on a log an' let a kid like you see Miss Julia home."

"Don't worry about that. I'll make out to entertain her somehow." He added with a grin, "Course, I'm no ladies' man like you, but she'll have to put up with me, I reckon."

"She's outa luck. Well, give my love to Pa Stark when you get to the Circle Cross."

"I'm not figurin' on meeting him tonight."

"Maybe you're right, at that. He's some impulsive, Pa is. Kinda quick on the shoot. Like as not he'd mistake you for a curly wolf."

"Was that what you wanted to tell me?"

Little imps of deviltry danced in the beady eyes. "No, Wils. A wink is as good as a nod to a blind hoss. Scratch gravel, boy. You know the ol' saying: Opportunity is like a baldheaded guy with chin whiskers; you can catch him comin' but not going."

McCann's answer was direct. "I'm not liable to forget that she's Matt Stark's daughter, so you needn't look so blamed knowin', Jim. I don't like her any more'n she does me."

"Sho! She's a mighty nice li'l girl, an' the best lookin' one in Arizona."

"No Stark looks good to me," the son of Peter McCann said grimly.

Chapter V

DESERT ANIMALS

THEY were taking the short cut across the white powdered desert before either of them spoke.

"What did you say your name is?" she asked, rather imperiously.

"They call me Wilson."

The girl noticed the slight pause before he had drawled the answer. It probably was not his right name, she reflected. A good many men did not use the one to which they were born. In that country it was not good form to insist on particulars as to who a man had been or from where he had come. She did not look at him, but without turning her head saw the resolute square-cut jaw and the broad, muscular shoulders. There was strength in him, whatever he might have done in his checkered past.

"You ride for the McCanns."

He assented, without words.

Silence fell again between them. They had come out of the silt and were threading a way among the steel-thorned yuccas. The moon and the stars were out, touching the land as by a magic wand. All harsh detail was blurred. Ten thousand years of drought were wiped out. A soft desert breeze was sighing gently across a sleeping world.

His words, when at last they came, were a surprise. "Why isn't it always like this?" he asked, speaking almost to himself rather than to her.

"How do you mean, ike this'?"

But she knew, she hoped she knew, what he meant before he answered. For the desert had entered into her life, too. She sensed its moods and reflected them in her own. Sometimes it was a hot, devouring monster blasting all living things with its fiery breath; again at sunset, when light was flooding over the sheen of the mesquite, it might be a silver dragon less destructive. In the moonlight it was kind and lovely, all ugliness and threat obliterated. The hard, dry mountains, the strat-

ified earth vertebrae, the barren, sun-cracked valley, all had taken the veil and retired from stark reality to cloistered solitudes of spiritual beauty.

A crouching animal slipped quickly across the trail into the chaparral.

"Coyote?" she asked.

"Wildcat," he answered. Then, with unexpected bitterness, "That's the desert for you."

Again she understood what he meant, and again asked, "What do you mean?"

"Survival of the fit."

"Isn't that true everywhere?"

"Maybe so, but the conditions are different. Everything that lives here is born and bred in hardship, trained for attack an' defense. Take that wildcat—lean, cunning, ferocious, a machine made to stalk and kill."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Same every way you turn. No escape from it. All the plants have thick an' callous rinds. They have thorns that sting. They have to push their roots 'way into the ground to get water. If they don't toughen they die. Tha's what's ailin' us humans. We're desert bred."

"Aren't people the same everywhere?" she asked.

"No. Here we have to fight or go under. We fight the drought and heat of nature. We fight each other for the water holes. If we don't we lose out. Consequence is we get fierce and savage like that wildcat."

"Yes," she admitted with a sigh. "We're all under the spell of it, all hard and relentless. But we don't have to be—what

is it you called that wildcat?—ferocious and sly. The desert shows its teeth most of the time. It's full of sting and barb and thorn. But that's only one side of it. All the time it's trying to tell us something else, too, isn't it?"

His brooding eyes rested on her. So she, too, felt it, this wild young thing so full of contrary impulses, of passionate resentments, of brave, elusive dreams, of mysterious cravings for goodness and beauty. He forgot that she was of the enemy. He did not question the influences that had for a moment brought them close. Something primeval stirred in him, a joy old as the race, that walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. Without taking thought of it, he knew that they rode alone in a world wonderful.

"What's it tryin' to tell us?" he asked in his low, gentle voice.

"I don't know—quite. But something good—and hopeful. The lovely flowers of the yucca and the cactus—aren't they a promise to us? This morning I rode out into the desert, and the air was all rose-colored, except where there were little lakes of lilac and pink and fire-red in the hollows of the sierras and on the peaks." She laughed at herself, soft-eyed. "Maybe that seems silly to you. But it's the way I feel. Tonight, now. In all this still moonlight the desert isn't threatening us, is it?"

They were drawing up into a country of creased arroyos. On the crest of a hillock they stopped and looked back across the Painted Desert. The man was for a moment carried out of himself. Looking at this starry-eyed girl, in the freshness of her youth, it seemed possible to escape the inheritance of his dark environment. There was something in life deeper than hate and selfishness and revenge if he could only find it.

Down the wind came drumming the sound of hoofs. The two listened in silence. In the land of far spaces the ear becomes finely attuned to distinctions. Each of those sitting poised and alert on their mounts knew that several horses with riders were moving rapidly toward them. The fact had its significance in a country where one might travel a day without meeting a human being. Voices became clear, a snatch of laughter, an oath. Silhouetted against the skyline, three cowponies moved along the ridge across the arroyo.

Julia gave a little cry of greeting, lost in the clip-clop of the hoofs and the chuffing of the saddle leather. She turned to her companion, to suggest that they canter down and intersect the riders. But the words died on her lips.

The man beside her was watching the riders as they descended from the ridge and disappeared. He sat crouched, eyes narrowed to hard shining slits of light, teeth clamped like a vise. The change in him shocked her. Like the wildcat they had seen, he had become a machine designed to stalk and kill, a desert animal, savage and ferocious, the deadlier for the stillness of his emotion.

"Did you—know who they were?" she asked.

The eyes that looked at her were chill. He nodded, without speech.

"I reckon dad sent them to bring me home."

She knew he would not accept that explanation since she could not believe it herself. They had come through Tincup Pass

and were headed south. Moreover, they carried rifles. Why? What did they want with them?

"Does it need three men to bring you home—two Texas hired killers like Stone an' Gitner, as well as yore brother?"

"Killers! Who says my father's men are killers?" she flamed. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"Wils McCann," he flung back at her.

He could see her recoil and stiffen. "I might have known it. You liar!" She threw the epithet like a missile in his face.

Chapter VI

WILS McCANN LIGHTS OUT

STORMY-EYED, she strove to beat down his hard, level gaze by sheer dominance of will.

He laughed, shortly, without mirth. "That all yore schoolin' did for you? I've heard you rip loose a heap more efficient than that. Language used to come outa you like hot shot off'n a shovel."

Helplessly she glared at him. "If I were a man——"

"You've got an able bodied brother," he suggested ironically. "Maybe you could

get him to take a crack at me from the mesquite. He might have better luck next time."

"What do you mean—next time?" she demanded.

"Some other day."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said scornfully.

"Ask him when you see him again. He wouldn't lie, Jasper wouldn't. He's a Stark, you know."

She swung her horse and gave it a touch of the spur. Before it had gone twenty steps the man was riding beside her again.

"Hit the trail!" she ordered hotly. "I don't need your help to get home."

"I reckon not," he drawled. "But I promised Doc, so I'll mosey along."

She pulled up, a diamond-hard glitter in her eyes. "I'm going to my brother. I'd advise you to light out."

"After I know you're safe." His voice was cool and dry, his gaze level and unwavering.

"If I tell Dave Stone and that Gitner what you called them—killers——"

"Why then they'll prove it to you right there," he cut in with a jeering laugh. "Seeing is believing. They claim we owe 'em one for Tom McArdle, an' they'll collect now."

A tempest of impotent anger surged in her. His words bore the mark of hardy insolence. They were meant to affront and challenge her. Not since she had been in her early teens had she felt so uncontrollable an impulse to break out in crackling speech that pelted like hail. What was there in this hateful man that stirred so deeply the wild and lawless elements of her being, so long dormant?

Turning swiftly, she galloped down into the draw through the rabbit-brush. She did not look round, but she could hear McCann's horse close behind. It followed into the greasewood and palo verde that grew on the hill slope up which her pony clambered. Before she reached the top her escort was again knee to knee with her.

Julia's glance swept the landscape. The last of the three riders was disappearing into an arroyo. Obligingly McCann pointed him out. In a weak voice she called to her brother.

Her companion's smile was mocking. "Lemme get him for you." Before she could stop him there came from his throat the far-carrying yell of the cowpuncher, "Yi yi yippy yi!"

She had a shaken sense of stilled pulses, the premonition of impending disaster. But it was too late to ride away now. Already the three riders were showing darkly in silhouette against the skyline.

One of them called, and McCann answered promptly. She waited with dread beside this enemy of her family while the men rode toward them.

"Who is it?" Jasper Stark demanded.

Julia called her name to him. She heard him say to his companions, "Jule an' Doc Sanders." He was riding in the lead and it was not till he had pulled up his horse that his startled oath announced recognition of McCann.

Stone and Gitner ranged themselves beside him. Their eyes fastened to McCann, but neither of them spoke.

Hurriedly Julia explained. "Doctor Sanders had to stay all night with Jim Yerby. He asked Mr. McCann to see me home."

"Since when has Wils McCann been yore friend, Jule?" her brother demanded harshly.

"He's no friend of mine. I didn't know who he was till he told me just now."

"The Starks know me well enough to shoot at me, but not well enough to pass the time of day," McCann added tauntingly. "An' that's about as well as I want to know most of them."

His gaze moved to the Texans. Gitner was a big rangy fellow with the appearance and manner of a bully. He looked dangerous, but not so much so as the man on his right. There was a deadly quality about the stillness of Stone. He sat as though carved out of marble. Only the chill light blue eyes were quick with life. McCann knew his reputation, and one long steady exchange of looks told him this small brown Texan would live up to it. On the draw he would be chain lightning, and he would fling bullets with machine-like accuracy. But there was one advantage in dealing with such a man as Stone. He would not get nervous and fire because of jumpy nerves.

"You didn't shoot at him from the mesquite, Jas, did you?" his sister asked.

"Been runnin' to you about it, has he?" snarled Stark. "Well, there's nothin' to it. I shot to warn him back, an' he's been belly-achin' ever since. He's got no kick comin'."

"I knew it was something like that," the girl replied quickly.

McCann laughed, softly and derisively.

"Something amusin' you?" Gitner wanted to know, heavy lower jaw thrust forward aggressively.

The Arizonan met him eye to eye. "Any law against laughing, Mr. Gitner?"

"Depends how you laugh an' where."

"If I could get Mr. Gitner to show me how an' where——"

Stone interrupted, quietly, each drawling word spaced evenly. "If my name was Wils McCann I'd light out now *muy pronto.*" His eyes were slits of shining menace.

Julia, alarmed, moved her horse a step or two so that she was between the Flying V Y rider and his foes. "Yes," she said, and her voice was not quite steady, "I'd go now, Mr. McCann—please."

"Tha's good advice, I reckon," he agreed. "Or I might not go at all. Yore friends seem anxious."

He lifted his sombrero in a sweeping bow, swung Jim-Dandy, and moved away at a road gait. The thing was done flippantly, with obvious intent to irritate.

Julia was relieved when the darkness swallowed him and his horse. "We'd better go home now," she said to her brother.

Jasper was annoyed and showed it. He looked at his companions, doubtful what to do.

With a dry, ironic smile, Stone settled the matter. They could not go about their errand now, since the information that they were night riding had become public property.

"Why, yes, Jas. Might as well go home, I reckon, like Miss Julie tells us," the little Texan said with gentle sarcasm. "We taken all the ride tonight we need for our health."

Chapter VII

The Giffords

ON HIS way back to the Yerby place from the Flying V Y next morning, Wilson McCann passed again the sheep ranch on the mesa. A young woman was in the yard giving directions to a Mexican herder, a wrinkled, smiling old fellow who shambled off as the rider pulled up his horse for a word of greeting.

The place belonged to the three Gifford sisters. They had inherited a few years before from a stiff-necked uncle who had brought in sheep regardless of opposition from the cattle interests. It had been an ill-starred venture, followed by quarrels, warnings, raids, and bloodshed. Old Andy Gifford died while the trouble was at its height, and the hostility had been passed on to his nieces. But it took the form of sullen aloofness rather than active warfare. The neighborhood did not like sheep, was disturbed at the presence of these "hoofed locusts" eating up the range, yet could not bring itself to the point of driving out three defenseless women.

When their uncle died, Ann Gifford had been twenty-two, Nora past nineteen, and Ethel sixteen. Far from friends, on the edge of the desert, the lives of the girls was a lonely one. The ranchmen of the district looked upon them with ill-concealed resentment. Their wives and daughters paid no friendly visits. An invisible fence separated them from the world around.

But in a man's country these three attractive girls were a magnet not to be resisted. A few cowpunchers met them, and broke down the barrier. Their ponies had been seen in the corral at the sheep ranch. Rumors began to fly, as they must when presentable young women are visited only by men. At last the wagging tongue of gossip found something tangible to whisper. Ann and Nora Gifford had taken the train for Los Angeles, while the youngest of the three was attending school at Tucson. Some months later the older sister returned alone, hard-eyed, close-mouthed, with the look of tragedy written in her face. No letters from Nora ever came to the ranch, it was observed at the post office. Where was she? What had become of her?

During Ann's absence a band of sheep had been harried and driven over a cliff by night riders. Ann's lips shut tighter, the lines about them grew harder. Since her return the ponies of no cowpunchers had been seen in the corral. She and Ethel lived alone. They saw nobody except their herder, save on the rare occasions when they went to Mesa.

McCann lifted his hat. "Howdy, Miss Gifford. What's the good word?" he asked.

Ann Gifford was thin, brown, dry as a chip. Her eyes blazed a burning bitterness. Resentment at life's injustice marred her dark good looks.

"What can I do for you?" she said bluntly.

"For me? Nothing, ma'am," he replied

disconcerted. "I reckoned there might be somethin' I could do for you."

"Well, you reckoned wrong."

"When there's no men folks on a place a husky, willing lad comes in handy sometimes. If you need me——"

"We don't."

"Now or any time, why——"

"Not now or any time," she snapped.

McCann was embarrassed but persistent. He had met the Gifford girls only two or three times, and then casually. But he had thought a good deal about the hard lines into which their lives had fallen.

"I'd be pleased to help any way I could. A man——"

"That's what Tony's for."

"Sure, but onct in a while maybe a white man——"

"We'll not trouble you, thanks." Her refusal of his offer had the crack of a whiplash.

This was definite enough. McCann searched for some meaningless phrase to soften what she had said. This done, he would ride away promptly enough.

"Well, it's an open offer, ma'am. I'll be movin' on now. Jim Yerby's done broke his leg, an' I'm kinda lookin' after him."

His glance picked up the figure of a young girl in the doorway, a soft, round little person with dimpled cheeks in and out of which the pink could pour at the least excuse. The mouth was childishly sweet, the hair abundant and fluffy. Men instinctively grew tender and protective when they looked at shy-eyed Ethel Gifford.

Again McCann bowed, this time to the girl in the doorway. He had a strong sense of frustrated good will. If they would only let him help, he could be of use to these young women who were isolated as effectually as though under a quarantine.

Ann faced him, inflexibly hostile. She did not speak.

"Well, so long."

Jim-Dandy felt the rein on his neck and turned toward the trail. From the ridge above McCann looked down on the low buildings of the sheep ranch. Ethel was still standing where he had last seen her. She seemed to him a lonely and pathetic figure robbed of the joys of youth.

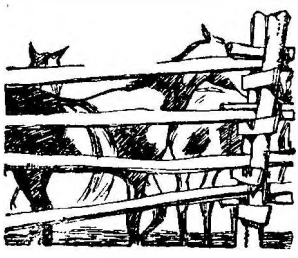
Yerby was inclined to be querulous this morning. His sleep had been broken, and he had suffered more or less pain.

"Doc's been worryin' for fear you wouldn't come, boy. Seems he's got another patient—mebbe two or three. What's been keepin' you?"

"Had to fix a fence. Pedro bring my roll an' some grub last night?"

"Sure did. Well, son, now you're here make yorese'f to home."

Wilson hung his saddle by one stirrup to a peg in the outside wall and turned Jim-Dandy into the corral. He saddled Doctor Sanders's horse and brought it to the door.



Yerby, as usual, was reminiscing. "—I done so, then druv to Tascosa hittin' the high spots. It was a sure hell-poppin' team of colts, an' when they got too frisky I sawed 'em off into the polecat brush an' the smartweeds. Them was the days, Doc, when the Panhandle was a he-country in pants. I was with a buffalo huntin' outfit, an' we ce'tainly taken the hides off'n 'em. One hammered-down li'l runt I knew skinned 'most a thousand that summer."

"Yore hoss is served, Doc," McCann called in. "Course I don't aim to drag you away from any hammered-down li'l runt you may have for a patient. Take yore time. He can't any more'n talk an arm off you."

The old-timer snorted. "Ever see the beat of them kids, Doc? They don't know sic' 'em, an' they don't want to learn from them that does know. They're like that peg pony of mine when I go for to saddle him—plumb full of wind."

Doctor Sanders laughed. He knew Yerby enjoyed rough repartee. That was why McCann "rode him," to use the phrase of the country. "You act like a pair of kids, if you ask me. Don't forget to give Jim one of these powders every four hours, Wils." He added his, "So long," and bustled out to the horse.

Before he left McCann offered a suggestion. He did not quite know the spring of the impulse that impelled it. "Wisht you wouldn't say anything about that gunplay at Tincup Pass, Doc. No use startin' trouble before it has to come."

Sanders assented.

McCann's eyes followed him as he dipped into the arroyo that would bring him to the mesa upon which was the sheep ranch. The young man smiled ruefully. He was thinking about the Gifford sisters.

It seemed to him that their lives were in-

volved in tragedy. The desert had taken toll of their happiness. Why should they be pariahs, outcasts from the society of those living near? What had they done to deserve it? That they ran sheep was an unfortunate incident and had nothing to do with what they were. Young McCann, with the hot temper of his age, rebelled at such injustice. No wonder Ann had become embittered at the destiny that pressed upon them. Nora had vanished, the bloom brushed from her life, if the dark rumors he heard were true. But his thoughts dwelt on Ethel, so unfit to cope with the harshness of this dry and cruel land. The soft warmth and shy charm, the whole unarmored tenderness of her youth, were heavy handicaps for one within reach of the Jornada de la Muerte. It would inexorably wither the joy and gaiety of her girlhood.

CHAPTER VIII

PETER MCCANN TACKS UP A NOTICE

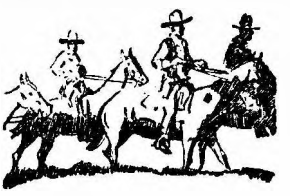
ON THE porch in front of Basford's Emporium, which was also the post office, Mesa and the adjoining country met to discuss the news and to formulate views. It was the official clubhouse of the frontier town, as Martin's Gilt Edge Saloon and The Legal Tender were the informal ones.

Today conversation was engrossing, but guarded. For the feud between the Starks and the McCanns had broken out again. During the night a cabin far from the main ranch-house of the Flying V Y, one used by line-riders in the foothills of the Sierra Mal Pais, had been raided and burned by armed horsemen. Two punchers had been sleeping there, and in trying to escape through the window, one had been wounded. He had slipped away into the chaparral and hidden. After daybreak his companion had brought help from the Flying V Y and carried him to the ranch.

Mesa buzzed with excitement. Peter McCann, two of his sons, and his foreman, Wes Tapscott, were in town. They had come in force, so the story ran, to find out what the sheriff intended to do about it.

Curt Quinn, to two safe friends, confidentially summed up public opinion. "Old man McCann ain't expectin' Hank to do anything. I don't reckon Hank got elected sheriff to pick a row with the Starks. No, sir. Hank will go out an' look the ground over an' scratch his haid. He won't look oncet at the Circle Cross ranch, an' I don't know's I blame him. Nor old Pete won't blame him either. He come to the law to make the proper bluff, but he'd be plumb disappointed if it interfered in his own little private feud. The McCanns will play out the hand their own selves."

The town looked with respect and awe upon the four lean, brown men who dismounted at the sheriff's office. All of them carried rifles as well as side arms. It was known they would use these if they held it to be expedient. Peter himself was of strong build and slightly bow-legged. Hard-eyed and imperious, a fighter from his youth, he asked no odds of any man. If he was a leader it was not by chance, but by reason of the dominant force in him. Hawk-nosed and shaggy-browed, the chief of the McCanns bore in his face the look of heady and ungovernable temper. One glance at the three was enough to show from whom his lithe and keen-eyed sons had inherited.



"Chips of the old block, Wils an' Lyn are—about as tough propositions to bump into as a fellow's liable to meet," Simp Shell commented as he watched the four riders leave the sheriff's office. Tilted back against the wall of the store, in the spot which would be reached last by the sun, Simp was lazily rolling himself a cigarette. He was a middle-aged man with no business except everybody's business. Of late years, from sheer indolence, he was running to an overflow of flesh. He bulged prodigiously. "Except the old man. He's got a leetle the edge of the boys yet. When he gets on the hook I ce'tainly want to be lookin' for a tree to climb."

"How about exceptin' Matt Stark an' them Texans, Stone an' Gitner?" Basford murmured significantly. His gaze, too, was fixed on the horsemen moving toward the post office.

"They're no pilgrims," admitted Simp.

"Well, I don't claim to be no prophet, but someone's going to hell on a shutter one o' these days," spoke up a young man standing in the doorway.

Quinn looked at him quietly, judicially. The last speaker was Basford's clerk. He had come from St. Louis for his health two years before. Already the climate had healed his diseased lung.

"Young fellow me lad, if I was figurin' on stayin' well I'd be kinda careful how I

drapped them dynamite remarks around. They're likely to go off onexpected an' blow someone up. If a guy padlocks his tongue it won't get him into trouble. I knew a man lived to be 'most a hundred onct by travelin' right on his own range an' never crossin' to his neighbor's only when he was lookin' for some of his own dogies."

The clerk looked at the cattleman, flushed, and suddenly remembered business inside the store. He was not used to the ways of the Southwest, and he had more than once talked himself into trouble. In a country where it is an open question whether a newcomer left his former habitat just ahead of a sheriff, curiosity is a dangerous attribute. Men are taken for what they give themselves out to be and no questions are asked. Medford still remembered with acute humiliation an occasion when an innocent "who?" and "where from?" addressed to a hardbitten stranger, had brought him to precipitate grief.

The quartette of riders swung from the saddles and grounded the reins. Peter McCann nodded grimly to those on the porch and walked into the store. Tapscott followed him. The others stayed to exchange a word with Quinn and Shell.

"I seen that top horse of yours with a bunch of my broomtails the other day, Lyn, down on Dry Creek," Quinn told the younger of the brothers.

"That so? If you're roundin' up yore fuzzies wisht you'd run him into the corral for me, Curt."

"Sure will. Anything new?"

He asked his question casually, and just as casually Wilson answered it. "Not a thing, Curt—not up our way."

"Tapscott was tellin' me the other day he figured we'd better start the beef round-up earlier this fall."

"Maybe so. I ain't heard the old man mention his plans."

Lyn sat on his heels and from his hip pocket drew the makings. There was nothing to show he was not at perfect ease with the world—except the long rifle he had just propped against the wall. He was a good looking lad, just turned twenty, slender and graceful as one of Praxiteles's models.

The talk drifted. It touched on the long dry spell and its effect upon grass, on a group of mustangers in the north who were walking down wild horses, on the *chaperejos* of a passing *vaquero*.

From out of the store came Peter McCann with a square of wrapping paper, a hammer, and some tacks. To the wall he nailed the coarse paper. Those on the porch watched him silently and read the notice roughly printed there.

$1000

REWARD

For information identifying all or any of the Night Riders who shot Joe Walters at the Cass cabin will be paid by

Peter McCann

This called for comment. After a long moment of waiting Quinn spoke. "How *is* Joe?"

"He'll make it, Doc says."

"Good. He's one tough customer, Joe is. I kinda figured he'd fool 'em. Nell was allowin' to ride over today an' see if they was anything she could do."

"Not a thing, Curt. But tell her much obliged."

That was all. McCann's spurs jingled down the steps. His sons and his foreman followed. They swung into their saddles and rode away.

"Short an' sudden," commented Simp. "The old man don't orate much, but his actions talk mighty loud. I notice he ain't offerin' no reward for the arrest an' conviction of them night riders. Not none. He aims to do all the arrestin' that's needed an' he don't reckon any convictin' will be required."

Quinn nodded. Simp's remarks had been addressed in a low tone to him. He was of the same opinion. McCann would go his own way, regardless of the law. If anyone protested he could point out how he had first appealed to it for protection. But there would be a grim ironic light in his eye when he mentioned the fact.

CHAPTER IX

WILS MCCANN USES HIS QUIRT

THE McCanns had not been out of Mesa ten minutes when another group of horsemen was seen approaching by the Tincup Pass road in a cloud of dust. They drew up in front of the Gilt Edge saloon and left their mounts at the hitching bar.

Jasper Stark straddled into the gambling house, his brother Phil and Carl Gitner at his heels. Stone stood on the porch and looked round leisurely in his cool measured way before he passed through the door into the Gilt Edge. Killer he might be, but he

was an individual first. He did not follow at any man's beck.

The Stark brothers and Gitner were at the bar celebrating.

"Come an' wash the dust outa yore throat, Dave," invited Jasper in no subdued voice. "It's on me today. Bet yore boots. Come on up, boys. Name yore poison." This last was addressed to the two or three loafers hanging about.

Stone's cold blue eyes looked at Jasper with no warmth in them. As a boy the Texan had ridden with Mosby in his border raids. There were rumors that at one time he had been one of Quantrell's guerillas. The habit of his life was to consort with danger. It seemed to him child's play and worse, an indication of arrant weakness, to wear such a manner of exuberant triumph as Jasper Stark displayed. What had they done but drive two frightened cowpunchers into the chaparral, wound one, and fire an empty cabin? If the faction with which he was allied called this a victory, there would surely be trouble ahead. The McCanns were fighters.

"I wouldn't choose to drink," he said.

"Different here," retorted Jasper. "Set 'em up, Hans. The lid's off today."

The older of the Stark brothers was large and muscular, but he carried himself slouchily. His physical strength was not convincing, because it had back of it no mental or moral force. The younger son was of a different type. Phil was only eighteen, but he had been brought up in the school of the frontier which has no vacations. Already the softness of youth was hardening into manhood. Stone judged that he would go through when the call came.

The Gilt Edge was the usual resort of the Stark faction as The Legal Tender was of the other side. Hans now gave information to Jasper as he set out glasses and bottles.

"The McCanns wass in town today already yet."

Jasper stopped, glass poised. "Here now?" he asked.

"*Nein,* not now."

"How many of 'em?"

"Four. Old Peter, Tapscott, and two of the boys."

"Hmp! What they doin' here?"

Hans shrugged his shoulders and lifted the palm of his hands. He had told all he knew.

"Got out, eh? Musta known we were headin' this way," Jasper boasted.

Stone laughed, softly, ironically. "Where do you get that line of talk, Jas? Are you foolin' yoreself, too, or jus' trying to fool us?"

"What's eatin' you, Dave?"

"Ever hear of old Pete McCann givin' the middle of the road to anybody? He's there both ways from the ace, if you ask me."

"We'll show him how much he's there before we're through."

"Yes?" drawled the Texan, lazily and insolently.

"I'll tell him so, right off the reel, him or any of his outfit soon as I meet up with 'em," the young man bragged.

He was irritated at Stone. Was the gunman on the Stark side of the feud? He was taking old Matt's money. Well, then, why did he talk like that?

"Better tell 'em kinda low, so's they don't hear, Jas. A few of 'em are curly wolves. Leastways they've got that rep."

"You scared of 'em, Dave?"

Jasper was alarmed at his own question. His eyes fell before the chill, steady regard of the little man. It was not safe to resent outwardly Dave Stone's scorn.

After a moment the Texan spoke. His words lessened the tension. "I reckon my six-gun will have to talk for me when the time comes, Jas. Only fool kids get all het up with talk so's they have to steam off," he drawled.

After some time of rapid refreshment at the bar, the Circle Cross riders moved out again to the main street of the little town. Stone had already departed temporarily to buy a shirt. Gitner and Phil Stark had business at the blacksmith shop. Jasper strolled across to Basford's for the mail. Inside, he caught a glimpse of the little Texan at the dry goods counter.

Public opinion, represented by Quinn, Shell, and others, still sat on the porch and awaited developments. It watched Jasper Stark now to see what he would do about the placard on the wall. It had watched Stone, too. The Texan had read it with an expressionless face and offered no comment. Nobody could have told from his manner that it held any interest for him.

Jasper swelled, evidently steaming up to blow off. He could not resist taking the center of the stage, but unfortunately for

him, leadership in the Southwest demanded first of all gameness. He was always trying to fill a place he had not the stark courage to hold.

"Hmp! Wants information, does he? An' he'll pay a thousand dollars. What's he aim to do with this information when he gets it?"

Jasper's voice was heavy, his manner abusive as he turned to Quinn. The cattleman did not look at him. His expressionless eyes were on a cloud of dust far down the road ribbon. A rider was cantering toward Mesa.

"Why, he didn't tell me, Jas. Yore guess is as good as mine," Quinn answered evenly.

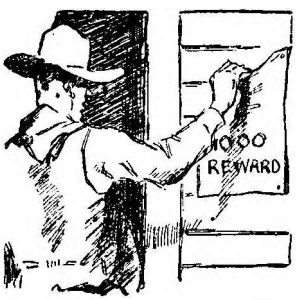
"Thinks he'll run on us maybe. Figures he'll cook up a lot of lies an' then do us some meanness whilst we're not lookin'. I'll tell him not to fool with us any more'n he would with the business end of a diamond back. We'll burn powder quick."

Jasper was "wilding up," as Simp Shell expressed it later. He was full of bad whisky and a sense of his own importance. He strutted, moving up and down the porch as he boasted. The silence of the listening men exasperated him. He wanted applause.

"Don't amount to a hill of beans, this don't." The drink-excited man snapped his fingers contemptuously at the poster. "Say he knew. What then? What then?"

His back was toward the man coming down the road. If he had been observant he might have seen an odd change in the gray eyes of Quinn, a flicker of subdued and wary excitement.

"I'll show Pete McCann where he gets off," Stark went on, vanity overriding caution. "I'll sure learn that hombre not to run on the rope." He took two swift strides forward and with one sweeping gesture ripped the reward placard from the wall. Tearing the paper into fragments, he flung them down and ground them under his heel.



At the same instant a rider pulled up in front of the store and swung from the saddle. Stark turned, the anger he had worked up burning in him.

On the lower step a man was standing, his quirt dangling by the loop from his wrist. He was watching very quietly and steadily the impotent fury of the stamping rowdy.

Under his ribs the heart of Jasper Stark died within him. For the man looking at him was Wilson McCann. He had a sense as though the ground were falling from his feet, a shocked certainty that he had been delivered into the hands of his enemy. His arm made a motion toward the revolver at his side, a hesitant and indefinite gesture.

"Don't you!" warned McCann, and his steely eyes did not for the thousandth fraction of a second release the other.

Stark dropped his hand. In his eyes was the look of the trapped rat. Actively his brain was searching for a way out. His brother and Gitner were nearly half a mile away, but Stone was here, not twenty yards from him. The Texan would pump lead into McCann if he got gay. With the thought came a resurgence of courage. He had nothing to fear.

His voice was loud, to attract the attention of his companion. "You pull yore freight, Wils McCann, if you know what's good for you. Get me. *Poco tiempo.*"

McCann came up the steps toward him, evenly and without haste. There was that in his face at which Jasper took alarm.

"Keep back. Hear me? Keep back, or I'll—" Jasper retreated to the door, his voice rising to a shriek. "Don't you dass lay a hand on me."

His enemy plucked him from the shelter of the store as though he had been a child. The quirt in the hand of McCann rose and fell, rose and fell again. Jasper cursed, threatened, wept. He called to Stone for help, tried to break away from that iron grip and escape, did all he could to save himself except stand up and fight. The swinging lash burned like a rope of fire. The tortured man howled in agony and begged shamelessly for mercy. Into his flesh the rawhide cut with inexorable cruelty.

He flung himself to the floor and McCann released him. The man with the quirt was panting from his exertions. He looked down scornfully at the quivering mass of wheals at his feet.

"You'll learn to let my father's placards alone. Understand? An' not to shoot at me from the brush, you damned jayhawker."

McCann looked up. From the windows, from the door, from both sides of

him the eyes of silent men were focused upon him and Stark. Against the jamb of the door Stone was leaning, muscles at indolent ease, only his cold eyes warily intent. At the first glance McCann knew that the Texan had elected not to take up Jasper's quarrel. The thumb of his right hand hitched in the sagging belt was close to the handle of the revolver only for protection in case battle should be thrust upon him.

To Medford, the store clerk, Wilson spoke. "Father forgot the mail. Left it in the store. Get it for me."

Medford's excited eyes were withdrawn from the window. Presently the clerk appeared with a package of letters and newspapers.

"Much obliged."

The Flying V Y man turned. Jim-Dandy was standing near the porch, parallel to it. With one quick leap, McCann was in the saddle. His feet found the stirrups and the pony went pounding down the road at a gallop.

Presently Simp eased himself out of his chair and waddled across to the braggart huddled on the floor.

"Better get up, Jas. He's gone," Simp said.

He lent a hand to get the other to his feet. Jasper looked round, furtive-eyed, and knew he had been weighed and found wanting.

"If I hadn't slipped—" he began, and stopped. His breath was still ragged with dry sobs. "He took advantage—with his quirt."

"Yes. You only had a gun," Stone answered contemptuously. "A gun an' yore fists."

The beaten man, trying to save his face, flared to weak and passionate resentment. "You stood there an' let him beat me up—after I fell," he accused.

The Texan looked at him stonily. "I was hearin' how quick you burnt powder an' how you was allowin' to learn the McCanns not to run on the rope. From yore say-so I figured you'd make this Wils look like a plugged quarter. Anyhow, where I come from, a grown man plays a lone hand when it's one to one."

"Tell you he took advantage. I slipped," whined Jasper.

"You sure done so when you picked on this Wils McCann to raise a rookus with," Stone agreed.

Jasper limped painfully into the store and sank down into a chair. "I'm sick," he whimpered.

Medford brought him water. After a time he was helped to the hotel. He was not able to ride home and in any event he had not the nerve to face Matt Stark with even a doctored story of his humiliation.

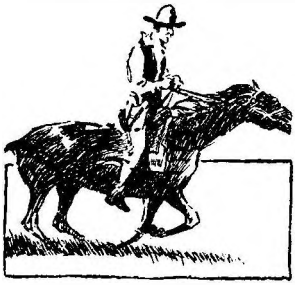
The old man would be in a blaze of fury at him.

CHAPTER X

MATTHEW STARK SERVES NOTICE

JASPER had not in his mind overstressed the effect upon his father of the public disgrace his conduct had brought upon the family. Matthew Stark was game to the marrow and inordinately proud. That a Stark should show the white feather to a McCann, that he should be whipped like peon without offering fight, filled him with a bitter despair he could not endure. If Jasper had gone to his death with guns blazing he would have sorrowed for him and been proud of him. But this degradation was unspeakably horrible to him. It was gall and wormwood in his mouth.

He ordered Phil to saddle his horse and rode to town alone. Fast though he traveled, the dusty road seemed interminably long. He craved action drastic and swift. First, a settlement with the weakling who had dishonored him, then battle with his enemies to revenge himself upon them. He would have Wilson McCann's blood. Nothing less would satisfy him.



The old man strode through the hall of the Mesa House and into the room that served as an office.

"What room is Jas in?" he demanded of the proprietor.

"Why, he's in the front room upstairs, Mr. Stark. I give him the best room I had. Doc Sanders has been lookin' after him."

Stark was already taking the stairs. Collateral information did not interest him. He always had been a man of one idea and had gone straight to the thing he wanted.

The man lying on the bed heard a heavy tread. The door burst open and his father stood before him, the fires of eruptive wrath blazing in his eyes. Jasper knew his day of judgment had come.

Matt Stark stood, feet well apart, leathery jaw clamped tight, and looked at his unworthy son. "Well?" he asked harshly at last.

"I slipped. He got me down," Jasper whined.

"Don't lie to me. I've seen Stone."

He had, and from the disgusted Texan had heard the plain, undiluted truth.

"I was kinda dazed. He hit me first off with the loaded end of his quirt an' I didn't know what I was doing. He 'most killed me."

"I wish he had," the father retorted bitterly. "If anyone had told me I'd raise a coward for a son—" He broke off, to deny his own claim. "But I knew it. I've known it for years, only I wouldn't let myself believe it. You were always a puling quitter. No sand in yore craw. Never was. The first Stark I ever knew without guts. I'd rather you'd died—a hundred times rather. But I'm through with you. No son of mine can stand up an' take a thrashin' without fightin' like a wildcat."

"I was sick anyhow, an' I wasn't noticin' when he knocked me kinda senseless," Jasper whimpered.

"You're lying. An' what if he did? Pack a gun, don't you? After he'd taken the hide off you still had yore forty-five, didn't you? Think Phil would have let him get away with it an' not pumped lead? Not for a minute. But you—you're gunshy. All you can do is drink an' brag. Why, you flabby weakling, they'll laugh at me all over the county. The McCanns'll never quit grinnin' about it. By God, I couldn't a-believed it—even about you."

It seemed to the writhing man on the bed that his father's eyes smoked, they were so full of burning fires of fury. He knew his protests were useless, that nothing he could say would blot out the unchangeable facts. But he continued to plead his excuses, because there was nothing else to do.

The old man cut him short. "I'm through with you—absolutely. Right now I'm going over to Fletcher's office to change my will. You don't get a cent—not a red cent. An' you get out of Arizona. I'll give you a week to settle yore affairs. You'll pull yore freight an' change yore name. From now on you're no Stark. Understand?"

"I've got to sell my stock," Jasper said sulkily. Already he was sketching a campaign to mitigate the old man's wrath. Julia was his favorite. She could do anything with him. He would have her talk to her father and get him to be reasonable.

"I'll buy it. Name yore price. See Fletcher about it. I don't want any dealings with you myself. Don't you ever cross my track or I'll make you think this Wils McCann was only playin' at quirting you."

Matthew Stark left the room and the hotel. He walked down the street to Fletcher's office, and found the lawyer was at Phoenix and would not be back for several days. The owner of the Circle Cross hesitated. He was half of a mind to go to Tucson and have a new will made at once. Any kind of delay annoyed him. But he had reasons for not wanting to leave the valley just now. The new will would have to wait till Fletcher returned.

Across the street he could see the editor of the Mesa Round Up sitting at his desk. Jackman was editor, newsgatherer, compositor, pressman and office boy of the weekly sheet. The chains of his spurs jingling, Stark strode across through the dust and entered the little frame building. He brushed aside the greetings of the newspaper man and ordered brusquely what he wanted.

Within the hour printed posters had been tacked up in each of the saloons, on the wall of the post office inside and out, on the door of the false-front town hall and at a dozen other conspicuous places. They bore this simple legend in blackface type:

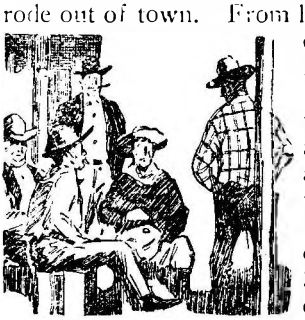
This Is To Serve

NOTICE

That I will kill Wilson McCann on sight.

Matthew Stark.

This attended to, Stark mounted and rode out of town. From his favorite chair



on the porch of Basford's store, Simp Shell watched him go, a grim and menacing figure of wrath. To Basford and another crony, Simp offered the opinion that hell was liable to pop mighty soon.

"The old man's called for a showdown. It's up to Wils now," he concluded.

"To Wils an' old Pete. Don't forget him. He's likely to sit in an' take a hand, the old man is." This from Basford.

"Sure is," the third man corroborated.

"Matt's crazy mad because Jas showed a yellow streak. He'll not rest content till guns get to fogging," the fat man added.

"Funny about Jas," Basford mused aloud. "Reckon he weighs twenty pounds more than Wils. Husky, too. Big an' rawboned. Comes of good game fighting stock. He's been fed on raw meat, too, as you might say. What ails him?"

"He ain't worth a continental ding an' never will be. You can't make a silk purse outa a hog's ear any more'n you can train a coyote to be a wolf even if it is of the same family. No, sir. No can do. That fellow Jas has had all kinds of chances, but he's what he is. I've always kinda suspicioned he wasn't nothing but cock-a-doodle-do."

There was no dissent from Simp's verdict any more than there was from another opinion he voiced, that his father had kicked him out and taken upon himself the care of what he considered the family honor. It was agreed that Matthew Stark and either Wilson or Peter McCann would clash at their first meeting, and that from it one or both would be carried away dead or mortally wounded.

CHAPTER XI

YERBY OFFERS LITERARY CRITICISM

WILSON drew up among the scrub pines on the side of the hogback across from Yerby's cabin. These days he followed roundabout trails and moved with extreme caution. For his life had been posted by a man who never made vain threats. It was the sight of a whitefaced bay standing in front of the house that brought him up short now.

With the trained eye of a cowpuncher he recognized the horse instantly. He had last seen it on a certain moonlit night and Julia Stark had been in the saddle. But he had no certainty that she was using it today. Someone else might be waiting for him in Jim's cabin—say Jasper Stark or his father or that Texas killer, Gitner. He decided to play safe.

From its place beside the saddle he drew a rifle and tested its mechanism. This done, he crept on all fours through the greasewood and the yucca till he had put a long hundred yards between him and Jim-Dandy. Behind a clump of cholla he squatted and watched the house patiently. For nearly half an hour he did not stir. Except his eyes, he was motionless as a statue.

A girl came out of the shack and hung a few pieces of washing on the limb of a live oak. Wilson would have known the trim, straight figure among a thousand.

He did not intend to take chances. Julia Stark might not be alone with Yerby, though the fact that he could see only one saddled horse pointed to that conclusion. With the greatest care, availing himself of every shrub that offered cover, he worked toward the house from the rear. Voices drifted to him, those of the old settler and Julia. Apparently nobody else was there.

When at last he reached the window Wilson raised his head slowly and looked inside. Julia had seated herself and was evidently just about to read aloud from a book. Jim was sitting in a chair with his leg propped up in another chair in front of him. The old-timer was getting in a few words while there was still time. The theme of his talk was the book in the girl's hand, which was "David Copperfield," brought by McCann according to the doctor's orders from his own small private collection. As a literary critic, the old nester was original in expression if not in thought.

"This Steerforth guy, ma'am, he's sure enough one bad actor—about the worst I ever did see. I don't reckon he could a-got away with it in this country. I'd think some of the friends of this li'l girl would oil their six-shooters an' go gunnin'. Yes, ma'am, they'd ought to a-fixed it so's he went to sleep in smoke *muy pronto*. I recolleck oncet when we drove a beef herd up the trail from Clarendon we jumped up three campers one night. They was headin' for the Cherokee Strip, an' I kinda got a notion one of 'em, a smooth, black-eyed fellow, was in quite some hurry. He looked plumb worried when I give 'em 'Hello the camp!' till he seen I was a stranger. Along about three A. M. in the mawnin' whilst I was night herdin' I heard guns poppin'. This girl's brother had arriv onexpected an' let daylight through the black-eyed guy."

Julia did not ask what girl. Yerby's stories were likely to leave something to the imagination and in this case details were unnecessary. She settled herself to read.

Wilson went back to his horse, rode across the arroyo, and shouted, "Hello the house!"

Miss Stark came to the door. She stood, erect and uncompromisingly hostile, watching him as he dismounted. Her dark look was like a flashing sword.

He nodded good morning without response.

"How's Jim?" he asked.

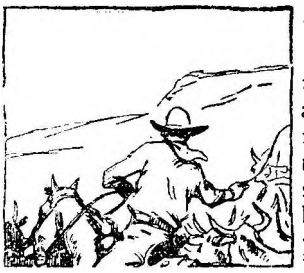
She stood aside to let him pass into the house, gathering her skirts close so that he would not brush against her as he went by. Nothing could have expressed more positively her detestation of him than that disdainful gesture.

No discomposure showed on his aquiline face. Seamed and darkened by wind and sun, it had the immobility of the stark sierras.

With jingling spur he moved across the room. "How are you, dad?"

"Fat like a match. Whad you know that's new?"

"Not much. Gather of beeves on Poison Creek next month. Some more rustling up in the hills, they say."



McCann chatted easily, casually, with the nester, ignoring the burning resentment that held the girl passionately silent. His manner was coolly indifferent, but not for a moment was he off guard. He sat astride a chair, back to the wall, so that his eyes could command both window and door.

Watching him covertly, Julia saw a sudden change in the lounging figure. The back straightened and the muscles grew taut. Every sense had quickened to life. For someone was coming up the path toward the house.

Julia moved quickly to the door, then drew a breath of relief. She had dreaded and half-expected to see her father. But the approaching figure was that of a young woman.

The new arrival was Ann Gifford. She had brought with her a cake. Since Yerby's accident she had been in the habit of coming every day to supply his simple needs. Even her fierce aloofness had not been proof against the little man's good will. Nobody who knew him could continue to dislike Jim Yerby. She had capitulated, reluctantly and stiffly, on the tacit understanding that it was only while he was bedfast. She would give kindness if she must, but she would not accept any.

"Meet Miss Julia Stark, Miss Gifford," their host said, and after pronouncing the formula added, "Miss Julia she's jest back from Los Angeles, where she's learned 'most everything they is to know outa them schoolbooks, I reckon."

Julia laughed at this testimonial as she stepped forward to shake hands. She had wanted to meet the Gifford girls ever since her return. Ann was still holding the cake and she did not put it down. Coldly she bowed.

"I called the other day, Miss Gifford, but you weren't at home," Julia said. "May I come again—some day soon?"

"We're often out with the sheep," Ann replied.

It was a rebuff, but Julia refused to accept it. "You can't be out all the time. I'll try my luck again," she said.

Yerby tried to cover Ann's discourtesy by a flux of words. "Miss Julia she was jest startin' to read to me from this here David Dickens book."

"David Copperfield," Julia corrected.

"Sure enough. Dickens, he's the fellow that owns the brand. Well, I was sayin' that this Steerforth duck, the one that done li'l Emily dirt, why someone had orta hung his hide out to dry, seems like. If them fellows had been he-men some of them would have fixed him good an' ready for a funeral. I don't hold with dry-gulching, you understand, but there's times——"

The nester stopped abruptly, the springs of his garrulity dried up. A glance at Ann Gifford's frozen face had done it. He recalled the rumors that had come to him as to the reason why Nora had gone to Los Angeles and embarrassment flamed in his countenance. He felt as though conversationally he had stepped off a precipice and was sinking in a gulf of space.

McCann rescued him by commenting on the number of characters in the book. "I never did see so many footloose folks trail-in' around. There's David an' Peggotty an' Miss Betsey an' the Murdstones an' Barkis——"

Yerby jumped at this diversion as a terrier does at a rat. "You're whistlin', boy. There's li'l Emily, too, an' that Steerforth an' Mrs. Gummidge——"

"And Micawber and Mr. Dick and Uriah Heep and Ham and Traddles," Julia contributed, speaking to the man on the bed and not to his friend. "Then there's Agnes and Dora, of course, and Rosa Dartle."

"Looks like he'd have trouble with all them folk millin' around in his haid whilst he was writin'," the old-timer mused aloud. "But this Dickens guy sure knows how to throw a rope so as to cut out any of 'em from the herd when he's good an' ready."

Ann Gifford did not stay. Her manner implied that she wanted to have nothing to do with any of them except Yerby.

The nester spoke first. "I'd like right well to do something for her an' her li'l sister if I knew what," he said, wrinkling his forehead in thought. "O' course, sheep are pests. I ain't denyin' that none. But seems like these girls ain't hardly to blame because old Andy Gifford was so mean and obstinate he plumb wasn't contented till he'd started trouble."

"Exactly how I feel," McCann agreed.

Julia had opened her lips to say substantially the same thing, but she closed them again without speaking. She did not intend to be of the same opinion as Wilson McCann on any subject.

Nevertheless she had a word to say to him, and before she left she said it. He had stepped out to bring a bucket of water from the spring. She met him under a live oak a few yards from the house.

"You know my father is looking for you?" she said abruptly.

He put down the bucket, an ironic smile on his face. "Someone did mention that to me," he said.

"Why don't you go away? Why don't you leave the country?" she demanded.

"Because Matt Stark has served notice on me of his intentions?" he asked grimly. "What kind of a man would I be if I ran away after that?"

"He's an old man—twice your age." Her voice trembled and broke for a moment. "I should think—you'd be ashamed to hurt him."

"Am I the one lookin' for trouble? Did I print bills sayin' I'd kill him on sight?" His face was hard as hammered iron.

"You know why he did that—because you jumped on Jasper when he wasn't looking and beat him when he couldn't defend himself." The flash in her eyes warned him that she was restraining herself with difficulty, that if it had not been for the dread in her heart she would have let herself go in denunciation.

He laughed scornfully. "That's the story he's telling, is it?"

"And now father's crazy mad. If you don't go away——"

"I'm not going," he cut in harshly.

"Then someone will be killed," she cried despairingly.

"Yes."

His brown, competent fingers were on the barrel of the rifle he had been carrying in one hand. Again, as once before, there flowed through her a sense of his virile power. This man was dangerous. His force expressed itself in the cool, quiet eyes, in the clean lines of the face and figure, in a certain wary stillness that meant reserve strength.

She had a momentary picture of him lying still in the dust, all the vigor and potency of him gone limp and flaccid; and on the heel of it another one, this time of her father, being carried into the ranch-house with his eyes closed forever. Both flashes of imagination were horribly clear to her. She shuddered.

"If you'd only go—while there's still time——"

Her distress touched his not very accessible heart, the more because he knew her capable of fierce and primitive passion. She was far from the clinging vine type. Independence and courage were of the essence of her. But her pride could not stand out against the shadow of tragedy hovering in the background.

"I can't go. What would folks say?"

"Does it matter what they'd say if you were doing right?" she asked eagerly.

"It would matter to me. Besides, I'd not be doing right to go. This is where I live—the only country I know. I can't let anyone run me out. I've got to go through."

"Why have you?" she pleaded. "It's all wrong, this feud. If you'd just go away, for a while, maybe things would quiet down. Then you could come back."

He shook his head. "No. I can't go. I don't want to have any trouble with yore father, but if he's hell bent on it, why it'll have to come."

With a little gesture of hopelessness she gave up. It was of no use. Before making the attempt to move him she had known it would be. For according to the frontier code he was right. None but a weakling would run away after an enemy had served notice that he was looking for him.

As she turned away his voice stopped her.

"I'll promise one thing. It'll be a fair fight far as I'm concerned—no layin' in the bushes an' waitin' for him."

Her dark, troubled eyes rested in his. Their appealing beauty disturbed him. He would have liked to give peace to her worried soul. But he could offer no assurance. When the hour came, if it lay with-

in his power, he must strike her to the heart.

Much stirred, he watched her lissom young body as it moved with light rhythm toward the house. She belonged to the enemy clan, but he could not hold her in cold disapproval. There was something fine and exquisite in her, something radiant and warm. An enemy, yes! But already he knew her a very dear one whose presence filled the secret places of his being.

CHAPTER XII

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

AS JASPER STARK moved about the streets of Mesa with his slouching gait, his eyes furtively questioned public opinion to discover what it thought of him. His manner of braggadocio still sat on him, but it was a hollow mockery. He was full of shame, resentment, and self-pity. Hatred surged in him. It was characteristic of the man that he was ashamed not so much of the weakling's part he had played as of being found out.

He sent for Gitner. That hardy ruffian straddled into an upstairs private room of the Gilt Edge and looked at young Stark with a scarcely veiled sneer. "Want to see me?" he asked.

"Yep. Heard the old man say anything about me, Carl?"

"The old man don't mention yore name. It's understood at the Circle Cross that Matt's through with you. Why?"

"Sit down," Jasper growled, with annoyed impatience. "I wanta talk." He pushed the bottle on the table toward the other man.

Gitner took a chair and a drink. He was willing to listen. Whatever developed would be to his advantage, for he knew he held the whip hand. Stark would have to come to his terms if he wanted anything—and of that the Texan had no doubt whatever. Jasper had not sent for him merely for the pleasure of his company.

The gunman offered no comment. There was a tactical advantage in forcing the other to lead and he availed himself of it.

"Shove that bottle north by west," Stark said surlily, and then poured himself a large drink. He tossed it down at a gulp and almost at once replenished the tumbler. Morosely he eyed the liquor. "The old man been to town this week?"

"No. Last time he was in was the day he read the riot act to you," Gitner grinned maliciously. "But he's had Fletcher out to the ranch an' they spent 'most a whole mornin' together. Miss Julia was with 'em a while, an' she had quite a setto with the old man by what I've heard tell."

"What day was that?"

"Lemme see. That must 'a' been Thursday."

Jasper gloomed at his drink and poured it down his throat without visible pleasure.

"He was making a will, don't you reckon?" he said at last.

"I reckon."

"Question is, has he signed it yet?"

"If you want to know why don't you go ask him?" suggested the Texan with sarcasm.

"I don't need to ask him. He hasn't. Fletcher would draw it up when he come back to town. That would be the way they fixed it. But Fletcher had to leave Thursday night again for Phoenix to argue a case before the Supreme Court. He got back this afternoon, not more'n an hour ago. He'll finish writing up the will tomorrow."

"Looks like," agreed the man from the Lone Star state. "You got it all worked out, Jas. Ought to 'a' been a lawyer."

"An' he'll take it out either in the afternoon or next day."

"Sounds reasonable. Better kiss the ranch good-by, Jas."

Stark moved the bottle toward Gitner, folded his arms, and put his elbows on the table. "Have another, Carl."

The eyes of the two met and held fast. There was something of crouched significance in Jasper's narrowed gaze. It brought the other man to a wary and alert attention. He knew that he was going to find out now why he had been asked to come here.

They talked, in whispers, for an hour, their heads close and the door locked. Not once, though they drank much, did their voices lift. It might have been noticed, if anyone had been observing them, that Gitner left the Gilt Edge half an hour before his companion. Nobody but Hans, the bartender, knew that they had been in the room together.

At the hotel, waiting for him, Jasper found his sister. They walked a little distance down the road to be alone.

"No use, Jas," she told him. "I've fought it out with dad and he won't listen

to a word. You've disgraced the family, he says, and you're no longer a member of it. He's cutting you out of his will."

"That'll suit you an' Phil," he sneered. "What do you care if I do get a rotten deal?"

Her scornful eyes flashed anger at him. "That's a nice thing to say, after I quarrelled with dad about it for you. But you always were a poor loser."

"I haven't lost yet," he snarled. "If you think I'll sit down an' let him cut me outa my share of the ranch, why you've got another guess. I'll not stand for it."

"You can't help yourself," Julia told him curtly. His boasting was an old story with her and she gave it no weight. "After a while maybe he'll not be so bitter, and if you behave yourself we may be able to get him to put you back in the will. What's the matter with you anyhow, Jas? Why didn't you stand up and fight Wils McCann?"

"Tell you he hit me when I wasn't lookin'. Tell you I was dazed an' I fell. He jumped me when I was down."

"I don't believe it," she flung at him. "He's not that kind of man."

"Course you won't believe your own brother against a McCann," he reproached her bitterly. "You're every bit as bad as the old man."

"I asked Dave Stone how it was. He told me the truth."

"He's a liar if he claims it's different from the way I tell it," he cried with weak violence. "He come at me, McCann did, an' hit me with the loaded end of his quirt. I kinda fell against the wall, stunned like, an' then he knocked me down. That's all I knew till he was ridin' hell-for-leather down the road. It's the honest-to-God truth."

She was convinced he was lying to save his face, but there was no use telling him so.

"When are you going?" she asked.

"Going where?"

"Why, I thought—dad said——"

"I don't care what he said. He's not runnin' me. When I get good an' ready maybe I'll go an' maybe I won't."

She came to a subject that never was long from her thoughts. The fact that she mentioned it at all to her brother, from whom she could expect no help, showed how much the dread of it obsessed her.

"I'm worried about dad—awf'ly worried. Every time he rides away from the house my heart sinks. If he should meet that Wils McCann, and of course he will sometime——"

"Does he always carry his rifle?"

Jasper's eyes shone with interest. His sister was surprised and gratified at this evidence of filial concern. She had expected him to be sullenly indifferent.

"Yes. Wherever he goes. It's dreadful, Jas—to sit at home and wait—and never know till I see him again whether he——"

"Does he ride alone?"

"Not if we can prevent it. I go with him when he'll let me—or Phil. And once or twice Dave Stone. But if dad sees we're trying to protect him he gets wild and won't have it for a minute."

"Sure. That's the old man for you. Well, you tell him something for me, Jule. He's not the only man that's lookin' for Wils McCann."

Her startled eyes fastened to his. "What do you mean?"

"What d'you reckon I mean? I'm a Stark, no matter what the old man says—an' he's a McCann, an' on top of that he's done me dirt. I'll fix him, sure as he's a foot high. But keep it under yore hat. I ain't gettin' out any bills about it. Not none."

She was torn by conflicting emotions. That Jasper had spirit enough to fight his own battle, if he really meant it and would not weaken when it came to the test, was tidings that warmed her blood. The danger in which her father stood might be averted if her brother met McCann first. Yet this was cold comfort. After the first flush of gladness for Jasper she knew by the chill that drenched her heart how dreadful it would be if any of her family killed Wilson McCann or were killed by him.

"Isn't there any way out, Jas, any way at all but this?" she cried, almost in a wail. "Do we have to start this—this awful feud? Surely there must be some way I could stop it if I only knew how."

Yellow lights gleamed like sinister beacons in his cold eyes. "No way. The McCanns started this an' it'll have to go through now."

(*Part II in the next issue of* SHORT STORIES)

THE PENANCE OF THE MARSHES

By MEIGS O. FROST

Author of "The Whip Discovers Art," "The Cajan of Bayou LaFourche," etc.

THE HEART OF THE "TREMBLING PRAIRIE," WHERE TALES ARE RIFE OF PIRATE GOLD, IS A PERILOUS PLACE TO HARBOR A SECRET AS DID THE MYSTERIOUS OLD MAN OF PILOTS TOWN

IF YOU delve deep and long enough into the mass of tales men tell of the Mississippi River during the two centuries and more it has been a pathway of the white man, you will come to the story of the wreck of the *Conqueror*.

It is not a happy tale.

Up out of the Gulf of Mexico she came, in record time, back in the 'sixties, cleaving the long rollers with pride befitting her name. It was her maiden voyage out of Brest. In command was a Breton youngster not yet past his twenty-second year.

Captain Michel Roussell had been almost beyond words the favored child of fortune. Son of a wealthy family of Brittany, tall, dark, wide-shouldered, a giant of a youth, he had won his ship at an age when hundreds counted themselves fortunate to hold the certificate of a second mate and the berth of a third. Ah, but they were born with fingers curved to grip rope and wheel-spokes, those Bretons, said seafaring men.

This voyage, the first he made as master, his young wife and their baby daughter sailed with him. There had been keen anticipation of the visit to New Orleans; laughing, chatting gossip of its brilliant gaieties which the young mariner already knew so well. He had made the port from his apprentice years. Not yet had Butler's army or Farragut's fleet quenched the spirits of its people. Not yet was the blockade of the Civil War a ring of iron through which no ship might force its way.

It was rough weather when the bar-pilot boarded the *Conqueror*, far out in the gulf, swarming up the jacob's-ladder from the thwart of a wildly-tossing yawl. It was no time to cross the bar, he advised. Better far to heave to until wind and sea eased off, before trying the twisting, treacherous channel. With the young captain he went below, leaving the second on deck.

Those were the days of two-handed drinking men.

No man save the pilot and Captain Roussell knew the cognac-punctuated conversation that took place in the cabin between those two, who had been friends for some eight years. But presently the cabin-door opened, and out into the companionway they came, flushed of face, side by side.

"You pilots, *mon vieux*, take yourselves too seriously," the youthful captain was heard to exclaim. "I could take her in myself, drunk and blindfolded!"

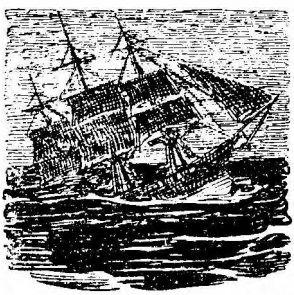
The pilot laughed huskily and drunkenly, saying something the captain's ear alone caught.

"If I could not," said Roussell magnificently, with a wide gesture of outflung arm, "I would bury myself in these accursed Louisiana marshes for eternity! You talk to a sailor, now!"

No other word between them was heard as they strode on, lurching ever so slightly.

Now aside from any question of ironclad pilotage regulations, no deep-water sailor in his sober senses, however often he may have made Port o' Orleans, dares affront the Mississippi. That twisting channel of great depths and sudden shallows, of lancing, ripping snags and insane, swirling eddies, is a lifetime study in itself. A profession in which the lore of yestermonth is likely to be as useless as the lore of a hundred years before.

No man knew what mordant pact master and pilot may have made. But presently all men knew the result. That night, her bottom ripped out by a snag, the *Conqueror* sank in mid-river in the maze of The Passes.



One passenger, one deckhand, clinging to a floating trunk of driftwood, reached shore uninjured and were saved. From them men learned of the fragments of talk between captain and pilot that had been overheard outside the bar. The rest swirled out to sea—with the exception of three.

Captain Roussell men found next day, stretched on a shelving reach of the muddy bank, unconscious, a jagged wound in his head. By his side, their sodden garments yet gripped in his hands, lay the young wife and baby, both dead. By what desperate struggle the young giant had brought them ashore across the wide and swirling reaches of the lower river, men could only guess and marvel.

Woman and child were buried two days later in the little cemetery of The Balize, that ancient pilot settlement where river met Gulf in the days when the Sieur Iberville, seeking passage for his fourteen-foot keels, found it and raised the "balise"—the sea-beacon—that others who followed in his wake might not have to search as he had searched in tiny row-boats among the myriad mouths of the mighty stream.

The folk of The Balize saw virtually nothing of the tragic figure of the young captain. His face almost obscured by the great swathings of bandages that hound the wound in his head, he called upon the chief of the pilots. His bearing was one of tortured silence. In his hand he bore an order on certain bankers of Brest. He broke his silence long enough to give explicit directions of the tomb that should be reared with those funds.

Next day he started the hundred-mile trip up-river to New Orleans, on another incoming ship. At the wharves of the city he nodded silent farewell to his brother-captain, who wrung his hand in silent sympathy and understanding. He stepped into the city crowds, in his stained and muddied uniform, and reported at the agents of his owners.

Needless to say, they broke him.

Then he vanished, as other broken mariners have vanished. There were other tragedies afoot, in those days of the 'sixties, to overshadow even the loss of a ship with nearly all on board; to dwarf even the disgrace that closed a promising maritime career.

No man thereafter could have told you aught concerning Captain Michel Roussell of the *Conqueror*.

"If I could not take her in myself, drunk and blindfolded, I would bury myself in those accursed Louisiana marshes for eternity!" he had sworn in drunken arrogance.

A mighty oath. A blasphemous oath. A foolish oath.

He was not alone in his folly, though, seamen will assure you.

The Flying Dutchman, too, uttered blasphemous oaths from the deck he trod in command.

HE WAS a mystery to the Louisiana South Coast, was old Simon Tournelle.

Of the simple, ordinary, surface facts of the life he led, full knowledge was the share of all who dwelt in that strange land stretching wide and waste between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico, a hundred miles to the south. But there were wide gaps in the routine of his days—gaps unaccountable to them.

Bar pilots and river pilots, shrimpers, oystermen, fishers and trappers, guides for city hunters who invade that wilderness with catalogue kits when the wild duck fly—all knew him. All added murkiness to the mystery with cryptic phrase.

"Queer, that ol'-timeh," any one of them would say, with significant tap of finger on sun-tanned forehead. "Sho' must have him a lotta cash money tucked away somewheah. One week he's heah. Nex' week he done gone, an' he stays gone fo' a long, long time. Jus' nach'lly lights out 'n' has him a high-rollin' time up in N'Awlyins, I reckon. Wheah-at he get all that money? Mebbe he done foun' him one o' them pirate hide-ups like Placide Bonfils says—I dunno."

Little time it takes for that sort of tale to spread in that sort of country. And old Simon Tournelle, tall, gaunt, bearded, silent, had been among them for years on the Lower Coast, going his taciturn way.

One enemy he had, the coast folk knew; one friend. A voluble enemy, and a friend who could be as silent on occasion as old Simon Tournelle himself.

The enemy was Placide Bonfils. A queer, half-crippled, warped bit of human wreckage, trapper until his infirmities barred him from the trap-line; then helper to the Pilot Town storekeeper from time to time, who paid him for his sporadic labor enough at least to give bare living for the man, his bedraggled wife, and his frightened daughter, now fifteen. Girls are women at that age in those surroundings.

The friend was the Reverend Father Girault Duchassois, little priest of the Oblate Fathers, who reached his wide and watery parish of the Lower Coast in his battered mission-boat, the *St. Rita*. Tiny portable organ and tiny portable altar that strange floating church bore, to be set up beneath the open sky on many a mud-bank, on shell-reef and sodded levee and wave-washed *chenière*, where gathered his rough congregations. Strange the stories he had heard in the little cabin-confessionals of his floating church. But where old Simon Tournelle was concerned, though Father Girault would talk endlessly of many things, the priest was silent. Silent even, and this at the old man's order, on the many deeds of kindly charity that his gifts to the little priest made possible.

There was a night when, crouched outside the slab cabin of the recluse, peering through a chink in its rough walls, Placide Bonfils had seen money pass from Simon to the priest—had heard the instructions on who it was to help. But that tale the deformed one never spread. He gave good news of none. And to his bitter tongue was due much of the strange report about the old recluse, that filled the mouths of the coastal gossips.

Placide Bonfils! The name that meant, translated, "the good and quiet son!" There was evil mockery in its very syllables. He may have been good and quiet in the babyhood during which that name was bestowed. Now he was neither. Misshapen as was his body, his mind was warped and twisted far more evilly.

Sometimes, in strange backwaters of this earth, such folk are to be found, rancorous, stewing in their own acrid bitterness.

The river-side shack in which he dwelt was not far from the shack of old Simon Tournelle. Their enmity dated from a night when Bonfils, full of bad liquor, had beaten his wife and daughter so that they fled frightened and screaming into the dark. In Tournelle's shack they took refuge—the shack where girl and woman alike had stopped from time to time to do some kindly office for the old man; to receive his gently-voiced thanks. Bonfils, insane with wrath, followed them.

Old Simon stepped to the doorway as he heard hail. His great duck-gun was in his hand. Woman and girl were crouched behind him.

"When you are sober, *miserable*," he told the raging beast outside, "they will return home. Now, get you away from here."

Drunk as he was, armed as he was, vicious as he was—and the coast spoke low-voiced of two they believed he had slain craftily—Placide Bonfils recognized the steel in the old man's voice. He left. That night the draggled woman and the shivering girl slept safe behind the barred door of Simon's shack, while the old man, dragging his pirouge before the door, wrapped himself in blanket against the mosquito hordes and slept on guard, gun at side.

Bonfils's anger was not enough to stir him to combat. He could not face the steady-eyed one he held his foe. His wrath took outlet as warped and twisted as the spirit of the man. Far and wide, playing upon his deformity, seeking sympathy as injured husband and father, he spoke darkly of Tournelle in connection with his daughter.

The foul tale came to the ears of the old

man at last. Before the Saturday night throng in the store at Pilot Town he seized the misshapen one by the throat with hard and wiry old hands, shook him till he dangled limply, branded him cur and liar, and openly threatened his life if further talk like that came to his ears.

The grinning crowd about him rather wondered at his rage, but from that night there was no doubt. Simon Tournelle had an implacable enemy. An enemy who spread bitter gossip and hinted sinister mystery now, with blind desire to hurt shackled somewhat by the crafty caution of fear.

IT WAS a land to breed mystery.

A level land and desolate, dotted here and there, as you leave New Orleans on your down-river way, by strange little settlements bearing names of episodes and folk forgotten to all save historians and ancient river gossips. Settlements with little shack stores and little shack houses, with weather-grayed oyster factories marked by towering monuments of gray-white shells whose contents had been rifled and shipped, tinned, in lugger-loads up to the city.

But when you go farther southward, around the winding bends of the sullen river, even the little settlements you have passed take on metropolitan character by contrast. Down by Quarantine and Pilot Town you come to the last outposts of humanity in that strange world, save for the isolated shacks of trapper and fisher, and the little post of United States engineers who daily keep up the fight against shoal and mud-lump for an open channel at the jetties of South Pass.

Wide and sweeping here the Mississippi River pours through its myriad mouths of The Passes the swirling brown flood that stains the blue Gulf of Mexico far out to sea. All about stretches a wilderness of the "trembling prairie" grown high above with roseau-cane and the rustling marsh-grass, grayish-yellowish-brown; unplumbed below with bottomless depths of fluid gray slime to be passed only by the marsh-walking feat of leaping from tuft to tuft of the coarse growth.

From the crows'-nest of ships that follow the river-path, you can see a far-scattered silver coinage of round duck-ponds, a jumble of low and marshy islands streaked by the brown, black or silver weavings of obscure bayous, passes, channels, many of them nameless. Great watery horizons. Soft and dripping soil that cuddles oozily to the surface of the waters from which, even now, built up by the enormous siltage of the rushing river, it is thrusting its way as earth first emerged dripping from unfathomed depths.

Strange, grotesque flights of brownish-gray pelicans you see, lightened here and there by their rarer white brothers, solemnly playful, rising and skimming, dipping and settling about the slimy mud-lumps that ever and anon rise from the waters like forgotten débris of a new-made world.

Bubblings of natural gases out of the tons of soft alluvial soil affront you as they rise with sinister gurgles and gulpings to the oily surface of the water that covers their source. Playful porpoise you see, sleeping 'gator and leaping gar. Over all the wide blue arch of Louisiana's soft sky. And ever the sullen river swirling silently past.

This the domain that had been home to Simon Tournelle more years than men remembered. Now, as nearly as one might judge, he was around seventy, though age on the Lower Coast is difficult to determine when men near fifty. Men who in cities would be nearing their dotage, seem in that primitive land to retain a wiry strength that enables them to perform without fatigue tasks that would tax the muscles of an athlete unaccustomed to the steady grind of pirouge paddle, the drag of shrimp seine, the tasks of the oyster dredge.

In the shelter of a clump of wind-twisted scrub growth by the river-bank just below Pilot Town he had built his shack of driftwood slabs and rusted tin, salvage of the river that wrested loot from the inland country and laid it at the feet of such dwellers as dared the desolation to the southward.

His battered cypress pirogue from time to time came up to the Pilot Town wharf, laden within scant half-inch of the water's edge with pelt of mink and muskrat caught in his trap-lines through the marsh; with hides of alligators slain by his rifle and hatchet.

Those were the days of the market-hunters, before conservation laws and closed seasons were known. His ancient

eight-gauge muzzle-loading shotgun with its spotless shining barrels and its tin-patched walnut stock, loaded the pirogue day after day throughout the winter with cargo of mallard and canvas-back, pin-tail and teal, red-head and ring-neck. He shot with the easy, effortless certainty of the men to whom the use of firearms is all a part of the day's work—who think no more of expertness in their use than blacksmith thinks of athletic form in swinging his sledge. New Orleans gourmets gave yawning market for his kill.

Too, there were periods when the silent old man guided sportsmen from the city through the alligator-runs amid the roseau-cane to hidden lagoons where the duck-potato grew thickest and the wild flights landed at dusk and dawn.

Thus it had gone through long years. And the tales of his hidden wealth spread. His simple mode of life, no more luxurious than that of the poorest of his neighbors; his long and quiet dealings with the Pilot Town storekeeper who paid fair prices for peltries and for market-hunted duck, formed some foundation for these tales. But his long absences, unaccountable to the folk of the coast, distorted by Placide Bonfils and those to whom he spread the tale, gave rise to more. They were not the routine absences of trap-line or hunt.

They came on no set schedule, those absences. One day old Simon would be seen lounging around his shack. Then for days he would vanish. He reappeared as silently as he disappeared. There were those who tried to follow him. His trick of slipping away from them became South Coast proverb.

Were the shrimp-schools hard to find as the seining luggers cruised about, the man in the bow casting hand-net in vain search for the handful of shrimp that meant the school was near?

"Doggone! Reckon they're hidin' out with ol' Simon Tournelle, Jules!"

There had been a visiting British sportsman once, who all unwittingly had cemented the structure of the South Coast rumor that "Ol' Simon sho' done foun' one o' them ol' pirate hide-ups."

However much the cynical may scoff at tales of buried pirate treasure, the South Coast not only believes. It knows. Its bayou-banks and shell-mounds are pitted with diggings. Its stories of the small discoveries of ancient coin that man has made, of the greater discoveries that wait, are as integral a part of its life as its lore of tide and storm, of oyster-bed and shrimp-school.

Pieces-of-eight and reales of Spain, golden pesos of Old Mexico, sovereigns of Britain—these the coast knows unquestioningly rest somewhere in chests of iron-bound cypress in that watery waste.

Time means little down there. Was it not only yesterday they knew the swash-buckling passing of Jean Lafitte, of Pierre Lafitte, his brother? Do not the ancients tell yet the tales of Dominick You, that yellow-haired cannoneer who was their second in command, who died rich and respected, a New Orleans alderman, after a gallant fight side by side with Andrew Jackson against Pakenham; whose tomb can be seen yet in the old St. Louis Cemetery? Are not the names of Beluche and Gambio, Johannot and Nez Coupé, Johness and Rigaud, buccaneers all, on the muster-roll of its history?

From the soil of the Five Islands—Cote Carline, Grand Cote, Petite Anse, Cote Blanche, and Bell Isle—have not earthern pots and wooden chests of olden coins been dug? Coins with which undoubtedly the thrifty pioneer merchants of New Orleans bought duty-free the cargoes the Lafittes looted from the Spanish Main and piled high in the Red House at Grand Terre.

Ah, the Lower Coast knows!

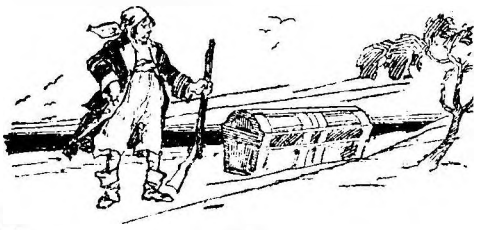
That British sportsman, sent to Simon Tournelle by men of New Orleans the old man had guided, had spent a delirious month in the marshes. Day after day his bag of mallard and canvas-back had loaded his pirogue to the water's edge before sunrise had cleared away the mists of dawn. When he left to return to the city, he had added to old Simon's guide-fee ten British sovereigns as grateful bonus. These the old man had exchanged some time afterward for American currency at the Pilot Town store.

Placide Bonfils had seen the transaction. Simon gave no explanation.

British gold, with no thought of its date! Now to Placide's hate was added envy with his certainty that this enemy he had convinced himself was the wrecker of his home, had found wealth. Vindictively he spread the story afar.

Thereafter a man might have talked himself blue in the face in vain effort to convince the Coast that old Simon Tournelle had not stumbled upon a pirate "hide-up." They guessed no longer. They knew. Stealthily some watched the old man's movements. But from time to time he vanished as before.

That he brought no other gold for exchange—that never had he brought other —made no difference.



The mystery about Simon Tournelle deepened.

MYSTERY might wrap the strange old figure on the Lower Coast. But up in New Orleans there was no mystery about the group of youths the police knew as the Shot Tower Gang.

They were hard with the hardness that takes pride in the completeness of its immunity to decency. They lived what they deemed "the life." Endless games of pool they shot in grimy waterfront resorts. By saloons and soft drink stands unnumbered they congregated through that section the police called the Irish Channel, with Gangland jest and horseplay through lazy hours, some sober, some drunken, all dangerous.

Pitched battles they fought from time to time with their natural foes, the St. Mary's Market Gang, with the huskies of the Slaughterhouse Gang. Battles in which nature's fists were supplanted sometimes by brass knucks and bricks, and in certain climaxes by knife and pistol. Anything went, at some stages of an Irish Channel scrap.

The waterfront was their natural habitat. There they made rendezvous from childhood, when they looted bananas from the fruit companies' wharves at an age that saw most children little past the kindergarten stage. They swam through the swirling eddies of the Mississippi River like the wharf-rats for which they were collectively christened. Far back in the forest of piling beneath the docks, they established camps of rough flooring of looted planks from lumber cargoes—camps reached by precarious runways of yet other planks—camps from which the Dock Board Patrol, making its rounds in the police boat, routed them whenever discovered.

Much of the staggering total of loot of goods stolen in transit between freight car and ship, the police of that day attributed to the Shot Tower Gang. Many an arrest had followed many a hot-foot chase. But it was hard to get evidence that would convict.

It was hardest of all to "get something" on two of that gang upon whom the authorities long had cast yearning eyes—Rat-tooth Riley and Bow-legs Bannigan. The Channel crowd had a pretty taste in names.

It was a cinch, the way Rat-tooth figured it. Far back underneath the wharf he had been boring energetically away with a heavy auger. When the steel tip shot through and his hands were wet suddenly with splashing fluid, he reached downward.

"Quick wit' the bucket," he called softly to Bow-legs.

Up through the dark a big bucket was pushed into his hands. Into it gurgled a golden stream.

Above them, the other side of those thick creosoted wharf planks, stacked tier on tier, were barrels of whisky for export. There might be good market for that whisky overseas and in Latin America—but Rat-tooth knew of a good market, too. There was a certain saloon man who stood ready to buy all that was brought him—and no questions asked.

Dim and shadowy forms moved along stringer and loose plank gangway in the darkness beneath the wharf. Buckets and funnels and demijohns were ready, provided by that thoughtful saloon man. Two skiffs were moored far up under the wharf, where the muddy waters of the river lapped softly against the clay bank.

Bucket after bucket passed silently down the line. The gurgle of the whisky sounded softly in the dark. The Shot Tower Gang was on the job, swinging into action with smoothness and precision. From this swirl of keen and rubber-soled activity would come more funds that meant long and lazy hours shooting pool, that brought from shop-shelves raiment even more gorgeous, that enabled one to move, magnificently affluent, through the Irish Channel Saturday night dances, flask on hip, money in trousers' pocket. Easy money!

"Get a gait on! Show some speed, youse!" commanded Rat-tooth with hoarse whisper, at the receiving end of the line, where the whisky was spurting down. For there had been a pause in the hand-to-hand delivery of the bucket brigade. The stuff that meant money was running over the edges of the bucket he held.

But there came no speed to answer his summons. Instead, through the musical plashing of the wasting liquor, came in an-

over the hoarse whisper of Bow-legs Banigan.

"D'ju get de office, Rat-toot'?" it sounded. "Spike jus' slips it t' me someg'n bumps a pile out dere!"

A moment of indrawn breaths. Then, through the blackness beneath the wharf, streaked a long line of brilliant white light from the bullseye of authority.

"You're under arrest!" roared a heavy voice. "Not a move, you young crooks, or we'll drill you! Round 'em up, boys!"

The dock patrol had sprung its surprise.

For a strident, deafening moment, a miniature hell flared amid that forest of thick black piling.

The white warp of the thick-lensed bullseyes was interwoven with a woof of orange flame as pistol shots laced the night.

Weapons were blazing now, those in the hands of the dock patrol answering those of the Shot Tower Gang. For the waterfront police had appraised perfectly the problem they faced in that arrest.

Often the youths of Gangland, cornered, exchange the minor sentences of the crime at which they are caught for the penalty of needless murder. Theirs is not the business-like attitude of the professional burglar. It is more the hard-boiled pride of the old-time killer of the far Western frontier—the pride of a reputation for hardness that cannot face admission of defeat of which arrest is the evidence.

All this the dock patrol knew. They had come silently beneath the wharf, ready for it, pistols in hand.

Deafening the crash of shots in that confined space beneath the wharves for a moment. Acrid the fumes of powder-smoke, billowing stiflingly, seeking outlet.

Then silence, broken at last by hoarse voices. Flashing lights.

Two of the dock patrol lay, slumped in the slimy mud of the river-bank. Three of the Shot Tower Gang sprawled beside them.

But the keen eyes of Captain Martin Flaherty of the patrol, scanning the dead, glowering redly into the strained and pallid faces of his prisoners, showed the wrath of disappointment. He knew that the two leaders he sought—caught with the goods on 'em, this time—had escaped him once more.

"There's one sure thing," he growled to Lieutenant Jerry Nichols, as the swift patrol boat that had followed their silent skiffs came surging up to the scene of battle, "those two birds ain't gonna monkey 'round this back-yard for a while without gettin' theirs. They're spotted from now on."

"Wonder if they got plugged in the scrap an' drowned in the river?" speculated Lieutenant Jerry, twisting his handkerchief tighter as tourniquet about a bullet-pierced forearm. "You notice both their skiffs are here."

"Drowned me eye," scoffed Captain Flaherty. He had been born in the Irish Channel himself. "Those two were borrrn t' be hanged!"

That might be as it might be. At that moment, far downstream, Rat tooth and Bow-legs were resting pantingly between rough rock and the splintery thwart of a great timber barge that in the morning was bearing giant stones southward to the push of a government tug. By Port Eads at the mouth of the jetties those rocks were to splash overside to build up those ragged ramparts through which the channel scours on its way out into the gulf.

Amphibious as they were, the pair were winded by their swim and the effort of swarming up the splintery side of the barge. It is one thing to swim in your birthday suit—the customary bathing garb of the gang—it is another to swim clad, even though coatless, with a heavy pistol and a packet of cartridges in your pocket.

They reached their refuge unmolested. The shots of the waterfront battle far upstream had not even disturbed the crew of the tug. There was no watchman on the barge. Who was going to steal five-ton stones, anyway? The barge was theirs. It suited them exactly.

They knew that with the waterfront alarm out, it would be almost hopeless to try to reach the streets of the Irish Channel over the wharves that night. Their only hope was to land at some down-river settlement and return later, when things had quieted down, on some shrimp or oyster lugger headed for the Old French Market. But all that was in the distant future. Just now life's only problem was to be on their way out of there.

They huddled together for warmth, against the chill of the river-mists, floating

close to the surface before dawn. Suddenly they drowsed. Presently they awoke to the stir of activity on board the tug, the other side of the rock-barge from their refuge. They lay quiet for a while, watching. Ravenous, they smelled the fragrance of coffee and ham from the tug's galley. Then, with no regret whatever, they saw, from a crevice between two great stones, the edge of the wharf slide past.

A day later, their stomachs drawn by hunger, far down-river among the little settlements, they slipped ashore after a short swim through the dusk. To the storekeeper they told a tale of a drunken card game and fight with their tug-boat captain—a fight that had ended in their being knocked into the river in a general mêlée. It was no unusual story. They had feared to climb back on board, they said. Was there any work they could do here?

Was there work!

It was mid-season for the oyster factory, short-handed, as always. Men and women, boys and girls even, slaved from the darkness before dawn to the darkness after dusk. The two newcomers were put to work trucking the cans of oysters and the baskets of empty shells from the workbenches where tapping happers and thick-bladed oyster knives were plied hour after hour.

Work!

It was distasteful to any member of the Shot Tower Gang. But now it meant food and lodging of a sort, and above all a refuge in time of trouble. Down here in the wide wastes there was no curiosity. The oyster season was on. That was all the factory workers knew.

The two city gangsters merged with their environment. Within a week, sunburnt, clad in slimy blue denim, walking in rough, water-stained boots, they showed no trace of town. With youth's swift adaptability they entered into the South Coast life. They even learned to paddle a pirogue during their scant hours of rest—that seemingly effortless part of the coast's daily life that in reality requires the nicety of balance of a trick cyclist.

Held by the memory of the deed that they had seen beneath the New Orleans wharf, for three months they worked, holding as close to their tasks as swamper saving to buy his own lugger—and than that there is no greater example of thrift and work and simple living. But three months is a long time. An age away from saloon and pool table and gossip of one's fellows and plans of battle against rival gangs; talk of girls and Saturday night dances up and down the Irish Channel.

The Pilot Town settlement, they learned, was the metropolis of the section where their lot had fallen. There on week-ends gathered some who sought diversion. There was a pool table.

Their feet were itching. There was money in their pockets, now. All trace of the city, they believed, had vanished from them. They took the down-river mail boat one Saturday morning. That afternoon they landed at the Pilot Town wharf.

It was good to feel pool cue in hand again. It was good to hear the click of the balls, even though the cloth over which they rolled was faded gray instead of its original green; was torn with three-cornered rips here and there. It was good to swagger among one's fellows, buying a drink now and then. In those days every grocery down the coast had its bar, and most had their pool rooms.

By the time the swinging kerosene lamps were lighted that night, Rat-tooth and Bow-legs were at home. Long as they had been away from the city, still some of their collection of hair-raising, waterfront jests were new coinage in this realm—tales that brought tribute of roars of laughter as the liquor sank in the bottles and the human steam-gauge rose.

There was one in the group in the little store, however, who did not join them, either in drink or jest. He had made his few purchases. As they were being assembled he sat quietly, then walked silently out into the night—the only one who had not lingered.

"Who's ol' moss-face?" queried Rat-tooth.

"Him?" asked Placide Bonfils, who had been serving the drinks, and sharing them. "Yo' 'n' yo' pahtneh sho' is a coupla smaht boys. Mebbe so yo' be able t' fin' out what we-all ain' done foun' out yet?"

"Middle name's 'Go-Getter,'" grinned Rat-tooth.

"Well, heah's yo' chance t' go out 'n' git yo' some real gittin'. That ol' houn' done come close t' breakin' up my home. He's sho' wo'th uh pot uh money, too.

Done foun' some ol' pirate hide-up. Got it hid out in the swamp, somewheah. Sho' is livin' easy 'n' makin' himse'f too dog-gone much t' home with my wife 'n' girl both."

Then, low-voiced, cautious, but with drunken embellishment, came the story Placide had told so many times that now it had become an integral part of his life. With the hard-boiled surface cynicism of the city gangster, Rat-tooth ridiculed it. But the glitter in his eye gave the lie to the sneer on his thin lips.

"Yer nutty, friend," he scoffed as the tale ended. "Where d'ya get this fairy-tale stuff? Le's have 'nother drink 'n' shoot some more pool. That pair o' dubs at the table's gettin' ready t' give some-body else a chanct."

But behind the mask of his cynicism, Rat-tooth's sharp brain was working. A bankroll, huh? Pirate stuff. Nobody's money. Hid out in the swamp!

Nobody but this old moss-faced nut got the low-down on it, hey? To the click of the battered pool balls his thoughts ran on. It was a copper-riveted cinch he and Bow-legs weren't going to spend the rest of their lives down in this hole. Might as well come out of it with a stake while the getting was good.

This old guy had been changing gold coins, had he? Well, gold was gold. You could pull that stuff anywhere. Izzy the Kike, on Rampart Street, back in town, now——

He came to decision. Before the night was over he and Bow-legs had rented sleeping privilege in one of the back rooms of the store. They were tired oyster-shucking, he explained elaborately to the storekeeper. This was a good place to rest up a while before they took the mail boat back to town.

"Sho'," said the storekeeper. "Make yo'se'fs t' home."

Profit to him was profit. Irresponsible South Coast labor was an old story. If you could make anything out of 'em while they went through on the wing, you were that much ahead.

That night they slept in the back room. Next morning, when Placide Bonfils came to open up and sweep out the store, ready for the Sunday trade, Rat-tooth called him into their quarters.

"Gimme the low-down on this hank ol' moss-face is hidin' out," he demanded.

The old enmity still simmered in the heart of Placide. Again he rehearsed his imaginary wrongs with bitter fluency.

When the three had finished talking, sinister agreement had been reached.

A scarred old pirogue and some fishing tackle came cheap at the store. Day after day Rat-tooth and Bow-legs lazed about, fishing, drinking, gossiping, shooting pool, fraternizing with Placide in store and shack. And in the case of Rat-tooth, to use his own verbiage, "shining up" to Clothilde Bonfils, the daughter of their new-found partner. Though she knew nothing of the Irish Channel girls' sharp give and take of repartee, still she was better than no girl at all, Rat-tooth decided. Worth trailin' along with in the odd times when they were not engaged in what became their chief task in life. That was the trailing of Simon Tournelle.

By now Rat-tooth was wholly convinced. The tale of the hidden treasure he had heard, not alone from Placide, but from many of the coastal folk. And as his keen eyes looked about him, with always the plan of getaway in mind, yet another scheme was taking shape in his brain. It must wait, however, until they ran down this little business of where old moss-face kept his swamp bank.

The two from the city, almost adepts now in the handling of their cranky pirogue, took to longer and longer trips into the channels of the lower delta. Time after time they made it a point to delay their return to Pilot Town until after dark. Now and then they stayed out all night, sleeping in some lonely trapper's shack in a section where any man's arrival after nightfall means primitive hospitality.

Their strategy had its effect. Nobody at the Pilot Town store noticed much now, how they came and went. Nobody save Placide Bonfils, who knew what was behind their apparently aimless maneuvering.

Here and there on their trips they had seen old Simon paddling his pirogue silently along. Never did they appear to watch him. Casual hail he answered by wave of hand, as was his wont. But each time they had seen him they reported the location to Placide, and so gradually the field of his cruisings had been narrowed down, though as yet they had not learned the mysterious place to which he vanished.

Then came the moment for which they had waited.

The two were dozing on their cots in the rear of the store one night, when Placide, whose turn it was to watch the shack of the old man, awakened them excitedly.

"He done jus' stahted," he whispered.

Silently the three of them slipped out to the landing. Placide in the center, the other two at bow and stern, they paddled swiftly and noiselessly down the river. Great banks of cloud bulked overhead, thinning here and there to let through the dimmed radiance of the moon. By that light they caught a glimpse of the small craft far ahead—the pirogue they knew held Simon Tournelle.

The long hours of work with pirogue paddle paid dividends now. It was a strange chase the old man led them. Close to the bank, to be in the shadow of the thickets wherever possible, they paddled downstream after him. One moment they would lose sign of him as he rounded bend far ahead, a dim blur close to the water's surface. Again they would catch sight of their quarry as they edged around the twisting curve of the bank.

Out down Southeast Pass they went—the pass that Placide knew no ship took because of the sand-bar at its mouth.

They were paddling through a ghost-world now. A world in which creeping mist-wraiths writhed and curled about them. Eerie creakings of the roseau-cane, stirred by the light breezes of the night, broke the silence from time to time. The splash of a leaping gar sounded like a pistol shot.

Twisting and turning, the course led down the sullen flow of chocolate-brown water that now was black in the faint light drifting through from above. Hour after hour they sped along to the double-push of stream and paddle. Their two-man power enabled them to keep pace with the old man, despite his mid-channel course and the time it cost them to hug the bank.

Then, south of them, they heard the faint plash of the peaceful Gulf against the bar. By the last curve of the pass they halted, peering out around the bend over the wide stretch of water. Dimly they saw old Simon's pirogue cross the bar and follow the edge of the marsh that turned to north and westward. He was heading up into the wide and shallow reaches of Redfish Bay. To this there was no outlet but the open Gulf, Placide knew. It was easy following now.

Close to the twisting shore of the shallow bay they hugged the shadow of the marsh growth. The old man, seemingly feeling secure against all observation, headed straight across its smooth and level expanse. Silently they followed him. Saw him drive his pirogue into the mass of rustling growth at the head of the bay. Saw him loop its mooring cord to a tuft of the growth, and disappear into the depths of that primeval jungle.

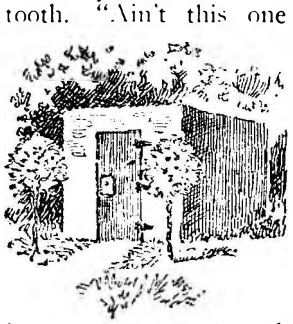
At a little point nearby they pushed their slender craft behind the concealment of the cane. Then, watch on watch, they waited. From time to time they wolfed the food with which the pirogue had been stocked against just such a trip as this; from time to time drank of the water-jug. Mercifully for them, the breeze blew in steadily from the gulf. They were spared the torture of the mosquito hordes.

Long was their vigil. It was late next day when they saw the old man emerge from the thicket, enter his pirogue, and paddle for the pass once more. They waited until he had rounded the point. Then, aquiver with eagerness, they paddled for the spot he had left.

The trail of the broken roseau-cane was clear. From tuft to tuft the two youths leaped, using their pirogue paddles for better balance. After them, tenaciously despite his twisted body, came Placide Bonfils with the skill of the veteran marsh-walker.

IT WAS the pair of gangsters who first emerged into the clearing. Apparently they had been heading into a jungle, pathless save for the solitary trail they followed—a trail of windings seemingly endless. But it ended suddenly in a strange space beneath the open sky. They stopped in amazement. Circling the object on which their eyes were fixed, they stopped again and gazed at one another.

"C'n ya beat it, Bow-legs?" asked Rattooth. "Ain't this one helluva place t' keep a safe?"



They were facing a structure of solid iron, some seven feet high, at least six feet wide, and ten feet long—the wonderful old charcoal process iron that resists the salt air of the coast, rustless, when a few brief months of that same exposure enables a man to break

across his knee one of the steel beams of today. It was not dissimilar in appearance to the great iron safes of the counting houses of business firms a few years agone.

About it smoothed earth sloped away into the oozy marsh. Two great oleanders, masses of white and crimson bloom, stood guard before it. Near them, just where the earth went down into the ooze, a rough shack had been erected.

As they gazed at the scene in bewilderment, Placide Bonfils came crashing into the clearing. He swore as he looked about him. But his was not the bewilderment of the city youths. Into his memory were surging tales he had almost forgotten.

"Ain't this one helluva place t' keep a safe?" repeated Rat-tooth in puzzlement.

"Safe!" said Placide scornfully. "She's safe, all right. No man would have guessed. Boy, don' yo' know uh tomb w'en yo' sees one? This place, sho' as hell, she's the ol' graveyard o' The Balize. That dam' ol' fox, he done pick uh tomb fo' keep his pirate hide-up in it!"

With clawing eagerness his twisted figure rounded the corner of the ancient tomb and strove with the door. The heavy panel of cast iron, set on great black hinges and held with a huge brass lock set in the darker metal, resisted all efforts. With pirogue paddles, the three sought to force it. After one paddle had split half its blade, they gave that up.

The two from the city ran appraising eyes over that door. It would never yield to such simple effort, they knew. But they knew that to which it would yield. Their fingers slipped over the surface, tried hinge and lock, their eyes ignoring the inscription on the door.

"Nothin' to it," came the judgment of Rat-tooth at last. "We gotta go back t' Pilot Town an' get a sledge an' some crowbars at the store. Gimme five minutes wit' *them*, an' I'll have it open."

There was nothing else to do. Another careful search they made about the place for possible opening. Then they splashed their way back to the pirogue, and started retracing their course.

Hide his gold in an old tomb in a Godforsaken cemetery, would he! Use a cast-iron tomb for a safe, huh? They'd show ol' moss-face a trick or two!

Nothing they knew—or cared—that they had invaded one of the most amazing spots in the history of the New World. A sunken city—almost a forgotten city.

The Balize! There at the Mississippi's mouth it had stood through the early years of the white man's first tentative pushing into a strange continent, when Europe's kings battled and schemed over their colonies here. A spot on which monarchs had cast their eyes. A spot admirals and generals took into their calculations. A spot where princely revenues were spent in fortifications. A spot that today is only a name in musty archives.

There rose the walls of the first fort in Louisiana. There Don Antonio de Ulloa of Spain faced Aubry of France, signing the articles that ceded the great Louisiana province, backbone of the continent, from France to Spain. There floated the first Spanish flag to fly above Louisiana soil. Floated over a fort that cost a Spanish king twenty-five thousand pounds sterling, says an old English chronicler—a fort long since sunk in the ooze with walls and quarters and guns.

All gone now the pilots who back in the 'thirties had made The Balize, by official report, the wickedest spot in Louisiana—scene of the raw, red sinfulness of far frontiers, where keen-edged knife and crashing navy pistol ended all-night orgies of liquor. All gone, too, the model settlement that followed, when a Louisiana legislature drastically cleaned house in the state's port of entry and made it a model pilot's village.

For in the 'sixties, the crevasse had come crashing down with a great river-rise. It had cut a new channel to the Gulf, choking up the Balize Bayou of old. The pilot settlement by that strange freak had found itself miles across the marsh from the path all ships entering the river were to take henceforth.

The Balize folk had left their homes and migrated to Pilot Town. Their town sank in the ooze as had sunk the forts of the King of Spain. Now, buried from human eye in the miles of marsh growth, the lone tomb of iron was all that remained.

And speeding toward Pilot Town, intent on tools with which to force it and loot the treasure of old Simon Tournelle, were the trio who had succeeded in trailing him to his strange and solitary hiding place—the goal of his mysterious disappearances over so many years on the South Coast.

"We c'n make Pilot Town an' get back by next day, can't we?" asked Bow-legs Bannigan, his quivering eagerness matching Placide's own. "Then we clean up this stuff an' on our way outa here, hey?"

"Take your time," came Rat-tooth's

gruff response. "Keep your shirt on. We'll get back down here soon enough."

Rat-tooth had plans of his own.

PLOUGHING up the river in his battered mission boat, the *St. Rita,* headed from Port Eads for one of the settlements just above Pilot Town, where he was to rear his little altar by the wharf for a promised Sunday morning service, Father Girault Duchassois suddenly bethought himself of old Simon Tournelle. It had been weeks since he had visited the silent old man.

It was Saturday afternoon. He could shove off at daybreak Sunday, after a night's sleep on the boat moored by the old man's shack, and yet be in time for the service, he figured. Emerging from South Pass into the main body of the great main stream, he veered over to the east bank to avoid the down-river swirl of the mid-channel current. Presently he was at the slab door where he was so welcome a guest.

Through a long and sun-lit afternoon the pair sat talking of many matters. Had the folk of the coast known that of which they spoke, much that had been mystery through long years would have been mystery no more. Night drew on at last.

"Dine with me, Pere Girault," invited the old man, starting to kindle fire beneath the covered pot of *jambalaya.*

"With pleasure, Simon," said the little priest, and presently they sat them down to the fragrant mixture of rice and ham and oysters, ladled from the great iron pot, that was flanked by a wood-smoke blackened coffee-dripper from whose spout came the strong black fluid Northern visitors had sworn would "float a ten-penny nail."

Their meal was finished at last. Gray-blue smoke wreaths rose from the charred briar pipe of the little priest, mingling with the reek from the old man's cigarettes rolled of the harsh black "string tobacco" of the coast—almost pure perique.

It was the little priest who first broke silence.

"Old friend," said he, "I wish there were some way to scotch this snake of rumor. I have been silent. I have kept my word to you. Yet ever anew comes up this story of the buried treasure men say you have hidden in the swamp."

"They still talk that foolishness, Pere Girault?"

"Throughout the coast. We are patient, Simon, you and I. Yet there are times when I wonder if it would not be better to take steps to silence that fool of a Placide. Wherever that story rears its head, in the end I find trace of him. I think the man believes that you have treasure buried down here."

"I have, Pere Girault," said old Simon softly. "But you know what treasure, you who know why I wait. It is weary waiting sometimes."

"I know, Simon." Silence again for a space. "An evil mind, that man's." His thoughts turned to the draggled wife—the frightened daughter. "You have done much for those poor women, Simon. Yet even to that he gives foul meaning. Nor do I like the appearance of these newcomers from the oyster factory above, who are so much with Placide and his family of late. Bad, those two, or I know not men."

Silence fell between them again—the silence of old friends who need little speech at times. Up out of the marshes rose a great golden moon, bathing the wide levels with soft, clear light. Higher it climbed, and higher.

"Simon, I grow garrulous at times," smiled the little priest at last, and looked at the watch he drew from beneath his cassock. "I have service at Poverty Point in the morning, and it is near midnight, now." He stepped to the door and looked up the sullen stream. "Even the lights of the store have gone out. I think some little sleep before dawn will not hurt."

He turned to bid farewell to his old friend before stepping on board the *St. Rita.* But even in the midst of his cordial words, a gasping voice sounded at the door. Both wheeled to look. It was the draggled wife of Placide Bonfils.

"*Pere* Girault!" she panted. "It is good that you are here! I came for Simon and for help. I need you both."

She sank, shivering with fright and excitement, on the rough slab bench by the door. Then her story poured forth, almost incoherent in its rush of words, tumbling one upon the other in the *argot* of the coast.

"Placide, he lies hurt in our cabin. And Clothilde—ah, the poor little girl—she is gone. With those wretches. Those two new-come of late. It is their work."

"Be calm, my daughter," urged the priest. "Tell us quietly, now, that we know what to do."

But there was no calming her now. She must tell her story her own way.

"It happened just after the store closed and the folk went to their homes. From my cabin I saw the lights go out. But Placide, he did not come. Then presently they come down the path together, those two and my husband. They gather up some boat gear from the cabin. A shotgun, too. Then roughly one of them tells little Clothilde to come with him. She has fear. She clings to me. I, too, have fear. I order them from the shack. But this husband of mine, does he aid me? He laughs evilly. 'Be quiet,' he tells me. 'We are better off without the girl. Let her go!' *Pere* Girault, I place the girl behind me. I see that all three are drunken."

She burst into frightened sobbing.

"Speak, my daughter," said the priest, "and speak quickly. The tears can come later."

She gulped convulsively.

"Those two!" she said bitterly. "Me they seize and bind, tying cloth over my mouth that I cannot call for help. Clothilde, she is dumb with fear. Then the two turn upon Placide. With barrel of pistol they knock him down. They tie him with fishing line. He is senseless. They take the girl and go. They are so drunken that my bonds are loosely tied. I fight free. And as I go out the door to reach Simon and ask aid, I see the little lugger of Jules Bourgeois go past downstream. Jules, *Pere* Girault—all men know he sleeps tonight at the house of the father of his betrothed at Pilot Town. Of a certainty they have stolen the boat to escape. They plan some evil, *Pere* Girault."

A great oath burst from the lips of the gaunt old man. "That poor child!" he said.

A hot glint shone in the eyes of Father Girault. Up the path, the woman trailing behind, they sped to the Bonfils cabin. With cold water dashed in his face they brought consciousness back to the stunned man.

Dazedly Placide looked at them for a moment. His eyes took in the gaunt and bearded face of Simon Tournelle—the sun-blackened, deep-lined countenance of the hot-eyed little priest. No words Father Girault wasted in commiseration of his hurt.

"You who have held friendship with them," he snapped. "This is no time to lie! I know you of old, Placide. *Where have they gone?*"

The ring of clashing steel blades sounded in his voice. Placide Bonfils shrank back from the glinting blue-gray eyes.

"They—they robbed the store, Pere Girault," he stammered weakly. "There was much money there for the payment of pelts to the trappers who were to come Monday. They took my daughter with them. They go in the lugger to make the Mississippi coast and escape. I—I—they thought that I was with them. But—I was but going that I might when came the time, turn them over to the law."

The little priest looked a moment into the working face. "Liar!" was all he said.

It was the fighting man and not the man of God who held sway in his being that moment. "I know how much you mourn that your daughter is with them! Your wife has told."

He spun on his heel.

"Come, Simon. On the *St. Rita* we follow them."

"A moment, *mon pere*," spoke the old man. His fingers working yearningly, he reached out toward Placide Bonfils.

"What course did they plan to take?" he growled.

"Out Southeast Pass," stammered the shivering man.

"Liar again!" snapped Simon. "You know no lugger can cross that bar!"

Stark fear shone in the eyes of the twisted being who cowered there. He could not tell Simon Tournelle why they had taken the Southeast Pass. He dared not. The sinewy old hands were nearing his throat. But to change his story now would be fatal.

"I swear they took that pass!" he shrieked in a surge of fear. "You may slay me if you wish. But they took that pass."

"He will be here to deal with when we return, if he has lied," said the old man shortly. Oaths rumbled in his throat as he and the little priest went down the path. Into his shack he stepped for a moment. His great duck-gun was resting

in the crook of his arm as he stepped aboard the mission boat.

Mooring line flicked from the great snag to which it was looped. The *St. Rita*, poled with a mighty shove out into the current, headed downstream, keen eyes looking ahead through the moonlight. Somewhere along that winding channel little, frightened Clothilde Bonfils was in the hands of drunken fiends.

LONG afterward, Father Girault, closing his eyes, could see minutely every detail of that mad trip. The glow of the moonlight on the wide reaches of marsh grass and roseau-cane. The black stretches of the twisting channel. The alligators that seemed to be floating logs at their approach, but that sank silently as the ripples of the *St. Rita's* bow reached them. The brooding, primeval silence that wrapped the whole world, it seemed—a world over which death itself seemed to hover with black and bat-like wings.

It was no deeper, that silence, than the silence of the two men who sped to the south.

Out down Southeast Pass the *St. Rita* raced, with never a trace of Jules Bourgeois's stolen lugger in sight from bend to bend. Then, as they rounded the last turn in the channel through which open Gulf could be seen dancing in the moonlight, they saw the craft.

"Crouch low beside the wheel, *mon pere*, lest they shoot!" called Simon. "I will take care of them."

His great gun was poised and ready. Up to the side of the lugger surged the mission boat. The two watched keenly for sign of movement on board. There was none. Swiftly they lashed the *St. Rita* alongside with looping hawser. They leaped to the lugger's deck.

In the little forepeak, cowering in the blankets, they found Clothilde Bonfils.

They lifted her out to the deck. Her legs gave way beneath her as their hold relaxed. She sank to the dew-wet planks.

As one would hold a child, the gaunt old man lifted her, with soothing words of comfort.

"Where have they gone, my daughter?" the priest asked gently.

Slowly, chokingly, she found voice.

"Around the point in the lugger's skiff, *Pere* Girault," she said. "They spoke of pirate treasure hidden in a tomb. A tomb of iron. They had tools with which to break it open. Then they were coming back, to go——"

It was a heart-breaking cry from the lips of the old man that interrupted her words.

The gaunt old arms that had held the girl, clutched convulsively. Gently he lowered her to the deck.

"Quick, *Pere* Girault," said Simon Tournelle. "There may yet be time."

Moved by the same thought, they leaped back on board the *St. Rita*. From its deck they lifted the light pirogue in which the priest had threaded many a shallow stream in the depths of the swamp. Into the bow stepped Simon, his gun beside him. Under the push of the paddles the little craft skimmed over the bar.

Up into Redfish Bay they headed, straight over the course that Simon Tournelle had covered so many times in the weary years he had spent on the South Coast.

The moon had been sinking lower and lower—fading in the great space of the arching sky. Darkness deepened as the two paddled desperately over the broad expanse of the quiet bay. Then, like a peephole into the door of a blazing furnace, the glowing bead that was the upper arc of the rising sun showed, out at the farthest edge of the tumbling waters at the Gulf to the east.

Into the mass of roseau-cane at the head of the bay darted the sharp bow of the little pirogue just as the light of dawn came flooding over the waters, while a great sheaf of gleaming lances of light, vanguard of the sunrise, vanished from the eastern horizon.

In the small and oozy inlet, the two pursuers saw the empty skiff of Jules Bourgeois's stolen lugger. They looked at one another comprehendingly. To this, the malicious tales of Placide Bonfils had brought them.

Then to their ears came the ringing sound of metal on metal.

Lightly the little priest leaped to a tuft of marsh-grass and plunged on along the trail of the broken roseau-cane. Behind him, his gaunt and bearded face drawn in grim lines, his heavy gun balancing him as he sprang from tuft to tuft with wiry legs from which the years had taken such small toll, came Simon Tournelle.

"One more smash wit' the sledge, Bowlegs," ordered Rat-tooth.

Metal crashed at the blow.

"Now," said the leader. Point of crowbar inserted in fresh broken crevice. With grunt and strain the two leaned against it.

The job was done. The great iron door swung open wide. The two peered within. Exposed before them, indeed, lay the treasure of Simon Tournelle.

Over the threshold stepped Rat-tooth, reaching for what he saw, to drag it out to the light of day. Then the frightened call of his companion sounded in his ears. He darted out again.

Leaping through the roseau-cane into the little clearing the two vandals saw the two who had trailed them. The priest was in the lead. The mud-splashed little figure in black was topped by a face scowling with wrath.

But that face was mild compared to the visage behind it. For a cold and terrible rage had settled upon the features of Simon Tournelle. Jaw clenched beneath gray beard, eyes smouldering, muscles of cheeks hard as iron ridges, the tall old man stood poised. Not a word came from his lips. One glance he cast at the shattered iron door.

There was no need of words. Pistols gleamed in the gangsters' hands. Their muzzles spat in the morning sunlight. The sound of the two explosions was dwarfed to the merest pop by the greatness of the open space.

A red weal streaked the cheek of Father Girault Duchassois. But the little priest gave no ground.

"Devils——" he began, but his thundering order never was finished.

Old Simon Tournelle at the shot had lurched for a second. Then, with never a word, as effortlessly and instinctively as ever he had raised that mighty gun against the squattering rise of mallard and canvasback, he snapped the patched old stock to his shoulder and fired. Twice—though one explosion seemed but a continuation of the first.

The smoking barrels of the great weapon sank. Uncertainly the old man stepped forward. His knees wavered with the weight of his body, but he held himself to his feet by some supreme effort of will. Step by step he crossed the open space between the two great oleanders to the shattered door of the ancient iron tomb. The light of the morning sun shone full in upon it. There in their niches of brick and mortar rested the two strange old iron coffins of the 'sixties. One was that of a woman. One was that of a child.

Weakly the gray old head nodded.

"They are safe, *Pere* Girault," he muttered slowly. He lurched sideways for a step or two. Then his filming eyes rose to the outer surface of the shattered door. A great crack fissured across its face, marring the inscription lettered in a foundry mold of long ago, cast by the order of one torn in an agony of remorseful grief.

Death should come gently
To one of gentle mould like thee,
As light winds, wandering through groves of bloom,
Detach the delicate blossoms from the tree.

The blurred eyes of the man the South Coast had known so long as Simon Tournelle could not stay open to read it to the end. But there was no need. It had been graven on his heart nearly half a century before.

"It was not gentle—that death," he murmured.

His great, gaunt figure seemed to crumple in upon itself. He slumped forward, face downward, one hand outstretched, the sun-browned old fingers touching the edge of that door that long years ago had closed upon his treasure.

To his side sped the little priest. With tender hands he turned the old man over. The muddy black cassock, hastily torn off, he wadded into a pillow of sorts. In his hands he scooped up the swamp water, to dash it hopelessly against the sun-tanned brow.

The fading eyes opened once more.

"*Pere* Girault," came the whispered words, "you know, old friend, this is the end. Think you that aught I have done in these years absolve me of the oath I took that night my drunken folly sank the *Conqueror?*"

The hard little hand of the South Coast priest gripped the gaunt fingers of the dying man. His lips, that had been moving in the last offices of his calling for those who sail uncharted seas, spoke in answer.

"Michel Roussell," he said softly, "I who know the good that you have done—I tell you that you stand absolved."

The brow of the dying man knit with mighty effort. Speech struggled through his bearded lips.

"Then take us all three and bury us out in the Gulf," he whispered. "Clean blue water—where no hand of man can disturb their sleep—when I am not here—to guard against—that tale—imbeciles—treasure—and——"

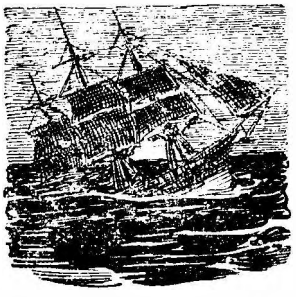
The lips ceased their fluttering effort.

The soul of Captain Michel Roussell sailed out across a Sea Invisible.

Beside the prostrate body with its upturned smiling face, knelt the little priest, his lips moving in prayer.

Crashing steps through the marsh, that told him of the approach of men, brought him to his feet. From Pilot Town they had come at the tale the wife of Placide Bonfils had spread. From staring-eyed little Clothilde Bonfils, on the deck of a rocking lugger by the bar, they had learned where to go.

With raised hand the little priest of the Oblate Fathers motioned them to silence—to gather about him. Then to that rough-clad group he spoke. It was a strange scene. It echoed to stranger words, there on the site of the sunken settlement.



Of the old, now almost forgotten, wreck of the *Conqueror* he told them. Of the blasphemous oath that her captain had taken. Of the long years of penance through which he had kept that oath, disgraced among the world of men, coming back to the desolate marshes bearded and unrecognized, living out his life in that lonely shack by Pilot Town, spending long hours in prayer from time to time by that lonely tomb where wife and child had been laid at rest.

"He was a sailor, *mes enfants*," said the little priest at the end. "Little of value as my life may be, doubt not he saved it. I have known him since first I came among you. The good works he has done with me as his almoner, some of you have reason to know, now that death ends the silence he imposed upon me. A life of penance he has done for a great fault in his youth. You help me, do you not, to bear him to sleep in peace amid blue water beside those he loved—as he asked with his dying breath?"

Heads nodded silently.

"These others we leave for their turn," said Father Girault, with wave of hand to where two other dead lay crumpled. "First comes the task of serving one of our own."

With reverent hands they bore the gaunt old form out to the *St. Rita* by the bar of the pass. Reverently they prepared it for burial at sea, lashed in the canvas of their spare boat-gear. And then with infinite labor they took from the ancient tomb the old, old coffins or iron that so long had rested there.

It was a solemn little procession of boats that went its way back up Southeast Pass to the river. Few words were spoken as the little fleet steered southward, down the mighty stream, down the South Pass channel, out into the tumbling reaches of the Gulf of Mexico.

There, where the blue water is unstained by the sullen rush of the muddy river, where the Port Eads light is only a tiny mark against the horizon, they hove to. Bareheaded they stood on decks that rose and fell to the long, smooth swell of the open sea.

And the little priest, again in his stained and rusty black cassock, the great brass cross of the Oblate Fathers thrust in his sable girdle, read the service for the burial of the dead who are to sleep in deep waters.

"—we therefore commit their bodies to the deep—looking for the general Resurrection in the last day—when the sea shall give up her dead——"

Out over the waters to their ears rang the voice of Father Girault Duchassois.

The clean blue of the waves that Captain Michel Roussell had cloven in the pride of his youth grew smooth once more. Beneath them he rested at last, absolved of the oath of his folly, side by side now with those he loved.

On the deck of the *St. Rita* stood Jules Bourgeois, close to the side of the little priest. He shivered slightly. A coastal man was Jules.

"A cold bed in which to rest, *mon pere*," he said, looking out over the marching ranks of the waves.

"Not so, my son," said Father Girault. "For him who lived so long among us, it is warm as the love that lives in the heart of man. A sailor has gone home to sleep."

EMPTY BOTTLES

By ANTHONY M. RUD

Author of "Nevada Diamonds," "The Devil's Heirloom," etc.

A SHADOW OF THE PAST SPREADS A GRIM CLOUD OVER THE LIVES OF MEN OF THE UNDERWORLD—WHO WOULD FORGET THEIR PAST

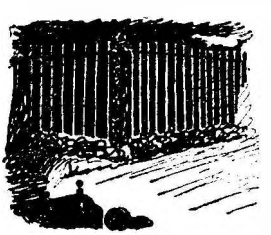
AFTER eight days, when the Turk felt certain that no suspicion attached to him, he drove out to the haystack cache in the identical truck he had used to rob the loft. Nearly all was brutally serene in his mind. He grunted contempt for both the police of this Mid-West city and for the avaricious merchant who would not spend one hundred dollars a month to procure the services of a watchman. Eleven thousand dollars' worth, wholesale, of the most expensive silk jerseys, chiffon stockings and lingerie direct from Paris had been the apparent price of his penny wisdom.

Dislabeled, and with the cases planed and camouflaged by coverings of glued Bristol board, these sheer, beautiful goods would pass through the hands of Abie Treiger, "general importer," whose dingy shop occupied the third floor above a movie palace in a town thirty-odd miles to the west of Chicago. Thence, who could know? Abie kept his trade secrets, for they were worth discounts of "feefty, ten und t'ree" on the asking prices named by his furtive supply agents.

A cursory inspection made an evening earlier from the window of a taxicab hired to take him out Roosevelt Road toward the fistic mill at Sager's Arena in Aurora, had assured the Turk in respect to one of the minor worries. The buildings of this farm upon which stood the secret haystack, were dark—as untenanted as any of the crawfish flats outside Broadview. Now, if field rats hadn't gnawed their way into the filmy laces——

The Turk bit down upon his dead cheroot, grinning. The haul had come none too soon, for that dame had devilled him out of his honest job at the moonshine bar. Damn her! But then, she'd taken the worst end of the stick, at that. Between old Haskell and tending the kid she'd have her hands full and stuck to it; unless the crook was loosening up a lot better than he used to, he'd give her the air on any proposition like Benny!

Driving on, with the spotlight lowered to splash a brilliant stain upon the right-hand margin of the concrete road, the Turk's face became lax and heavy-jowled in the shadow behind the wheel. He drove miles more, growling occasional curses at some of the idiots coming from the west, fools who didn't know enough to dim the headlights of their cars.



Then he snapped on the dash bulb in order to read the odometer, and left the light burning. In the faint illumination, crouched like a toad upon the stiff, high

seat, he looked to have no forehead—only a mass of black, tousled hair still sticky from the pomade of two nights since. His nose was bulbous, depressed into width at the bridge where the heel of some gang fighter had smashed it years before. The mouth was wide, with thick, pendulous lips. His neck had been absorbed, it seemed, by the pads of adipose above and below.

A lump, a clod with cunning, no more a Turk than he was an Irishman. Why the cognomen had been attached to an offspring of Slav-Levantine-Bavarian ancestry was answered only in some unwritten and now forgotten archive of a Continental slum.

Men had deceived themselves more than once concerning the Turk. Behind the swarthy skin and jaw, behind the slanting, matted brow, lay a brain stultified by long years of excesses, yet dangerous still, as were the long, capable fingers. Unbelievable as it now must have seemed to one who glimpsed the driver for a first time, the Turk nearly thirty years before had come to America as a promising apprentice to the repair chief of a Swiss firm exporting huge and expensive calculating machines.

Not even a genius could have learned the intricacies of these complex mechanisms in three years; ordinary students who ask only an operating knowledge must study and concentrate for weeks before keys and levers work their wills in division, discount and other processes of modern commercial affairs. A Swiss apprenticeship in watchmaking, or the repair of calculating machines, ends only when the master decides that his advice and example have begotten another master; rarely is it of less than ten years duration.

The Turk found a more lucrative profession, one in which the sensitive touch of trained fingers and the keenness of an auditory sense trained to diagnose trouble before taking down a machine, made him appear a genius. Only a lack of Napoleonic qualities in the leader of his gang of safe-crackers and loft-robbers brought the catastrophe—and a long hiatus in the Turk's activities. He had not been to blame. When the plain-clothes men surrounded the building he was working away upon the clicking tumblers of a safe, oblivious to the quick tapping on a window pane which signified that the others were on their respective ways.

This night he had been in as nearly an expansive mood as his surly, whisky-curdled nature could allow. One job, the looting of a delicatessen store from which he had carried away the tiny safe bodily, had gone askew. The very simplicity of the mechanism balked him for a few hours. Then, after a two-day debauch he returned to find the safe gone and only one empty beer bottle in the spot of hiding.

That bottle puzzled. It had not been there earlier; of this much the Turk was positive! The hair lifted along the back of his neck with a vague, elusive phantasm of memory he could not grasp and make his own. He departed New York City that night, swiftly, and in a stolen speed truck upon which he placed serial and motor numbers slightly different from those borne originally. In Chicago he registered the truck as his own, put it up for a needed repair, and then lay low in a job behind the bar of a soft-drink saloon while he sent for Benny, his crippled son. The bowed, limping child arrived almost starved; the Turk, half in hate and half in pity, threw food and white whisky into the child's stomach; then proceeded to ignore him as before.

The beer bottle slipped into obscurity. The Turk gathered courage, made a connection with a dependable fence, and then planned another coup. It came off with ridiculous ease; these Chicago cops and merchants were easy marks, for sure!

And now he passed the abandoned farm, looking for lights and seeing none. Stopping the truck on a side road, he reconnoitered. Nobody home. The stream of traffic passing constantly through the night on Roosevelt Road bothered the Turk not a jolt. Without lights on his truck as he drove in, no one would suspect him of being other than a countryman. Why should anyone want to despoil a haystack?

Pawing like a dog burrowing under a fence, the Turk dug quickly and silently into the stack. He slowed as he reached the spot he had left the cases. A dull apprehension began to seep into his brain. The first ought to have been about here. Had the hay slumped, covering the cases deeper?

Glancing around once, almost in fear, he began again to throw aside the fragrant timothy. A hundred pound slump of the

dusty stuff from inside dropped upon his head and shoulders; but he shook himself, sneezed, and cleared this out in a hurry.

They were gone! Damn it, *they were gone!*

Further than he had any right to expect the cases to have receded, the Turk dug, sneezing imprecations as the hay dust filled his eyes, his nostrils. His knee came down upon something unyielding though small. Scraping away the lowest layer, his fingers closed upon the lump; it was small and hard. He lifted it, and by the feeling knew the object all too well.

Another empty beer bottle!

In a space of seconds the angry, dismayed cracksman changed character. The hair once more prickled up along the ridge of his neck, but this time in sheer terror. The coincidence meant something he could not remember, but something which menaced! What the hell was that bottle for? Who was jobbing him? What did he remember about an empty bottle? Somewhere, sometime—but the memory had been dosed too often with raw fusel oil and alcohol. There was nothing but fear, ten times enhanced because of its nature remaining unknown, ungrasped. The Turk backed from the hay tunnel on his hands and knees, cold sweat beading his cheeks. Just to get away and be alone to figure it out!

A circle cold and small pressed against the rearward bulge of his underslung jaw.

"Don't go for your gun, Turk," bade a quiet voice. "I'd have no compunction in blowing you to hell, but as a matter of fact I'm not out for shooting. I need you other ways."

"Huh? What——?" His voice came as a frightened croak.

"Never mind what, for now! All you need to know is that I am not a policeman; that I have written down and filed away thorough reports of your New York crimes—the confession of Lag Hillis, for instance, in which he tells how you and he scragged a bank watchman. Lag confessed to me and a priest. Do you remember?"

The rise of the Turk's shoulders and the bunched knots of muscle thrusting upward through the fat of his shoulders, were tantamount to a confession though he did not, could not speak.

"Of course you do," continued the voice in calm certitude. "That was only one instance. I have also complete descriptions of three other occasions upon which you worked for Haskell's gang. They're written down, notarized, and waiting for my death or disappearance. The minute I don't show up they'll be placed in the hands of the police. Now I think probably you understand. I'm putting up my gat. Turn around. We're going back to town in your truck."

Shaking with a fear he could not hide, the Turk obeyed. On his feet he towered above the immaculately garbed figure waiting—a slim, straight-featured little man who did not show a gun now, or seem to be in the slightest dread of his life!

"My taxi-guy!"

The slight stranger nodded, his lips twisting in a sidewise smile. "Yes, and many other men who have served you, Turk. Your memory for supers isn't very good. Can't you recall anyone before me who has limped like this?"

With that he strode out toward the truck. At each step his left hip sagged two or three inches though his shoulders and head remained square to the horizontal.

A surge of blurred, frightened memories came now. The guy who'd got him the flop at Staff Ritter's! Maybe the same bird who'd watched that time he grabbed the safe from the delicatessen.

Out flipped the Turk's automatic. The slight man waved it away, almost careless. "If I'd wanted your life, Turk," he explained patiently, "I could split to the police long ago. I don't. I need you—and in addition, though it may make no impression whatever on your elementary mind, I may say that you can go ahead and shoot. You'll trade a bullet for the chair. That's all. I'm not particular. Go ahead and trade!"

The stranger actually reached inside the left hip pocket of his suit, withdrew a flat cigarette case and matches, then lit a Turkish cigarette of the oily, aromatic sort the Turk always had considered beneath the dignity of a man.

Turk did not shoot. Something more than fear stayed his hand. Already he had come under the spell of that soft, wire-strong voice—of sheer indifference as mirrored in that voice. A tight corner, for sure. But he'd see what this bird wanted. It couldn't be as bad as the chair.

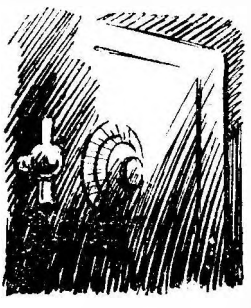
It proved to be far less bad. The stranger explained nothing, but simply put the cracksman to work. There was a safe—made of wood. This safe was not supposed to hold valuables, but Turk had to work upon it according to blueprints fur-

nished by the man he learned to call, simply, X.

There was no question of wages. X provided a bed, meals, and an occasional pint of moonshine whisky of the same corn-and-molasses ferment the Turk had dispensed and drunk for upwards of two years while working behind the so-called soft drink bar. Later, when the Turk needed clothing, an entire new outfit, from hat to shoes, was given to him without explanation. Also some extra ties and semi-soft collars, size eighteen; a few silk handkerchiefs of the colored variety he had affected.

Questions went unanswered. Little by little the Turk understood the object sought by his strange master. X was asking the Turk to throw down the entire profession of safe cracksmen! The blueprints, drawn by X himself, were as readable as those of a mechanical engineer. Also they were appallingly simple and straightforward in principle. X, knowing full well, it seemed, the means by which the Turk had made himself valuable to Connie Haskell in the old days, purposed to make a lock which would baffle every crook even of the Turk's own ability! No lock could be made to withstand "soup," of course; but the scheme broached by X was intended to foil, not safe-blowers, but the gentler and more artistic craftsmen who specialized in opening boxes with the aid of their hands and ears alone.

In short, X proposed a sort of eccentric to the action of the main tumbler lock, an appliance whose rasping noise plus its nonpertinent ticks upon the steel, would hide and camouflage successfully the touch and sound of the combination. The device was



to be made at first as an inexpensive attachment for use upon wall safes and other cheap safety-deposit contrivances; later it might be elaborated to include every good mechanism up to the two-thousand-dollar time locks of bank vaults. X stated that he insisted upon a finished article which would fool the most accomplished Jimmy Valentine; and one, also, which could be manufactured at a price of not more than five to thirty dollars, depending upon the variety of lock it was to protect.

X promised a patent, with a one-tenth interest assigned to the Turk. The prospect failed with the unwilling machinist; too long he had considered such contrivances as problems to be solved. The idea of manufacturing a lock device which would baffle even himself was revolting—though it caught and thrilled a deeper instinct, that of the maker and lover of fine machinery. But the Turk too long had been trained as a crook. The inverted loyalty which had made him accept eight years and some months of hard labor rather than betray his gang, came to the surface. He made the small mechanism, but saw to it that it worked in faulty fashion.

X frowned. He suggested corrections—the right ones. The Turk turned sulky and stalled; after all what matter if this man had the goods on him? A quick kill, a getaway, another change of name and occupation—his black eyes slitted as he looked at the man who held over him the threat.

Yet the mechanic delayed. There was something he could not fathom, something daunting in the gray, flinty eyes of the debonair little man! When X came around to supervise, which he did seldom, the Turk needed every bit of his self-restraint to keep from following the specifications laid down—as if by the old Swiss master. Once or twice, not bunglingly, but with an assurance which brought a scowl to the lips of the ex-apprentice, X filed off projections carefully provided by the Turk, projections which made impotent certain phases of the interference camouflage.

"You could have done that," said X the last time. "I shall not threaten any more. Only this must be right. And now, because I am preparing for another of my human objectives, teach me the touch and system by which I can open safes."

He made the request in a quiet voice, but one which brooked no denial. Explaining that his finger tips had been trained in the speedy and sensitive manipulations of a deck of cards, X took for granted his ability.

Sneering at what he thought presumption, the Turk obeyed. Where'd this bird get the idea he could get hep to a trick only a couple dozen burglars in the country could turn? Telling a guy to listen for this and that, and feel when the tumblers came into a worn notch, was good dope, but what would it mean to him? Nothing. Getting the hang of that trick was way beyond the ordinary goof. Maybe trying it would get X into trouble, though. The

Turk gave his best advice and instruction, and complimented hypocritically as the younger man strove in vain to master the knack.

Then came a day when it seemed that X realized his deficiencies. Not once had he succeeded in opening the simple lock after it had been reset to a different combination. He took it away, however, and with it the door and mechanism of the wooden safe; the latter, in spite of the Turk's stalling, had neared perfection. The elder man meditated smashing it to bits, destroying the blueprints, and making a run for it on the day he killed X.

Those gray, flinty eyes of X seemed to divine his thoughts, however. The time he brought the materials for a second model, he directed the Turk to the window which looked down upon the grimy street. There an odd bit of drama was being enacted. A bluecoat swung slowly along the opposite sidewalk. Officer M'Goorty at the moment was thinking, doubtless, of the discomforts of a heavy uniform on such a hot day—especially when foaming relief no longer was passed out to him from the side doors of the vacant saloons.

Suddenly he stopped, staring down beneath the fore-shortened shade of a tattered awning in front of what had been Dan's Place. Was the heat affecting his brain, then? It looked like a bottle of beer, one which still wore its tin hat—and upon which the beads of coolness streaked the famous label!

With a bound M'Goorty pounced upon it, exclaiming reverently as he saw that there indeed had been no deception! An old-time label, too—bearing the legend at the bottom, "Alcohol By Volume, 3¾ Per Cent!"

Glancing about and upward, Officer M'Goorty suddenly tucked his prize beneath his coat, and turned swiftly for the haven of a doorway. At the instant his eyes reached a certain second story window across the street, a heavy, toadlike workman whose swarthy skin had gone to the color of green crayon, fell back clutching his gun—but without a thought of turning it upon the tyrant who kept him to this hateful task. The eyes of X glinted with contemptuous amusement mingled with memory and cold menace.

IN A small, primly furnished bachelor apartment, several miles from the warehouse room in which the Turk worked and slept, the man called X finished the first model. Not content with its seeming perfection, he waited its shipping to Washington several days longer. Though he had not allowed his subordinate to guess, back there under the Turk's tutelage X had found himself able to solve the combination of a simple lock. Still he practised, buying now a set of more intricate ones.

When he was satisfied that his eccentric, when attached in place, utterly destroyed the sound and feel by which a touch-and-ear cracksman worked, he shipped the model to a patent lawyer in Washington with a summary of his claims.

That was half his job. In case the second half failed, he would have to use the other model now being constructed slowly by the Turk. But X had no intention of failing. Irony lay behind his attitude and revenge upon the Turk, yet in dealing with the man who once had been the Turk's director and leader in affairs of crime, X would play a grimmer game. He went, as twice before, prepared to kill—though hoping to avoid this issue in favor of a better.

The spacious bungalow of James Leffingwell Haskell backed upon the slanting shore of Lake Michigan, facing one of the outside avenues of a north shore suburb through which Sheridan Road deserts its blue-eyed affinity to right-angle through the hinterland of glass-showcased apartments.

X knew the ground, and also believed that he knew that the house would be deserted at this early hour of the evening. Haskell, some time previously, had ordered seats for a musical revue from a downtown ticket broker.

In the act of crossing an expanse of darkened lawn to the north side of the wide piazza, X froze in his tracks. A brilliant light had flashed upon the very spot he would have reached in another moment! There was no shelter nearer than a hedge of box which lined the motor-way to the garage in the rear. As the door opened and a man's figure emerged, X bent and ran for the hedge, vaulting over and then peering cautiously above the close-branched greenery to discover whether or not he had been seen.

Apparently he was lucky. A woman's voice sounded in words of frosty farewell. The door closed. A slouching, heavy figure of a man vaguely familiar to X descended the broad steps and traversed the walk to the street. It was not Haskell, whose lank, bent and wizened figure would have been unmistakable in any light.

X waited, an edge of impatience rising now beneath the calm certainty of his usual poise. At least two persons on whom he had not counted had been present in the bungalow this evening. Possibly one of the servants had been entertaining in the master's absence; yet if that were the case, why had the man departed before ten? Haskell, if he were at the theatre indeed, could not reach his home earlier than midnight. Keeping to the shadows, and speculating concerning the two lighted rooms in the master's portion of the house, X made a stealthy way back to the garage.

It was a small, one-car structure of stucco to match the bungalow. The doors stood wide open. There was no car within.

X nodded in satisfaction. Haskell was away. As if in corroboration of the servant hypothesis—probably a quarrel would account for the early parting—the lights in the front of the bungalow all were extinguished save one dim bulb in the hall which X knew burned all night.

He hesitated no longer. Unaware of the crouching, toad-like figure who scowled in puzzled interest at the furtive one's goings and comings, keeping to his vantage point of shadow and hedge from which X's figure if not his face was discernible, the burglar stepped lightly up the front steps, moved along the piazza to the fourth French window—the one from which he had removed the wired alarm—jimmied it open, and entered. Behind him a heavy, crouching shape detached itself from the shadows and followed—tiptoeing with extreme caution and slowness. The Turk didn't understand any crook going after old Haskell, but the lay might be worth looking into. On account of his suspicious, miserly nature, the boss never had had any use for banks.

A faint gleam of light from the hall showed X the furniture. He moved swiftly through this wide living-room, tried a closed door on the southeast wall, found it moved under his hand, and pushed it open cautiously. The little office was dark.

No light could penetrate this den of the old miser-crook, but before beginning the supreme test, X closed and locked both of the two doors, and then searched out the wires to the alarms of the three alcove windows. Cutting these, he slid open gently one of the three, and peered down. The faint gray-blue from a distant street arc disclosed an open lawn, the grass of which was soft enough to dull the sound of a seven-foot drop—though it would, most assuredly, show footprints.

The first guarded flash of his lamp caused X to start, seizing his automatic. Then, with a silent laugh at his own scariness, he projected a faint glow from the powerful lens through his shrouding fingers, and moved toward the wheeled object in the far corner.

It was an invalid chair! From within its capacious arms came the faint suspirations of a sleeping child. X bent over, making certain that he was menaced by nothing more than a small boy clad in pajamas, a child who still clutched an open book, though he had turned out the desk lamp at his elbow!

X turned back. He reached high, pressing a button, then lowering the heavy panel of quarter-sawed oak which sprang away under his hands. Behind this stood the unwieldy contraption old Haskell, who should have known far better, thought was a safe. True, a second's quick examination showed X that the box was more intricate than any of the locked receptacles upon which he had practiced; yet now he *had* to succeed.

Spinning the larger dial, then revolving it to right and left more and more slowly, X listened for a space of ten minutes to the faint clicks and felt for the infinitesimal "give" which heralded a number or letter of use in the combination. With sensitive finger tips just touching the steel he caught one—another. Five such surrendered themselves; X made mental note, memorizing the positions, praying that he had not missed any. Probably he had not.

The second dial proved child's play in comparison. It set with a distinct click and loosening. The cracksman nodded in satisfaction. There was nothing superlatively difficult here, as the second dial merely had to be adjusted to a single position while the first was rotated in a correct succession of five numbers.

Now came mere routine, provided X had done his guessing correctly, the spinning off of permutations. Sooner or later the door would open. It did—on the third trial!

Fronting X was a double tier of locked steel drawers, but these he had expected.

Removing a set of flat skeleton keys from their silencing of cotton, he opened one drawer after another. Though he had expected much, the sight of the scintillating diamond trays, the collection of finger rings, tiaras, lavalliers and brooches still in their settings, the assortments of cut rubies and sapphires brought a gasp of amazement and admiration to his lips. No wonder old Haskell had been able to desert the life of crime! How many dozens or scores of times must he have held out some precious portion of the swag captured by his human tools!

The cloth sack drawn from beneath X's jacket filled to bulging. And yet there was one last drawer. Liberty bonds! X inhaled sharply as he glimpsed the figure 10,000 on the topmost one of the sheaf, yet he took up the bunch bound by the rubber band, and then three strays which appeared more like municipals, thrusting all of them into the inside breast pocket of his jacket and fastening against loss with a safety pin. This vengeance would be sweeter even than he had dared to dream! How he would torture Haskell during the next month, sending in the mail a single gem crushed to powder, the broken ashes of a huge bond! The miser's soul would shrivel and die; and X would watch, unsuspected.

As he was finishing the job by wiping all the metal and wooden surfaces with a silk handkerchief to remove finger marks, a snuffling sigh from the invalid boy made him start.

"Don't be angry, Uncle Jim!" begged a faint, tired voice. "My back aches so *bad!*" Tears were not far away.

"I'm sorry. But hush, sonny! Just close your eyes and go to sleep again," whispered X. "You mustn't make any noise just now." He turned the flash around, at the same time completing the wiping of the oaken panel.

"But I wanted to tell you, Uncle Jim; I didn't want to make you mad. I just couldn't sleep at all; I guess I'm busting in two! It seemed like maybe I could read, so I got myself out of bed and come in here. I ain't hurt anything."

In spite of his need to hurry away, something in the plaintive, tired voice tugged fiercely and suddenly at the vitals of the man who called himself X. He walked forward, holding the bright light upon the gaunt, pain-lined face of the lad in the chair in order that the latter might not distinguish the intruder.

Then all at once X discerned the reason for the wheeled chair. The lad, an undersized, ill-nourished boy with wan cheeks and great, dark eyes, one who might have been anywhere from nine to fourteen years of age, held his legs curled up in an unnatural position — one which sent a wave of sudden pain and compelling sympathy through the elder! Unconsciously X's hand pressed against the hip upon which he limped.

"I am not your uncle, just a messenger he sent to get something for him. Is Haskell really your uncle?" asked X swiftly, a strained note coming into his voice.

"Oh no! Miss Ellen just brought me here——"

A thumping crash, a hoarse command of which the words were indistinguishable, and then the continued impacts of heavy steps such as are made when men struggle, broke in upon the speech. X waited no longer. Reaching the window in three hurried steps he tossed out the filled bag, then vaulted after it. His heels sank deep in the damp sod.

A window shade ran up, throwing light outward to the lawn. Simultaneously plate glass splintered. X turned with his pistol ready, but the destruction had little direct bearing upon his escape. There in the oblong of light two men wrestled. One was tall, lank and old. The other appeared toad-like, bulbous in the grotesque distortion of conflict.

The hollow *pung!* of a shot jarred X into action. He saw, as a last tableau, the figure he knew to be that of the Turk, sinking out through the jagged glass of the broken window, his huge hands still clutching at the windpipe of his adversary. X ran, then walked, to the point he had cached the Gladstone bag which he had provided to hold the loot. On the way to the boulevard, where he would pick up a cab, he noted the lights of Haskell's car slowly retreating toward the garage. Apparently the chauffeur had not been alarmed.

X READ the account of the double tragedy for the third time while he waited the coming of Detective Sergeant Bill Sebastian. Piecing out by

deduction the portions unstated in the newspaper account, X guessed that the Turk must have shadowed him, following him into the home of the old gang leader—probably from curiosity. Surprised by the return of Haskell, the Turk fought to escape. Haskell, no match for the middle-aged intruder, went down and out with a broken neck and black-blue sunken marks of fingers upon his skinny throat.

The shooting occurred as the two threshed about before the window. Though X had been inside the bungalow twice previously, spying out the hiding place of Haskell's unsold loot, he had not learned of the niece, Ellen Haskell, until she was mentioned by the boy cripple. That part was explained by the statement that Ellen Haskell only the day before had returned from a trip to Philadelphia taken in the boy's company.

And here X discovered a startling fact, one which caused his brows to crease in discomfort and perplexity. Ivan Andrus, the cripple, was said to be the son of the Turk!

Ellen, weeks before, had taken the boy to the Haskell home with the permission of Arieniev Andrus—he who was known as the Turk. Ellen, who devoted most of her days to settlement work, said that she had been attracted and compelled by the unfortunate child's extraordinary mentality. She wished to give him a chance—such a chance in a world as might be vouchsafed by a straight, whole body. For this end she had consulted several eminent child specialist surgeons.

She had shot the Turk. Coming into the room just at the moment when Andrus was killing her relative, she tried with all strength to part them—but in vain. Guessing Haskell's extremity and seeing a pistol lying upon the rug, she seized it and fired at the Turk's knees.

The heavy-calibered army pistol, jerking upward in her unaccustomed grasp, threw a slug glancing into the heart of Arieniev Andrus, though not until his deadly work upon Haskell had been completed.

Bill Sebastian, son of that old chief of detectives, Nicholas Sebastian, gasped and pinched himself furtively beneath the desk during X's calm, terse recital. The visitor, a slim, quietly-garbed youth in his early twenties, spoke in a businesslike fashion—quite as though the finding of a huge, stolen treasure were a part of any year's routine!

A riot of quite natural speculations seethed within the investigator's brain. Who was this chap who refused his name? A member of the mob which in the days of Sebastian the Elder baffled the watch-dogs of half a continent? Son of the chief crook, perhaps, inheriting a vault full of stolen goods he did not dare to try to sell? A double-crosser, asking immunity through making a policeman his accessory after the fact?

Bill Sebastian's trained instincts denied. X was not pretending to narrate the whole story, yet there was decency and a likable quality in the level gray eyes which made Bill ready to overlook small irregularities. Restitution of properties long believed lost was being offered. In reading the list of jewels alone, Bill remembered vaguely how his father had chewed his mustache and growled at the cleverness of men who could make away with such spectacular articles, escaping detection. There were the Triplets, three coal black diamonds next to priceless which once had been the chief treasure in the collection of a Baltimore millionaire—and for which there still stood a reward of twenty thousand dollars "and no questions asked." None other of the stones X listed were valued as highly, yet several of the names had been connected with famous burglaries of the past. The Palmerston sapphires, the Bert Jones casket of Burmese rubies, the Telfer turquoise.

In all, X claimed to identify sixteen lots of stolen gems. Beside these he noted curtly at the end, "sixty-seven stones removed from settings; thirty-five pieces of silver, gold, and platinum jewelry." He made no mention of the bonds. Haskell

was known to have made some money in stock exchange speculation; unless proof to the contrary arose, X had an idea for the just disposal of this wealth.

The sergeant's eyes grew bright. More than the half of the reward money offered by the visitor loomed before him the tremendous boost such a recovery of the gems would mean for Bill Sebastian. X insisted he was to be kept clear of the affair; Bill's own word, backed by his known fidelity to a promise or a trust, was all the security wanted! X had chosen his man with care.

Two months before, the entire credit for a striking achievement in sleuthing had been grabbed from Bill by an ambitious superior. This was an opportunity to more than square matters—and Bill would

not be backward! He rose, extending his hand. "I'm with you, X—with just the reservation that if you're not on the square you'll get the same treatment any other would receive!"

A smile which brought out youth and an invitation to comradeship from behind the mask of flinty gray, grew in X's eyes as he came to his feet, meeting the clasp halfway. "Sometime, Sebastian," he said, "I'm going to tell you the same story I hope to be able to tell this afternoon to a person I have not met. Until then—well, I think the satchel I left with the desk sergeant may keep you busy!"

THE card brought to Ellen failed to mention the pseudonym of X. It bore the name, Sidney Torres Casson.

"I have come to speak to you a little about the crippled chap, Ivan Andrus," began Casson quietly, bowing to the girl's reserved nod. In truth that courteous gesture concealed a sudden, mighty perturbation, a wondering, a rebellion, a knowledge—and a quickening of arteries and brain which both obeyed, the knowledge rather than the insurgent reaction of cynicism. Unknowing, he had guessed her thus! She would have had to be distant, dark-eyed, slim. It was near to the perfection of taste that she had not donned a height of mourning, but had chosen a frock of cream white with a trim of lavender. Casson, who now had shed the initial X for good and all, found his calm a goal to seek rather than a tool to use. Within two minutes he knew what he would not dare tell for months, years perhaps.

He struck exactly the one chord which could have demolished barriers permeable only to sympathy! Ellen Haskell straightened. Her eyes lost their impersonality; though shaded with grief that was not for the man who had died nor even for the man she had killed unintentionally, they regarded Sidney Casson with a great intensification. Perhaps a relative of the crippled boy, a man come to redeem the brutality and neglect the effects of which she could not assuage!

Casson plunged. He withdrew from his pocket a rubber-bound packet of bonds, then added to it the three strays he had found in the lowest tray of Nig Haskell's safe.

"There are papers worth close to two hundred thousand," he said quietly. "I am told that you are the sole heir of Jeremy Haskell; therefore I bring them to you. I have asked a representative of the Capital National to call in one-half hour. He will be prepared to give you a receipt and take them off your hands for the present. A box in your name has been rented at the bank. Here is one key. I suggest that you give it to him for the time being. His name is LaFleur—a straightforward young chap with whom I have had some dealings."

"But—*but*——?"

Ellen Haskell made no attempt to hide her gasping astonishment. "*Those!*" she cried. "All that? Oh, thank heaven!" With obvious difficulty she restrained an impulse to rise and leave the room.

"Go tell him!" bade Casson with a smile in his eyes. "I think I understand in part. Don't let him come in here—yet!"

Her glance showed doubt, yet she nodded sharply in decision. Five minutes later she returned, and without explanation gave her hand to Casson's clasp. High color had come from beneath the shadows of her days of trial.

"Thank you!" she said, and took a chair. "Please smoke if you wish, and tell me all."

Sidney Casson was glad of the chance to divert his attention, which had been fastened too closely upon the girl. He lit a cigarette and blew upward a stream of smoke. Then he spoke.

"Just one question," he observed. "Had Ivan's trouble anything to do with his father?"

Ellen's hands clenched, but she managed a quiet voice. "Only this: Arieniev Andrus was a drunkard. He had been so for many years. He struck his son time and time again—the last time with an empty beer bottle. The child's spine is injured. He needs an operation."

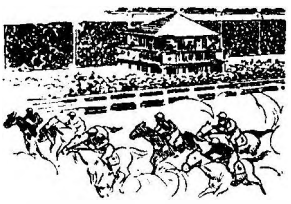
"Enough!" cried Sidney Casson, choking. "You see me?" With that he walked a circuit of the great Persian rug, limping.

"Yes!"

"Then know why I came! I guessed. Ivan will have his chance. The same man swung a bottle upon me and broke my hip. I was six years old at that time. But let me tell more of a story than that, for the sake of the boy!

"We begin in the year 1904 in the upstairs room of a dingy Chicago saloon. A small lad lay on the bed, boning geography. His father returned. The man's eyes shone. He had not been drinking but he was terrifically excited and flowing over with jubilance! Highball had won the

Derby at Washington Park! On his nose the man—my father—had placed three thousand dollars, within a ten-case note of his all!



"Dad never had balance. He had promised my mother that I should be educated off the turf; that I should go to school away from the tracks, and number none of touts, bookmakers and followers of the ponies among my friends.

"He did his best, but mother never guessed how broke he would be. Until the end of 1903 dad and I often slept in flop houses, haymows, or wherever we happened to be. It was a bad life—but dad, failing and becoming bitter, made me study day and evening on books he himself knew only by hearsay. Before I was nine I could spell down most grammar school graduates; I could describe every country in the world; I could—but never mind. Dad did his best, and I thank God that he died believing that he had fulfilled every expectation of my dead mother. You see, dad was drugged and robbed of his money. The drug killed him. Haskell, your uncle, was the man who directed the spoilage; Arieniev Andrus was a lookout for the gang.

"I won't try to tell it all. When dad was groaning out his life, Haskell's thugs came up. I saw them. All of them died too early, unfortunately; Pete and Sam, who did the poisoning, in the electric chair of New York State. Otherwise I should have paid them in more terrible coin!

"Haskell lived. So did Andrus. The rest of the original gang was scattered. I searched down each one, finding that save for one murderer serving a life sentence in Missouri, and two others who are in for long terms, there are no members of Haskell's original gang."

The girl raised both hands in protest. "He always was kind—" she faltered, and stopped.

"Was he, honestly?" demanded Casson, a set of cynicism coming to his jaw. "Wasn't he a miser? Didn't he refuse to you just the five or six hundred dollars which you needed for the boy?" In that moment he forgot that a girl sat before him.

She dropped her glance, not speaking.

"Oh, you don't have to confess. I knew both Haskell and Andrus. Too well I knew them!"

With that he arose and walked the length of the great library. His limp was no more perceptible than ordinary, yet Ellen saw it. Her features twisted in pain.

"There is much—much—" she cried, shielding her eyes.

"Much that you did not understand!" he finished bitterly. "Aye! This much, however, you may know. Haskell and the Turk both have paid insofar as they could pay. Before Andrus died I made him give to me the whole cleverness of his mechanical talents; these, with a certain price of restitution I exacted from Haskell, will make my stake—the capital with which I shall start manufacturing. I need tell you little more."

"But you haven't really explained anything!" she protested. "Won't you come with me and look at Ivan? The doctor gave him something to make him sleep. Now that I have money enough to do it, I shall take him to a hospital in Philadelphia, right away."

In the semi-darkness of that chamber, looking down upon a boy whose life was to be changed in its entirety, Sidney Casson turned and clasped the hand of the silent girl. That touch was a pledge and a promise.

THE TRAIL OF THE DIM LANTERN

By RUSSELL ARDEN BANKSON

Author of "Isle o' Courage," "The King of Bonepart," etc.

LEGENDS OF FABULOUS BONANZAS LURK AROUND MANY A MINING CAMP, BUT NOT EVERY OLD-TIMER KEEPS HIS FAITH AS THE YEARS PASS

SADDLE MOUNTAIN was haunted by the ghost of Tobie Dutton. No persuasion would induce a settler of the region to go up on its barren slopes after the shadows of dusk began to fall.

"Well, now, reckon I ain't believin' in ghosts—but once Tim Harter, who used t' live by the mountain, seen Tobie's lantern goin' over the trail, an' that's enough fer me."

That was what each and every one of the old-timers in the Saddle Mountain district would say, with variations, if the subject of Tobie Dutton and the dim lantern trail was brought up.

Yet, high up on the mountain on a narrow bench of land between the two humps, where the trail of the ghost lantern began, Davie Smith lived—had lived for thirty years.

Davie Smith followed a will-o'-the-wisp, the dim lantern which the ghost of Tobie Dutton carried nightly along the forgotten gold trail, heading over the crest of the peak into the great wilderness beyond, toward his lost gold mine.

In the full span of a man's life, fact and legend and superstition became interwoven so closely that the whole story of the trail of the dim lantern might be heard from the lips of the old-timers as though it were the gospel; or Davie Smith would sit in the doorway of his ancient, rotting cabin and spin the yarn, his soft, mellow voice scarce above a whisper, his fading eyes sparkling with the mystery which had come to envelop him through the passing years.

Davie was not an old man as years are counted, turning fifty, perhaps; but as time is measured by the things one has lived and seen, Davie was old. He was bent of shoulder and there were furrowed wrinkles in his weather-beaten face.

The mystery spell of Saddle Mountain was cast over Davie Smith, as it long ago was cast over the log cabin perched up there, when the soul of Tobie Dutton came back to traverse the trail to the lost mine.

In the golden glow of a late fall evening, Davie came down along the bench between the humps, his heavy rawhide boots clumping on the rocky trail, his ragged overalls lopping over the tops of the boots and swishing against the greasewood brush on either side.

Davie was tired, and the habitual droop to his heavy shoulders was just a little more pronounced. He gave an audible sigh of relief when he came up to the door of the cabin and dropped the prospector's pick and shovel at his feet. Under his arm he held a battered violin case of great

age, which he carried inside the cabin and laid on the rough board table built against the far wall of the single room.

For just a moment before going through the door he hesitated and looked back over his shoulder, glancing up toward the blank, barren heights of the mountain peak, a look that took in the slope from shadowy depths to the skyline above. That was force of habit, for Davie knew that it was yet too early for the ghost lantern to begin traveling.

It had been a long, hard day for Davie. He had taken on more than he had intended. He had expected to go only over to Lookout Point and there putter the day away in an old prospect hole on which he had once labored for a week.

The lure of the just beyond had called to him, though, and he had answered. He had gone on and on, picking, shoveling, scratching at the earth and rock here and there, until he was several miles from home when the slanting sun's rays warned him.

"I allow t' he tired," he grumbled to himself plaintively as he turned to the tin box stove in a corner of the room, to start the fire for the evening meal.

Once, while he was building the fire, he paused, listened intently for a moment, then moved stealthily, in spite of his great hulking size, to the door, and peered furtively upward along the mountainside.

The darkness was coming quickly now, even up along the skyline, and he could not clearly make out the greasewood patches, although he instinctively placed their locations in his mind.

"A leetle early; a leetle early," he told himself, still with that plaintiveness in his voice, as he turned again to the fire.

He went ahead with his supper, frying a generous helping of salt side pork and mixing a goodly sized cake of sourdough bread. But several times he glanced through the open door, out into the darkness, toward the mountain slope.

He ate greedily, like a man who has worked hard and has missed his dinner. He ate slices of salt pork, a whole slice at a bite, and large chunks of the soggy bread, soaked in the drippings from the frying pan.

When the meal was finished, he lighted a candle, shoved his simple dishes to the back of the table, and opened the violin case.

From the inside he lifted out a fiddle. It was old, old beyond description, battered in places, scarred and patched, but age had given it a rich mellowness of coloring.

It was a relic out of the past, a thing which a second hand dealer in the city would not have bartered a set of strings for. Yet it was the one, the only solid, substantial thing which linked the present of Davie Smith with that dim, elusive, mysterious past of Tobie Dutton. It was this old dilapidated fiddle which had cast the spell of Tobie Dutton upon Davie, back thirty years before, when he was a youth, a square-shouldered, hard-muscled young fellow, full of fight and fire.

Davie had found the old fiddle in the possession of a hill-rat who wandered into the mining camp where he was mucking ore. Davie had an ear for music, and he had asked the prospector to let him play on it.

Curiosity led him to examine the instrument and its case closely. And there under a corner of the case lining, he had found the note. It was fading and crumpling to pieces and smeared with rusty bloodstains, but Davie had made it out. The words of it were blazoned on his mind:

Saddle mt Idaho terrtory elevn of Aug. 1863 four robbers have attack me an left me here for dead while they have took all my gold i have give my secret to this fidle an haveing no kin whoever comes by this fidle will lern where my gold mine is if they will start from my cabein up here on Saddle mt i canet write no more Tobie Dutton.

The name and the message had startled Davie Smith. He knew the legend of Tobie Dutton, as did every prospector and settler in North Idaho.

Tobie, back in the days before the Civil War was fought, struck a fabulously rich gold bonanza, back in the mountain wilds beyond Saddle Mountain somewhere. The strike was his secret and it netted him hundreds of thousands of dollars before his end came. He went in to the mine from devious, secret ways, but he always came out over a trail which he had made across Saddle Mountain, and which wound down past the cabin which he had built on the shelf of land between the humps of the peak.

Goaded by their inability to follow Tobie

into his hidden mine, ghouls of the hills, camp bandits, had lain for him at his cabin, tortured him to make him give up his secret, and, failing in that, had murdered him there and driven off his pack train of jacks, laden with tons of the rich ore.

That Tobie Dutton built the cabin on Saddle Mountain there can be no doubt, for the cabin stands there to this day; that Tobie Dutton was murdered by the hill bandits, there is just as much proof, for besides the last note which he scribbled, there is a grave scooped out in the rocky side of the mountain back of the cabin and piled high with boulders to protect it from the coyotes; and that Tobie Dutton had a secret bonanza there is absolutely no question, for Davie Smith found records, yellowed with age and rotting to fragments, of the smelter returns on half a dozen shipments to San Francisco. These Davie uncovered in the old cabin after he went there to live and to follow the trail of the dim lantern.

These things being true, there was just reason to believe that the ghost of Tobie Dutton went nightly down over the forgotten trail, from the crest of Saddle Mountain, almost to the cabin, and that it there turned about and headed back toward the mine, carrying a lantern in its hands to guide its steps as Tobie Dutton had always done when he led his pack train, loaded with ore, out from the wilderness.

Davie, when he found the old fiddle, bought it for ten dollars, and with it under his arm, headed northward to Saddle Mountain.

At the base of the mountain, on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, he found the old deserted city of Gold Point. It had been a booming placer camp back in the 'sixties; Tobie Dutton in his day had seen it come into existence, had seen its ascendancy, its decline and decay. Davie spent a week in examining every nook and cranny of the old town, for a possible further record of Tobie Dutton, then he headed up the mountain.

The slopes, clear to the crest, and on over on the other side were pock-marked with the prospect holes of the hordes who in the early days had tried to find the ledge of Tobie Dutton's treasure. Tobie's cabin had been ransacked, looted of all it had ever possessed, by the gold-crazed searchers, and in later years by the curio seekers. Even the grave of Tobie Dutton, back of the cabin, had been disturbed by ghouls seeking a further clue.

Davie Smith met settlers of the region, who warned him of the ghost lantern which passed each night over the old trail, but Davie, in the simplicity of his courageous youth, felt a sort of friendly comradeship with Tobie Dutton's ghost. He had a direct message from Tobie, a promise given him by Tobie. He believed that message; he believed that Tobie Dutton's flickering lantern light would lead him to the lost bonanza.

And so, as he had done almost every evening for thirty years, Davie Smith, after his supper was over, took the mellowed fiddle from its case and with it held in his ungainly, calloused hands, moved over to the door.

Standing there with his shoulders braced against the mud-chinked casing, his head with its tangled mat of iron-gray and sun-bleached brown hair bending low, and the fiddle cupped under his roughly bearded chin, he began to draw the bow across the strings.

He played nothing in particular, perhaps a wisp of an old-time tune creeping into the notes now and then, but from the ancient instrument there came a plaintive appeal, soft and rich, like the voice of the man when he spoke.

It was as though Davie Smith held conversation with himself. He seemed to be talking out into the night, appealing for something, the foot of his big right boot moving up and down, keeping irregular time to the notes of the fiddle, his head and body swaying slowly back and forth.

The candle flickered in a stray breeze which crept into the room behind him. And still he played, his eyes now and then straying up to the black bank above him, which was the mountainside.

"Comin' late," he whispered. Then his fiddle talked again.

When the notes died down at last, to his eyes—though others could not see it—there seemed to be shining from the heights above, the rays of a dim light, moving slowly toward the cabin, bobbing along irregularly, appearing, disappearing, as though a man were walking an uneven trail, carrying a lantern in his hands to guide his steps.

Davie Smith straightened up and took in his breath sharply. His hands with the fiddle and the bow dropped down to his sides and his faded eyes glistened as he stood there waiting, watching.

"She's brighter'n usual t'night," he whispered; the excitement mounting within him. "Tobie aims I should ketch up with him sure!"

With his eyes following the dim light, Davie moved out of the cabin, toward the trail, still holding the fiddle under his arm.

A dozen feet from the door, though, he came to a sudden stop. A man was standing there, a dim shadow in the darkness. He had been walking up toward the cabin from below, and as Davie emerged he paused.

"Evening!" he greeted tentatively. He had a pleasant voice, and one would judge that he was young.

Davie started, taking a step backward.

"Howdy!" he answered, after a moment. He was waiting for the other to speak again, explain himself.

"My name is Benton Sturgis," the stranger said quickly. "How would chances be to stay overnight with you? It's further up here than I thought. I left that old tumble-down place they call Gold Point, this morning, figuring I would walk up here by noon. I don't mind saying I'm entirely fagged."

The young man laughed easily, and came closer to Davie.

"I came all the way up here to see the trail of the dim lantern and to have a look at that fiddle of yours."

Davie found his voice then.

"Y' go in an' set," he invited, the courtesy of the hills in his voice, in spite of the fact that he did not like the company of human beings. On occasions when they passed his way, Tobie Dutton seemed reluctant to follow the trail with his beacon light.

"Jes' make yerself t' home, stranger," he went on. "Tobie Dutton's comin' down with his light, now. Reckon he's aimin' t' lead me t' the mine t'night."

He would have moved on, but Benton Sturgis caught up with him.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Smith," he begged. "I'd like to go over the trail with you, just once. Is his light shining now? Let me see it, too!"

Davie hesitated.

"It's right up thar, comin' this way——"

He broke off, a bit puzzled, his voice bewildered, as though something which he could not understand had happened.

"He's gone!" he said simply. There was suddenly a tiredness, a listlessness in his voice, as he turned back again to the cabin. "He won't come no more t'night."

The newcomer chuckled softly, but Davie did not hear. Sturgis had known all along, he told himself, that the phantom light on Saddle Mountain would not be visible to him or to any other mortal eyes save those of the recluse Davie Smith.

But he had been curious, although his real mission up there was to have a look at Davie's old fiddle. He had the time and the money to indulge in a passion which had given him a reputation as the owner of one of the finest collections of rare old musical instruments in the world.

Several old violins had strayed to this country and had been lost, he knew. One or two had later been found buried in the mining camps of the Northwest, carried there by persons who had rushed in after the gold, and then had parted with their treasures under one circumstance or another.

He had high hopes that in the instrument owned by Davie Smith, which had been described to him by those who had seen it and handled it, he would find one of the lost pieces of art.

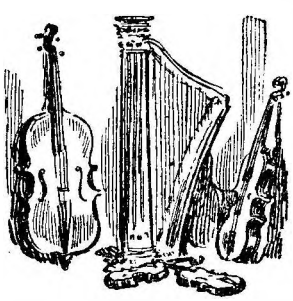
He followed Davie into the cabin and stood before the old hill-rat, reaching out his hand to shake the great paw of the other.

"To tell the truth, Mr. Smith," he said, a friendly smile in his eyes, "I'm more interested in that fiddle of yours than I am in the trail of the dim lantern. Might I have a look at it?"

Davie eyed the stranger suspiciously.

"What y' aim t' want with it?" he demanded, holding it tighter, as though he would protect it against the other.

"I'm a collector," Benton Sturgis stated frankly. "I make a hobby of finding old musical instruments and buying them."



Davie still eyed the other sharply and kept his hand on the fiddle. "This un ain't nothin'," he said. "It's jest a old fiddle which don't amount t' nothin'. I only paid ten dollars fer it."

Mr. Sturgis looked at it, but he made no move to reach for it. He was a tall, square-shouldered young fellow whom no one could mistrust, and Davie seemed to sense, too, that there was nothing to fear in him. Suddenly he offered the fiddle to him.

Sturgis looked it over carefully, in the flickering candle-light, turning it about, studying the wood, peering inside it, tapping the body lightly with his fingers while he listened to the sound.

And as he examined, the pupils of his eyes came to narrow pin-points of excitement while a slow flush crept up over his face.

"Might I—play on it?" he asked. There was a note of reverence in his voice which he could not keep away from Davie.

Davie did not try to answer. He handed over the bow, and then turned to the cupboard, where he filled his pipe with strong tobacco.

"I ain't much o' a fiddler," he said, then, as he puffed deeply. "I'd be right pleased t' hear someone play that knows how."

Again Benton Sturgis laughed that soft, boyish laugh of his, but he moved over to the open doorway and seated himself on the sill, bracing his back against one casing and his feet against the other. He said nothing, but he drew the bow lightly over the strings, seeming almost to caress them.

And then he played. He played such things as had seemed to surge up in Davie Smith sometimes, to cry for expression. The sweet, mellow notes came and they seemed to whisper to the very soul of Davie Smith, until the tears trickled unabashed down his wrinkled, weather-toughened face.

"I reckon—I can't stand no more," he said, after a bit. "Thankee very kindly, Mr. Sturgis."

Sturgis gave the fiddle to Davie and looked out into the blackness of the night. He knew that his face was a mirror to what was inside him, and he did not want Davie Smith to see.

He sat in silence while Davie placed the fiddle back in its case and laid the case on his bunk.

"It's turning chilly, like a nip of early winter was creeping into the nights," Benton Sturgis said quietly, after a bit, his voice matter-of-fact and commonplace, as he looked up at Davie, who was leaning now against the door casing above him.

"Come another month an' it'll be pilin' up snow around these parts," Davie answered, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Reckon we'd best roll in. Y' kin have that bunk over t'other end o' the room."

The next day Benton Sturgis puttered around with Davie Smith until noon, helping him sharpen and temper his pick and gather in some wood from lower down the mountain. Then he helped prepare the meal. But never once did he mention the fiddle, which still lay in its case on the bunk, where Davie had kept it close to him during the night.

After the meal was finished and they had lighted their pipes Sturgis brought up the subject.

"Might I look at the fiddle again?" he asked.

"Reckoned y'd be wantin' to," Davie answered.

Sturgis spent an hour fussing over the old instrument. Then he handed it back to the hill-rat.

Davie was watching him, but Sturgis was not over eager. He began talking about something else.

"Folks tell me you found a note from Tobie Dutton in the lining of the fiddle case, when you bought it," he said. "That's mighty interesting. Was that what brought you up here to follow the elusive trail of the dim lantern?"

Davie's face brightened. This was a subject on which he could talk. It was a subject which he had lived for thirty years, and he talked. He told Sturgis the story of the promise which had been given him, of his faith, his absolute assurance that Tobie Dutton would lead him to the lost mine, of his patient vigil, and of the reward which would come to him.

"I wonder," Sturgis mused, when the tale was finished. "It seems to me that Tobie Dutton might have had another idea in mind. I believe that he must have known that this fiddle was a rare old masterpiece, that some day it would be worth a fabulous price. I believe that that was the great fortune and good luck which was to come to the possessor of the fiddle."

Davie looked at Sturgis, hardly comprehending. "What y' aim t' mean?" he asked.

"I mean, Mr. Smith, that I want your fiddle bad enough to pay you ten thousand dollars for it. I will pay you the money in gold. It will be enough to give you all the comforts and pleasures you would want through the rest of your life."

Dumb amazement and disbelief spread slowly across the hill-rat's face. He looked at Benton Sturgis as though he thought the visitor had lost his reason.

"Y' mean—if I give y' that fiddle you'll give me ten thousand dollars?" he demanded, his voice trembling.

Sturgis looked him square in the eyes.

"I'll take you down to Coeur d'Alene, to the bank there, today, and hand the money over to you," he answered.

Davie's hands were shaking. He visualized ten thousand dollars in gold, piled up in front of him, belonging to him. It was more money than he had ever seen at one time. It was more money that he had ever owned altogether, in all the nearly fifty years of his life. It was a fortune that would make him rich beyond his dreams.

He had visioned the pot of gold at the end of Tobie Dutton's trail. He had followed that trail for thirty years, but he had never hoped that all at one time there would be laid down before him so much gold. It had always seemed to him that when he caught up with Tobie's dim light, there would be gold—just gold. This was money, real, ready to spend, to give him the things which he had dreamed about, take him back to see his old home town, to look up his old cronies of a bygone boyhood.

He sat there looking across the rough board table at Benton Sturgis, and his eyes were wide.

His rough, calloused hands crept out, slowly, across the table. He would bind the bargain.

His fingers touched the fiddle, lying there between them. He looked down at it. He stared at it. Slowly a hand went up and closed about the stock. He gripped it tightly.

It seemed to be talking to him, whispering to him about Tobie Dutton and the lost gold mine; it seemed some living thing which had been his life's companion, something which had urged him to keep on following the trail of the dim lantern. It was whispering to him that never again would these things be, never again would he see the flickering, elusive light up there on the mountain, feel the spell which gripped and held him when he played on the old fiddle, softly, there in the doorway of his cabin.

His face grew tense, his muscles hard, as there surged up in him the greatest struggle through which he had ever gone.

Then all at once he relaxed, his grip on the fiddle stock went limp. He looked again at Benton Sturgis, and there was just the edge of a smile in his dimming eyes.

"I couldn't do it, mister," he said, gently, softly, as if the fiddle were talking. His voice had grown that way; he had listened through the years to the fiddle until his voice was mellow like the notes from the old box.

Benton Sturgis smiled back at the other. He was more disappointed than he could ever tell. He had built up his plans carefully and he had played his trump card in a way he thought would win. He had banked on it that it would win. But he had lost. He looked into the eyes of the other and he knew that nothing would change the older man's decision then. He was a good sport, a good loser, though, and he stuck out his hand.

"You remember that offer, though, and what it would buy." He spoke without malice. "I'll come back and see you again."

"I don't reckon it would do no good," Davie answered. He hated to make this straight young fellow feel bad.

But Benton Sturgis was going, then, passing out through the door, moving down the mountain along the trail that leads to the outside world.

For three weeks Davie Smith worked diligently about his cabin, gathering in wood for the approaching winter, and in making a trip to the village for his winter's supplies, which he purchased with the pitifully small gleanings of gold dust he had been able to wash out of the old workings about the deserted ghost city of Gold Point, during the summer.

In this period he thought much about the wealth which had been offered to him by Benton Sturgis, and always there was a sort of gladness in him that he had not taken it.

For now every night the light of Tobie Dutton on the trail above glowed brighter for his eyes, seemed coming closer, waiting longer for him, as he played softly on the fiddle.

He followed the trail of the dim lantern every night—followed it up to the crest of the ridge, where it vanished. But now there were times when it seemed to him he was almost up with it; when it was glowing just a few feet ahead of him; seemed as if he could see the dim figure of Tobie Dutton, looking back over his shoulder toward him; could hear the crunching of the rock under his feet as he moved along.

He would call to Tobie sometimes to

wait for him or, standing up there on the crest, play softly on the fiddle, but always the light would vanish, be snuffed out suddenly, leaving him to make his slow way back to the cabin in the saddle.

THEN Benton Sturgis came again, climbing up to the cabin. He was cheerful and pleasant, staying with Dave for three days, helping him put in the last of the winter's wood, for already there had been flurries of snow up there on Saddle Mountain, and the sky was overcast most of the time, while the sharp winds blew down off the peaks.

When Sturgis was ready to go he mentioned the fiddle, stressing the things which so much money would bring to Davie.

But Davie only shook his head.

"You won't be able to follow the dim lantern trail for always, Davie," Sturgis said, dropping into the familiarity of hill-friendship. "Then you will have nothing to carry you on. I am going down to the city for a few days, Davie, and I'll come back once more before I go East. And this time I will bring the gold with me, so you can see it."

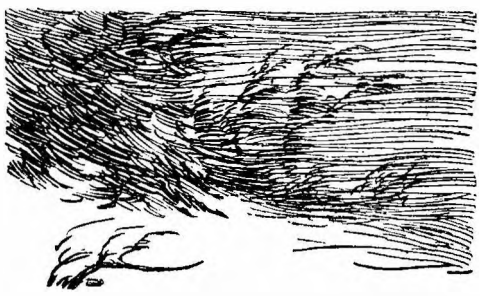
Davie's eyes brightened, but his head was shaking.

"It's comin' on t' storm an' I don't reckon y' kin hardly make it back ag'in," he answered. He hated to tell Sturgis good-by. He felt a real loneliness in his going.

The next day the first real storm of the winter came. It blew a regular blizzard up there around the twin peaks of Saddle Mountain and all the fury of the elements gathered to rush down along the shelf between the humps.

It was one of the worst storms Davie Smith in his thirty years on Saddle Mountain had ever witnessed. He stayed close indoors all the day, while the snow swirled outside and piled up high about the cabin.

When night came he watched at the



window for Tobie Dutton's light, and when he thought he saw it blinking at him he tried to open the door. The snow and wind came in and almost took him from his feet, though, and he gave up.

That night and the next he did not follow the dim lantern, but on the third day the storm ceased and it turned bitter cold with a stiff, steady wind blowing down from the north. After dark the stars shone, and far up on the mountain Davie saw Tobie Dutton's light coming down toward him, across the sloping fields of snow.

It had never shown so brightly, seemed to beckon him so strongly, and his pulse quickened with a new assurance that now Tobie would lead him to the mine.

"Reckon he's sure t' take me thar t'-night," Davie whispered eagerly, as he went about putting on his heavy clothing for the trip out into the night. He wrapped his feet up in bundles of sacks and strapped on his homemade bear's paw snowshoes, for the snow, he knew, would be as deep as his head in places. And then when he was ready to go, he paused.

"Reckon it'll be quite a spell of a trip, an' I might be needin' some grub," he muttered.

Quickly he packed together food for a long journey, then he turned to the cabin door, only to check himself again.

"Tobie'll sure want his fiddle, when we git in thar," he said, aloud, and so he took the fiddle-case from the table and tucked it under his arm. With the door open, then, Davie turned from it once more, yet another errand remembered. He was leaving this cabin perhaps forever, and Benton Sturgis had told him that he would be back.

So he went to the box cupboard and brought out a scrap of paper and a stub of a pencil. Laboriously he wrote a note to Benton Sturgis.

Deer mr Sturgis i am goeing to the mine tonite soe i wonet bee hear when you come soe you make yorself to home an you stacy as long as you want to i will tel you where the mine is when i have got to it onely i will not be able to sel you the fidel becas tobie will want it your friend davie Smith.

Out on the snow crust, the door of the cabin closed carefully after him. Davie moved forward and upward steadily. It seemed to him that Tobie's lantern light was moving along just ahead of him, and when he stopped to listen he was certain he could hear the soft crunch, crunch of Tobie's shoes in the snow.

Up and up he labored, toiling over the

heavy drifts, breaking through here and there, floundering in the deep snow which engulfed him, struggling forward determinedly while the light ahead beckoned him on.

Far into the night he traveled, fighting back the aches in his stiffened joints, struggling against the weariness which was creeping over him, keeping his eyes on that brightly shining light, that hallucination which was his guide, his urge. So it was after midnight when he came at last to the crest of the peak and looked down into the stilly white world of the wilderness beyond, set out in a twilight softness from the starlight and the setting moon.

And then for the first time in thirty years of following the trail of the dim lantern, Davie Smith saw the light winking back to him from over the divide, beckoning him on down into the great beyond.

All faltering left him then and he stood up straight, his shoulders squared, a quickened heat to his heart.

"I'm a-comin', Tobie," he called softly. He had known from the start that this night he would be led on and on to the lost mine.

He paused only long enough to adjust the pack of food more closely to his back, then he hugged the fiddle-case tightly under his arm and started the descent.

It was harder going down than it had been coming up, it seemed to Davie, for his feet went out from under him, hurling him deep into the snow. But hour after hour he plodded forward, scarcely realizing that there was a limit to his iron strength, that his power to do was fast ebbing.

Only dimly now, and far away did he seem to see the beacon light. It was escaping him, eluding him.

Once he called out despairingly, pleadingly, to Tobie to wait for him, but it seemed only that the light grew dimmer.

Then suddenly it was not ahead and he stood there dazed, a terrible fear creeping over him. But he found the dim flickering flame to the right, and he veered his course sharply.

On and on he floundered, then again the light was gone, and he only found it after several minutes, the tiniest dot of flame, to his left.

After that it seemed to Davie Smith that the light of Tobie Dutton's lantern was playing tricks with him, that it was flitting here and there and everywhere to bewilder him.

His strength was leaving him. Now there were times when he fell into the snow and lay there for long minutes, while he fought against the drowsiness which was creeping in over him.

At last he could not see Tobie Dutton's light and after that he wandered on, staggering wherever his feet willed, while slowly there came up into his heart a great bitterness.

Tobie Dutton had tricked him, led him far out into the mountains, to leave him to die.

When daylight came creeping in over the white world Davie Smith did not recognize it. He thought it was Tobie Dutton's lantern again, playing tricks with him. In all his gentle life Davie Smith had never sworn, but suddenly he stood up and cursed Tobie Dutton.

Reason and understanding had gone from him. He was a derelict, a human atom, a tiny splotch of color fighting madly, blindly over a vast white field of snow. In his delirium he had gone down a mountain range and had crept up another, and now he lay in the snow, high above the timber line, with the crest of another mountain peak just ahead of him.

At times there crept over him a spark of fear and he knew that slowly he was dying, freezing, that his feet were stiff and hard, and that his hands were little more than pegs at his sides. Yet he clutched the fiddle which he had carried through all of that terrible night.

He climbed up and up, sometimes crawling forward, sometimes standing erect for a few steps.

He had his glazed eyes on a dark opening near the crest of the mountain, at the base of a sharp pinnacle of rock. It looked as though it might be a cave, a place of shelter, and he began to struggle desperately toward it.

His very life depended upon his reaching that shelter and starting a fire.

Suddenly he stood up and raised his arms high above his head, letting the fiddle-case drop into the snow, while he laughed aloud, like a madman. But in that moment he was more sane than he had been in thirty years, for the pinch of death had driven from his mind that hallucination which had hung over it like a shroud.

"God! I been a fool! I been crazy!"

he cursed. His voice was no longer soft and mellow like the notes of the fiddle. It was deep and harsh.

He looked down at the fiddle and raised his encumbered foot to kick at it savagely. He checked the movement, though.

"Fool! Fool!" he mumbled hopelessly. "I could have had ten thousand dollars fer that shell o' wood! Fool!"

He would have kicked at it again, but another thought struck him.

"I kin sell it yet! I kin git my money fer it yet!" he said aloud.

Stiffly, painfully, he stooped down and gathered the instrument back into his arms.

Then he was moving forward again, fighting foot by foot, yard by yard for that haven up there under the crags.

How Davie Smith made it to the crest and into that shallow depression against the cliff wall, not even he could ever tell. But make it he did, in a blind, delirious condition, to tumble forward out of the snowdrifts and into the semi-shelter, away from the sharp wind.

The frost was creeping up his legs and arms, but as the drowning fight against the water which is engulfing them, so Davie Smith fought against that slow, sure drowsiness which was stealing over him.

He bunted his head sharply against the rock wall to arouse himself, and he chewed loose with his teeth the thongs which held the heavy mittens about his hands.

In a pocket he found the tin can of matches which he always carried, and got the lid off.

There was no wood up there, though, nothing that would burn, and again Davie Smith cursed aloud—cursed the phantom of Tobie Dutton and the fool that he had been.

With a match in his teeth because his fingers would not hold it, he struck a flare and held it within the circle of his hands until it burned down to his lips.

He must thaw his fingers so that he could get his boots off and rub his feet and legs.

Desperately he worked, using snow to rub his hands, then lighting another match to warm them.

At last he came to where he had but a single match left, and he hesitated before striking it.

His hands were showing life now, but fire to dry his clothes and start his sluggish blood to moving was imperative.

Again desperately he crawled about the shelter, searching for anything that would burn. His hands came to the violin case and he clutched it, striking at it savagely. It was tin!

He laughed again, that harsh, bitter laugh, as he tore it open and lifted the fiddle out.

"Ten thousand dollars! All in gold, piled up in front o' me. Mine!" he chuckled. "Fine life I got, worth ten thousand dollars, but it's my life an' I kin do what I durn please!"

Slowly, deliberately, he raised the rich old fiddle high in both his hands. Then, again that strange chuckle in his throat, he brought it down across his knees. It was broken into half a thousand pieces!

In a moment he had struck his last match and had touched it to the tinder, building up a tiny fire over which he huddled, feeding the flames a splinter at a time, glorying in the new life which was coming back into his body as his heart quickened to the warmth.

Everything in the world that he possessed was gone: his fiddle; his dreams of the lost mine; his belief in the promise which Tobie Dutton had given him, all were gone, leaving him an old man, a disillusioned old hill-rat, sitting up there half-frozen in the dead of winter—sitting there with his dreams of what might have been. Slowly he gathered up the last piece of the splintered fiddle.

To the under side, the part that had been the inside of the fiddle box, an envelope, yellowed with age, was glued!

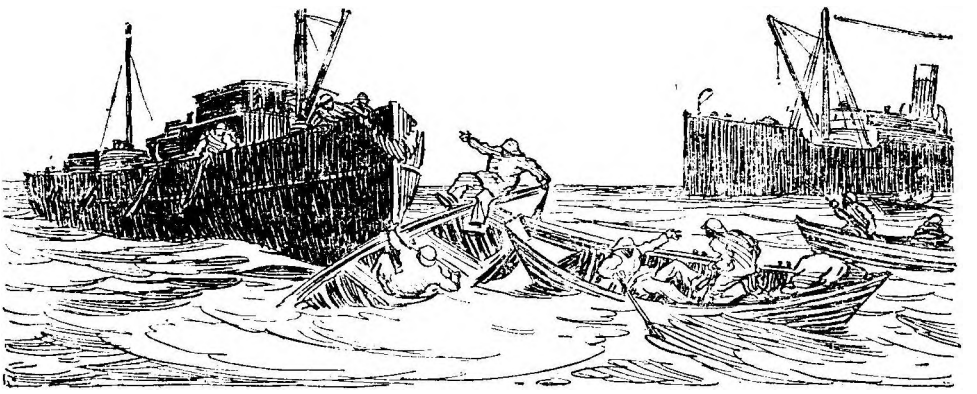
With fingers in which the life blood was flowing again, Davie Smith loosened it from the wood, and opened it. Inside was a sheet of paper. It was filled with writing, but still legible.

And across the top was a line which Davie spelled out carefully, painstakingly:

"Ful Directions Fer Getin To Tobie Dutton's Hiden Gold Mine."

GETTING TOGETHER

AN INTERNATIONAL radio station in Argentina is to be operated jointly by American, British, French and German companies.



DEEP SEA DOLLARS

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Ice Pirates," "The Vagabond," etc.

RUNNING RED, NOT BLOOD, BUT SALMON, AND A FORTUNE WAITS BENEATH THE ALASKAN WATERS FOR THOSE ADVENTUROUS SOULS WHO STAND READY TO BRAVE THE PERILS OF THE NORTHERN STRAITS

CHAPTER I

A SPORTING CHANCE

AS JUDGE KEENE read the will in his best judicial voice, he paused frequently and peered over the top of his glasses at Cavanaugh, as if to say, "This section is important, and I hope it is sinking in." Then he would continue. At length he tossed the document onto his desk.

"There, Hayden," he said, "it is in a nutshell. Now before you take a punch at me, which is what you'd like to do, and which would be bad for both of us, read your father's letter. And another thing, remember this, although your father spent most of his life at sea, he acquired a remarkable knowledge concerning law and business. Lest you or some alleged heir decided to attempt to break the will on the grounds of mental incompetence, there are three affidavits attached proving beyond the shadow of a doubt he was in his right mind and knew exactly what he was doing."

It struck Hayden Cavanaugh that Judge Keene was too confounded keen to suit him. Back in his mind lingered the thought that his father had been largely influenced by the judge. Much had been left to the lawyer during the past year, while Hayden had been finishing up a frequently interrupted college education. Skippering a sub-chaser during the war had set him back a year; then putting in an additional year at sea in order to win his master's papers had taken toll. Cavanaugh had been born at sea, aboard one of his father's sailing ships before the elder Cavanaugh went over to steam.

The letter was rather lengthy and concluded:

"I can not help but feel Marie Heath is not the sort of a girl for a man whose calling is the sea. He needs a companion who'll stick not only through thick, but thin as well.

"However, I've always given every man a sporting chance, and I'll do no less by my own son and the girl he has chosen for his wife. Therefore, I am giving you the Sunset. *She is in good condition, victualed, fueled and ready for sea. Go ahead and make good, and the best of luck go with you. I hope your little girl will stick while you're doing so. You've never been whipped yet.*

"The bulk of my fortune is held in trust by Judge Keene, who will administer it as I have directed. Don't blame the judge for this. You never have liked him any too well. However, I've never misjudged a man yet, and in my opinion the judge is sound and right from keel to masthead."

The letter closed with expressions of love, confidence and good wishes. Hayden Cavanaugh's reactions were those his father had predicted. He decided not to take a punch at the judge after all, but he did not exactly warm up to him. "As I understand it, sir, the *Sunset* is mine and that's all. I've got to stand on my own hind legs in managing her?"

"Exactly!"

"Well, it's a sporting chance, and I'll take it. How about the Mt. Baker Park home?"

"That remains a part of the estate. You may occupy it for the present. When a

change is necessary I'll advise you. Good-by, Hayden, and good luck!"

The judge extended his hand and Hayden accepted it. He was a gentleman at all times, though, confound the judge! he might at least inform him the charities and endowments the bulk of his father's fortune would be applied to. It was decent of him, though, to permit him to remain in his home. It overlooked Lake Washington, and from the veranda one could frequently see the university oarsmen practicing. The seagoing cruiser, *Spray*, was tied up in the boat house, ready at all times. That was part of the estate, also. And his car? Then he remembered the runabout was in his own name.

It was considerable of a let-down to enter a lawyer's office expecting to find the responsibility of an estate on one's shoulders, and to emerge to find one cut off except for a steamer, and at a time when hundreds of craft were tied up for lack of cargo. "And all on account of a girl," he mused. "Well, she's worth it, but I'll have to break the news easy. Father was wrong on caring only for comfort and luxury. She's the kind that sticks."

THE *Sunset* was tied up at a buoy in Lake Union. Vessels lingering in Seattle any length of time found it convenient to run through the canal to the fresh water basin, and kill the salt water growth on their hulls. The sight was not altogether encouraging. Some fifty hulls, in various stages of completion, were tied up, forming a bridge of ships. They had been designed to carry supplies to France during the war, but were moored in the basin when the Armistice stopped building. They were not ready for the sea, and represented a war loss rather than a trade barometer. But seven steel ships lying abeam, their stacks covered over, indicated that deep sea tonnage was not much in demand.

Cavanaugh circled the steel craft in the cruiser, then bumped up against the *Sunset's* gangway. She was a counterpart of several of the wooden vessels, except that she was complete in every detail and had made a voyage or two during the war. He had forgotten how his father had acquired her—perhaps the old gentleman had lost a bet. He did not know she was one of his problems and that he had once remarked, "It'll take a younger man than I to solve the *Sunset's* fate!" His last earthly act had been to will and bequeath the problem to his son.

Cavanaugh assisted the girl up the gangway. Then looked down from the bridge. "Well, Marie, what do you think of it?"

"Not very graceful, a bit tubby, and smells of rope and things," she replied. "What did you bring me out here for?"

"This," he said, "is our meal ticket."

"What do you mean, Hayden?" she queried, sensing the unusual note in his tone.

"Just that. The will was read this morning, and I was bequeathed this and good luck!"

"Don't jest about such things!" she said sharply.

"I'm not!"

She was silent for several moments. "You'll contest it, of course?"

"No, the estate was dad's and his the right to do with it as he saw fit. He saw fit to give us a sporting chance, and willed us the *Sunset*. May she bring home the bacon."

"Hayden! Haven't you any spirit in you?"

"Yes, that's why I'm not going to attempt to break the will. That's why I want to see how much backbone I have. It'll be sport working out this problem together." He eyed the gleaming diamond on her finger that betokened their engagement. "Won't it?" he insisted after an interval.

"Perhaps, but it's not necessary. He could have just as well left you independent."

"I'd call a good steamer mighty near independence—a lot nearer than many get," he replied practically.

She wasn't quite so sure, and on the way back her mood was silent and thoughtful. Somehow a bit of the glamor with which she clothed Hayden Cavanaugh was missing. She was essentially a girl who admired varnish rather than the structure beneath. Some of the gilt had been removed from Hayden in the form of stocks and bonds the elder Cavanaugh had otherwise disposed of.

"I'm utterly sick," she said as he left her, "and I'd made so many plans, too."

"We'll make a lot of new plans together," he replied cheerfully.

WHEN Cavanaugh got down to business and commenced to rustle cargo, which was the following day, he found it difficult to maintain his cheerful attitude.

"Many shipping concerns are operating at a loss," one operator informed him quite frankly, "but you should worry—you've money enough back of you to tide you over. It's the little fellows like me that have to scratch gravel."

"And I'm one of 'em, as you'll find out when the news breaks," returned Hayden as he left.

In the ten days that followed, the best he could do was to book a South American lumber cargo for late autumn—and this was February.

"I can't have her idle all that time. Sugar's going up, might ramble down there, buy a cargo and dump on the market, thereby making a neat profit for myself, and doing the public a bit of good. No, can't do that, because I'd have to run down empty; and it would take a lot of cash to swing the deal. Huh!"

Marie had recovered somewhat from the blow, and was almost her normal self once more. That helped some, for he needed encouragement from that particular source; more than he got, but apparently all that was within her to give. Then, she was occupied with her own affairs, though the wedding was months ahead.

"Don't go too strong on the wedding," he said one day, "because I'm still at sea with no port in sight." He paused, then disclosed what was really on his mind.

"I'm going to be married in June, Hayden, and it's up to you to be ready."

"I'll be ready!" he answered grimly. "See you tonight."

OLD Man Opportunity who goes around knocking at people's doors and is occasionally admitted, knocked lightly on Cavanaugh's door several days later. It was so light a knock, a man with less auditory powers would not have heard it. Tucked away on the page devoted to waterfront news was an item of interest to a limited number, but of vast interest to them. Cavanaugh read it, skipped on to the next item, then returned and read it again. Then he grabbed his hat and raced from his office.

"A lot of people are going to work fast on that, and I'm one of them," he exclaimed.

CHAPTER II

THE WINNING NUMBER

THE three-room apartment of Miss Edna Geary was as neat as a pin, but she continued her dusting in order to quiet her nerves. From time to time she would read a message over, then continue her dusting. She was dusting the piano for the fourth time when the doorbell rang.

"Shall I answer?" inquired her chum.

"Yes, Rita!"

Rita vanished and presently returned. "A Mr. Langley desires to see you. He says it is very important."

"Very well!"

Edna entered the room without offering her hand. "Be seated, Mr. Langley," she said. It was apparent they had met before.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well, Edna," Langley began.

"Miss Geary, if you please. Edna is reserved for my friends. What is it you wish to see me about?" Edna had a very good idea of the nature of his business.

"We have been advised by our Eastern man that, in making the award on the Kalla Bay fish-trap site in Alaska, the Government resorted to a lottery, and you held the winning number. Of course you are not engaged in the cannery business, Miss Geary, and it occurred to us that perhaps you would be willing to sell your right to us. We are prepared to offer you as high as five thousand dollars, cash." He drew forth a check book.

"The trap site is not for sale to the Kalla

Packing Company, Mr. Langley, at any price."

He ignored her coolness. "Don't let that little affair——" he began.

"You term it a little affair!" she said scornfully.

His assurance seemed to vanish instantly. "Five thousand dollars is a lot of money for an ordinary school teacher," he snapped, "and we're prepared to give you just that. Let me remind you the Kalla Company is prepared to fight this thing through to the finish. We'll hold up the award on the grounds that it was an unfair method of awarding such a coveted location. It is the last site the Government intends to allot in that district, and instead of limiting the applicants to the *bona fide* companies engaged in canning salmon, it was thrown open to the rabble. Everybody and his dog filed an application."

"Anything the Government has to give away of value is naturally open to all American citizens. I am one, I exercised my right, and was fortunate in securing a prize. As to reminding me of the Kalla Company's methods, it is not necessary. I taught in Alaska last year and had ample opportunity to see them at close hand. Nothing is too low for you to resort to to accomplish your ends; you ship the scum

of the earth up there to work in your canneries; you cheat natives and whites alike at every opportunity, and for one I don't intend to have anything whatever to do with you."

"Very well, if that's your decision, there is nothing more to be said, now. Later, however, Miss Geary, will come regrets and the regrets will not be ours. Enjoy your trap site while you can—it won't remain yours long. We've fished off that location for three years——"

"Illegally," she cut in.

"We've fished there, and what is more we intend to continue, this coming summer and for many summers to come." With this parting shot, Mr. Langley vanished.

"Edna, you have about one hundred per cent. less brains that I gave you credit for having. Five thousand dollars in the hand is worth a hundred thousand in other people's pockets. If it had been I, that man wouldn't have left the room without writing a check, unless it had been over my dead body." Rita was dumbfounded.

"I have some sense of decency, and the Kalla Packing people are impossible. There goes the doorbell again. I seem to be popular with my site. If it is Langley, don't answer."

Rita scouted to the transom and reported, "Looks like it might be the stroke oar of the Washington crew. Something over six feet, weight around one hundred and eighty on the hoof and—let's admit him."

"Go ahead, Rita!"

And so Mr. Hayden Cavanaugh was admitted. He faced the two ladies smilingly. "Hope I'm not too late, but if the cannery and fish trap site is not already disposed of, I'm here to offer a most astounding proposition."

"Proceed."

"Briefly. I have a wooden vessel, ready for the sea and no cargo, nor any signs of a cargo. You have a fish trap site and no cannery. Let's get together and form a stock company, pick up the equipment of some abandoned cannery, and go into business. I'm frank to admit the idea came to me while reading the account in this morning's paper of your good fortune, and I didn't take much time for constructive thought, because I knew the big companies would be camping at your door with offers. If you are not interested in my scheme, however, let me say that a good conservative estimate of the site is fifteen thousand dollars. Don't dispose of it for a cent less."

"How much will you give me for it?"

"I can't give you a cent, but I'll give you twenty thousand dollars' worth of stock in the company. All I have is lots of ambition and a steamer. Frankly, I expect you to turn me down, although if given time I think I can convince you the proposition is sound."

Edna was thoughtful for several minutes, frequently regarding her caller sharply. "You wish time to investigate?" she queried.

"That's it!"

"Then let's investigate together. I'll not accept any offer for a week. You have that long to convince me."

"Thanks; when shall we start in?"

"This afternoon," Edna replied. "Call for me at two."

Cavanaugh felt like dancing as he left. "Lord," he exclaimed, "and some people claim you can't do business with a woman."

Rita was excited. "Know who that is, Edna? Well, it's *the* Hayden Cavanaugh. He's one of the catches, and is engaged to

that doll-faced Marie Heath whose picture is always in the paper on Sunday morning."

"That's interesting!" replied Edna noncommittally. She was trying to see the catch in it all; the wealthy Mr. Cavanaugh needing money, and unable to pay more for her trap site than twenty thousand dollars in stock.

Then came three other men with check books, and finally a reporter of an evening paper accompanied by a photographer. "Nothing just yet," she informed them. "Later on there may be a story, but a schoolmarm winning a fish trap site isn't really important, is it?"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"That will come later."

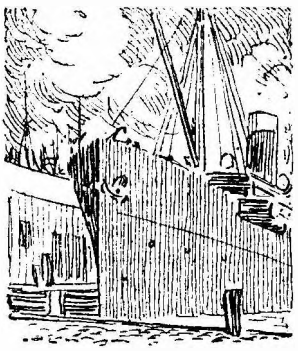
CAN'T play tennis with you this afternoon, Marie, I'm up to my neck in business!" announced Cavanaugh.

"My, but you sound businesslike. Can't you postpone it?" she inquired. He noticed a trace of disappointment in her voice and something more.

"Not very well. You see I've made my appointments already, and it's the first chance I've really had to make anything out of the *Sunset*. Sorry!" He hung up the telephone, and hurried away to meet his possible business associate.

She was ready, and the romantic Rita lost an opportunity of talking with him while Edna dressed.

"I'm primed with figures, Miss Geary. Red salmon run for about three weeks in July. Last year they brought nine dollars a case, that's forty-eight tall cans. Our old ship can handle about thirty thousand cases. Say we got fifteen thousand cases of Reds, and fifteen thousand of Humpbacks. The Humpies don't bring as much as the Reds, but it's better than coming back empty. We can pack the Humpies off Kodiak after the Red run is over. That's one advantage of a floating cannery. Cans cost a dollar and a half a case, and will have to be paid for in advance; also we'll need twenty tons of salt and—no time to name all the items here, but they all cost money. However, a pack of thirty thousand should bring in over two hundred thousand dollars, and that'll cover a lot of costs, and leave a profit besides. I measured up the after hold of the *Sunset*, and there's plenty of room for a cannery, if we handle the space right. It'll take a crew of twenty Chinamen and about thirty whites. Add sixteen gill net boats, and two fishermen to the boat, and you'll have our gang. Some of the fishermen have their own boats."



Somewhere she had read a personality article about old Captain Cavanaugh. It had touched on his thoroughness and ability to quote statistics on various businesses in which he was engaged. Hayden's figures were impressive.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as they roared over Victory Way at a speed well beyond the limit. "Aren't you afraid you'll be arrested."

"Can afford to take a chance rather than lose an opportunity," he replied. "Wonderful little bus—I like it."

He turned off the highway near one of the smaller Puget Sound communities, followed a road bordered by towering firs, and presently the blue waters of the Sound greeted them. In a small cove were a number of weather-beaten buildings. He pulled up before them. "This cannery hasn't been running for two years, due to shortage of fish," he explained, "and perhaps the owner will listen to reason. But first we'll inspect the place."

No one was about, not even a watchman, and after some prying on a window he gained admittance, then assisted her through. "I didn't have time to get hold of the owner, and borrow a key," he explained. "We are technical burglars, but if the owner knew our purpose he'd doubtless fall upon our necks."

Edna knew something of canneries, and Cavanaugh had spent three vacations at one of his father's establishments in Alaska before it was absorbed by one of the larger companies. The inspection they made was thorough, and the appraisal was a fair one.

"I'll offer him fifteen thousand cash, or more if he'll take stock," he said, then smiled. "I'm getting the cart before the horse. Perhaps you don't think much of the idea, and I'll find myself with a floating cannery and no place to fish?"

"Possibly I may be crowding my luck," she answered, "but if I am I'm ready to chance it. I'm going in with you. I've been cold-blooded throughout the day, have fought back my enthusiasm, and my cold-

blooded judgment, such as it is, tells me to go ahead with reasonable safeguards."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now we'll run to Everett and hook up with the owner. I want everything nailed down before the news leaks out. Perhaps you don't know much about the Kalla Packing Company's methods, but I do."

"And so do I!" she answered so quickly that he wondered what her experience had been. "Look!" she exclaimed a short distance from the cannery. "Someone has been in just after we were. He turned around and has gone back to the highway. You don't suppose——?"

"I'm ready to suppose anything," he replied, "now that people know you have been awarded the site. If somebody noticed us setting off together this afternoon, he might not know what we were about, but he would be quite likely to investigate if it happened to be one of the cannery crowd. That site has been a plum they've angled for for many years without success. And you can depend upon it when they find they can't buy it from you, there's going to be a lot of opposition."

"And when the Kalla Packing Company learns you're coming up with a floating cannery, they'll be ready to commit murder, Mr. Cavanaugh. One of my chief reasons for accepting your offer, aside from the excitement it involves, is the fact that the Kalla people have control of most of the available building sites near the bay. We'd have to erect our buildings on piles in deep water." They were getting along famously, for each realized the other had a well-defined knowledge of conditions.

Cavanaugh opened up the car and took the gravel road to the highway at a forty-five mile clip. If a car had followed them he did not propose to let its occupants put anything over. He saw, immediately ahead, a car hurrying along as rapidly as they were. It, too, turned off, and headed for Everett. "Now for a race!" he said grimly. "He has a half-mile start."

The runabout fairly bounded as it hit the ribbon of concrete. The other driver had let it out, and Cavanaugh's speedometer was hovering around 60 most of the time, except at the turns, which were wide and gradual. "There's a motorcycle behind us!" the girl exclaimed.

"Is it an Indian?"

"I don't know. It's red."

"That's it! State Highway Patrolman. We're in for it!" And yet Cavanaugh did not slow up. The motorcycle officer came closer and closer until he was alongside, and above the rush of wind, which drowned his voice, signaled for them to stop.

Cavanaugh pointed frantically ahead. "Get him! Get him!" he yelled. The officer did not know what it was about, but sensed something unusual, for that speed was rare on the highway. He took after the other car. "Hang on, Miss Geary, we're going to turn. He'll arrest the other fellow and wait for us to come up. He may be put out at our getting away, but he'll have one bird in the hand."

They lurched down a wood road for a half-mile, then came to another that paralleled the highway. Cavanaugh crowded the car to the limit of safety and a margin over. Not until they were in the streets of Everett did he slacken speed, then only enough not to attract attention. He pulled up before a "No Parking" sign and hopped out.

"Come on!" he invited.

She followed him, and presently they entered an office.

"Mr. Seldon!" he stated.

"I'm Seldon!"

"How much do you want for the machinery in the cannery, exclusive of boilers and engine; cannery machinery proper, I mean."

"Why, I hadn't thought——"

"Neither had I until I looked it over and on inquiry discovered it hadn't been operating, nor any likelihood of doing so this year."

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

"Too much! I'll give you fifteen thousand cash, or——"

The telephone rang.

"I'll meet you part way, Cavanaugh, I'll sell for eighteen thousand dollars, cash!" Seldon picked up the telephone, and Cavanaugh waited impatiently. "Hello, who! What! Langley! Shake up your phone, Langley, I can't hear."

"I'll pay your price of eighteen thousand dollars, cash!" said Cavanaugh in loud tones. "Here!" He thrust a dollar into Seldon's hand. The man pocketed it mechanically, then a strange expression came over his face. He handed the dollar back, but Cavanaugh refused to touch it. Presently Seldon hung up.

"Langley just phoned that he had been arrested by a highway policeman while going sixty miles an hour; and that if you came up here to buy the cannery machinery to wait until I heard from him. Under the circumstances the deal is off for the time being," explained Seldon.

"No, it isn't, Mr. Seldon," replied Cavanaugh with a smile. "There was an offer by you, an acceptance by me and a consideration paid which you accepted and put into your pocket. That consummated the deal. If either party attempts to withdraw now, that party is subject to an action for damages, and in our case the damages would be rather heavy. Your lawyer will hear me out, I'm sure."

"I'll see what he has to say, also just what Langley has to say before taking further action."

"The money will be ready on demand, either cash or certified check," replied Cavanaugh.

"And where," asked Edna as they left the building, "is the money coming from?"

"Search me," grinned Cavanaugh. "Ah, a committee awaits. Hello, here's Langley. Rather hot under the collar, too. If he didn't know before, he knows now who his opposition will be this summer if he's really prepared to fight. From the way he's been moving I think there's no doubt of his intentions. Hello, Langley."

The Kalla Packing Company man nodded briefly, then Hayden faced a committee of two motorcycle police; one representing the City of Everett and the other the State of Washington. Cavanaugh smiled. "All right boys, I plead guilty to speeding at sixty miles an hour and to parking in a no parking zone; where do we go from here?"

They explained, and Cavanaugh put up the necessary bail, which he promptly forfeited.

Chapter III

OLD MAN TROUBLE

OLD MAN TROUBLE was on the job for the next week and many weeks thereafter. It was simply surprising how many different varieties he could dish up on short notice, thanks to the Kalla Packing Company and their northern manager.

Seldon did not wait for Cavanaugh to return, but went to him. "I'm throwing myself on your mercy," he groaned. "My lawyer says you've got me, particularly as Miss Geary was a witness, but the Kalla people threaten to run me out if I go through with the deal, and I know what they can do once they start gunning. I've side-stepped trouble, so far."

"That's what makes them so hard-boiled," explained Cavanaugh. "They're used to riding rough-shod over people, both here on the Sound and up north. I'm sorry for you, but we are giving you a good price and have to look out for number one."

"I admire your nerve, but don't think much of your judgment. All right, come around with the money when you're ready, and I'll do my part."

Putting off the evil moment was a breathing spell for Cavanaugh, for, try as he might, financial sources were closed to him. He guessed the reason without difficulty, but did not give up. His own reserve was gone, thanks to expenses in forming the company, but Miss Geary was in the affair now, and he had to win out. As a last resort, he tackled Judge Keene. "I'm not asking it as a favor, sir, I'm coming as one business man to another. I want twenty-five thousand as a starter, and I'm giving good security. Ship and cargo will be insured in your favor."

"My instructions are specific on that matter—I'm not to loan you any money, Hayden. Sorry."

"So am I," he replied feelingly. "Well, I'm not licked yet."

"That's the way to talk, young man!"

Hayden departed with good old-fashioned advice ringing in his ears.

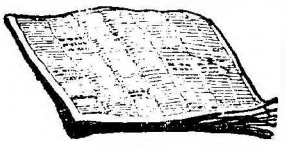
"Can't do business on advice and nice words," he growled, "and the judge will follow instructions to the letter, depend on that."

More trouble was being stirred up for Cavanaugh at that very moment. One of Marie Heath's chums was calling on her, and the girls had reached the confidential stage.

"Everything is in a mess," Marie was explaining. "Hayden's father cut him off except for an old tub that he's trying to make money out of. I don't know what to think. I know nothing of Hayden's business ability, but I have some hopes. He has gone into partnership with a school teacher, and they are going to make a fortune with a floating cannery. Isn't that rich—the school teacher part of it? Can't you picture the severe old dame pointing a finger of disapproval at Hayden, when he doesn't do something she thinks should be done!"

Marie's chum regarded her with pity,

"My dear Marie, don't you ever read the papers? The old maid school teacher is anything but that. She is only twenty or twenty-one. She has brown hair of the shade that drives men mad, and her eyes are blue; she's one hundrd and ten pounds of energy and nerve. Why the newspapers say she can even paddle one of those skin boats the Eskimos and Aleuts use. That means she's a girl that can paddle her own canoe. She's dangerous. Marie—for



Hayden. Get a morning paper and read the story about her, along with a two-column picture, and draw your own conclusions."

Whereupon the chum departed, leaving Marie alternately miserable and indignant.

A glance at the morning paper confirmed her worst fears. "I'll settle all that," she said decisively, "and settle it at once."

HAVING hopped from one to another, Old Man Trouble finally joined forces with Langley. "Let's get this bird, Cavanaugh," he suggesetd gleefully, and Langley agreed. He had to have help, so he sent for a man he knew, Dan Benedict. Benedict belied his name inasmuch as he was single, and believed himself well off. He answered to the nickname, "Single," and rather gloried in it. Woman's sphere in this world was one of pursuit, and man was in the lead with none too much margin. "But I'm too fast for 'em and they've never caught me yet!" he would conclude. Benedict had been employed for ten years by the Kalla people and knew the cannery game from fin to label. Langley got to the point at once.

"You've something like ten thousand dollars tucked away, Single. I know you want to invest in the cannery game because you've tried to buy our stock several times."

"And it wasn't for sale!"

"Exactly. It's too good to let go of. Young Cavanaugh is starting a floating cannery, and he's going to need money, badly. He'll welcome you with open arms." Langley winked. "Get me? Now I'll loan you fifteen thousand dollars for six months, you to give me your stock as security for your note. That'll give you a big voice in affairs, big enough to make a lot of trouble when operations commence. How about it?"

"I'm willing!"

The visit of Single Benedict to their headquarters sent Edna into a state closely resembling panic. "Don't accept anything from him," she pleaded. "Have nothing to do with him. He's a Kalla man."

"Let's find out what he wants, anyway?" suggested Cavanaugh.

Accordingly Benedict was admitted into Cavanaugh's private office, and lost no time in getting to the point. "I'm an old cannery man, Mr. Cavanaugh, and I've twenty-five thousand dollars to invest in the cannery business. I know the venture you're embarking on, and we should be able to get together on some basis."

Cavanaugh was thoughtful for several moments; then he asked him questions, and finally agreed to give his visitor a decision in half an hour.

When Single Benedict was beyond earshot Edna emerged from the private office where she had fled at sight of him.

"Well?" she queried.

"Heaven sent him," said Cavanaugh, "even if he is an enemy. What do you know about him?"

"That he's a Kalla man is sufficient. He is bound to them hand and foot. It must have been Langley who sent him here, and I'm surprised he could do anything so crude. Single Benedict is a woman-hater, too, but that doesn't affect my opinion of him. It's his Kalla association."

"Miss Geary, I know all you say is true, but the fact remains I have got to have twenty-five thousand dollars—and a lot more. I've tried the banks and private individuals. The banks have turned me down cold, and in that I very certainly see the hand of the opposition. Individuals won't advance the money unless we give them a share all out of proportion to what they are entitled. Then there is another angle; wherever the money comes from we have no guarantee that the lender won't be induced to sell out to the Kalla crowd. Our only chance is to accept the money we need, regardless of the source, play the game square, keep our eyes open, and make the best of it. Many a battle has been won by allowing the other fellow to think you were playing his game according to his rules. I'm afraid of the Kalla crowd, but if they think we don't suspect them of being behind Benedict, we can play our own game—and I am also afraid of a money shortage. We're up against it. If we take it from Benedict then we know who it is we must watch, which may help some. However, I'll protect your interests by leasing the site from you for one season, instead of buying it outright, and

paying in stock. That's only fair to you."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," she replied with spirit, "but I'm afraid of Benedict just the same. We sink or swim together, and we should be able to beat them at any game in the end, so long as the majority of the stock remains in our hands."

"Exactly, Miss Geary; you're a brick. I think it is best to accept the offer. Benedict expects a foreman's job, of course, but we'll watch him."

And thus Benedict was admitted, to Langley's great glee, when he learned of it very shortly afterward.

"From now on, Single, you're a Cavanaugh man, but I'll manage to slip instructions to you from time to time," he chuckled, very well satisfied with the proggress he was making.

He even made Seldon happy by telling him he could deliver the cannery machinery without fear of his wrath, so it was a great day when the *Sunset* nosed her way down the canal to the Sound. Presently salt water lapped her hull, Cavanaugh on the bridge signaled full speed ahead, and before noon she was tied up to the cannery dock, and the first machinery was going into her hold.

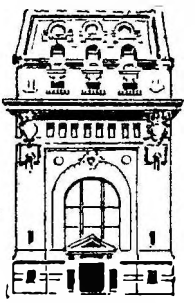
The day in part was spoiled for Cavanaugh. He had invited Marie to accompany him, but when she noticed Edna also aboard she had promptly refused.

"I'm not going if that girl is along," she declared.

"I'm sorry that you insist on taking such a foolish attitude, Marie. I've told you repeatedly our relationship is a business one, and no other. Miss Geary is a stockholder, and I can't very well order her off." He was silent a moment, then added firmly, "And wouldn't if I could."

"All right, I'm not going then." Marie stepped into her runabout, and drove down the boulevard at a rate of speed suggestive of inward rage.

MR. CARTER TURNER was a fussy individual, but his appearance suggested ready money and lots of it. Few men of the Pacific Coast business world knew him, but those who did claimed his first dollar had been doubled many times. His name, it might be added, was not listed in any city directory. Apparently he was an inquisitive soul, for he made two trips of inspection to the *Sunset*—when Cavanaugh wasn't about. His gray mustache bristled as he asked questions, and when the installation of the machinery was completed this mysterious stranger knew to a dollar the worth of the *Sunset,* and knew almost to a cent the amount of money Cavanaugh had on hand, and how much he needed. Then he visited various banks. The president of one seemed to recognize the caller and talked frankly.



"Be seated, Mr. Turner. So you are interested in the *Sunset,* too, eh? Well, there's a lot of money to be made out of the craft if handled right, but it takes money to start with. Cavanaugh has sense enough to know that he's not going to obtain it by rubbing a lamp, and he's been working night and day to raise funds to start on. I admire the fellow's nerve, but——"

"Exactly. He should be in a state now where he's willing to take money, and not inquire as to its source," interrupted Turner.

The banker nodded. "You know a drowning man will swim to a water-logged plank and hang on for dear life—when there's no cork life belt handy. Should you tackle Mr. Cavanaugh I'm certain, Mr. Turner, he'd climb aboard in the hope your plank would float him to safety. Frankly, there's no cork life belt bobbing around on the financial sea into which he leaped recently."

Mr. Carter Turner moved fussily away, and the expression in the banker's eyes was a mixture of envy and admiration. Mr. Turner went directly to Cavanaugh, and his astuteness was not deceived a bit by the buoyant manner in which Cavanaugh and Edna greeted him. He guessed, rightly, that they had been staring dejectedly at each other, attempting to find a solution to their financial muddle.

"It is rather disappointing," began Mr. Turner, "for one to offer the best of security when one needs money, and find all doors closed."

"Oh, we're doing nicely," replied Cavanaugh. Mr. Turner would have enjoyed testing this statement by a gesture, such as starting toward the door, but he was in too big a hurry. Instead he handed Cavanaugh a short time note, filled out, ready to sign. Then he asked numerous questions and answered none.

"Who are you, anyway?" queried Cavanaugh bluntly.

"I can assure you I'm not an unknown

benefactor," answered Turner with a grim note in his tone. "If you sign that note, and I think you will sign it because I've investigated this matter thoroughly, I expect to make money—good money. I shall also expect an agreement putting up the vessel as security. Also, I shall expect first rights to the pack you bring south, and shall hold the policy insuring the vessel and cargo; so in case you are wrecked——"

Apparently Mr. Turner had overlooked nothing. Cavanaugh was still stunned by the note. The amount was the exact amount he needed, within five hundred dollars. Someone else who knew the cannery game from A to Z had undoubtedly furnished the figures to Mr. Turner. It suggested that other "big fellows," aside from the Kalla people, believing Cavanaugh did not have a chance, were taking a hand.

Even admitting his dire need of funds, Cavanaugh hesitated to make the plunge, yet search as he might, he saw no possible trap. The note would not fall due until several weeks after he expected to be back in Seattle with his pack sold. It was not an attempt to purchase stock and possibly obtain control. As he wavered, either by accident or design, a pack of bills slipped from Mr. Turner's pocket to the floor. They were crisp and decidedly pleasing to the touch as Cavanaugh gathered them up while Mr. Turner in his fussy way apologized and assisted. The contact was reacting strangely on Cavanaugh. The bills meant his big chance to succeed, to save that which he already had, and he could retain them by merely signing his name on a perfectly legal document. He did not hand the roll back to Mr. Turner, instead he placed it on the desk and reached for his pen.

"Shall I get the smelling salts?" inquired Edna as Mr. Turner disappeared.

"Smelling salts wouldn't touch me," he replied. "That came like a bolt from a clear sky. Nobody knows a thing about Turner, except that he has a habit of doubling his money on every deal he has a finger in. He knew how much we needed; knew that we needed it right now or we'd crash on the rocks, and he knew I'd take it because I had to. What do you think?"

"We were desperate when he came in," she admitted, "and I was beginning to think we must accept some proposition that would tie us hand and foot and take the profits and most of the principal. At least, we are free to act and to fight—and we are taking one chance already on Single Benedict."

"This came so easily, I'm suspicious. Perhaps one of the big rivals of the Kalla people has heard they had bought an interest through Benedict, and is deciding to take a hand itself. Edna," the name slipped out unintentionally, "we're going to be the center of a battle before summer is over—a regular free for all, knock down and drag out—if the big boys get to scrapping over that site. Beyond a doubt they had other cards up their various sleeves, and never dreamed of a floating cannery dropping anchor off the site."

"Well, do you like a fight?"

Hayden grinned. "I'm not showing any indication of running out of it!"

"I wish I were going along!" she declared. "I love the country."

"You *are* going along!" he announced, and Edna's surprise was only too apparent. "That is, if you want to, can make arrangements, and find some lady to go with you as companion."

"Of course I want to. Mrs. Lockwood, my aunt, will go. She's a regular fellow, too. But do you really need me? I realize you can't take passengers."

"I need someone to handle the finances and books. You are secretary-treasurer of the company. And besides, I'm afraid they may try to put us out of business by an injunction, or something. By the time the courts moved, the run of Reds would be over, and they know it. I want the grantee of the permit on the job, with all of the necessary papers—or certified copies of them. Perhaps you'd better lock up the originals in Seattle, and we'll take photographic copies, properly authenticated."

CHAPTER IV

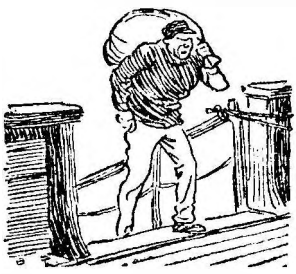
"STAND OFF."

CAVANAUGH'S crew came aboard several days before sailing north. Single Benedict eyed them with an appraising eye. "Where'd you get 'em, Cavanaugh?" he queried. "They don't look much like cannery hands to me. The Chinks that came aboard yesterday are all right, but this crowd—" He shrugged his shoulders.

"The American Legion furnished them, Benedict. We're in for trouble this summer, and I wanted men who thrive on trouble and know how to fight. The Legion had 'em."

Two hours before sailing a husky, two-

fisted individual carrying a bag on his shoulders came up the gang plank, made his way aft, selected a bunk, deposited his bag, then reported to Cavanaugh.



"Here's a note," he announced.

It was from the mysterious Mr. Turner, and brief.

Cavanaugh:

Manning is a good man. Appreciate it if you'll put him to work. Thank you.

Carter Turner.

"Where have you had experience?" inquired Cavanaugh, eyeing the man sharply. He was built for trouble.

"At the Associated Packers, one year. I'm an all around man, sir!" The man was almost defiant in his attitude.

"All right, Turner's recommended you highly, and that's enough, Manning. Make yourself at home."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Ex-Navy man," mused Cavanaugh. "He's got the stamp of the service about him. That about settles Turner's identity—he's one of the Associated Packers' men. Merry little crowd; wonder if the other canneries have men planted aboard?"

Cavanaugh's reflections were interrupted by a din on deck. He hurried to the bridge where he could observe what was taking place. The crew had taken points of observation, and were watching the Chinese, who were engaged in the strange ceremonial of putting the Wind God to route that the ship might have a fair voyage to the Bering Sea. Sacrifices of barbecued pork, candy and fruits were offered to placate the god. Large white papers, traced with intricate lines were offered, as the course the ship was to take, the theory being that the Wind God would become hopelessly lost in attempting to follow. The rattle of exploding firecrackers lent noise to the ceremony.

"They've done that for thousands of years before putting to sea," said Cavanaugh to Edna and Mrs. Lockwood.

But he spoke absently as he watched the dock anxiously for a glimpse of Marie Heath. She had halfway promised to be down, and wish him a *bon voyage*. Fifteen minutes after sailing time he reluctantly gave the order to cast off lines. Astern the propeller kicked up the water, and the *Sunset* slowly backed away from the dock with her strange crew.

Single Benedict came up from below, and caught sight of the two women on the bridge. "What the—?" he began, then shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "What kind of a ship is this that takes women along? And I'll have to eat with 'em, too."

"Well, Kalla Packing," answered a voice, "if you don't like to eat with the ladies there are plenty that'll take your place." Single turned hurriedly. Manning, the man who had been recommended by Carter Turner, was regarding him with unfriendly eyes.

"Get below, Manning; you don't belong on this deck," he snapped.

"I belong anywhere on this ship I feel like being," was the reply, but, nevertheless Manning went below to the section allotted to whites.

With the freedom of one feeling himself in a position of responsibility, Single mentioned the incident at the table that night. "Manning will bear watching, Cavanaugh. I don't know if you know it or not, but he's a Navy deserter—escaped from a Navy prison. Can't see why they haven't found him before."

"Why didn't you turn him in?" inquired Cavanaugh.

"Because I want to live my normal span of life, Captain, and one way of shortening it is to go too far with Manning."

"Are you married, Mr. Benedict?" inquired Mrs. Lockwood pleasantly. She had already heard of Single's dislike for the reputed weaker sex, and was a great tease.

"I know when I'm well off," he growled in answer. "I'd like to bet both of you'll be either engaged or married before you leave Alaska again," he added. "Lots of women go up there to grab off a husband."

"Yes?" drawled Mrs. Lockwood to the amusement of Edna and Hayden. "But that shouldn't cause you the slightest worry, Mr. Benedict." Single took three sharp glances at her before resuming his meal; he had an idea he was being kidded.

A SHIP under full sail greeted them off Unimak Pass, and brought exclamations of delight from the women and a thrill of pleasure to Cavanaugh.

"It's a rare sight," he exclaimed, "and a fearful comedown from the glory that was once hers to her present occupation of cannery ship. I love them and am

proud to say that the ground work of my nautical training was on my father's windjammer."

"Where is she now, operated by some cannery?" inquired the girl.

"Thank God, no!" he said fervently. "She went down at sea in a storm with flag flying; a fitting end."

The rhythm of the engines that had filled the *Sunset* day after day without break suddenly stopped.

Cavanaugh leaped to the engine-room speaking tube. "What's the matter down there?"

"Haven't found out yet. Something broke. Will notify you in a moment," came the reply.

An ominous silence hovered over the craft, as she slowly swung around in the grip of a five-knot tide. Mrs. Lockwood turned gray, not from fear, but from seasickness, for they were in the trough of the sea, and hurriedly entered her stateroom. Cavanaugh studied the distant reef through binoculars. The reef was a long way off then, but the tide was taking them toward it rapidly.

The break in the engine-room did not just happen. It had been planned, timed for this particular moment.

Riding not far from the sailing craft they had remarked a Kalla Packing Company sea-going tug bucking the sea, and Cavanaugh watched her through the binoculars for several minutes. The lurching of the steamer frequently broke in on his vision, but he was quite sure one of the men in the tug's wheel-house was Langley. And then he saw a number of things not on the surface.

He stepped to the engine-room speaking tube again. "Bad break?"

The reply was equally brief. "Bad break. Sabotage, sir!"

"Is it serious, Hayden?" Edna inquired earnestly. The white water over the reef was visible to her now.

"Not for the people aboard, but for us as owners it's mighty serious. The people can be saved without difficulty," he explained.

"See," she cried, "the tug is coming this way. If we do get too close to the reef, they can send a line aboard."

"They can," he said grimly, "but I won't take it!"

"You won't!" She regarded him in dismay.

"That's Langley's game, Edna. We're a vessel in distress, and unless we can bargain with him to tow us for a fixed rate we'll have to take his line. That's salvage; half the value of the ship, cargo and pending freight, Edna. Do you think he'll bargain with us?"

"Hardly," she replied. "I'd sooner go on the rocks!"

Cavanaugh descended into the depths of the engine-room. He did not need to ask about the progress of repair. It was apparent. "Make a temporary repair, chief," he suggested. "one that will take us to sea, clear of the reef, and you can have a week to do the permanent job."

"That's what I figured on. And another thing, Captain. I'm trying to figure on the man that did this job. He knew just what to do and how to do it. It wasn't one of my men, because I know 'em."

When Cavanaugh returned above, Edna was staring as if fascinated by the white water, her hands gripping the bridge rail. She presented a picture of health, excitement, youth, but not fear—just grim determination.

"A fitting partner for a North country man," Cavanaugh exclaimed, "and if some North country man doesn't win her, it'll be mighty strange."

Just then Manning touched him on the arm. "If you're curious about the engines breaking down this particular time, you might ask Single a few questions," he suggested.

"What do you know about it?" challenged Cavanaugh.

"Me? Nothing at all. I'm just suggesting, that's all, sir!" he replied. "He's a Kalla Bay man, you know."

"And you're with the Associated Packers."

"I was, sure, but I'm not now. I'm with the Cavanaugh-Geary Packing Company," he replied. "I'm loyal to my own gang."

There was food for thought in that, but Cavanaugh had no time for thought just then. The Kalla tug was alongside, her skipper leaning from cabin window with megaphone in hand.

"Want a line?" he bellowed.

"How much to tow me clear, Captain?" countered Cavanaugh.

"Hayden!" The words were fairly

snapped at Cavanaugh; he was actually startled. Edna was regarding him with a mixture of amazement and reproof. He smiled. So she thought he was weakening, eh? Asking the enemy for mercy.

"Admiralty Court can settle that little matter," replied the tug captain. "Right now, you're about due to crash." Cavanaugh glanced toward the white water, and inwardly prayed for the clatter of turning engines.

"We want no line, sir!" Cavanaugh replied. "Thanks."

The tug came closer and closer, a man on deck with coiled heaving line. Langley spoke in a low tone, and the man glanced toward the *Sunset's* crew grouped around on deck. The line circled and the lead arched upward, descending upon the *Sunset's* deck. Eager hands reached forth to grasp it, and were stayed by the thunder of Cavanaugh's voice from the bridge.

"Hands off that line! Get back, men. Back!"

Amazed, they obeyed. The line slid over the rail, and the next lurch of the vessels jerked the lead clear. The megaphone swung around to bear on the tug's pilot house. "Stand off, damn you! Stand off! When I want a line I'll ask for it."

Langley thrust the tug skipper aside before he could reply, and shook his fist at Cavanaugh. "You'll take the line, Cavanaugh, or the underwriters will hear of it, and you'll not collect a damned cent."

"Which'll cost you several thousand dollars!" retorted Cavanaugh. The man might as well know that he knew the Kalla people had bought in to the *Sunset* through Benedict.

Nevertheless the tug remained close at hand despite Langley's chagrin in not getting someone aboard to take a line. Cavanaugh was no fool, and he knew he must take a line before the *Sunset* drifted right onto the rocks. He had no intention of piling up. Those aboard the tug knew it also.

He watched the narrowing expanse of black water between ship and reef. "They've beaten us," cried the girl. "You've got to take the line. See that mocking smile on Langley's face. Oh, I could fight him right now!"

Cavanaugh nodded. He wanted to fight also, and what was more, he proposed to do so at the first opportunity. "How about it, chief?" he called through the tube.

"She won't stand the gaff, sir, but we might try it!"

"Well, give her as much as you think she'll stand, and see what happens."

Slowly the *Sunset* forged ahead, while those aboard were tense in the expectancy of another break. The steamer swung around and, barely making headway against the tide, drew clear of the reef.

"It's now safe to smile, Edna!" Hayden announced.

"If Langley wasn't aboard the tug I'd wave my hand," she said. "I'm going to do it, anyway!" She fluttered a farewell with her handkerchief.

"And now for the man who did the job," growled Cavanaugh, as he turned the bridge over to the first officer. "A head is going to fall, perhaps Benedict's, perhaps Manning's, but there is going to be an example made for the benefit of the others."

He commenced with Benedict and Manning, for both had been seen in the engine room, according to members of the black gang. There were others, too, who had appeared at different times and watched the machinery curiously. It was a man size job to weed the guilty man from the innocent.

Not even Ah Goon was spared. Ah Goon made pies of very high quality, which he sold to members of the crew and cannery hands. Ah Goon shook his head solemnly. What words he spoke were pretty close to being the President's American, as distinguished from the King's English. "Ah Goon keep eye peeled, an' ear open. Let you know, Cap!"

"All right, Goon, if you hear anything, let me know!"

MAN is a creature of habit. In Alaska he goes to bed at bed time, though the sun may remain on the job all night long during the summer. Ah Goon slipped quietly from his bunk and made his way to the upper deck. The decks were deserted, except two men forward were smoking as they walked the width of the deck.

"Slip cap an earful!" muttered Goon as he made his way toward Cavanaugh's door. "Tell him who break engine machinery. Damned cuss!"

Cavanaugh heard his knock. "Come in!" he called, then again, "Come in!" A sob came distinctly through the door, then a tired sigh. "Edna," he whispered, "what's happened?" He donned an overcoat over his pajamas, and opened the door.

The body of Ah Goon lay at his feet. He

had died without sound except the sob and the tired sigh. Cavanaugh searched the gear and the boats lashed to the upper decks.

"Poor devil," he muttered, "he'd unearthed something, and was on his way to report it. Someone took a big chance to keep him from speaking. Killed him right at my door. Well, that shows the lengths to which they will go. Hello, thought I saw a head over there."

The head came up a ladder, followed by the rest of the body; Single Benedict. He hardly looked as if he had just committed a murder, but he was the only one in the vicinity, and he had only emerged when Cavanaugh's footsteps indicated that someone was so close that he must certainly be observed.

"Ah Goon's been murdered!" said Cavanaugh suddenly.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Single. "Why, I saw him coming up that ladder not five minutes ago."

"See anyone else around, Benedict?"

"Not a soul." Then, evidently seeing he was making a case against himself, he lapsed into silence.

The murder of Ah Goon created no end of excitement. An examination of the body disclosed the cause of death. A knife wound made by one who knew exactly where to strike. Amid strange rites of his fellows, Goon was buried at sea the next day. Unimak Pass lay astern, and the waters of Bering Sea, sullen and black, seemed to fairly leap to claim the body. Edna and Cavanaugh both felt the depression more than the others. Goon had tried to be a faithful servant, brief as had been his period of employment.

By noon the whites had relegated the affair to the limbo of incidents, and the Chinese—well, one could never tell what was going on in their minds. Another man was vending pies that night—pies of not so good a quality as Goon's.

"What will be next? Who will be next?" cried Edna in dismay. She could not put the two incidents, the attempted wrecking of the ship and the killing of Goon from her mind. They had come swiftly, unexpectedly, and the steamer had but just entered the Bering Sea.

A lull followed, a lull that lasted until they had dropped anchor in Kalla Bay. The great gulf of water known as Bristol Bay was dotted with icebergs, through which the white winged sailing vessels were making their way. There was a romance about it not to be denied, and the cold wind and excitement had put color into Edna Geary's cheeks that caused more than one admiring glance to be cast her way from the Legion men aboard. Here was a girl worth fighting for. And they would doubtless have to fight for her, if the present lull meant anything. Experience had taught them a lull presaged a new outbreak of a storm.

Chapter V

Langley Stacks the Deck

THERE are some canneries in the North that look only to the immediate present. They take their toll of fish, thinking only of present profits, ignoring or getting around the letter and spirit of the law; packing only the highest grade of fish, and dumping out the less valued species of the silver horde to drift to the beach by thousands, to profane the air with the stench of their rotting bodies. Such a cannery was the Kalla Packing Company. It recruited its forces from hell's thickest scum; wrecks of humanity who toiled the fishing season through, spent their earnings at the Kalla store, and returned at the end of the season with a few dollars—if they hadn't gambled them away coming south.

One year the company had emptied a county jail—release being conditioned on the culprits signing up for the season with the Kalla people. Two had leaped overboard from the ship before it left Puget Sound, one had made it to shore. The other drowned.

There are other canneries, of highest business repute, who obey the laws of the land, look to the future and select their employees with care, but they were not located on Kalla Bay.

Langley stepped ashore and looked around. The crew that had preceded him had put things in shape. They would be ready when the Reds came. In the distance he could see the *Sunset* riding at anchor in a sheltered cove. It was a maddening sight, particularly as the fishing was at its best off that spot during the run.

"Hello, Langley!"

At sound of the voice the manager turned, but the man who came toward him

did not offer to shake hands. When Langley extended his hand, the other accepted it.

"Rather surprised to see me in these parts, eh?" he said. "Well, I'm surprised to be here myself. There's been too much trouble around this cannery the past couple of years, and they figured they'd better have a deputy marshal on the job."

"We've always had one, Gibbon!"

"I know it, but he was kinda lopsided. He was your man and lopped on your side. The other side was kinda thin, and gave the natives and the whites that happened along the worst of it. Now me, well as everybody knows, I'm what you might call symmetrical. I'm looking forward to a right peaceful period in these parts. You might pass the word around amongst your men that things ain't what they used to be, providing any of 'em lived to come back a second year."

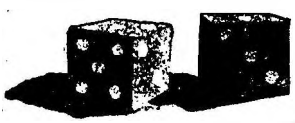
"That's not necessary, Gibbon!" snapped Langley.

"Oh, yes it is—that and a lot more. Now I've had my say, and a word to the wise is sufficient. Nobody ever accused you of being a boob, whatever else they might have charged you with."

Having, as he said, said his say, the marshal wandered down the dock to look the China gang over. He expected to find trouble there sooner or later without half-looking.

"So they run old Gibbon in down here, eh?" Langley was plainly disturbed. "I wonder if Cavanaugh had strings he could pull to bring that about. You can't bluff Gibbon, and he won't listen to reason. He's one of the old-fashioned man-hunters who's lived poor and will die poor." Langley might have added, "and honest." He entered his office and found it ready for occupancy. "Well, I've got to get rid of Gibbon before the fun starts," he declared.

This he proceeded to do, choosing a day when Gibbon had cruised down the bay to pay his respects to Cavanaugh, and incidentally size him up. A miserable drug-ridden Mexican was one pawn. The man needed dope, and Langley supplied it. "Now get this straight, José," he said, "the reason you haven't money to buy dope with is because the negro, Sam, cheated you in the crap game. He cheats everybody, so stay away from him."



Langley saw the dark eyes flash vengefully, and knew that he had said enough. Unconsciously, José fingered his knife. One can't confine mixed races in the dark holds of a ship for days, and have harmony.

Langley gave Sam an order that took him beyond the limits of the cannery, and followed him himself. He knew the outcome before he gave Sam the order. The negro hummed a tune, for being once more on land made him happy. In an isolated spot, José leaped from his hiding place with gleaming knife and snarling words. The knife slashed the negro's arm before he could draw his own weapon and fire. Then José crumpled up, his blade slashing the tundra.

For several moments Sam regarded his work in horror. "Oh, lordy lordy!" he groaned, "I killed him. Hones' I couldn't help it, hones' he'd killed me with that knife. Oh lordy—" He broke off. Perhaps no one had witnessed the affair. His eyes darted about, and he saw Langley standing on the knoll, looking down. The manager came on the run.

"What's this, Sam?" he demanded sharply, as though he had not instigated the whole affair. Briefly Sam explained, his voice filled with horror.

"You saw it, Boss, you saw him pull his knife and slash, you saw him, boss—didn't you? I never harmed nobody before, boss!"

"That may be true, Sam, but you'll have a difficult time explaining it. Everybody knows you won money from José coming up."

"Them weren't educated dice, boss, they was hones', hones' they was."

"I know that. Listen, Sam, you've committed murder! Murder! Sam, you've got to get out of the country, immediately. Gibbon, the marshal, is a terror. He'll never rest until he finds you, but you've got a fair start. Come back to the cannery, get plenty of grub and clear out. Work up the river, and don't stop. You're a strong man, Sam, and can carry plenty of grub."

"Thanks, boss, thanks for giving me a chance. I know you know I didn't mean to."

Langley took good care he did not observe Sam's departure. To clear his own skirts, he had jailed the negro in a store room used for that purpose on occasion. The official jail was empty, locked, and Gibbon had the key—which was convenient.

News of the killing had reached Gibbon shortly before he returned to the cannery. A passing motor boat suggested he had better hurry. "What about the killing?" he demanded of Langley.

"Some row between a Mexican and negro. I happened along just as the nigger had finished the job. I did not encounter any particular resistance when I arrested him. The jail was locked, so I cooped him up in a store-room. He flew the coop. On checking up, I find he's taken a quantity of grub and evidently intends to resist capture."

Gibbon regarded Langley with open suspicion. "Sounds all right, Langley, but peace officers in this country have learned to take your stories with a grain of salt, and poke around for the truth elsewhere."

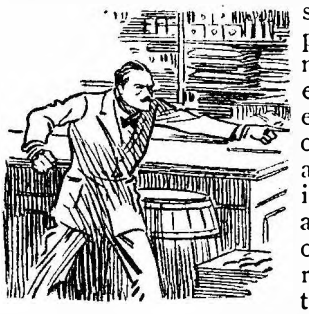
Nevertheless, Gibbon took the trail at once, though Sam had a six-hour lead and panic resulted in his covering his tracks fairly well. Langley watched the marshal depart with outward satisfaction. He was rid of him. If the negro could only keep the marshal guessing for three or four weeks the run of Reds would be over by that time.

"Just suppose," he mused, "the nigger killed Gibbon. He's crazy enough to do 'most anything, thanks to the scare I threw into him. Well, what if he does? Gibbon's been a thorn in the side long enough."

Then he called his fishermen together. A few were legitimate, but for the most part they were riff-raff he had picked up for the purpose of driving all opposition from the Kalla Bay trap site. He pointed to the *Sunset*. "She's dropped anchor where the best fishing is, men. Her boats will get the cream of it, so it's up to you. There are many of you and few of them. The marshal is on a wild goose chase, and won't be seen in these parts for many days unless he has a lot of luck. When the Reds run, chase the others off and take 'em. I don't care what you do, but I don't want to know what it is. I'm interested in fish; the more salmon you bring in, the better for me. That's all, men." He started to turn away. "No, it isn't, either. Most of you know Single Benedict by sight, and those of you who don't, can have him pointed out to you. Remember, whatever you do, don't touch Benedict. He may put up a fine bluff, but he'll not hurt any of you. He's one of our gang."

The first personal encounter between Langley and Cavanaugh took place a week before the Red run started. It came so unexpectedly that Langley did not have an opportunity to resort to his usual tactics and stack the deck. To the manager's amazement, Cavanaugh stepped from his launch, walked down the dock, and entered the Company's store. Langley happened to be alone at the time. He looked up, then, realizing he was on his own ground, became threatening.

"You clear out of here, Cavanaugh," he shouted, "and stay aboard your own vessel. The Company's store is not selling goods except to people employed by us, or the natives; and it's not selling to you at any price. Clear out before I arrest you for trespassing."



Cavanaugh grinned cheerfully. "I don't want to buy anything from you, Langley, at any price, but you're going to serve me whenever I see fit to ask it. I'm coming ashore every time I feel like it, and what's more, I'm coming into your store." Then he played his ace. "You're postmaster, Langley, and I've called for my mail."

"You haven't any mail!"

"Perhaps not, but I've called to see if I have."

"Your real purpose here was to size things up, to look over my men. The mail part of it is just a stall." Langley was furious because he knew the other's argument was unanswerable. He ran through the mail hurriedly. "Nothing for you!" he snapped.

"Strange," muttered Cavanaugh with a fine show of disappointment. "I had written to a correspondence school relative to taking a course in salmon canning. I should certainly have received a circular. Well, thanks, I'll call again."

"And if you do, Cavanaugh," Langley fumed inwardly, "I'll be ready for you."

He watched the broad back and swinging shoulders disappear down the dock, and he noticed Cavanaugh was carefully sizing up the men about, and the equipment.

The relief on Edna's face when Cavanaugh returned thrilled him strangely. "And I have no business being thrilled by the relief on any girl's face except Marie Heath's," he told himself in his cabin. Marie looked at him from a silver frame.

"About time for a letter, isn't it, little girl?" he queried aloud.

From the cabin window he could see a pair of feet and sturdy legs. Presently they were joined by smaller feet and even sturdier legs. "Now don't you try to escape, Mr. Benedict," came Mrs. Lockwood's cool tones. "I saw you start nervously as I came in sight."

Apparently Mrs. Lockwood seated herself, for Cavanaugh could now see four heels in a row, Benedict's heels moving nervously. "Where is the husband I came for, Mr. Benedict?" the lady pursued remorselessly. "You said all unmarried women came to Alaska for the purpose of securing husbands. Well, trot him out, and let me look him over. I haven't seen anything yet worthy of special notice. Present company excepted, of course, Mr. Benedict, because the world knows your attitude on the matter. It'll be a terrible blow to my sex when more of them hear about it."

"I wish she wouldn't kid that fellow," growled Cavanaugh to himself. "She'll get him riled up, and he's going to make trouble enough as it is."

And that was just what she was doing. If a man wished to remain single that was his business. She had married the best man in the world, might he rest in peace, and no one had aroused the slightest interest since he had passed on five years before. Just the same she resented Single's attitude that she and her niece were excess baggage. Certainly Edna was filling a very important rôle in handling the books and funds, and she was helping, too. Even Cavanaugh had to show good cause before she approved of an expenditure.

Apparently Single recovered somewhat from the attack. "I'll look around and see if I can't find you a man; that is, if I decide I don't want you myself. I'm thinking it over," he said solemnly.

"Now, what do you think of that?" chuckled Cavanaugh at the comeback.

The one bit of recreation those aboard the *Sunset* enjoyed was during the few days previous to the run of Reds. And then they came, and all forces girded up for work and battle.

Chapter VI

The Run of Reds

TIME and tide wait for no man, neither do salmon. Man must be ready or he loses his silver harvest that brings in gold. The pack must be completed within three or four weeks, or not at all. Other grades follow later, but do not bring the price the red salmon bring, and cost as much to pack. They are weeks of hectic activity, but the days are long—too long in fact for those who rely on the hours of darkness for executing their plots.

The first salmon came aboard the *Sunset,* just enough to start the machinery, and keep it running for an hour or more. Edna, in rubber boots and clothing, fed the first salmon into the iron chink, followed it through the conveyors to the deft machine that fills and covers the cans, personally labeled the first can, and bore it away in triumph amid the cheers of the crew.

Cavanaugh watched the returning Kalla boats—for that day they had kept off the Cavanaugh-Geary fishing grounds—and noted they were riding light. Already he had partly guessed the truth—the run this year would be light, and the fight for the fish would be more desperate than ever.

During those early July days the sun did not set until after nine o'clock, and twilight lingered until ten-thirty. The brief period of darkness was over by one-thirty in the morning. Yet during that brief period a man came out of the darkness in a bidarka, thrust a note beneath the door of Single Benedict's room aboard the *Sunset,* and as silently vanished.

"I'm going ashore, sir," he informed Cavanaugh next day; "the mail boat is docking, and I'm expecting a letter or two. Can you spare me?"

Cavanaugh was expecting something of the sort. "Very well," he said. "You might bring off any mail you find for me."

Langley was on hand to meet Benedict when he noticed he had come alone. "I'll be brief!" he explained. "You're prepared to take care of things, I suppose, to play up to my game, Benedict!"

"Yep. I could not very well come ashore before. Had no excuse, for the *Sunset* crowd and the Kalla crowd can't very well chum together. Where's the marshal?"

"Still up the river looking for Sam. I hope neither of 'em ever come back."

"Pretty clever work, Langley. I only

know what I hear, but I know your ability. You wanted to get rid of Gibbon and that was a good way, though tough on Sam and the Mex."

"People are made to use. If you don't use 'em, you're overlooking some mighty good cards."

"That's right!" agreed Single. "Any mail for Cavanaugh?"

"A bunch, including a letter from the fair Marie. I'm keeping an eye on his mail, naturally." Langley handed Single the packet. "By the way, Single, something's going to drop soon, but don't worry, you're safe enough. You know me!"

"Yes—and thanks! I'll be listening for the crash!"

EVEN to those who follow the salmon year after year, the mystery of it all is ever present. What wonderful thing is it that causes the fish to return unerringly to the stream of their spawning to spawn in turn and die; to come from the ocean from no one knows where; to follow up the stream, always going against the current higher and higher until the salt water is scores of miles behind; to seek the creeks, hurling their bodies across shallows or climbing waterfalls with swift charges; until, battered and bruised, they lay their eggs in sandy shallows. Spring finds the creeks alive with young salmon; finds the brush filled with bones of the dead, left there by high waters.

As it is with the Reds, so it is with the silvers, humpbacks, and lowly dogs. Time was when they choked the creeks until their backs gleamed above water; filled traps until the nets burst, and those in the bottom of the spillers were smothered by weight of numbers. But the fish that are caught do not reach the creeks to spawn, and so each year their numbers become less. Kalla had not worried particularly because they had been fishing on a Government site when the Government was otherwise occupied. But this year a duly authorized occupant was on the site. Partially filled boats meant partially filled cans and purses. The fishermen in Langley's employ became resentful day by day, and Langley waited until the strain reached the breaking point, then gave them a free hand; but watched himself from a safe distance.

Peacefulness had caused relaxation on the part of the others aboard the *Sunset*, but not on Cavanaugh's. He was not deceived, yet he forgot his affairs for one brief period while he hurried through his mail. The letter from Marie trusted everything was going nicely, but did not express a great amount of confidence. Apparently she still resented the fact they were unable to marry in June. Cavanaugh had been willing, but she balked at accompanying him for the summer "on a smelly fishing steamer." She had been running about a bit with Walsh and knew, of course, Hayden wouldn't mind that, because no one regarded Walsh seriously.

"They may not regard him seriously," he growled, "but they're not unmindful of his wealth!" It was not a pleasant thought. He read further. "And I know you are not lonesome with your pretty school teacher." At this point Cavanaugh blew up. No man likes to have his motives, particularly honorable motives, misconstrued.

He wrote a hot reply, then tore it up. Then he turned to his remaining mail. There was quite a lot of it, personal letters, advertisements and—a letter from Carter Turner. It was brief, provokingly so.

Dear Mr. Cavanaugh:

Discharge Manning immediately. My mistake. Sorry!

Carter Turner.

"Deuce of a time to discover a mistake," he fumed. "Hello, this stationery looks familiar." He turned it to the light and examined the water mark. The discovery was anything but reassuring. "The Cavanaugh Company's own stationery," he exclaimed, "one of the second sheets. The others have the firm name at the top. Sent in a plain envelope. Huh!" It was a poser. Either the Associated Packers had bought out his father's estate, lock, stock and barrel, or else— No, it did not seem possible, still Judge Keene had once been counsel for the Associated Packers before taking over the Cavanaugh affairs. Then he thought of Manning. The man had behaved himself throughout the voyage so far as he knew. He really had nothing against him but suspicions. Cavanaugh probed deeper. "Maybe he was responsible for the breakdown off Unimak Pass and, failing to prevent us from reaching the trap site, they want to get rid of him. Queer! I'll watch that fellow."

And that reminded him of something else. It was necessary to erect a building ashore to show good faith and hold the site for the future. That must be attended to soon.

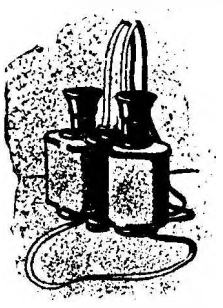
Cavanaugh hurried out on deck. "Where's Edna?" he inquired of Mrs. Lockwood. On her insistence Single Benedict had been explaining the "iron chink" to her.

"Fishing," she replied. "She was telling of an experience on Puget Sound when she caught a steel-head on light tackle and landed him—a twenty-pounder, I believe she said it was. It took a half-hour to land it. Mr. Benedict replied no woman could do it, and she's taken some light tackle and agreed to bring in three salmon to prove it."

"Who took her out?"

"She rowed the dory out herself, but one of the men, Manning, I think it was, agreed to do the rowing while she fished. He was to report whether she landed the fish unaided."

"Yes, it was Manning," Single put in. Cavanaugh was uneasy—all the more so in view of the letter he had just received—but he gave no outward indication. Was a plot of some nature being instigated by Single and Manning? He was prepared for anything, things had been quiet so long. And twilight was coming on, too. He searched the waters with his binoculars. The tide was running out swiftly, even for waters where swift tides are common. The *Sunset's* fishermen were dotting the water far out, and some distance away he made out a dory with two people in it. Both were dressed in oilskins, for the sky was overcast and threatening rain. It was impossible to tell at this distance, but it was doubtless the *Sunset's* dory. Then as he watched, the scene changed. The boats drew together, even the dory started toward the other craft nearest it. And then he understood. Bearing down on the *Sunset's* fishermen were a number of gill net craft, in tow of a heavy gas boat.



"Come on, Single!" ordered Cavanaugh. "The fun's commenced!" A few scattered reports came across the water. The *Sunset's* fishermen were taking no chances; but Cavanaugh knew this fight would not be settled with pistols, but by fists and oars wielded by strong men. It was for this hour he had chosen his men. Would they stand the test? He thought they would, and his place was in the thick of it. He only hoped Langley would be present. "Come on, Single!"

"Coming!" replied Single. There was no reason for him remaining behind, for Langley's instructions had been explicit on that point. "Don't hurt Benedict, he's one of our crowd."

In the coming battle Cavanaugh determined Benedict should be well toward the front, where he could be observed. Mrs. Lockwood called down to them from above, just as the boat shoved off, "If there's trouble you tell Edna to come back immediately. I don't want her hurt."

"All right!" replied Cavanaugh as the power dory shot ahead.

Cavanaugh laid a course that would intercept Edna's tiny craft, but the Kalla Packing Company's fleet drew in ahead of him. Instantly the air was filled with noise of the tumult. The few desultory shots gave way to curses and the crashing of falling oars and struggling men. No chance to use a gun now, the danger from one would be as great to friend as foe.

A power boat shot across the bow of Cavanaugh's boat, her three men ready to grapple with the opposing two. Benedict gripped an oar and Cavanaugh shut off the motor an instant before the craft crashed together. His oar crashed downward, taking a man with it. A *Sunset* boat came to the rescue, and the three craft swirled along on the seething tide.

"That's Benedict," yelled a voice, "but the other fellow's Cavanaugh. Get him! Get him!" Cavanaugh laid a man low in the opposing boat, just as a Kalla boat joined the fighting group. He downed another man, and then the sky overhead seemed to crash down upon him. Was it thunder or a blow? He pondered foolishly as he crumpled to the boat. He had a hazy view of struggling legs, and saw Benedict either leap, or perhaps he was knocked, overboard; then unconsciousness stole over him.

Cavanaugh could not have been unconscious more than five minutes. Perhaps it was less. The struggle was continuing in the twilight, and he was alone. He stood up unsteadily and looked about. A boat with three men was rushing toward the dory in which Manning and the girl were drifting. In the madness of the battle it was unlikely that they would notice one of the occupants was a girl. Edna was dressed as the men, and it was well she was, for the rain was coming down in torrents and an off-shore squall was aiding the tide. Cavanaugh started the motor,

and hurried toward them, standing with cupped hands.

"'Vast, you idiots, 'vast!" he bellowed, using, in his excitement, a term that he rarely employed. "'Vast! That's a girl! 'Vast!"

"'Vast and be damned to you!" yelled a second voice, and an upraised oar dropped Manning. Or did he fall just ahead of the blow? Cavanaugh groaned at his helplessness as the second man in the enemy boat lifted an oar and crashed it down on Edna's head. The girl crumpled so quickly that it seemed as if the descending oar's progress was hardly impeded.

The occupants of the Kalla boat, maddened with success, set a course toward Cavanaugh. Here was one boat in the clear. He groped about in the bottom of the dory for his automatic, which he could now use without danger to friends. An unseen hand stayed the progress of his craft; the engine stopped with a tired cough.

"Now what?" he exclaimed angrily.

He wanted to dispose of the other craft, then rush to Edna's aid. The dory was drifting rapidly with wind and tide, riding high, a fine victim for the wind.

He looked astern and understood. The propeller had fouled a gill net, partially filled with fish. He could see the gleaming bodies floundering in the twilight and the net vanished under the stern of his craft. He bent low and slashed with a knife, desperately trying to sever the strands before the other craft could reach him.

"It's Cavanaugh!" It was a different voice shouting this time. "Get him, boys!"

Cavanaugh leaped to his feet, and faced Langley. There was little room in his own craft for the sort of a fight he knew was coming and, adopting a cardinal principle of the sea, he carried the fight to the other. His swinging oar sent the first opponents sprawling to escape its blow, then he leaped aboard and fought his way toward Langley. The narrowness of the craft made it impossible for them to get behind him. Only one man could face him at a time, and that man did not last long. It was a rough and tumble fight without quarter. From his place of safety astern Langley caught up an oar. He could not bring it down, but, using it as a lance, he charged. The hurled oar passed his own man, and the handle was driven into Cavanaugh's stomach. No living man could resist such a blow. A cry of agony burst from his lips, his hands grasped the oar, hands strangely powerless and numb, then he slipped overboard.

"We got him, Langley! See there, he's

tangled up in that gill net. He'll drown in a minute!" Instinctively Cavanaugh struggled to free himself from the strands that yielded at his every movement, yet always clung tenaciously. "He's drowning, Langley!"

"Let him! He attacked us; we didn't attack him!"

Chapter VII

CASUALTIES

EDNA was one of those fortunate persons who never experienced a headache. When consciousness returned the rain was drenching her face. It was a cold, nasty rain, driven by a raw wind, but she rather liked it, because her head was pounding furiously and lights danced before her eyes. The oar had come down squarely on her head. Two things had saved her, the sou'wester she was wearing and the heavy cushion of hair directly between head and oar. The dory was bobbing about violently, but presently when her senses cleared somewhat she managed to find the oars. Her fishing gear was scattered about the bottom of the boat. Also two salmon she had caught with light tackle. But for the battle she would have undoubtedly won a bet from Single Benedict.

Manning stirred slightly, and when she took the oars he recovered completely. It was a different Manning than she had known aboard the boat.

"Just leave those oars where they are," he ordered. "We're going to drift through life together for a while."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Just that. Nobody ever accused me of failing to grab a chance. I'm grabbing one—that's all. That row between the two gangs of fishermen was just what I needed to finish up a little plan of my own. When the big fellows are fighting, a little fellow

can grab something and run, if he's got his eyes open."

"Then you were not hit with an oar?"

"Nope, not me. I saw it coming and dropped. If you'd have done the same instead of trying to fight back, you'd have saved yourself a crack on the head. Still, maybe you wouldn't be here."

"Who won the fight?" While she was asking questions her mind was rapidly seeking means of escape. Manning had played a shrewd game. Not once had he made a move that anyone could object to. At all times he had been obedient, but when the time came to strike, the mask dropped.

"I don't know who won the fight," he replied, "and I don't care. I saw Cavanaugh go overboard in the row and——"

"He was saved!" she exclaimed. It was half a question, half insistence prompted by hope.

"Hmmm, so that's the way the land lays, and him engaged to another girl. Maybe I can— Still it's all business with him. The girl back in Seattle—" Manning was muttering to himself as he planned. "I'll tell you one thing, Miss Geary, and that's this: If you make a break, or squawk out, I'll bang you over the head with an oar, and I'll bang hard enough so you'll feel it through that pile of brown hair."

"Well, what are you going to do with me? Surely I'm not so important a person as to figure in your plans?" she said at length.

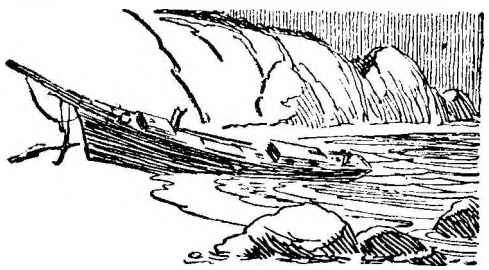
"You're a cool one, ain't scared and that makes you dangerous," he replied. "As to what I'm going to do with you, you'll find out. I didn't expect to have you on my hands this quick, but now you're here, I'll work out the rest." He regarded her studiously. "Never quite realized how pretty you was before."

Then he took the oars. She marveled at the strength that made it possible for him to maintain the pace. Evidently now that they were beyond earshot of any of the gill netters he proposed to put the dory out of sight before daylight. For two hours he rowed steadily, then his pace became slower. The wind and tide had helped a lot. Now the tide was turning. He did not buck it, but made for shore. Both were hungry, so he built a fire and broiled salmon on the end of a stick. It was flat tasting, and half raw. She ate a little and stopped, sick and disgusted.

"You'll probably have to eat a lot of it," he remarked, "because we haven't any grub."

When the tide again turned he set off, rowing steadily until at length he came to a bleak rock. It was almost sheer, and storms had eroded it until it overhung in many places. The water beneath was white as it surged amid the black rocks and was sucked back again.

Manning did not seem at all disturbed. On top of the island tundra grew where the rocks permitted it. Otherwise it was desolate. He faced the dory toward the reef, then waited; presently a larger wave than usual surged in from the sea. Manning bent to the oars with long, hard strokes, and they rode swiftly on the crest, nearly capsized in white water, then rested in the comparatively calm water of a small lagoon. Not a dozen rods away the girl saw the remains of a schooner. Its masts



had gone by the boards as it had driven over the reef, but the hull seemed in fair condition.

Manning moored their craft to the broken rail of the wreck. "Get aboard!" he ordered.

Edna wasn't ready just yet to bring things to a showdown. Somewhat reluctantly she obeyed. He tugged at the door of the cabin which had opened amidships, then pulled it slowly open. With a sweep of his arm she was sent through the opening. The door banged shut. "You can't open it, so you don't need to try. You can get plenty of fresh air through them deadlights if you open 'em. One's broken. You're safe enough if no storm comes up, and I'll know you won't be climbing to the top of the island to start fires and maybe attract attention."

She heard the thud of oars as he prepared to shove off, and presently their steady rise and fall as he rowed across the lagoon. She tried desperately to see where he went, but the list in the wrecked craft made it impossible to see other than the rock towering above.

Edna slumped down on a damp bench, suddenly weak from excitement and lack of food. She should have fought furiously from the first, but what chance would

she have had? Perhaps she had been wise after all, for she had at least conserved her strength. The whole thing was incredible. Perhaps the blow had so dazed her she was dreaming and would presently awaken. "No, it's all too real for that!" she sighed. "I wonder where Manning went to, and when he'll return?"

NOR was Edna the only casualty of that fight. Aboard the *Sunset* Mrs. Lockwood was frantically asking the men for her niece. One of the crew was missing, the others were bandaging wounds. They had seen nothing of Edna, nor of Cavanaugh; they had been too busy for that. And where was Benedict? He, too, was missing. The mate was there all right, the logical man to take command had they been at sea, but they were not at sea, but anchored—a commercial enterprise and not a ship under way.

To the amazement of everyone, Mrs. Lockwood called them together. "It seems advisable," she explained, "to proceed with the canning, and do our investigating on the side. What do you think?"

"We're ready, Mrs. Lockwood. Cavanaugh has this thing organized, so it will run itself," replied one. "We're packing gats from now on."

The good lady was somewhat shocked at the battered faces, yet she felt a sense of pride. They seemed to have enjoyed the fight. She despatched a motor boat to search the shore for signs of Manning and the girl, then waited for results.

Over at the Kalla Packing Company's plant Langley was taking stock, while Single Benedict was tilted back in a chair in the office.

"You know who got the worst of the fight, Single," growled Langley. "We did! Why didn't you tell me the sort of a gang Cavanaugh had lined up, and I'd have sent down more men. We outnumbered them as it was, but my crowd—scum!" He fairly shouted the word. "But it wasn't a one-sided affair by a long shot. I've got one souvenir, and I'm going to keep him. Hauled him aboard in a net like a fish, half-drowned. Want a look at him?"

"No, he might get away. I guess I'll be getting back to the ship. Things are doubtless in a mess by this time," replied Benedict.

"Keep 'em that way. Pack a little, and tell the fishermen what you can't use we'll take, and see that you can't use the most of it. There'll be a change in a few days that'll give us all of it."

Langley here ran through the mail and took out an envelope, then he made his way to the cannery prison. It was not the storeroom from which the frightened Sam had escaped, but a more formidable structure. Langley thrust the letter between the bars. "A letter for you," he said tauntingly. "And how are we after the battle?"

"Fine and ready for more, Langley. You don't think this is the end, do you?" retorted Cavanaugh. His clothing was still damp from the fall into the water, and the room was not heated. Rage and exertion alone kept him warm.

"This is all the battle you're going to be in for the time being, Cavanaugh. By the time you get out of this there'll be nothing to battle for."

"Nothing except false arrest and damages for unlawful detention—enough to fight like hell for, Langley," replied Cavanaugh. "Think that over, particularly from the legal angle."

"Thanks," laconically, "I have. You attacked us. We weren't in the affair at all."

"So I noticed, keeping safely out of the way until one of our boats mixed in. You welcomed me with open arms. You've been out to bust us from the first, Langley. You know it, and so do I."

"Usually start what I finish, Cavanaugh. I guess we understand each other perfectly. In the meantime, listen to the hum of machinery! We're packing Reds." The sound of machinery came quite distinctly, and the vibration shook Cavanaugh's cell steadily.

So he was here until Gibbon returned, at least? The old peace officer would listen to the story, and promptly release Cavanaugh, but the run of the red horde would be over by that time. Then he read the letter. Quickly at first, then slowly. His strong hand crumpled it, and he thrust the ball into his pocket. "I've got to get out," he muttered, "get out where I can do something."

There were many accounts to be settled: the attempt to wreck the *Sunset*, the death of Goon, Single's appearance on the scene, and his lack of explanation at the time. And Benedict was on the job now. Cavanaugh glanced up at the window with its bars. It was growing twilight outside. "Here goes," he snapped, and up-ended the iron cot in the cell.

He had found the weakest spot, the bars.

One by one he tore or worked them from the wood, then broke the glass. The lapping of water came distinctly to his ears. He thrust his head through the opening. As he had guessed, he was on the water side of the building. The other side was built against the shore. It was a twenty-foot drop and the water might be deep or shallow. He hoped that it was deep; then he dropped.

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER ANGLE

JUDSON WALLACE, counsel, was attempting a difficult rôle—he was trying to be pompous and seasick at the same time. It can't be done. The power boat moved swiftly toward the huddled buildings. "That's the Kalla Packing Company's plant ahead, sir!" stated the mate.

"Thank God, then my troubles are over for the time being." Wallace presumed the steamer in the cove was the *Sunset*, and he noticed two groups of boats—at respectable distance apart. Langley was there to meet him. Judson Wallace gave him a soft paw. "Well, here I am," he said complainingly. "How did you know I was at Seward? It's getting so a man can't take a vacation any more. What's the cause of this damned foolishness anyway? It cost the Company money to hire a gas boat to bring me over here, and I suffered untold agony. I've got to go through it again to get back. Well, here's your injunction against the Cavanaugh-Geary people. It'll be heard in a few days—when the commissioner gets over and holds court. In the meantime it's effective. But I'm telling you right now it won't stick. If they've a permit all proper, you can't keep 'em off their site. They'll have to produce the permit, of course. Let's see; here's a court order giving you the right as a stockholder to take over the Cavanaugh-Geary Company's affairs if something happens to the principal stockholders. You're using that as an ace, I take it. And lastly, here's your commission as Deputy United States Marshal. I couldn't get them to give you authority over Gibbon; you're in charge only during his absence and subject to his orders. Believe that's all. Now give me a bed that's soft and don't go jumping around. I'll consider food later."

Langley pocketed the papers gleefully. He had overlooked nothing, and if he couldn't get them one way, he could another. He had a hunch that there would be a mighty good buy in a floating cannery and trap site this coming winter. If the *Sunset's* fishermen, under Benedict's instructions, were willing to sell him their fish, all right. If not, or if Cavanaugh in some way escaped, or Edna took a hand in things, then the injunction would be served; and he would serve it as deputy marshal, and would enjoy the situation. He could picture the pent up rage aboard the *Sunset*, and no one aboard would dare lift a finger against him. He settled back, and listened to the hum of his own machinery. Then he thought of his prisoner. Now wouldn't be a half-bad time to do a bit of gloating.

Langley threw open the door of the empty cell, then peered through the windows. "Didn't suppose any man would have nerve enough to go down into that water," he commented. "Cavanaugh's a bigger fool than I thought."

One of his launches was just docking as he stepped outside to look into the water beneath the window. Langley eyed the occupant curiously. "What happened to you? I didn't know you got mixed up in the big scrap. We left you behind."

"I know you did, but last night I was overhauling my launch when who should come out of the water from under the dock but Cavanaugh. He climbed aboard, and we had a row—damned near killed me. Made me take him back to the *Sunset*, and sent word back that he had a machine-gun mounted on one of his boats. Said that if any of our men mixed into their affairs, he'd let 'em have it."

"He did, eh? Very well; better get that eye of yours fixed up. It's looking bad. Is your nose broken?"

"Feels like it, but I don't think it is. I'll have the eye attended to," replied the battered individual with the mark of Cavanaugh on his brow.

Langley was thoughtful for several minutes. He still had a number of good cards to play—Benedict, and the court orders.

He hardly believed Cavanaugh would dare defy an injunction.

UPON Single's return to the *Sunset* he was amazed to find everything running as usual. Marks of the battle were evident everywhere, but the men were carrying on. He knew Cavanaugh was a prisoner and concluded that Edna had taken charge. Mrs. Lockwood greeted him anxiously. "Any news of Edna, Mr. Benedict?"

"Didn't know she was missing," he replied. "I was a prisoner of war myself in the enemy's hands, but got out of it none the worse. What happened to Edna?"

"Missing! So is Manning!"

"I'll be hanged! "Who started things going?"

"I did!"

Single was hanged again. He hadn't expected it of a woman. And the cannery was running at top speed, too.

"Any news of Cavanaugh? I heard he was knocked overboard."

"He was, but is being held by Langley, I understand. I didn't see him myself. They did not regard me as an important prisoner," he added.

Single took charge of affairs, until Cavanaugh put in an appearance. He came up the gangway hurriedly after giving the launch operator the message to carry to Langley.

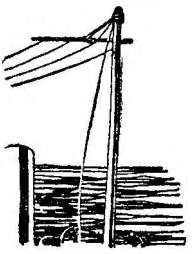
"Was Edna hurt in the fight?" was his first query.

"Edna and Manning are missing!" Mrs. Lockwood was keeping her courage well, but beneath her calm exterior Cavanaugh saw the woman was nearly frantic.

"You keep things moving, Benedict," he ordered. "The run is at its height. I'm going to look for Edna, and when I find her I'll come back. Pack up some grub while I change into dry togs. I've been wet for hours."

As if he had not been burdened with enough trouble for one day, just then Mrs. Lockwood entered the cabin. "We've been robbed," she announced. "I don't know when or how, but the certified copies of Edna's permits are missing."

Cavanaugh groaned. "Edna's not careless with anything. She did not mislay them, you can depend on that. I'm beginning to understand the code message we picked up from the Kalla station addressed to Judson Wallace, Seward. He's their counsel, you know. They're going to serve an injunction now that they've found they can't run us out. It'll stand until the commissioner arrives. Perhaps longer if we can't furnish documentary evidence, and I imagine our evidence has reached Langley by this time. You tell Dan, alias Single Benedict, I want to see him, please. Thanks!" And while waiting for Benedict to appear, Cavanaugh changed his clothing. When Single arrived, Cavanaugh got to the point at once.



"Langley may try to enjoin us. Ignore it, understand, ignore it. I'll take the penalty for contempt of court, but we're not going to lose on our pack. I'm holding you responsible while I'm gone, Single."

For the first time since he had come aboard, Single showed resentment. "You don't need to look at me, or talk to me like that, Cavanaugh. I'm not afraid of you or any other man."

"That's true, no doubt, but I wanted to make my orders distinct, plain and brief. No offense intended." Single stalked out frowning.

"I'll be back when you see me, Mrs. Lockwood," Cavanaugh informed her a few minutes later as he went over the side. "Don't worry about Edna. She can hold her own anywhere. Remember as between a woman's wit and a man's brute strength, bank on the woman every time." Fine words, and the way Cavanaugh put them made them seem real enough, but inwardly he felt differently about it. "If anything happens to Edna, I'm going to take it out of this mysterious Carter Turner's hide. He discovered his mistake too late to suit me."

CHAPTER IX

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

LANGLEY found a man waiting for him in his office two days after the battle between the rival fleets of gill netters. They measured glances carefully, and Langley spoke first. "You wish to see me?"

"I don't know whether I wish to see you or not, but I'm going to find out soon. My name's Manning. I'm——"

Langley interrupted with a sneer. "You're the fellow the company planted aboard the *Sunset* to do a little job or two, and at the same time to keep tab on me."

"Maybe I am, and maybe I ain't. Any-

way, the company seems to know you were double-crossing them. Trying to get a personal control of the *Sunset* through Benedict, and at the same time do it with their money."

Langley flushed. The man had hit him hard, and he knew it. "Well, what's your plan? Let's hear it. I'm beginning to see a light myself. I'd say, offhand, you threw the monkey wrench in the *Sunset's* machinery off Unimak Pass. Another guess would be that Ah Goon chanced by with his pies when you did it, or had the goods on you some way and you silenced him effectively."

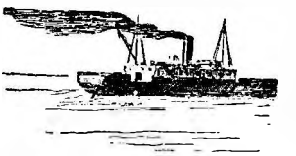
"If you're through your guessing, I'll do a little myself. I'll start by saying anything I do, I do effectively, and that includes anybody that double-crosses me. I know a number of things. One of 'em is this. If the *Sunset* fails to make her pack of Reds they're going broke, and you figure to pick 'em up at a bargain and chuck your own company overboard. That's a good idea, but they're packing day and night, just the same, and the run's half over. You're losing. I saw a strange gas boat coming in. I'd say old Wallace was aboard. That means an injunction and the usual stuff—delays, delays, delays, and going broke for the Cavanaugh crowd. But you've overlooked one thing, or maybe you haven't. Suppose they've got their permits and papers along? Bang goes your injunction, if the Cavanaugh crowd put up a fight. And you ought to know they'll fight, considering what I saw the other night."

"I told Benedict to get those papers, if they had any!" countered Langley.

"Yep, but you told him too late. I got 'em. Now suppose they don't have the papers, what's the matter with bringing in Edna Geary? She can tell a mighty straight story, and has a lot of looks to go with it. The commissioner's a square old cuss, and a straight story, told by a pretty girl, is going to make more of a hit than a lot of high sounding words from Wallace. These Alaska commissioners are from the old, square deal school. They don't care much about what some judge done a hundred years ago; they do what they think's right. What would it be worth to you to have the copies of the permit?"

"You have them?"

"I've got them, and I've got the girl out of the way. Never mind how I got 'em. What's it worth to have 'em stay out of the way? If it's worth enough I'll hand the papers over to you now, and leave the dame where she is. Then I'll strike across the peninsula and catch a mail boat or schooner out of the Cold Bay country. If it ain't worth a cent, I'll go back and get the Geary girl and turn her loose."



"If you don't get her, would she—would she——die?" queried Langley. He knew he faced a ruthless man, and the thought frightened him.

"Well, there wasn't any grub there, and she can't get out. She's got a raw salmon to tide her over a while."

The cold-bloodedness of it all left Langley silent for a moment—not that he had any tenderness in his own heart. "I'll give you five hundred dollars for the permit," he said at last, "and just forget about where you left the girl!"

"Car-fare!" sneered Manning. "Talk business!"

"What's your price?"

"A couple of thousand dollars!" Manning eyed the other coolly. "It's worth it to you. It's worth it to your company, either way you put it."

They haggled for a half-hour, and compromised on twelve hundred dollars. It hurt Langley to count out the bills, for it was his own money he was paying—not the company's. Manning counted them over again, then handed Langley the certified and photographic copies of the permit granted to Edna.

"And see to it that girl don't come showing up here the wrong time, Manning, or else you'll find yourself in a mess. I've paid for results, and I'm counting on getting them," said Langley by way of warning.

"Don't worry about the girl; she's salted down for a good long time," assured Manning. Nevertheless he decided to return to the vicinity of the island, and keep an eye on things. For this purpose Langley loaned him an outboard motor to fit to his dory. He also supplied him with provisions. Then Langley turned to problems nearer at hand. He called in his foreman.

"How about it; have we received any fish from the *Sunset* fishermen yet? I told Single to slow up things at the *Sunset* and shoot the excess fish to our plant."

"We haven't received a fish from Single, and what's more the floating cannery

is going full blast. I've had a scout or two out, and we've a fair idea of the catches they've been making," answered the man.

"Cavanaugh is on the job again, you know!" said Langley.

"No, he isn't. Do you expect that fellow to be hanging around the ship when Edna Geary is missing? Benedict is running things full blast!"

Langley whistled in blank amazement. "Get me my motor boat immediately," he directed. Could it be possible that in some way Single Benedict had fallen down? It was the last thing in the world he had expected, and if such was the case, or he had been bought off, then it was serious. But he still had his injunction.

Langley was going into the lion's den perhaps, but he prepared for it by donning his United States marshal's shield. There was a deal of comfort in having Uncle Sam back of him.

Things were humming when he came up alongside the *Sunset*. He mounted the gangway and looked around.

Single greeted him pleasantly. "Hello, Langley, what's up?"

"Why aren't you sending fish my way? Cavanaugh is not here, and you're in charge."

Mrs. Lockwood, standing nearby, pricked up her ears and listened for the reply. Langley's blunt words were the most amazing things she had heard in some time. Was it possible that Benedict——?

"Yeah, I'm running things, Langley, and every damned fish we get is going into our cans. You might as well find that out now as later," replied Single.

"I might as well—what?" faltered Langley, dumbfounded. "Why, you're our man—you're a damned crook!"

"Hold on there! I was your man. I plugged along with your company for several years, and I gave you honest service for my pay. You never asked me to do any crooked work until you heard Cavanaugh was coming up with a floating cannery. Then you asked me to invest, stating it would be a good thing. I already knew it would be a good thing, and had intended to invest."

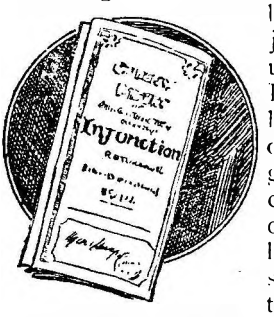
"But some of my money, a lot of it, went into this," shouted Langley. "I'm a stockholder. I've got a written court order here, as stockholder, to take charge of affairs in the absence of the majority stockholders. Cavanaugh and Miss Geary are away, and I've a right to protect my interests." He thrust the court order at Single. "Now what do you think of that?"

"I'll tell you what I think of it, Langley—this!" Benedict crumpled the paper up and tossed it overboard. "You're not a stockholder, Langley, you merely advanced me money to invest. You were afraid to trust me outright, or to come into the open, so you very carefully took my note, my personal note, which bears interest at seven per cent., and is not due for several months yet. In return I gave you my stock as security. The stock becomes yours when I default on that note, and not before."

"You knew my game and——"

"Exactly, and that's why I took the course I did. Nobody ever acused Single Benedict of matrimony or crookedness. You made the mistake of believing I was crooked merely because I worked for you. Well, charge it up to experience." Single Benedict tucked his thumbs into the armholes of his vest, and waited for Langley to do something.

Now that he had partially recovered from the blow, Langley was ready to do something. He fished in his pocket and brought out the injunction, and figuratively Single Benedict decided to beat him to the draw. He did not give the other a chance to read the order, but caught him by the arm and started him down the gangway. "Get off this ship, Langley; you're not a stockholder, you're not a guest, so you're where you don't belong. Hurry."



Langley swung suddenly and caught Single in the stomach with his elbow. Single grunted and swayed. With a vicious leap, Langley hit Single's chest with his shoulder, and the impact forced him through the gangway hand ropes. Benedict fought furiously as he slipped through, and dangled in mid-air, his hands clinging to the steps. Langley's toe came swiftly against the hanging man's fingers and he plunged into the icy bay. There was only one person to aid him—a woman. He came up spluttering. "Minerva!" he hellowed.

Mrs. Lockwood caught up a life belt with rope attached and rushed to the rail. "Coming, Single!" she answered.

Chapter X

On Edna's Island

WHEN the tide came in and the chill waters of the Bering Sea trickled through the cracks about the cabin door, Edna Geary experienced a brief instant of terror, then it was gone. She could see the water would climb so high and no higher. She was safe enough, though it was wet underfoot.

However, she was not one to sit with folded hands and wait for something to happen. Manning had caught her completely off her guard, or else she would not have been here in the first place. She knew she was no match for him in physical strength, and so all along she had remained passive, intending to grasp the first opportunity to turn the tables and escape. Manning had not permitted that opportunity. She tried the door, knowing well enough that it would not give, then she eyed the portholes, which gave on the deck. Except where one was broken, the heavy glass kept out the rain and air and the spray of any chance wave that might break over the cabin. Edna opened one of them, and measured the brass work. No chance to squeeze through that, unless— She had once seen a man go into a steam boiler through what seemed to her an impossibly small hole when compared with the man's breadth of shoulders. He had gone in, nevertheless, until only his feet remained outside, had done his work and come out again. Imprisonment was unbearable, and so she did a startling thing. She removed her outer clothing and thrust it through the opening. Then she herself followed, right arm and head together, squirming, twisting by degrees until she had forced the other shoulder and arm through. It was desperately cold, but the violence of her efforts not only bruised the tender flesh, but stirred her circulation as well. It hurt, every bit of the way, but once started there was no stopping. Finally she half-slid, half-fell to the deck, and crouched there, dressing hurriedly. Then she opened the door to give the impression that she had broken out that way in case Manning should return—and she knew he would return sooner or later.

She rummaged about the wreck, found several articles of interest, and finally unearthed some canned goods, rather ancient. She built a fire, cooked some corned beef —taking a chance on ptomaine poisoning —and consumed it. Thus fortified and feeling a new strength and independence in the warmth of the food, she found a way to the top of the island. There were not many, for the walls were abrupt. She found fresh water in several little grassy depressions, and a tiny stream dribbled down at one spot. A tarp made a fair shelter when properly anchored down with stones, but it was in the open, and she was seeking a place that Manning could not enter without a fight—a fight that would take place in a position in her favor. None such seemed evident on the flattish top of the island.

Every move of the girl was thoughtful and logical, based on her belief that someone would be seeking her soon. She had an idea that that someone would be Hayden Cavanaugh. "It's too bad Marie Heath is not here," she said suddenly. "It would add a touch of the romantic to the rescue." She was thoughtful for several moments, heedless of the Bering Sea wind that whipped about her. "I'm glad she's not," she suddenly declared. "I'm glad it's Edna Geary, even if it is going to hurt a little in the end. I wonder what Marie would have done under the circumstances?"

A night on the island, a wild brief night with drenching rain and howling wind while the sea thundered beneath the cliff, then dawn. She was up at four o'clock, laboring to get a tar barrel she had found to the top of the cliff. Then she carried wood, stacking it until there was quite a pile. Nothing like a tar barrel to make smoke, and that was what she wanted, but she waited until the sun broke through the clouds and the air was right. The blaze licked the damp wood without enthusiasm, but at length the pile flared up, sending a column of black smoke high in the air. She cooked a meal in the ashes, heated some hot water and bathed. "One might think I was expecting a caller; well, I am —perhaps several. I do hope that Manning and Hayden don't arrive at the same time."

It was two hours before the expected caller came in sight. There appeared, not a boat, but a long, narrow object, awash most of the time. The paddle amidships dropped alternately on the port and starboard side; the lone occupant sitting upright, seemingly a part of the craft. "A bidarka!" she exclaimed, and rushed to the topmost cliff and waved her arms to attract attention. Apparently the native had seen her already, for he waved his paddle, then continued.

To an inexperienced person the frail

craft offered small hope of escape, but Edna's keen eye had already discerned a second hatch in the bidarka. The least she could expect would be a precarious trip from the island to mainland, and perhaps eventual transportation back to Kalla Bay.

So interested was she in the native's progress that she did not see a second craft swing around the point close inshore. The report of a rifle sounded above the steady roar of breaking waves against the cliffs, and a jet of water spurted up near the bidarka. The native turned his craft swiftly and fled, but he was not to escape the lone occupant of the power boat. The

latest arrival stood up and emptied his rifle, then filled the magazine and continued, gradually timing the interval as the native craft reached a crest and vanished in the hollow between waves. One shot was not followed by a jet of white water. The paddle slipped from the native's hands, and he tore at his breast frantically. Suddenly his craft turned over, bottom up, floating slowly as if held by a weight beneath; then suddenly it bobbed lightly on the waves as if freed.

Edna watched the drama half-fascinated, hardly believing her senses. The motor boat was now swinging in toward the reef, the outboard motor humming merrily. Edna did not need a closer view to recognize the figure. The cold-blooded efficiency with which he disposed of the native informed her it was Manning. By that shot he had not only effectively prevented Edna's immediate rescue, but insured lasting silence. She turned, seeking means of defence. He could not hope to climb that cliff if her supply of rocks held out, unless he attempted it at night. She shuddered at the thought of his gaining the top.

And then another figure emerged from the cliffs on the opposite side, dripping with sea water, carrying his left arm queerly—Cavanaugh.

"Quick, Hayden," Edna cried, "he's coming up the rocks on the opposite side."

Cavanaugh felt for his automatic pistol. The holster was empty. "Lost that, too, Edna," he panted. "Saw your fire and figured it was you. Was working along the mainland shore for signs of you, and doubled back when your smoke loomed up. Lost my boat in the surf trying to get over the reef." He must have had a struggle, for his face was white in contrast to his usual rugged tan.

Hayden hurried to the cliff and crouched behind a shoulder of rocks close to the path Manning must take. He could see the man now, working up a few feet at a time, frequently glancing upward, automatic pistol in hand. A good sized boulder would have turned the trick and effectively disposed of the problem, but the method seemed cowardly and cold-blooded to Cavanaugh. At his order, Edna had taken a position some distance away out of danger.

Manning gained the top, and glanced around, then his face lighted as he saw Edna. "You've stirred up a hell of a mess," he snarled. "I'll make sure of you this time."

An arm closed around his throat from behind, crooked like some muscular vise, and silenced him. Surprised, the man recovered, tearing at the arm with fury. Cavanaugh held him, while his own teeth set in pain. Manning flung himself toward the cliff, working nearer and nearer by degrees.

"Hayden! Hayden! Let go!" Edna was running toward them now, frightened at Manning's tactics, and unwittingly playing into his hands. Cavanaugh would let go, he reasoned, if he got close enough to the edge. His strength was ebbing fast from lack of air. With a last mad plunge Manning flung himself free—free from the terror of that encompassing arm, free from the cliff, of life itself.

"Go back, Edna!" Cavanaugh panted. "Don't look down there."

"Hayden, what's the matter? You look like a ghost!" she cried, alarmed at his color.

"Take hold of my arm, the left one. That's it. Now twist as I tell you," he directed. She obeyed him reluctantly, knowing she was hurting him. "Harder! Harder!" he gasped, while the perspiration stood out on his face from the agony. Something snapped, a sickening sound, and he sat down weakly. "The boat turned over on me in the surf, and I dislocated my shoulder. Couldn't explain it because you said Manning was coming. That was the only way I could get him. If he'd quit instead of trying to kill us both, I'd have had a prisoner in my hands.

I need him, for several reasons. I'm going down below!"

Manning was alive, but going fast. His eyes burned furiously as he saw Cavanaugh bending over him. "Anything I can do, Manning, to make things easier? Any message?" Cavanaugh straightened the dying man out and eased his position.

"Go to hell, Cavanaugh! I should have killed the dame. That's what happens when you're tender hearted. I'd have been free to spend the money. Reach in and get it—my money!" Gently Cavanaugh removed the roll of bills. Manning clutched them; then, as a wave surged in, with a last effort he hurled the roll into the sea. It vanished in the crest of the backwash. "Nobody can spend my money!" he panted. He lapsed into momentary unconsciousness, then rallied. "I want to get Langley. That's Langley's money I threw away. He paid it to me. Hunt up Bong Yip at the cannery. Make him talk. Make him!"

It is a legal rule that a death bed confession is good evidence and worthy of belief, the theory being that even the worst of men are sobered by the approach of death and want to cross the divide into the unknown—clean. It came upon Manning suddenly; hate died from his eyes and an eager light came. "I'm going this time. Luck's deserted me. Kalla Packing never fails to wipe out competition. They counted on Langley, but wasn't sure. So they hired me. I tried to wreck the *Sunset* off Unimak, and the Chink found it out. I knifed him at your door. S'long, Cavanaugh." The effort to get the last few words out was too much. Manning collapsed.

"Who's Carter Turner?" Cavanaugh spoke slowly, distinctly, then repeated. "Who's Carter Turner?"

"A damned fool!" Manning gasped, and died.

CAVANAUGH remained by the body a half-hour to assure himself the man was really dead, then he and Edna, between them, buried the body. He had managed to wrap Manning in a section of canvas before she came down, however. With this duty performed, they set about seeking means of escape. Manning's dory had been smashed while he was climbin the cliff—due to his carelessness in making it secure. It was beyond hope of repair.

Edna pointed to the bidarka, bobbing about the lagoon, half-afloat. "I'm going to get it!" she declared.

Cavanaugh shook his head. "The water is too cold. Wait; perhaps tomorrow I can make it out there, if my arm isn't too stiff."

She shook her head as vigorously as he had done. "We can't wait. It seems in good condition, now. If we delay it may be smashed, and with it our last hope of escape until something else comes along."

"But I can't paddle one of the things. They're tricky as the deuce to a novice. It requires unusual skill and lots of practice," he protested.

"I have some skill and lots of practice. It was the only way I occupied my time last summer. Go up and stir up the fire. I'll salvage the bidarka."

She shoved a plank into the lagoon, seated herself on it and commenced to pad-

dle out, using a board. He waited until assured she was in no danger of slipping off, then climbed the cliff and dragged several chunks of wood onto the fire. It was blazing brightly when she joined him. She was wet to the waist, but the bidarka lay above high water mark on a bit of beach in good condition. As they dried out they discussed the situation. Several miles of water lay between them and the mainland.

"I've paddled that far alone, Hayden, but not with two. The peculiar way of sitting cramps the legs, and a white person can not stand much of it, but I know I can make it."

"You're boss in this instance. I don't know a blamed thing about them, but I've confidence in your judgment. It is essential that we reach the *Sunset* as soon as possible. Somehow I've always felt Benedict was right deep down despite his associations, but we can't go too much on that. He's in command. And there is no telling what Langley will do. He paid Manning to keep you away. That suggests that you should be there. Perhaps he's ready with his injunction."

"Then let's chance the bidarka!"

"I'm on!"

From the cliffs she mapped out a course

through the reef. The tide would soon be high, and there was less white water and fewer black rocks with cruel fangs waiting just below the surface. They took several cans of the corned beef as an emergency ration, then made their way to the frail skin craft.

"Hayden," she said seriously, "you have got to trust a woman as you never have trusted before."

A bitter smile flashed across his face, but she did not notice it. "I'm willing—when I can pick my woman. What's the order, Skipper? I'm passenger this time."

"You're worse than that, Hayden, you're ballast. We'll get it into the water first, and I'll steady it while you crawl through the hatch. I'm afraid to attempt it with you sitting up, you're so big and heavy. You must crawl down until you're out of sight, squirming as best you can, then I'll cover the hatch. Then pray, and I'll paddle. If the thing turns over I think I can right it—I've done it twice alone."

Cavanaugh squeezed his bulk through the hatch until his face was staring through it at the sky. He felt as if he were in his coffin. Perhaps he was. Certainly if the thing capsized he would be drowned long before he could squirm out. He was relying entirely on Edna's coolness and judgment. Well, he had relied on that before, and not found her wanting.

Edna smiled, a very serious, thoughtful smile as she covered the hatch with canvas and secured it. Now that the moment was at hand, she dreaded it. Then she took her own seat and shoved off, gliding smoothly across the lagoon, then into the surging sea and white water of the reef.

Cavanaugh's muffled voice came to her from below. "The ballast is riding fine, Edna!"

Just the same the air was getting foul, and they were barely under way. Cavanaugh wondered just how much of a warning one received before one actually smothered.

Chapter XI

Enjoined

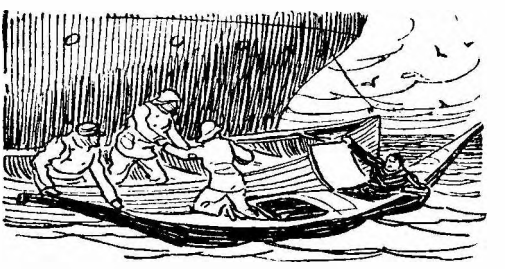
MINERVA LOCKWOOD'S quick response perhaps did not save Single Benedict's life, but he firmly believed it did. The life belt plunged into the water beside him, and he grasped it. She towed him to the gangway, where Langley awaited with a pair of handcuffs. Seeing the man was ready to renew the fight, Langley called two of his men from the launch, and Benedict did not have a chance. He was ironed and dumped unceremoniously into the craft. "Don't worry, Dan," Mrs. Lockwood called. "I'll keep things going here."

"You will, eh?" sneered Langley. "That's contempt of court, too. Come along!" He hustled the startled matron down the gangway and seated her beside the dripping Benedict. "Now if there are any more of you who think they're bigger than the United States of America, just ignore that injunction and see just how big you really are." He glanced around. Several Chinamen were peering down and a few of the whites. The fishermen were in their boats for the most part. Langley left a copy of the injunction posted where all could see when they returned. He also passed the word that while they were enjoined from operating the *Sunset* it was not necessary to let the fish spoil, and the Kalla Packing Company would be good enough to take the different catches at the usual figure. Then he headed for the cannery.

The hum of machinery in the *Sunset* ceased, and for the first time since the Red run began she was silent. Uncertainty ruled for an hour or so, then the men gathered in knots and the inevitable "game" started. Down in the Chinese quarters they played games of their own. Like the whites, they were putting in time until something happened.

At his cannery Langley waited for the *Sunset* fishermen to appear with laden boats, but none came. "Let 'em keep their fish if they want to," he growled. "They've quit, and we're getting more for a change. I'm satisfied."

This state of affairs continued for two days, then a bidarka rounded the point, close inshore, and came slowly down the bay. The crew of the *Sunset* gathered at the rail and watched its progress. A sud-



den cheer from the American Legion men.

"Good girl!" yelled a voice.

The good girl smiled, but did not relax

her caution. Eager hands grasped and steadied the craft as she squirmed out. Then the other hatch stirred slightly, lifted and Cavanaugh's perspiring and unshaved face peered forth.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, and he meant it literally. "I've blamed near smothered. We've been at this two days, camping and resting and eating corned beef." The unusual treatment had not aided his arm. It was helpless for all practical purposes, though not quite as sore as the day it was dislocated. Cavanaugh noticed the silence. "Why aren't you packing? Where's Benedict?"

"We're enjoined, sir!" answered the mate. "Benedict and Mrs. Lockwood were arrested for contempt of court, but it looked to me more like contempt of Langley."

"Langley?"

"Yes, wearing a marshal's shield and the authority behind it."

"All right, let's see how much authority he really has. You men set out at once. Don't say anything about my return, men. We'll see what happens, but if he or his men attempt to interfere just tell them you are ordered to go to work. I'll take all responsibility." All they needed was leadership, and they were willing to do the rest. "I am a law-abiding citizen, Edna, but I'm not going to obey that injunction, because it's an unfair move."

"It may mean imprisonment," she warned him.

"I can serve time in jail with the utmost cheerfulness if I know the holds of the *Sunset* are filled with packed Reds. You're a brick, Edna, the way you handled that bidarka. Several times I knew you were having your troubles—could tell it by the motion of the craft—but you pulled through. Getting back here is entirely due to your efforts." His admiration was sincere. They had been through a lot together during the last few days, and as a result had unconsciously been brought closer than years of casual acquaintanceship would have done. Development of team work, respect for one another's ability would do much for their future as business associates, if nothing more.

The news of the return of the *Sunset's* fishermen to the scene of the red hordes was quickly sent to Langley. It could mean but one thing. Cavanaugh was back. He delayed a day before acting, however, for he had learned by radio that a Coast Guard cutter was expected. There was considerably more authority in a cutter and a greater sense of security than in the deputy marshal's shield that he wore.

The cutter slipped quietly into the bay on the second day following Cavanaugh's return. Langley did not wait for her to drop anchor, but hurried away in his launch to the *Sunset*. He was prepared to start something now. He only hoped that Cavanaugh would start something. Three husky citizens of doubtful repute accompanied him as a guard. They were all armed.

Cavanaugh saw them coming. "You are supposed to be in Manning's hands, Edna," he said, "so keep out of sight!" The girl nodded, but watched the affair from her window.

Langley stalked aboard, a self-confident individual with drawn weapon and gleaming shield. "Who ordered these men to work?" he demanded.

"I did!"

"Didn't you see that notice posted over there?"

"Yep! But Reds are running, Langley, and when Reds run you can't pay much attention to notices." Cavanaugh's suggestion of a smile vanished. "What are you going to do about it? I see you waited until a Coast Guard cutter dropped in."

"I'm going to arrest you for contempt of court. I'm going to do more; I'm going to arrest every man aboard this ship on the same charge. The commissioner is aboard the cutter, and Wallace is arranging for a hearing a week from today."

"And we're tied up in the meantime. All right, Jack!" Cavanaugh's voice was raised slightly. "Let him have it!" At the same instant Cavanaugh leaped behind a door. From a place of concealment a jet of sea water shot, backed by all the force the pumps could get on one nozzle. It caught Langley square in the stomach and he collapsed with a grunt; it sluiced his automatic down the deck and overboard; then it aided Langley's men in their mad rush down the gangway, and all but swamped their craft. Two men rushed out and caught Langley as he regained his feet.

"Somebody's going to pay and pay like hell for this!" he shouted. The chill of the water left him chattering.

"A number of us have been drenched on account of you, and we gave you a taste of your own medicine, Langley. Besides, it was one way of disarming you and your men without bloodshed. You're to remain aboard a prisoner until I see fit to turn you

over to the Coast Guard cutter. Miss Geary, step here, please!"

Edna stepped into view.

"Edna!" exclaimed Langley, and his face told more than any words that might have slipped through his closely guarded lips. "Manning double-crossed me!"

"Manning is dead, Langley, but before he died he told many things, many things that I listened to, and the most important of which Miss Geary heard—words he saw fit to utter when he knew he was dying. That's why I have taken it upon myself to make you prisoner."

Cavanaugh said no more. He realized the uncertainty would break the other down. There had been much in Langley's life that would not stand the test of a jury trial. How much had Manning found out; how much proof had he; how much had he told? In the grip of two deck hands Langley was led below. Slowly defiance of the other returned.

"I'll tell you one thing, Cavanaugh—you think you've got me. Maybe you have, maybe you haven't. But you've lost the thing you were striving for most. You lost your girl back in Seattle, and I broke in on you just enough to spoil your pack by several thousand cases. You don't believe it, but the run's about over. It's a short run, and only those who've money behind can pull through. Wait until Carter Turner starts in—wait!"

"Who's Carter Turner?"

"Judge Keene's confidential man. The judge got fat off your father, and now he's fattening off you. Cheerful news, isn't it, but I've known it right along. It's been a three-cornered fight between Keene, Kalla Packing and Cavanaugh-Geary. The dark horse won. He sent Manning aboard, then found Manning wanted to job him and ordered his discharge. He was playing the game I tried to play, and come mighty near getting away with it. Now think of that, and maybe you won't think so much about me."

"I'll think of that in due time, Langley, but right now I'm going ashore and get acquainted with Bong Yip—he'll talk, according to Manning."

The effect of his words and the Chinaman's name was startling. Defiance vanished and a man stripped of courage cowered before him. Manning, though dead, had gained the revenge he sought—revenge for some affair known perhaps only to the two of them. Perhaps Bong Yip knew?

And to Bong Yip Cavanaugh hurried; never in his life had Cavanaugh encountered a man who knew less—apparently. The Chinese shook his head solemnly at direct questions, and cleverly extricated himself from Cavanaugh's verbal traps. Eventually Cavanaugh gave it up for more pressing things of the moment.

Mrs. Lockwood was comfortable and indignant. She demanded an instant trial. She wanted to be taken instantly to Langley and confront him in court. Single was uncomfortable and fighting mad. He wanted to confront Langley, but not in court, preferably in some quiet alley. The pair felt better when they learned the man was a prisoner aboard the *Sunset*. On Cavanaugh's rather sharp demand they were released. A surly clerk in the general store gave Cavanaugh a packet of mail the Coast Guarder had brought in. It was later by several weeks than anything they had received, having come from Seattle direct.

The four were in the act of boarding the launch when a hearty shout greeted them. "Things sure are happening now," exclaimed Edna. "That's Gibbon, the marshal!"

Cavanaugh had met him once before in another part of Alaska, in addition to a short chat aboard the *Sunset* soon after arrival. He was accompanied by a negro, obviously a prisoner, but not handcuffed. Gibbon shook hands.

"Had quite a chase for this boy, Cavanaugh, but caught him at last. Poor devil! Not so badly scared now are you, Sam? He's the one who killed the Mexican, José, and I'm half-convinced it was some frame-up on Langley's part. I'm going to question him."

"He's a prisoner aboard the *Sunset*. I was going to turn him over to the Coast Guard, but now you're back you can have him."

"What charge?"

"Nothing definite that'll stand the test of a trial, but we'll talk it over, pick up some loose ends and go to it. It's a long story, Gibbon, I'll tell you later," answered Cavanaugh.

"I'll be out in the morning. Sam and I have had a tough trip today. Come on, boy, I'll have to lock you up, but I'm be-

lieving your story of self-defense, so don't worry. See you in the morning, Cavanaugh, when I come for Langley."

"By the way, Gibbon, do you know Bong Yip?"

"Sure do. Now don't ask me to make him talk. It can't be done. I've tried it. He's loyal to Langley, too. Used to be his valet or something in the States."

CHAPTER XII

SOUTHWARD HO!

ABOARD the *Sunset* they were still packing steadily, though Cavanaugh knew the light run was practically over. Thanks, however, to the location of their site, they would be packing as long as any cannery in the region. He ordered a good meal sent down to his prisoner, then Edna took a seat beside him, and they went through the mail. They took up papers and magazines last.

"Hello, what's this? Somebody's mailed me a paper. Would you mind opening it, Edna? The shoulder won't stand long swings such as opening newspaper pages."

She spread the paper, a Sunday edition, out flat and turned page after page, scanning the headlines closely. "False alarm, I guess," she said. "We're down to classified, auto section, society and sports."

The first page of the society section stared up at them; a full-page photograph of a beautiful woman—except for the weakness about the mouth.

"Oh!" A soft exclamation escaped Edna. To herself she whispered, "My poor boy! After all he has gone through, and now this!" She heard him read slowly, "Mrs. Ramos Walsh, née Marie Heath, a recent bride."

Edna started to leave, for in this moment he would wish to be alone. Cavanaugh's hand caught hers and drew her back. "Old dad knew better than I," he said aloud. "Well, Marie, may all the good fortune and happiness be yours; and that comes right from the heart of one who once cared a lot for you."

"And you didn't know, Hayden. Is this the way she broke the news to you?"

"Oh, no, she was square enough about it. She sent me word, a letter Langley delivered while I was in jail that time. She did not seem to have much hope of my making a go of this. She predicted a long, uphill struggle and—lack of confidence hurt more than anything else. I can stand the thought that she was the reason I was left out of the will except for the ship. That is all right, too, for it put

me to a test I rather welcomed. In a way we've made good, together Edna, but the future is in the laps of the gods. It's in old Carter Turner's power to put us out of business when we return, unless we have the cash to meet his note. That's Judge Keene's game, working through him."

They were silent, thinking of the struggles they had gone through together; each with full confidence in the other. It suddenly occurred to Cavanaugh that it would seem strange not to have Edna near him when problems came up in the future. His feeling toward her lacked the mad fascination he had had for Marie. It was deeper, finer, a beautiful thing even amid the properties of such a stage as a cannery vessel. His heart ruled him now, absolutely.

"Edna!"

She seemed startled at his tone, and a shyness gripped her. The grip on her hand that he had retained since stopping her became firmer, gentler. "Yes, Hayden!" she whispered, for her mind had been traveling with his over the exciting days of the past two weeks.

"Let's go ahead with this thing together—life itself, I mean, not merely this, the first incident of our life. It mustn't stop here; if—if you can care for me—a little."

A twinge in his shoulder prevented the use of his left arm in a situation that properly requires the use of both. They were smiling into each other's eyes as they had smiled many times during the past few weeks, but this time it was over a personal problem they alone had solved.

Mrs. Lockwood entered, gasped and backed out. "What's the meaning of that?" she exclaimed. "Why, what'll Marie Heath say? Edna, how could she, and right under my eyes, too, and I never suspected."

"It means," replied Single, "that I knew what I was talking about when I said women usually come north single and go back married. I don't say they come North for husbands, though it does seem to me—yes, back in their minds that's what they come for." Single was getting harsh once more. Mrs. Lockwood leaped to the defense of her sex, and thereby committed a tactical blunder.

"Where's the husband you were going to get me, Single?" she demanded. "I didn't come up here for one, but if I had—well, you failed miserably, and you've mighty little time left to get him."

"I'm not going to get him, Minerva," he said in a voice he himself did not recognize. "I'm going to take you myself!" He was amazed at his courage, and so was she. She was even more amazed when he gathered her into his arms, and so was he.

"Oh, Single," she gasped, "I must have time to think!"

He pressed the pursuit feverishly, so gol darned happy he felt like cheering! "Don't think, Minerva, don't—you might not have me."

She gave up the struggle. "I won't, Single!"

"Won't have me!" he cried.

"Won't think!" she whispered. He felt capable of tackling the world single-handed. It was incredible that such an ordinary thing as a woman could mean so much to a man. Why, there were millions of them about, and he had never discovered it before.

The softness of night belongs to lovers and twilight was late, but they strolled on deck until Cavanaugh found a bench and lugged up with his good arm. Then the four sat beneath the stars and mutually confessed.

In his cell below decks Langley took on renewed hope. As Cavanaugh had done on a similar occasion, he stared at the bars of his cell door speculatively. He rummaged about his bunk for something in the nature of a lever, for he had much to gain by trying, and nothing to lose. A hack saw and blades tumbled out. His astonishment was momentary, and followed by caution. Someone, Manning perhaps, with a view to possible imprisonment in that same cell, had prepared for escape by secreting the saw and blades. Langley lost no time, but fell to work, knowing his time was limited. When he had severed three of the bars he left them in place, and lay down on the bunk to await darkness. "Bong Yip's got to die," he muttered, "and I got to cover up my tracks some way. Then I got to get down to that island. They buried Manning's body there, and it must have the money on it, yet. After that——"

LANGLEY squirmed through the cell door; a desperate man who thought only of freedom, ready to kill to gain it. His hand gripped a spanner he had picked up some distance from the door. In the darkness he slunk on deck, peering around swiftly. At the port gangway the bidarka rode lightly on the water—inviting him to enter and flee with no more sound than the light dipping of paddle.

He had been in one of the skin craft once before, the bay was calm and the shore not far away. He cast off, his hand leaving the gangway reluctantly. Then into the night. In the distance the drumming of a motor boat came across the waters. She was moving swiftly toward the *Sunset*. The man in the bidarka paddled furiously. The moon drifted lazily from behind a cloud and flooded the waters with the silvery light of mystery, outlining the oncoming launch and the black skin craft. The launch thundered by, leaving a curling wake astern that spread fanlike toward the bidarka and the open bay. The skin craft rolled violently, then capsized.

"What's that weird cry?" Edna's voice was hushed. The men leaped to their feet. Cavanaugh caught sight of the bidarka, and saw the water churn amidships frantically as something beneath fought to right it. Once, twice, thrice a hand broke the surface, then the craft remained still, drifting, bottom up.

Cavanaugh and Benedict in a dory arrived almost as soon as the launch. They righted the bidarka and pulled a sodden body aboard.

"Langley!" exclaimed Gibbon. "I was coming to get him; afraid he might have friends aboard the *Sunset* and make his escape. If we had a pulmotor at the cannery we might revive him. Several have suggested it, but he refused to spend the money. Better come along. I'm curious to know the effect this will have on Bong Yip!"

GIBBON led the Oriental into the room where Langley lay. Horror leaped into Yip's eyes, then relief, and he broke into a torrent of dia-

lect, once advancing toward the body threateningly.

"What does he say?" inquired Gibbon of another Chinaman who spoke good English.

"He says a very bad man has come to his end. Langley killed Indian girl on tundra two years ago, and Yip saw him. He's threatened to kill him ever since. Langley told José to kill Sam, but Yip saw it, and Sam killed José and Langley watched."

"That confirms Sam's story!" said Gibbon.

"How about Manning? Why did he hate Langley?" inquired Cavanaugh. The question was repeated, and followed by a long explanation.

"Langley marry Manning's sister; she get bad lungs up here; Langley wouldn't send her out until too late. When pretty near dead he send her out on sailboat—tub, slow—she die. Manning very bad man too, but not so bad as Langley."

"About a stand off!" said Cavanaugh, and Gibbon confirmed the opinion.

SIX weeks later the *Sunset* left Kodiak Island astern. In her holds were twelve thousand cases of Reds and fifteen thousand cases of humpies.

"Southward, ho!" cried Cavanaugh gaily.

Edna looked up from her books and smiled. He slipped his arm about her waist as if it belonged there. "How do we stand?" he queried.

"If we had started out free and clear with all debts paid we could say we had a profitable season, but as it is—well, it is up to Mr. Carter Turner. If he forecloses, he'll have to do it, unless you can raise the money elsewhere. If the same old forces line up, and they are likely to when they see a chance to crush us, I'm afraid borrowing will be hard. Perhaps our fight against the Kalla people will have a salutary effect. Who knows? but the main thing is we fought and won our first battle."

"That's the main thing; now for old Judge Keene, who's back of Turner. That's going to be a different battle. We can't get the cuss into the open and take a shot or punch like we could the others. He sits behind his desk and smiles and gives good advice and keeps out of harm's way. Money and the law of business and finance does the rest."

To their disgust Carter Turner was on the dock to greet them. "Did Manning do any great damage?" he inquired earnestly.

"Not much, but he's dead, so don't worry!" replied Cavanaugh dryly.

"I trust the season's pack was sufficient to pay off the note, sir!"

"We trusted the same thing, but the note isn't due for a week yet. See you later!"

"Judge Keene wishes to see you immediately."

"Tell him I'll be up this afternoon." Then to Edna he added, "Might as well see the old cuss and get it over with. You're coming along, too."

"I'm really sorry about Manning; he came to me highly recommended," and Mr. Carter Turner moved down the dock fussily.

JUDGE KEENE beamed. "I hold a note against you which I expect you to pay promptly, Hayden, as I need the money. I'm also ready to turn the balance of your father's estate over to you!"

"Huh!" gasped Cavanaugh. "Huh?"

"It was always your father's proud boast that he never judged a man or a woman wrongly, but he was scared to death for fear he would. That's why he fixed up the will that way, to give Marie a square deal in case he'd sized her up wrong. Well—ahem—the old gentleman certainly was a judge of human nature. I've ordered the old home fixed up, for I figured you would be needing it, eh? You young rascal!"

"But, Judge, the note you hold against me, why——?"

"My instructions were not to advance you any money from the estate, but there was nothing in that to prevent me advancing you money on my own account. I wanted you to have your chance. Hence Carter Turner."

"Hang it, Judge, I've misjudged you. I thought you were a mortal enemy."

"I know it, and I forgive you. Let that be a lesson, young man, never to jump at conclusions. I won't detain you longer, but tomorrow come in and——"

"Pay that note. You bet I will!"

"When's the wedding? I've decided to kiss the bride."

"There'll be two of 'em to kiss, Judge, and say, you're about the only man in the lot that didn't have a spy planted aboard."

"Yes I did, Hayden, and a good one—Single Benedict."

GETTING THE BRICKS

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

Author of "Snow In San Jacinto," "Certified Luck," etc.

OVER IN HELL'S KITCHEN WHERE THE BLUECOATS WALK CLOSE TO THE WALLS, THE MOUSE HAD SEVERAL ADVENTURES AND DETERMINED TO "LAY OFF RED-HAIRED WOMEN"

THE police wanted Red O'Malley—wanted him badly.

They were watching the bridges and ferries and railroad stations lest the red one slip from under their hands; and at the same time, as the newspapers asserted, they were "combing the city."

From the Battery to the Yonkers line, bulky men running to black telescope hats, roving eyes and fat, frayed cigars were intermittently paging all places frequented of yore by this dangerous youth whose speed on the draw and precision of marksmanship had proved fatal three nights since to the renowned Muggsy Maguire.

It was truly a fine-tooth comb the force was using in its quest of O'Malley, for from the commissioner himself had come the ukase that the internecine wars of the gangsters must no longer be passed with a shrug. But where the questing comb ran over the remote and sanguinary beat of Probationary Patrolman Daniel Grogan—a beat circumscribed by an ominous ring of blue on the precinct map at Headquarters—it lacked a tooth.

Here, in the heart of his old stamping grounds, Red O'Malley had had the temerity, as word came to Grogan, to pop into the open; and the luck to get under cover again unobserved by any eye among the thousands which had been seeking him almost from the moment that Muggsy had picked the wrong partner at the Henry V. Holtzmuller Social Club hall.

Dan got the news from a surprising source. It was one Antonio Lucci, nicknamed the Mouse, who bore it to him. That in itself served to discount the information. Dan's predecessor, gratefully relinquishing the Eleventh Avenue walk, had given him to understand that the Mouse was not only one of O'Malley's most loyal retainers, but his chief lieutenant—the real strategist of the Red O'Malley mob.

On this third day of the futile hunt for O'Malley, Daniel Grogan's attention had been captured by a soft and sibilant whistle. Dan, hugging the walls as enlightened policemen fall into a habit of doing in certain localities bordering upon the two rivers which figure most prominently among the waters making Manhattan an island, peered into the doorway from which the signal had come. He recognized with distaste the figure slouching back in the shadows.

"What's on your mind?" he demanded.

The Mouse regarded him silently for a moment with speculative beady eyes.

"I was wondering," he said huskily, "if you was as game a guy as you look."

Daniel failed to warm to the implied compliment.

"Try me some time," he suggested.

Lucci resumed his inspection of the law's new arm. His voice sank.

"I think I maybe could find out in the next five minutes," said he, with the air of one dallying with a delicious secret. "I think so."

Grogan shifted his weight from his heels to his toes.

"You could find out even quicker than that," he remarked significantly. "What's it all about?"

"You'd be rappin' for help if I told you."

"Would I?"

"Sure. Don't tell me you'd take a chance with Red O'Malley all by your lonesome!"

"What about O'Malley?"

"I hear he's around saying good-by to his folks. He's off for Cuba pretty soon. Soon's it's dark Eddie Finnerty is shooting him out to a rum boat. If you want to see Red about anything before he goes, you better hurry."

Probationary Patrolman Grogan surveyed his informant doubtfully—and balefully.

"I'd save up my kidding for somebody I thought I could handle," he advised. "You'd be likely to tell me where Red was, wouldn't you?"

The Mouse grinned mirthlessly.

"Drop around and ring O'Malley's bell and see what happens. You ain't got to mention my name—see?" He met Grogan's stare with no betrayal of purpose to mislead. "I might want a favor back from you sometime."

"We'll see about that when the time comes," said Daniel Grogan. "And now listen, Mousey. I happen to be on a stroll in that direction, anyhow. I might ring O'Malley's bell—and I mightn't. Whichever way, I won't be ringing for the reserves. But if ever I should find you making sport of me, Mr. Tony, I'll lay a matter against your ugly head that'll hurt you more than a brick off the roof. Mind that!"

Two minutes later and two blocks to the south of the doorway where lurked the Mouse, Grogan walked into visual proof of the veracity of Antonio Lucci.

A few jolts of the liquefied lightning which Eleventh Avenue was using for whisky had vanquished all doubts of Red O'Malley arising out of his mortal encounter with Muggsy Maguire. His samplings had reassured him that outdoors was for anyone. In the block that was his own, where women smiled upon him and men conciliated, the man the comb had missed was taking the air—and most of the sidewalk—on a return trip to the Dutchman's at the avenue corner.

The sight of the approaching uniform sobered O'Malley. But Grogan was too close to him then for flight to be considered. The red-topped one's right hand darted under his coat, and from the holster slung beneath his left armpit came forth the pistol at which the redoubtable Maguire had been looking when he died.

Perhaps at the high moment of the festivities presided over by the Hon. Henry V. Holtzmuller, O'Malley's handling of the weapon had been ever so slightly more facile. Now he was not quite quick enough in bringing it to bear on the enemy.

Some months earlier Daniel Grogan had harbored unspoken misgivings in regard to the method advocated at the police training school for depriving an armed adversary of his gun. He had been of a mind then that what worked so neatly in relation to an unloaded revolver might prove disastrously inadequate if the weapon's chambers were properly and lethally stocked.

But now, when the time had come to test theory in practice, Grogan remembered his lesson well. His left hand flew out and fastened itself to O'Malley's right wrist, sweeping over and downward. When Red pulled the trigger, which he did with all due promptness, nothing more vulnerable than a cellar door was in line with the pistol barrel.

The rest was routine; in practice Daniel Grogan had accomplished the thing a hundred times. Dan dropped his other big hand over the gun and wrenched it from O'Malley's grasp. Then he twisted the imprisoned wrist and brought it up sharply behind its owner's back.

This accomplished, Probationary Patrolman Daniel Grogan, captor single-handed of the week's outstanding police prize, spoke for the first time. The calmness of his voice surprised him.

"I can break your arm if I have to, O'Malley," said he. "And if that's not enough I can break your head. So hold steady now whilst I fasten us two in a lover's knot."

A veteran could not have been defter

with the handcuffs. The two clicks sounded almost as one. Braceleted to his first prisoner—and that prisoner no less a one than Red O'Malley, himself—Grogan turned to face the inimical crowd brought by the shot, Red O'Malley's own gun held lightly in his hand and his whistle triumphantly shrilling.

Checked by the menace of the pistol, the mob stood off until Grogan had hustled O'Malley into the entry to a vacant shop. The captive, dazed by the suddenness of his undoing, struggled only feebly.

Grogan let his whistle fall from between his lips.

"Nobody'd better start anything," he advised.

But this eminently sane counsel went unheeded. On those posts of the blue circles a successful arrest comprises two separate problems. The first is to get your prisoner; the second to keep him. It was in solid form that his answer came to Daniel Grogan. A half-brick crashed through the glass door behind him. He let go a shot in the air. That, he thought, should be enough to discourage further hostilities. Other whistles already were answering his call.

Grogan, awaiting the coming of the reinforcements he might now in honor concede to be needful, became conscious of an eddying at the rear of the rapidly increasing crowd. In a moment its ranks were parting: and then a girl, whose resemblance to his prisoner was somehow startling, stood before him. Her blue eyes were ablaze under her flaming hair.

"Turn him loose!" she cried. "Let him go—or you'll get killed."

"If it comes to that," retorted Grogan grimly, "so may somebody else."

The girl faced the crowd.

"Is one cop with one gun going to stampede you?" she exhorted. "Are you going to let him drag Red off to be railroaded to the chair?"

From the mob came a reassuring voice.

"Not! Get outta the way, Nora!"

As she stepped aside something soft and squashily vegetable struck the visor of Grogan's uniform cap and forced it down over his eyes. In the same instant the girl of the luminous hair whirled and sprang for him, clutching at the hand which held the pistol.

"Go easy, kid!" grunted Grogan. "You may——"

The speech ended abruptly. Something neither soft nor vegetable had come sailing toward him. It nestled snugly behind Daniel's left ear. A fist with a weight of desperation behind it pushed into his face —Red O'Malley's fist. With his one free hand Grogan struck back, yielding the gun to the girl. He and O'Malley went down together. They rolled across the sidewalk; off onto the pavement. Thus Daniel Grogan's head came where eager and heavily-booted feet could conveniently reach it. He felt only the first kick.

Dan came to with a sense of motion. He was in a conveyance loaded with men wearing uniforms like his—no; rather like his uniform had been. His own, Dan could see with the one eye that responded when he would have opened two, would need much attention before he could appear in it again for inspection. The Old Man —old Michael Casey—would probably insist that he have a new one. A stickler, old Casey.

It was a patrol wagon, Dan knew, that he was riding in. He was lying at full length along one of the hard side-seats. Across from him he could see an unfamiliar, blood-smeared face.

Grogan studied this face until the soreness of his head became more than he could bear. Where had he seen it before? What had happened? And in what had happened, what part had the strange face played?

The riddle solved itself as Dan closed the one useful eye again, and for all that inner grinding as of stripped brain-gears he smiled contentedly. The tousled hair above the face lifted the worry with which he had wakened.

He hadn't lost Red O'Malley.

II

IN NEW YORK CITY a great many things may occur in the course of two weeks; and usually do.

Speeding events of the fortnight during which Daniel Grogan took his ease in a hospital bed rushed blithely on over the incident of the green cop and Red O'Malley, and left it forgotten where it lay, the deadest of all mackerel deceased—yesterday's news.

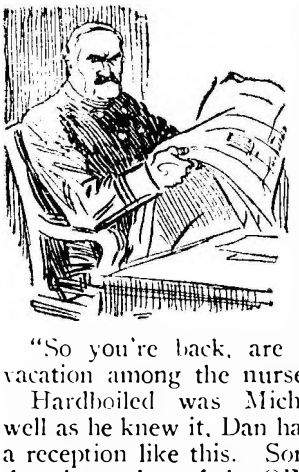
When they told him he was ready for duty again, Dan had accumulated a stock of newspaper clippings out of the sum of which might be drawn a potent lesson in humility. The report of the capture of Muggsy Maguire's slayer which Dan had found most satisfactory gave a good mea-

sure of credit to Policeman D. Horgan. That was the closest approach that catch-as-catch-can journalism made to Daniel Grogan's name.

Two of the papers, whose district men presumably had their story of the arrest from the same source, burned incense at the rectangular feet of Detective Sergeant William Dick, a person with whom Dan had not even a nodding acquaintance, but who in these particular accounts appeared as Red O'Malley's Nemesis.

So, as he stood in the door of the Old Man's office, with the pungent aromas of the hospital yet hanging heavy about him, Probationary Patrolman Grogan was in a mood to barter his laurels for the most modest of songs. Being a police hero didn't amount to so much, after all. Bitterly he asked himself—as often he had asked himself while he lay mending—why he'd not had the sense to stick to the placidity and profits of the steamfitter's trade.

And it was with the same old terrifying scowl which had set Dan quaking in his shoes during his first weeks in uniform that Captain Michael Casey raked Dan Grogan when eventually he wrenched himself from his newspaper.



"So you're back, are you, from your vacation among the nurses?"

Hardboiled was Michael Casey; but well as he knew it, Dan had not anticipated a reception like this. Somehow it seemed that the upshot of the O'Malley affair was an apology owing to his commanding officer.

"It wasn't a fracture, sorr," said Daniel meekly. "They didn't——"

But that hadn't been the right tack either. The face and the voice of Michael Casey became both more forbidding.

"As if I did not know that, Grogan," he censured. "It was an added duty put upon me to keep track daily of your condition. Do you think they'd have told you before they told me?"

Daniel Grogan gulped. It was quite another scene he had pictured.

The Old Man stamped across the little office and slammed the door on curious stares from the squad-room. When he faced Grogan again his expression in some slight degree had softened.

"It's only a short trial you've had," said he, "but I've the beginning of a belief that the making of an efficient police officer is in you. You may be seated by my desk, Daniel."

With this unexpected, absolutely unbelievable breaking down of the barrier and the ring of that unprecedented "Daniel" in his ears, the comparative advantages of the steamfitting career faded from Grogan's mind. No longer was it a matter of consequence with him what the newspapers had said and had left unsaid. In the one quarter where appreciation counted, the taking and keeping of Red O'Malley had been scored to his credit.

The Old Man, Daniel might know, was a real policeman still, and not at all the absent minded, fossilized old grumbler that a newcomer on the force was so often tempted to set him down for. He hadn't been reading Horgan where the name should have been Grogan, nor yet had he been misled by the tributes heaped by the press upon the enterprising Sergeant Dick. He knew that Daniel Grogan had done a fair to middling piece of police work, and he'd slipped out of his shell at least long enough to admit the knowledge.

But once out of his shell, Michael Casey stayed out of it for a considerable space, acting almost as if it were a relief to have the weight of it off his tired old back. Looking at the new face and hearing the new voice, Grogan asked himself how he ever could have thought the Old Man a tyrant. So rapt was he in wonder that he lost the first sentences of the astonishing unburdening.

The Old Man was talking about another Michael Casey. Dan hadn't heard that there'd ever been one; but in him his captain seemed to see a resemblance to this second Michael.

"He'd been a year or so longer than you on the force when they got him. His was the very beat where you've been walking, Daniel, and no worse a beat in the city is there for a man in the uniform to travel. I was a roundsman then. It was long ago, and the organization of the force was otherwise than now. But the neighborhood has not changed, Daniel. The rowdies of today are the sons of those young Michael had to do with.

"It was the bricks they got him with in the end, for the boy would walk out by the curb. It happened of a night time, and it was myself that should find him. That was the time, Daniel, when I made up my

mind that I'd rise some day to rule this precinct — and would rule it with a rod of iron. My only son was Michael, and a finer boy——"

The Old Man broke off. His nose needed attention. In emotive moments, as newspaper readers will scarcely need to be told, nose-blowing is the standard refuge of the policeman.

"I've said," he continued, in a manner better suited to the transaction of departmental business, "that the beat you've had is the city's worst. So it has been for twice twenty years back, and so it will be for years to come. I'm not minded to assign you back upon it if it is not your wish, Dan Grogan. Those who were your enemies at the start for no more reason than that you represented the law are more bitter enemies now. The way would be hard for you if you went again among them. That's why I say you don't——"

Dan Grogan's was a jaw that needed no squaring. Further projection of it than that which in repose made it the most prominent feature of a rugged physiognomy lent to Grogan an expression of anything but rollicking good humor. He let the jaw have its way now, though.

"If it's not that you don't trust me," said he, "I'll have the old walk back."

Captain Michael Casey retreated once more behind the scowling mask.

"In a way, Grogan," he conceded, "you've made the post your own. I meant to commend you in the matter of O'Malley. You did well. My eye will be upon you." The Old Man cleared his throat. "And now, Grogan, I think you'll perceive that I've personal reasons for desiring that a man with strength of arm and heart walk that particular part of the Avenue. Remember, my boy, that there's few in the neighborhood a decent officer would want the friendship of. Go back to your post on the night tour. Let your hand be heavy, Grogan—and keep close in to the walls!"

III

CLOSE to the walls lay the way of Patrolman Daniel Grogan, probationer no longer, but a full-fledged constituent of the world's Finest, during the three months which Red O'Malley spent in the Tombs awaiting trial.

In the course of these months Grogan's methods of administering the police business of his beat were such as to exact respect rather than to cultivate popularity. Inspection of the precinct records toward the end of the period might have inspired the thought that Dan Grogan had been pursuing a policy of letting bad enough alone. The arrest of O'Malley stood as not only the first but the last to Grogan's credit. But a statistician interested in such matters might have noted on most casual investigation an amazing increase in the neighborhood's black eye and sore head rate.

Silently approved by Captain Michael Casey, whom he had encountered more than once prowling along the Avenue and poking down the perilous side streets on moonless nights, Dan dealt with rebellions against statute and ordinance in his own not always legal manner and at the time and place of their occurrence as near as could be.

In this locality, graphically described as Hell's Kitchen, Grogan came to know that skulls grow to the thickness he had theretofore considered peculiar to Central Africa. He broke two flawless nightsticks on them in conflicts which never achieved a place in his reports, but broke never a head. And the Old Man noted with satisfaction, although he made no mention of the matter, that from the night of the invalided Grogan's return to duty the skin had no chance to grow white over his knuckles before they were raw again.

Another thing learned by Dan was that the folk living west of the Avenue are an old-fashioned lot, celestial in their adherence to the predilections and practices of their fathers. Among them the notion persists that the best method of all of demonstrating to a policeman the futility and downright hazard of his calling is to occupy the housetops contiguous to his path and shower upon him bricks subdivided and whole. This custom, at least, has the character of a sprightly jest; and there is always the chance that good aim from above and lack of agility on the policeman's part will combine to strike an agreeable note of tragedy. Dan knew better than the public how long was the list of departmental widows who had acquired pensions out of the sky. It was information with a quite personal interest to him. Almost nightly he was "getting the bricks"—which is the Avenue's phrase descriptive of its

favored method of reproving the bluecoat who ventures where his presence is not desired.

But Dan heeded well the injunction of his captain. He kept close to the walls,

and thereby he placed no inconsiderable handicap on the enemy aloft. Ricocheting brick crumbs often stung him, but never a direct hit did the exalted artillerymen score. Grogan bided his time. He fought his battles altogether on the ground while gradually a scheme took shape for the confounding of the hurlers of bricks.

This plan of his for revenge was uppermost in Dan's mind at the start of his tour one brisk October evening when he came upon the two persons who out of the neighborhood had most aroused his curiosity—Tony Lucci and the red-headed girl, Nora O'Malley. Grogan hadn't been able to fathom the duplicity of the Mouse. He wondered if O'Malley's sister had not in some unwitting way played a part in Lucci's betrayal of his chieftain.

While yet half a block away from the two, Dan decided that the Mouse was detaining Nora O'Malley against her will. He quickened his pace, and as he came near saw Lucci release his grip on the girl's arm. There was a queer look of mingled purpose and defiance on the face which he turned to Grogan, and Dan was stirred by the thought that at some extravagant moment of indiscretion the man called the Mouse might show the strength and venom of a full-grown, vindictive rat.

"Practicing for the movies, Mousey?" asked Daniel.

The Mouse bared his sharp rodent teeth. It was the girl who replied.

"Listen, Big Foot," said she, "I'll run up a signal when I need help. This gentleman is seeing me home. Isn't that so, Mr. Lucci?"

Dan smiled impersonally at Nora O'Malley, shrugged a blue shoulder and went thoughtfully on his way. He had passed the girl often on the street, but this was the first time she had appeared to recognize his existence. She hadn't forgotten nor forgiven.

Over to the west, Grogan made use of what remained of daylight to continue his poking about the docks. Whispers had reached him that the henchmen of Red O'Malley, whose revenues came chiefly from protection afforded certain bootleggers and acts of piracy performed against others, had established a series of munition caches along the waterfront.

No less authentic proved this information than that incomprehensible tip from the Mouse that O'Malley was where hands could be laid upon him. Already Dan had found and tossed overboard two new automatic pistols and an old style revolver, together with a sufficient supply of cartridges to have kept all three weapons hot for hours on end. He knew there must be at least another half-dozen guns lying about in hiding places at points where the smuggled rum came ashore.

One more revolver—a blue-steel Colt—was uncovered and flung by Grogan into the river before the shadows lay too heavily on the piers for his search to be prosecuted in better than haphazard fashion. Dan gave the hunt up for the time, and headed back toward the Avenue.

Strolling slowly eastward, he was deep in thought. This was the evening he had chosen for his long-planned counter attack on the garrisons of the roofs. Outwardly he had been giving no more attention to the rain of bricks than if it had been the mildest sprinkling of April. Never had he yielded to the always present impulse to race up through the houses. He knew that never thus could he come to close quarters with the foe.

In most cases the brick-droppers had worked on inspiration. They'd operate first in one sector, then in another. But there was a certain roof, around the Avenue corner from the tenement which lately had been the residence of Red O'Malley, from which the bricks seemed to descend as regularly as Grogan passed below; bricks, these, which seemed to come down with a more savage force behind them than elsewhere imparted. Other bricks were merely dropped. These were hurled.

With canny purpose Dan had not changed his schedule to avoid this menace. He went by the building at almost the same minute of the hour each night, hugging the wall. Unfailingly he was observed from above and two bricks promptly descended—not one or three, but always two.

The game in time had become standardized. That was what Dan had been aiming at. It was this roof he had decided to mount to when the moment should be ripe,

and upon this night the test of his strategy was to be made.

Not by the regular stairway did Grogan mean to reach the roof. That, he knew, would be to signal his coming. But he had satisfied himself that no one would be watching the fire escape at the rear, for a counter-balancing weight held the lowest ladder horizontal almost twenty feet above the yard.

To this yard Dan made his way under cover of darkness.

He had provided himself with a stout cord. To the cord he fastened a pocket-knife with his big handkerchief folded about it. On the first cast the knife went over an iron rung. With only the faintest creaking the ladder descended. Leaving his shoes below, Dan started for the roof.

The cleverest of burglars could not have made a neater job of the climb. Lights were behind the windows at the landings and people were stirring in the kitchens. In one three hulking men and a slattern sat at a belated dinner. Dan slipped past the four like a shadow, unobserved. Halfway to the landing above he waited to make sure. The conversation of the diners ran on without interruption.

When he had achieved the roof and squatted himself behind a chimney to await developments, Grogan was ahead of himself by nearly an hour. He hadn't expected to find the foeman aloft so early, but he felt his time off post would prove to have been most excellently invested. There was an itch in the hand that gripped his nightstick.

This was a black night, moonless and starless. What illumination there was above came from the electric glow overhanging Times Square, far to the east and a bit to the south.

Grogan, chewing at an unlit cigar, felt he could imagine no species of anticipation more delightful than that which thrilled him. Just as he represented the natural enemy to these heavers of brick, so were they natural enemies to his own kind. Dan rather hoped they would come in force. But whether there should be just a couple of them or they should troop onto the roof a half-dozen strong was not material to the issue, he thought. Surprise, the good baton and the fires of indignation within him might be counted as most dependable allies.

Heads should be laid open that night, Daniel promised himself, and they might mend again or not. The words of the Old Man should be heeded full well. In the operation to be, the hand of Grogan would not be light. It should be demonstrated for all the neighborhood to know the perils of this game of bricks were not entirely on the one side.

The cigar-end was a pulp on Grogan's dry tongue when the rasping of a bolt in a rusted slide interrupted his reverie. He peeped around the chimney, and saw the

hatch-cover lifting. Out of the black well upon which it had been closed a moment before an inky figure emerged and straightway dissolved out of view. The enemy had gone, doubtless, to peer over the parapet.

Dan still bided his time. Others might be coming. It wouldn't do to open himself to surprise, to permit that biggest of his weapons to be turned against him.

A reasonable wait assuring him that there would be only one to deal with on this night, at least, Grogan crept cautiously toward the street end of the roof. A deeper shadow against the metal parapet gave him the location of the other watcher. When the distance between himself and the shadow had been reduced to less than a dozen feet, Dan sprang forward. He brought down the nightstick just once.

The figure at the parapet crumpled into the tar and gravel underfoot like a smashed fly.

Dan's electric torch bored its broadening cone of light through the blackness. A gasp escaped. At first glance he saw that this enemy whose weapons were bricks was a woman.

She lay face down; the blow had knocked her senseless—might even have killed her, thought Grogan in sudden panic, except for the man's cap she wore and the piled-up hair beneath it.

The cap fell back and a disorderly torrent of vivid tresses tumbled about her bloodless face as Grogan turned her over. His heart gave a painful leap. This girl—the first of her sex that Dan ever had lifted hand against, let alone club—had to be out of all the world of girls, Nora O'Malley!

IV

THERE was a great mass of the red hair. The big shock of the skull-cracking blow had been absorbed by the cushion it made, and the girl's eyes were open before Grogan could find speech.

Dan had put his torch on a coping. He stood in its beam. Out of the darkness at his feet a cool voice came to him.

"So you're a woman-beater, too!"

Grogan felt the rush of blood into his cheeks. Now the boil of it that had begun with the opening of the trap distilled no longer red anger, but blushes. The berserk madness was gone. He was dizzy himself with the realization of what he'd done, almost sick through the reaction of relief that came to him at the sound of the words. What matter what the words were, so long as the sister of Red O'Malley lived to speak them.

Kneeling at her side, clumsily disentangling her damp hair from the crimsoned cap, Dan spoke his apologia in tones that trembled.

"I'd sooner have turned in my shield than done it," he concluded miserably. "I thought——"

"No mind what you thought. You've struck a woman, Grogan. I'd not taken you for that kind."

She struggled dazedly to her feet, scorning the hand he offered. A step or two convinced her she was not yet equal to walking, and she seated herself on the coping.

"It was I that dropped the bricks on you," she said. "I'll not deny it. You dragged my brother away to be murdered by your crooked law, Grogan."

"I did my duty," protested Daniel. "He was wanted for a killing."

"Instead of taking him in, you should have thanked him for ridding the earth of Maguire."

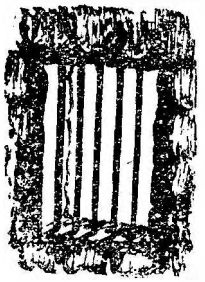
"I was two months on the force, and not yet Chief Inspector. The say was not mine, Miss O'Malley."

"You did not see the finish of Maguire, Grogan, but I did. His gun was first out, and he was the man to use it."

"So much the better then that a jury should have the facts. That could not be with Red free."

"Facts!" echoed the girl bitterly. "Does the District Attorney want facts when he's a chance to put Red O'Malley in the death-house?"

A choking sound startled Grogan. When it was repeated there was no further doubting the phenomenon. Nora O'Malley was weeping.



"A fine brother is that one of mine for a girl who would hold up her head," she wailed. "People must be thinking that the O'Malleys, man and woman, are a harum-scarum lot. I've seen the thought in your own eyes, Grogan, when you've looked at me in the streets."

A fury came into the girl's voice.

"But there's no decenter girl in the city, if I say it myself, than the one you've beaten tonight. In the neighborhood they will tell you that I'm wild. I've had to protect myself. I can strike like a man—yes, and shoot like a man if need be. Being a lady on Eleventh Avenue calls for different manners than on Fifth, Grogan."

Daniel Grogan hefted his nightstick significantly.

"Let me remind you, Miss O'Malley," said he, "that I've other uses on the Avenue than being a target for bricks from the roofs. If you'd report to me any——"

The red-haired girl got to her feet again.

"I'd not be beholden to you, Grogan. I can look out for myself. There are those I could refer you to for that."

Dan lifted his helmet to admit a large finger customarily employed as an aid to cogitation.

"Nevertheless," said he, "you might tell your friend, the Mouse, that I'll be having an eye on him. And I'm sorry, Miss O'Malley, that the one single arrest I've made on the beat should have struck you so cruel. It was no choice of mine. I'd like you to be friendly with me. Maybe you've noticed it's not my habit to walk minor offenders to the station?"

Nora O'Malley laughed cynically.

"I've noticed nothing about you, Grogan, except that you've set up for a bully with your club and your blackjack and the gun on your hip. You'd do me a favor by going upon your way. If wishing would do any good, I'd wish never to see your face again."

"I hope, Miss O'Malley," said Dan soberly, "you'll not always be wishing that way."

Then he turned and walked from her. At the rear edge of the roof he waved a hand to her. She was still where he had left her then; but before he was off the top landing of the fire escape he could see her

above, following his descent. From the landing below he called back to her.

"You mustn't be thinking too ill of me, Miss O'Malley."

No answer came; but the shape of her head, with the cap once more in place, stood out clearer against the blue of the brightening sky. On still another landing Daniel Grogan paused in his downward climb to invite, "Don't stop pegging the bricks if it gives you pleasure. I'll be walking close in to the walls!"

V

FROM the roof where he had trapped Nora O'Malley came no more bricks toward the heroic head of Patrolman Daniel Grogan. In other blocks desultory volleys from the clouds kept him on the jump for a while, but in the course of time even these were discontinued.

Temporarily, at least, it appeared that the beat of the blue circle had been tamed by methods inspired by Captain Michael Casey and put into effect single-handed by Grogan. His reliefs on the Eleventh Avenue post noted the calming and, without going out of their way to analyze the change, gave Dan due credit. They were older men in the police business, and the fine enthusiasm of their partner had gone from them. Peace was appreciated by the Messrs. Gregg and Lahey.

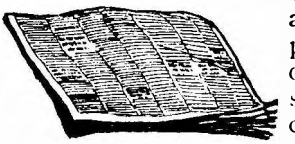
Dan saw Nora O'Malley often during this period of unprecedented and perhaps ominous tranquility. From the garrulous veteran, Lahey, he learned much about the girl. She was an operator in one of the big West Side telephone exchanges, and periodically had a season of night duty.

"But she's the one can handle herself with the mashers," Lahey had remarked. "Day or night, they give her a wide berth. Not a year ago she had a hat-pin between the ribs of a lad that had set himself up to court her in the cave man style."

Grogan noted the time the girl's hours were changed. It would be after midnight when she came hurrying along the Avenue. Sometimes—altogether too frequently to please Dan—the Mouse would be with her; and then her haste would seem even greater.

More than once Grogan was tempted to warn Nora O'Malley against Lucci, to hint the man was none too good a friend to her brother. He wondered if she knew the Mouse was married.

Occasionally, when Lucci was not at her side, Dan yielded to the attraction which the girl held for him and walked with her to her door. But she made no pretence that she found pleasure in his company. Her replies to his attempts at general conversation, attempts built chiefly upon the weather, the new movie releases and the great Gold Coin Lottery which the *Daily Comet* was using at the moment in place of an adequate reportorial staff to inveigle circulation, were short.



But even so, Daniel Grogan sensed through her reserve that her dislike for him was waning in intensity. That, he thought, might be in part due to the fact that Red O'Malley didn't appear, after all, to be on his way to the electric chair. A paragraph had been printed—for the erstwhile furore was by then no more than a memory subject only to the lightest joggling by the press—to the effect that the District Attorney had no hope of getting a verdict of first degree murder against Muggsy Maguire's slayer.

The evening of the day O'Malley was acquitted, Grogan essayed to congratulate the girl. She had been a star witness for the defense, he knew. When last he had seen her, Nora O'Malley had made history by smiling at him. But now she desired no felicitations. Her day in court had been a hard one to live through.

"No fault of yours, Grogan," she snapped, "that Red's not on his way to the death-house. He'd not want your compliments."

"And when's he coming home?" asked Dan.

The girl smiled bitterly.

"Home! Didn't you know Red's back in the Tombs? They took him for carrying concealed weapons the moment he walked from the court-room. That's your law for you!"

Daniel produced a cluck of astonishment and another of sympathy.

"And I had Red's promise," Nora O'Malley told him, "that he'd go straight if he came through this last scrape. Would you blame him now if he forgot his word?"

"They should have given him his chance," decided Grogan soberly.

Uninvited, he walked along at her side. A denunciation of Antonio Lucci, alias the Mouse, was on his lips, but he held it back. Though a policeman may despise a stool-pigeon, he may not give him away. That is an unwritten law of the force they call the Finest.

"I'd not put too much faith in this Tony who follows you about so much, Miss O'Malley," he contented himself with saying; and then he added guardedly, "I've a notion he's no true friend to your brother, if the truth be known."

The girl's swift glance toward him betrayed nothing. She made no comment; and that made it all the harder for Dan Grogan to put into words that other pertinent bit of information he had been of mind to pass on to her—information that was news to him, at least.

As his hand rose to his visor in leave-taking at the Dutchman's corner he remarked with manner elaborately casual, "This Mouse's wife was over at the station this afternoon looking to get a non-support warrant."

The girl's eyes were smouldering when she replied.

"Yes? And what business is that of yours, Grogan?"

VI

HER words, the last he was to hear from her for many a day, had jolted Dan Grogan like blows. As they were spoken she had walked abruptly away, and thereupon he began the minding of his own business in a manner most pointed. He minded it strictly and solely, yet always with a watchful eye on the Mouse.

That saturnine youth was more often with the red-haired O'Malley girl now. He seemed to have appointed himself her especial squire in the pendency of the separation suit begun by Mrs. Mouse.

But whether Nora O'Malley was alone or in company when he passed her, Dan always appeared lost at such moments in an impenetrable preoccupation. Something of engrossing interest, possibly not to be observed at a glance by others but hugely appealing to himself, invariably was going on across the street.

This was Patrolman Daniel Grogan's interpretation of minding one's own business; and the process revealed to him how precious few were his private enterprises which did not lead to thoughts of a piquant and hostile face in a frame of conflagrant hair.

Yet had he not kept his eyes so resolutely averted from her, Dan might have perceived that the face was not hostile all the time.

More than once, had Dan but known, the O'Malley girl's eyes had the look of wistfulness. Women—and in particular red-headed women—not seldom are that way. The pursuer arouses small interest in them until he has ceased his pursuit. Then they—wonder.

On the fourteenth day of Daniel Grogan's exclusive attention to Daniel Grogan's own affairs, a windstorm was in the course of turning itself into a rainstorm.

Through the afternoon a gale had been screaming out of the southeast. It whipped the surface of the river and gave to the high-cabined ferryboats a hilarious list to leeward. With sunset, immense black bolsters of clouds had begun to bank up, and when he started from the station-house, Dan was rubberized from cap-cover to boots. Fitful rain squalls doused him at one time and another through the evening, but the big downpour held off.

At midnight Dan was certain the deluge was imminent. The thunder had risen from a distant grumble to a tremendous near-at-hand crash, and the mighty spraying of lightning across the sky was almost continuous.

The glare which illuminated the water-front every few seconds put Grogan in mind of a memorable visit he had made to a motion picture studio. This, he thought, would be the same harsh and unreal lightning effect of the studio stage if only it were lasting.

So Dan still was thinking, harking back to his day behind the scenes at the movies, when a flare, followed by a deafening thunderclap, presented to his startled eyes a tableau weirdly theatric.

Under a pier shed, open and offering shelter from the rain already splashing down in big scattered drops, a man and a woman were struggling. Grogan knew the pier. It was one of those on which he had reason to believe the followers of Red O'Malley had cached a few of their weapons against a time of emergency—a pier his own search hadn't yet reached.

Dan started forward on the run. The struggling pair were more than a block away. When he had covered half the distance another blue-white flash ripped jaggedly across the tortured sky. He saw the two as in a screen close-up then, and increased his speed, shouting to them.

Whether she would have it so or not,

her business at this moment was his business—the business of any policeman, for that matter, or of any decent man with a sound heart in him. This girl under the pier shed was the O'Malley girl; and there was no mistaking, either, the identity of the man from whose clawing embrace she was trying to fight herself free. It was Tony Lucci.

Another cry escaped Dan when he reached the shed. The two had vanished.

"Nora!" called Grogan. "Where are you?" But the roar of the rain now banging in wind-driven sheets on the tin of the roof blurred his voice. Even in his own ears it was no more than a whisper.

The lightning spurted again as Dan made a prayer for it.

Halfway out along the pier the man and the girl were racing toward the river. The farther pier-end stood open, too. Water broken from waves dashed against the piling was flying in in great sheets.

The river was a cream-puffy froth in which no swimmer could live a minute, and for the river Nora O'Malley was heading. It was then Dan made another prayer. He didn't want the girl to escape from Lucci. He wanted the Mouse to win the race. That would be her only salvation.

Again the lightning showed her—and her lead had increased.

After one more ineffectual shout, Dan Grogan saved his breath. He was in need of all he had. Boots reaching to the knees were not made for foot-racing, nor were flapping rubber slickers. He was a hopelessly bad third as it was. The O'Malley girl's alternatives were the Mouse and the river.

The lightning came once more. Nora O'Malley now was crouching at the very end of the pier—ready, Grogan judged, for the plunge. His soul went sick. Earlier he had made no attempt at self-analysis. At this moment, a moment which might well be her last, he knew he loved her.

Less than a dozen feet from the girl Lucci had halted, as if to parley. There was a queer, new look to him. The Mouse suavity, the suggestion of mouse timidity, had gone. Full virile rathood had come to the Mouse. He began to move with springy rat steps toward the bending figure, his long yellow teeth bared in a grin at once conciliatory and savage. Another flash had illuminated the grin, and before blackness swallowed the two Grogan saw Nora O'Malley straightening against the background of the tumbling Hudson.

Dan was close now, sure the girl must have seen him.

"Don't!" he cried. "Don't jump!" Then, with a last spurt and a prodigious spring, he threw himself upon the double betrayer of O'Malleys.

For something considerably short of the next minute ensuing, Patrolman Daniel Grogan was engaged in a business in which Nora O'Malley's interests and his own were beyond question akin. A fainter flare as he leaped at Lucci showed him she hadn't jumped. She had been standing on the string-piece with her hands behind her, her eyes straining into what had been until the instant opaque night.

With this sight of her, Dan proceeded to give his undivided attention to the Mouse. He used his fists alone until his eyes caught the glint of a knife blade in Lucci's right hand; then he had recourse to his nightstick. The Mouse went down and stayed down.

Dan walked to the girl.

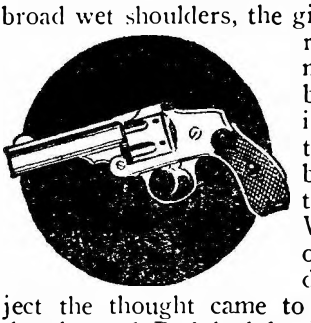
"Did I ever hear you say you could take care of yourself?" he demanded.

"Did you ever," said she, "hear me call on you for help?"

And that, except for the intervention of the lightning, might have been the end of it. But the eyes have a way of belying words. What Nora O'Malley saw in the eyes of Daniel Grogan when this final fortuitous flash came was not arrogance, and what Dan saw in her eyes was not aversion. His arms went yearningly open; unhesitatingly and unerringly, even though the light did not last to guide her, Nora O'Malley went into them.

But to the Mouse, just then painfully and tentatively lifting himself on a shaky elbow, the lightning showed something else—something which Grogan, he knew, could not have seen.

Before her hands came from concealment to reach themselves toward a pair of broad wet shoulders, the girl had furtively rid herself of a metallic encumbrance which in its fall toward the water threw back the glint of the sky-fire. With the sight of this swiftly descending object the thought came to Antonio Lucci that he and Red had let Nora know too much; and a corollary thought succeeding was that his night's adventurings in ne-



olithic courtship might have turned out a great deal worse without police interference at the climax. Certainly the girl could and certainly she would have used that gun she'd snatched from the secret cache at the pier-end which he himself had all but forgotten. A tartar she was, and no mistake. The cop didn't seem to get that through his thick head.

He was saying—saying in a ludicrously soft voice that brought a grin to Lucci's lips despite the buzzing under his dented skull, "Think what must have happened, Nora, had I not been close by! Can't you see now your need of a man to protect you—a man who loves you?"

An anticipatory chuckle shaped itself in the Mouse's throat. He'd had a taste himself of redhead repartee. In a second this calf of a cop would be getting his, getting it proper. What a chance he'd given her!

But Lucci's laugh died at birth. The reply had come in a tone the Mouse hadn't suspected that Nora O'Malley was capable of producing. It was a cooing.

"Oh, but I can, Grogan," said she. "And if you want the job, it's yours."

Then Nora O'Malley, the same Nora who a moment since had been seen tossing overboard a fully loaded, tried and tested automatic pistol with a notch or two already in its handle, began to cry. The Mouse didn't linger to see what measures the moonstruck bluecoat was inspired to by her new mood. As briskly as hands and knees would carry him, he was crawling out of both their lives, forgotten and unnoticed, enriched vastly in his knowledge of a peculiar species of a particular sex. Thenceforward, well-apprised of the danger of them and of their duplicity, he could feel sure he'd be off the red-haired women.

PROFITS FROM EARLY RANCHING

WHEN one knows the facts about the early ranches north of the Kansas line there is no surprise felt at the great fortunes made in the cattle business. A man who understood ranching, who could borrow $25,000 and was willing to work hard, could, by using good judgment, become independent in a short term of years. By buying ordinary Texas cattle and improving the breed by crossing with Durham bulls (in which the first progeny lost nine-tenths of its mother's native characteristics), he could afford to buy land, put up plain quarters, cut and cure hay in the bottoms for winter feed, pay 7 per cent. compound interest on the borrowed capital, and at the end of the sixth year repay the borrowed money with the total interest, and have for himself over $50,000 in stock, land and money. From the sixth year the profits became past belief. In the 80's such was the foundation of many fortunes; and if a man started in ten years earlier he was even better off. In 1872 one man began with 35 head and with $500 in cash; eleven years later he sold out for $135,000. Another started in 1871 with $1800. Four years later he had nearly 7000 cattle. Twelve years after he started he sold, that year, $200,000 worth of beef, and declined an offer of $850,000. for his range, privileges and the remainder of his herd.—C. E. M.

LIFE MAY EXIST ON THE PLANET VENUS

TO THE question whether any of the other planets in the solar system are inhabited by any sort of creatures comparable to living beings as we understand the term, astronomers still admit total ignorance. That life as we know it may be possible on Mars many admit, and now it is claimed that recent observations show Venus to be surrounded by clouds of water vapor, indicating the presence of oxygen and hydrogen and presumably proving the existence of conditions that would make life possible.

DRILLERS FIND FOSSIL SEA-WATER

AT A depth of 6,260 feet, drillers sinking a well near Pittsburg struck a vein of water which, geologists say, was impounded in a "pocket" of lava several million years ago, when the sea covered that part of the earth's surface. Specimens of this fossil sea-water have been pumped up and preserved for laboratory analysis and hermetically sealed for preservation in museums.

MR. THREE

A Complete Novel by HAROLD LAMB

Author of "The Devil's Bungalow," "The Hundred Visitors," etc.

WHOEVER VENTURES AGAINST THE UNKNOWN FOLLOWS THE PATH OF DANGER—A PROVERB WHICH WAS TO BE PROVED TRUE WHEN YOUNG BOB WARNER JOURNEYED INTO THE HINTERLANDS OF CHINA

CHAPTER I

THE DOMINO PLAYERS

DOMINOES clinked on the tables in the lounge of the Bonhomme Club, in San Francisco. Black cubes, of the American game, and white dominoes of the Chinese; ivory and bamboo pieces of the new game of mah jongg, a fad in the clubs of San Francisco, but a game known to the Chinese for some two thousand years.

It was after the luncheon hour and cigar smoke rose toward the high ceiling. Few words were spoken, so busily did the dominoes clink and chink. The stakes, more often than not, were high. Those who play in the Bonhomme Club are not pikers. Here were gathered men high in the professions, some heads of leading industries in the city, travelers, authors—most of them had made their mark.

Their hour of diversion it was, yet only one—a new arrival—turned to the reading matter on the long table by the fireplace and took up a magazine. He was a slender man, still under middle age; he moved leisurely as if in all his life he had never hurried. Something in the set of his shoulders and the muscles of his hands suggested military life, or physical fitness, and the skin of his lower cheeks and neck was tanned a deep brown.

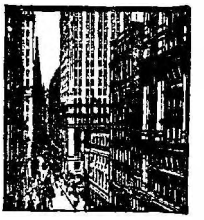
Two mah jongg players glanced at him more than once. Presently the taller of the pair, a man with a notable, ruddy countenance, hailed the reader.

"Bob Warner, or I'm a liar! Come out of it, man. Want to sit in with us—three birds of a kind, eh?"

Warner looked up and answered gravely. "Thanks, Hearn, I prefer to keep what feathers I've got. Besides, I'm off all things Oriental."

"Suit yourself, my lad. So you're fed up on China, after six years of it! What did you get out of it? Something good?"

Clifford Hearn, ten years ago, had been in a New York university with Robert Warner. Working in Wall Street with small means, he had profited by the boom of '16; then he had a hand in a fishery combine that boosted prices until the Government took notice, and the law was invoked to try the heads of the company. Hearn fought his way out of the mess, and doubled his stake twice over by getting control of a copper mine in Arizona in the days after the war when copper mines were shut down and the metal was going begging.



The man was a fighter. Which is to say that he was never afraid to take a chance. He had scattered his money

among leases in the oil fields of Southern California, as if over a faro board; his luck was good. In fact, those who followed his lead said it had never failed him. They called him King Cliff—those who knew him at all—and many stories they had of Cliff's luck.

Hearn had always patronized Warner, who was a shy chap, in college, where he fiddled around with ancient history and forgotten languages. The older man had waxed affluent by rapid methods, options on land and oil and stock selling rather than by the surer method of cultivation and building.

"Not so good," responded Warner. "I've got together some rather curious—experiences."

With a nod the promoter brushed aside the ivory dominoes, signing to one of the attendants to put them away as he rose to join the man by the fireplace. "Experiences, I'll say that!" He smiled at his companion of the gaming table, a slender individual, faultlessly dressed. "Ray, I want you to meet Bob Warner, the collector. He collects trouble. Bob, this is Count Camprubi, a friend of mine just over from China, himself. He has a story that will interest you."

The pallid features of Camprubi were handsome, and only his full, brown eyes and carefully chosen English indicated his foreign birth.

"I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Warner. You collect—trouble? Ah, I am afraid I do not understand."

"You will, Ray, when you know Warner better," chuckled Hearn. "He has been in more tight places than any man in this room, barring you, maybe. They say he saved his skin once by hopping a tin Lizzie out of the Gobi desert, and another time by out-deviling a bunch of devil-worshippers somewhere up the Yang-tse River. He goes in for mysteries, picks 'em to pieces. Last two years the United States Government used him as an informal agent in getting tourists out of the hands of bandits in the interior of China."

As in their college days, the big man spoke patronizingly, and Warner had the impression that Camprubi knew all this beforehand.

"Hardly all of that," he responded dryly. "I've only knocked about the Gobi, looking into things that interested me. I'm in California to stay—want to get my hand on a fruit ranch in the Imperial Valley, where I can read magazines that haven't pages torn out to make pipe spills for someone else a year ago. For years I've been dreaming of a real nigger cook who can turn out waffles and never heard of soy beans."

The newcomer in the Bonhomme stood on the hearth and surveyed the rapidly thinning throng of men with relish. He wanted to sit around with his own kind again, and dine at hotels, with perhaps the theatre or opera afterward. For seven years he had scouted the edge of the Gobi, or the great rivers of inland China, on business for somebody else. People were always blundering into trouble and had to be helped out.

He had collected, yes. But what he had gathered together was a lot of queer happenings, grim enough. He had been near the heart of Asia. He was sick of dung fires and the stench of sheepskins, and he never wanted to see camels again.

"Look here, Bob." Hearn drew out cigars and lit one after the others had refused. "We've been hanging around, Ray and I, to talk to you, ever since your steamer docked a week ago. You'll keep this confidential, of course?"

"Not necessarily," said the collector quickly. "You don't have to tell me anything, Hearn."

Camprubi glanced at his companion and shrugged slightly, returning to the study of his cigarette holder.

"Well, this is to your interest as much as ours," went on the promoter after a pause. "We have knowledge of something really big. You know I'm not talking just to say something. Proof is, I'm going into it myself, backing it, in fact. Camprubi got wind of it, and I've checked everything as far as we've gone. You know more about such things than I do, and you can verify the facts to suit yourself. We know where to find"—he hesitated, studying Warner's face—"the biggest lot of unset jewels in the world."

Bob Warner looked up with a smile. "Going to trade with Lenin and the Bolsheviks for the crown jewels of Russia?"

"I said 'unset.' These stones are loose, about a quart of 'em, near as I can make out. No earthly doubt about their value. We've seen an inventory — so many rubies, so many sapphires, matched, as large as a man's thumbnail."

Hearn lowered his voice, although by then the lounge was nearly emptied. The fine eyes of Count Camprubi glowed softly.

"They are really crown jewels," he added in explanation. Choosing his words with care, he went on. "They are within the borders of China. But they are not a treasure of the later emperors. They date back beyond the time of the empire that we know as Cathay."

"Earlier than Marco Polo?" In spite of himself, Warner was interested.

Camprubi lifted his slender fingers. "Ah, very much. Before the monarchs of Cathay were the kings of Tsin, in the beginning of history, as we know it. *Les anciens, mon ami——*"

"This treasure," said Hearn quietly, "dates from the time of the pyramids of Egypt, more or less. Call it three thousand years."

"Egypt," said Warner frankly, "is full of tombs that aren't there at all. The whole East is rife with ruins and each one has a story. And a story is just a story. The favorite yarn is that some dead king laid away his private stock where no one else could find it."

"True," assented the foreigner. "But there are always exceptions."

"This is one," added the promoter decisively. "Lord Carnarvon hit on another exception, when he found this Tut-ankh-amen tomb. The men that found it cleared a million, didn't they?"

After satisfying himself that no one else was within hearing, Clifford Hearn explained the legend that had aroused his interest. He did so in the matter-of-fact phrases of modern business, yet in his voice was the thrill of the searcher—the tensity of a gambler who is waiting his turn to sit in a game of stupendous stakes.

THREE thousand years ago lived the emperor Chong-Wang, monarch of Tsin, one of the first dynasties of what is today China. Chong-Wang took pride in a collection of jewels, brought from the mountains of India and Persia—as the empires are known today—over the caravan routes of Asia that are old as civilization itself.

The court historian of his reign made a list of the chief jewels of the monarch, and this list has come down in the annals known as the Bamboo Books, being inscribed on tablets of bamboo. It was the custom of the emperor to take long hunting trips into the west. During one of these expeditions into the great plain beyond the mountains of Tsin, Chong-Wang was attacked by a savage dog, among the hunting beasts, and died of his hurts.

Wherever he went, Chong-Wang took with him the precious stones that he prized. Rather than entrust them to an attendant, he was in the habit of placing them in a secret place in whatever palace or camp-site he happened to be.

When the emperor of Tsin died, swiftly and violently, he was quartered in a certain hunting pavilion called Singan-mu, or Palace of the West. Although the next emperor ordered a careful search of the pavilion to be made, no jewels were discovered.

Such was the legend of Chong-Wang and his hoard of precious stones. And that was all.

"Except," Camprubi smiled, "for an additional word of the worthy historian, who relates that the hound that killed the king was quite four cubits high, shaped like a tiger, and had the eyes of a demon. A typical bit of Oriental sophistry, to make it seem as if Chong-Wang had been attacked by a devil instead of an ordinary dog."

Warner nodded. "I know the legend. Professor Rand, head of the mission college at Lanchow—an old friend—showed me a translation from the Bamboo Books."

Suspicion, like a shadow, passed over the Count's handsome features, and Hearn's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Most of the accounts of royal wealth, especially in the Orient, are exaggerated," he observed. "But this looks straight. No reason to suppose Chong-Wang's historian would draw up a false list for his master's use. And the inventory has been handed down with the legend."

"And we can accept both as fact," put in Camprubi. "What do you make of it, Mr. Warner?"

"Mighty little. Admitting the truth of the legend—supposing the emperor had the jewels, and hid them—it all happened three thousand years ago. Chong-Wang died, I think, in 1077 B. C., which makes it exactly three thousand years, as this is 1923."

"Well?"

Warner glanced at his watch impatiently. "In that time anything not built of stone would become dust. A hunting pavilion hardly sounds substantial. Why, the surface of the earth changes in thirty centuries. Mountains might be worn down, and a river could flow over a city. Besides, the exact position of Singan-mu is not known."

A glance passed between the two ad-

venturers. Camprubi questioning, Hearn thoughtful. "I am an Italian," said the slender man presently, "and among the records of the Vatican I discovered the second chapter of the treasure. I learned the approximate position of Singan-mu."

To Warner it was as if someone had drawn back a curtain disclosing a thing unknowable. It was incredible; and yet, these two men were hardly fools. He held back a question as to how the Italian had obtained his knowledge.

Following his own purpose, however, Hearn gave him an inkling, to arouse his interest further. "After this Marco Polo went to Cathay from Venice, priests made the journey, to spread Christianity. Jesuits they were. One of them—I'm not saying which one or when—made a convert of a Chinese nobleman, who pointed out the ruins of Singan-mu."

Just a little the upper lip of Camprubi curled away from white teeth. His long fingers, shaped for a musician's talent, moved restlessly. Warner thought he was like a cat, watching over a saucer of milk. Camprubi's discovery brought the location of the treasure out of legendary times. True, but——

Hearn guessed at his point. "That was three hundred years ago. The frontiers of China were war-ridden after that. The priest, you can be sure, was half a prisoner—more anxious about his own skin than buried jewels. Singan-mu was lost again, until this year."

He tossed his cigar into the hearth, half-smoked. "Warner, an American antiquarian—you can call him that—hit on some ruins near the edge—well, the edge of the beyond, we'll say. On one of the granite blocks he found an inscription, two ancient Chinese characters. *They were the reign title of Chong-Wang.* And the position of the ruins he uncovered agrees roughly with the latitude and longitude given by the priest."

The three men were silent for a moment. Warner found it hard to believe what he heard. Out of the darkness of antiquity, into the shadows of medieval times, and then into the broad light of today the secret of the emperor of Tsin had come.

"Strange," he murmured. "But, somehow, I can't think such a hoard would be left unmolested all this time."

"Nature took care of that, my boy." Hearn smiled. "You said yourself the face of the earth changes in thirty centuries. It does, and it did. Since Chong-Wang hunted in the fertile valleys and hills of—this place, it has changed. He wouldn't have known it ten centuries later, because it was a barren waste of clay and rock; then it was covered with the sand that drifted in from the Gobi."

Warner nodded. This was true of all the western border of China.

"So, most of the time," the promoter went on, "Singan-mu was buried under a rising tide of sand. Then the prevailing winds changed from westerly to northeast, and the sand was driven back a few inches a year. This went on for centuries. Evidently this Singan-mu place was on a hill. Anyway, it came to the surface again, and a doddering old American fossil gatherer hit on one of the granite blocks."

"The sand," added Camprubi softly, "helped to preserve the ruins from the corrosion of the elements."

"It's out of my line a bit, this," observed Hearn dryly, "and you can be sure I've had experts check every step in my theory. Ray here," he nodded at the Italian, "knows what he's saying. And, look at this!"

From the side pocket of his tweed coat he drew a chain of linked portions of a hard gray substance. The fragments resembled soapstone, and were pitted deeply. They were strung together on modern twine, but were themselves of ancient workmanship; lines of carving on the surface were still discernible.

"Jade!" cried Warner.

"You said it," nodded Hearn. "A jade necklace. Precious stones, probably emeralds, were set in those holes."

"It came from Singan-mu," added Camprubi.

The two seekers after the treasure of Chong-Wang had been careful, while arousing Warner's interest, to keep from telling him anything that would point out the position of Singan-mu, the ruins of the pleasure pavilion of the emperor of Tsin. It might be anywhere along the line of the most barren and forbidding desert in the world—the Gobi, that lies behind the back door of China.

So, likewise, Camprubi said nothing of how he came to possess the jade necklace without its jewels. He must have secured it in China, and brought it to show as evi-

dence to Hearn, who had never been there.

"Possibly," the Italian murmured, "the jade was part of the hoard of Chong-Wang, brought to the surface by the working of the shifting sand. Possibly the man who found it took the emeralds, and sold the setting. I bought it in Shanghai from a curio dealer who told me its history, aware that the story would add to its price."

The jade was undoubtedly very old. Warner knew that its use, as a setting for jewels dated back to before the time of goldsmiths. Without comment he handed it back to Hearn, who pocketed it and surveyed him curiously.

"It's a good bet, even if we lose," the promoter said. "I've a hunch that the jewels are there. The Jesuit knew a little about Singan-mu; the fossil digger found out a little more. Neither of them thought of anything but doing their stuff—converting pagans and collecting inscriptions for museums; each one had his line. I want the goods, and I'll get them."

He glanced at the Italian. "Ray and I will. Nobody living has any claim to the hoard—nobody but the finder. Ray, here, crossed over from Shanghai, looking for a partner to tackle the thing. He brought his story to me. He needed money, equipment, and a bunch of men to see it through. He says the interior of China is not safe for a small party. I'm going into it, and we need a third."

He tapped the collector on the shoulder.

"When your ship docked, I said that you were the one to help us out. Bob, you know the country like a book; you can steer us up the Yang-tse, through China, and get a caravan together at one of the border towns. You know what we'd have to take along."

"I know," said Warner. He was aware that his qualifications fitted. He would be able to handle natives, to direct the work of excavation, to act as interpreter.

"How would a thousand suit you, for the trip, and all expenses? Of course you'll figure on a percentage of what we find," he added as Warner made no response. "We can settle that on the boat. I want to catch the next steamer out from here."

"You accept?" Camprubi asked.

"No," answered Warner.

"What!" Hearn laughed. "Why, it's right in your line, man! Call it two thousand, then."

Warner shook his head. "I'm not going with you, Hearn."

The two men studied him with varying emotions. Clifford Hearn had been certain that the collector would jump at the chance. Warner had little money, and such a search would interest him beyond measure. He had assured himself of these things before approaching the man who had just come in from the Orient.

"But, damn it, man," he cried, "you won't lose anything if we should fail. I'll go as high as a fifteenth of the percentage of the jewels——"

"I think Mr. Warner is not convinced of our chances of finding Singan-mu," put in Camprubi, who was more observing. "He may think that the Chinese have already unearthed all that was valuable, as the natives of Egypt have done with so many of the royal tombs."

"Partly that," smiled the collector.

"So? Then I can assure Mr. Warner that the natives of the Gobi have a most hearty fear of the spot. They do not go near it. They say there is a devil in Singan-mu, a four-legged devil. Each to his own fancy. I prefer the legend of a woman devil. It is," he shrugged, "more pleasant to contemplate."

"Then you'll be entertained, Count," added Hearn grimly. "Since there's a woman trying to work our claim." To Warner, he explained, "Other people have wind of this. But we hold most of the trumps. We've been frank with you—what's your real reason for backing out?"

"Frankly," Warner laughed, "I've a hunch as well as you. I think it's dangerous. Meddling with the unknown is not always agreeable, Hearn. If I were you I'd leave it alone."

"Scared, eh?" The big man's jaw thrust out, and the friendliness fell away from him on the instant. "All right. Stay out, then, and be careful to keep what you've heard to yourself, see?"

Again suspicion glowed in the dark eyes of the Italian, although he spoke quietly. "If you should try to use the information that we have given you, Mr. Warner, it would be unfortunate."

So firm a grip had the prospect of the jewel hoard taken upon the minds of the two men that, for an instant, greed, stark and unfeeling, was stamped upon their faces.

Although Warner had not said it, the idea of becoming a partner in the venture

with Hearn and Camprubi did not suit him.

"I've no intention of talking about your find," he pointed out impatiently. "And I'm not interested in it. When you get to the headwaters of the Yang-tse find a Mohammedan for a *caravanbash*. The Moslems do not share the superstitions of the Chinese. And don't load up with equipment here. Anything you want can be bought at Shanghai. Good luck to you."

He nodded to Hearn and left the room.

Chapter II

A Blow in the Dark

AT THE door of the Bonhomme Club the collector hesitated. He had been a fool to refuse Hearn's offer. What if they found the jewels of Chong-Wang? A long chance, but what a reward!

Hearn was a good leader. Those who followed King Cliff had made fortunes. He was ruthless in dealing with enemies, but he always stood up for his friends. And, to interest a man like that, the Italian, Camprubi, must have information he had not shown—although, counting on his acceptance, they had been open enough.

Well, he had made his choice. After all, he had come back to California to live. Professor Rand, likewise, must be returned from the mission college, having resigned his position. And several old friends would be glad enough to see him.

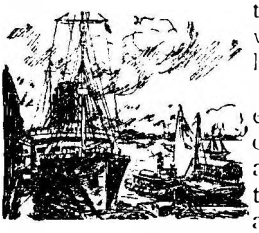
Two hours later Warner felt depressed. He had called on one pal of his newspaper days—now general manager of a new corporation. The man had been delighted to see him, but busy, very busy. Warner had left after a brief talk, interrupted by phone calls and questioning subordinates.

A second friend was on his way to the Berkeley country club—asked if Warner played golf. The collector smiled. Golf, during seven years in the barrens of Central Asia! His friend muttered about an engagement, a foursome—said he must catch the ferry, and would Warner make use of his car and chauffeur?

"Thanks," grinned the man from the Orient. "I'm walking."

Another of his friends, he learned over the telephone, had left San Francisco. It was clear to Warner that the newspaper coterie of seven years ago existed no longer. He was a stranger in San Francisco.

Idly he sauntered along the streets, and presently found that he had come to the Embarcadero, having followed the line of least resistance, which, in San Francisco, is down hill. Here laden trucks thundered dustily over the cobbles, and stevedores made their way out of the piers, coats on their arms. A factory whistle blew. Warner saw, directly in front of him, the high bow of the steamer that would take Hearn



to China. Smoke was rolling up thickly from a funnel.

His nostrils dilated as he sniffed the odor of dusty planks and warm sea water, of oil and wine and fish. Here was the jumping-off point. If he were going with Hearn, he would see the muddy waters of the great Yang-tse within three weeks—see the blue hills of Ichang, and the red clay that marked the threshold of Central Asia. He knew just what men he would take with the caravan; they would be glad to see him, and Rand, at Lanchow, would have all the latest newspapers.

With a sigh, Warner turned on his heel. Professor Rand was in San Francisco, like himself. Here, at least, was one man who had time to spare. He would go directly to the professor's house, and take him out to dinner.

So the collector pushed through the increasing throng that flowed down the hilly streets to the ferry. Catching a cable car he started up California Street toward the residential section, staring out at the tomb-like structures that towered over the rushing people of the street.

The city had changed.

Without trouble he found the Rand house. An old Chinese appeared at the door in answer to his ring.

"Is Professor Rand at home?"

The servant shook his head.

"When will he be in?"

This seemed to give the Chinese food for thought. His patient, wrinkled face puckered. "Long time," he ejaculated. "Solly. Him stop China-way long time."

Impatiently, Warner shifted to colloquial Chinese, and the aged guardian of the gate showed his appreciation by a respectful bow, when the white man made himself known as Professor Rand's friend. Mr. Two—as the servant named himself—explained that his master had changed his plans, although he had resigned his post as head of the Lanchow college, and had not left China as yet. *"T'a pu lai*—he comes not," Mr. Two concluded patiently.

Warner was more than a little puzzled.

Rand had said definitely, six months ago, that he would meet him in San Francisco. Moreover, Mr. Two revealed a courtesy and intelligence not often seen in a Chinese servant in the States.

"Very well," Warner said regretfully.

Mr. Two bowed and clasped his hands by way of acknowledgment. As soon as the visitor had gone, he locked the front door from the outside, and padded out quietly into the street. Without looking around, he started downhill, toward the Chinese quarter.

It was nearly dark by then, and Warner faced another restaurant dinner alone. His way led also to the downtown streets and he allowed Mr. Two to serve as a guide. The Chinese plodded on, immersed in his own thoughts.

An evening breeze from off the sea chilled the air and fog thickened the dusk. Street lights glowed. Warner found it necessary to hasten a little to keep the bent form of Mr. Two in sight. Few people were stirring on the California street at that hour.

A church spire loomed up out of the mist, and under this Mr. Two paused. Warner stopped, because behind him he heard an unfamiliar, pattering sound. It drew nearer, and the collector smiled, seeing a large dog, nose to the pavement, running past him, its claws scraping on the pavement. In the shadow of the church something moved.

"What in thunder?"

Warner's exclamation was provoked by the sight of Mr. Two fleeing down the side street, past the mission. The arms of the old Chinese were flung over his head, and a slipper dropped from one foot. All at once he cried out—a long, shrill intonation of fear.

Hearing this, the collector began to run after him, glancing from side to side to make out what had frightened the servant. With surprising agility Mr. Two darted into a side alley. The dog, as animals will, trotted after the fleeing man. Mr. Two—seemingly blind for the moment—tripped over a raised grating in the sidewalk.

He fell headlong against a flight of stone steps, under the solitary light of the alley. Warner heard the impact of his skull against the stone, and knew by the limpness of his thin body that he was badly hurt. The dog passed on, but another man emerged from across the alley, and stooped over the prostrate servant.

Warner, coming up, saw the other thrust a hand into the breast of Mr. Two's tunic. Then the newcomer turned and saw the white man standing over him. Dropping his chin on his chest, he sidled away, moving like a huge crab, and disappeared down the alley. For an instant Warner glimpsed a broad, pock-marked face, a loose-lipped mouth set with long, pointed teeth. Then the second Chinese was gone.

Kneeling beside Mr. Two, he found that the servant was conscious. But his eyes were lusterless and his skin pallid. Blood trickled down into his mouth. As the white man, suspecting a fracture of the skull, started to feel his head, Mr. Two reached into his girdle, panting with agony as he moved.

"Me finish," he muttered. Peering up, he recognized Warner. "Will you take this object to my son?" The words came clearly in Chinese, as if expelled by an effort of will. Having said them, Mr. Two's lips ceased to move. His fingers thrust into the white man's hand something round and hard. Glancing down, Warner saw that he held what appeared to be a medal of iron or bronze.

"Why, yes—certainly," he responded mechanically. The black beads that were the eyes of Mr. Two continued to fasten upon him steadily.

Briefly Robert Warner answered the questions of the patrolman, summoned to the spot. The officer wrote down the name and address of the injured Chinese, and the fact that it had been an accident. An ambulance arrived, and a man in white knelt by Mr. Two for a moment.

The skull was fractured, the heart very weak; death would come at any time. The young surgeon explained that the shock had proved too much for the aged Oriental. They could operate, yes—would take Mr. Two to the hospital—but the man could never survive it.

"He doesn't want to go to the hospital," remarked Warner, observing a sudden hostility in the black eyes. Mr. Two, like all of his race, dreaded going under the knife. "Better take him back to the house. The other servants can look after him, and get in a doctor. His son may be there."

Mr. Two's eyes closed in unmistakable satisfaction.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked the officer.

"Friend of Professor Rand. Knew him for years in China."

"Name? Address? Occupation?"

The notebook was closed. The ambulance surgeon and his helper lifted the limp body upon a stretcher; the collector summoned a taxi and went to his hotel for a valise and overnight change of clothing. It occurred to him that Mr. Two might have been alone in the Rand house and if so he would—because he had assumed responsibility for the Chinese—need to spend the night there. Several letters were waiting for him at the desk, and these he thrust into a coat pocket, beside the metal plaque given him by Mr. Two.

He found the ambulance parked in front of the Rand residence, and went in. The surgeon had placed Mr. Two on a couch in the library, and was lighting a cigarette in the hall. "Let ourselves in with the key we found in his pocket. Other servants must be out. Don't try to move him. He's still alive, but an hour's his limit. Want me to notify a physician—one lives around the corner?"

"Thanks, yes."

The man in white waved his hand, pleased that the hospital had not been called upon to perform a useless operation, and ran down the steps, humming under his breath. Warner closed the door, glanced at the dying Chinese, and switched on additional lights. After giving Mr. Two a drink, he made the rounds of the house, to discover that only one bedroom in the basement bore signs of occupation—a neat cot, a cheap image of Buddha, with incense stand on a shelf, and some clothing hanging on the door.

The wants of Mr. Two had been few. And he had been the sole caretaker of the Rand residence. The covers were over all the furniture—had been there, apparently, since the professor's last visit to his home. Warner left his suitcase in an upper bedroom and returned to his patient.

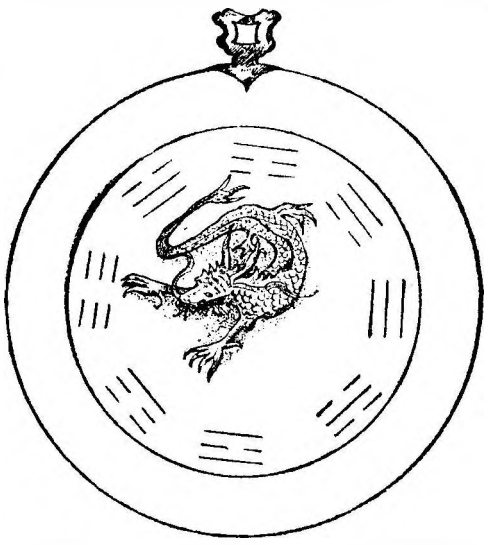
The black eyes of Mr. Two were open again. Warner remembered the thing that was to be given to the son of the Chinese. Taking out the metal disc he surveyed it, with increasing interest.

It was a bronze disc, circular, and clearly of ancient workmanship. On one side the medal bore a dragon of conventional design and around this an arrangement of eight miniature diagrams. These last, resembling the hours on the face of a watch, were formed in every case of three lines, some unbroken, others broken.

"I wonder just how," Warner muttered, "you come to have the eight *kua* in your possession?"

Like the seal of Solomon or the Talisman of Saturn, of the Hebrews, the *Pa-Kua*, or eight trigrams of the Chinese, stood for something unknown to western minds. The eight *kua* had always existed.

The original meaning of the symbols is no longer known. Age has given to the



eight *kua* an occult significance; they are a formula, a talisman, if you will.

Mr. Two must have had distinguished ancestors. The bronze was the kind of thing handed down by fathers to sons, and only the superior classes owned any; but Mr. Two was undoubtedly Professor Rand's servant.

"Your son, where is he?" Warner asked, bending over the stolid, wrinkled face. "How can I find him?"

The Chinese understood, but could not answer; nor could his hand grasp a pen. His lips twitched, and he lifted his hand. Warner returned to the scrutiny of the medal. The characters on the back were hopelessly obscured; the dragon was notable for its fine craftmanship, and might signify that the bronze was a gift from one of the rulers of China.

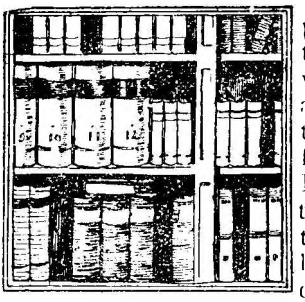
The bronze was solid; there was no other mark on its surface, nothing to give a clue to the name or the whereabouts of Mr. Two's son.

Perceiving a tensing of the muscles of the dying man, Warner glanced at him. The thin, quivering finger still pointed out across the bed. Of a sudden he was aware that Mr. Two wanted him to notice something. With his eyes he followed the direction of the pointing finger. It indicated bookshelves against the opposite wall.

"This shelf?" The white man laid his hand on the lowest tier.

Mr. Two remained as before.

"This, then? The third? Ah!" The old Chinese forced his head to move slightly, notwithstanding the agony it caused him. Warner ran his eye over the volumes on the shelf—old, leather backed books, journals of travelers, and the seventeenth century geographies.



Repeating the process of touching one volume after another, he came to one that satisfied his patient. Bringing it to the table, he read the title—Astley's Collection of Voyages, Vol. IV. And the date, 1747.

Quickly he skimmed over the page headings—Voyages and Travels in the Empire of China—Western Tartary. "What in all creation does the old chap want of this?" he wondered.

Then he laid the book on the table beside the bronze. The bell at the front door rang, loud in the silent house. The doctor, Warner thought, as he went to answer it, had come too late to do anything but make out the death certificate. Mr. Two had died.

Opening the street door, he peered out into the mist. "Come in!"

Into the hall walked Clifford Hearn and Count Camprubi. A woman was with them.

"Heard you were here," Hearn explained. "So we dropped in for a last *palaver*. After you left I thought things over a bit. I'm pretty sure you don't want to back out. Hold on, you don't know the Countess."

"Mrs. Camprubi," corrected the Italian. "You will pardon our intrusion? Our boat leaves the day after tomorrow, and we were anxious to see you."

Warner glanced in some surprise at the woman, who extended her hand with a smile. She had splendid teeth, and her olive skin was flawless. A natural grace, an alertness marked her movements. Over a close-fitting semi-formal black dress she wore a brown camel coat, as if it had been caught up from a motor car.

"I am so please' to meet the frien' of Cliff," she said in broken English, a little huskily. "Thees fog is so moch annoying, is he not?"

Warner had meant to ask how Hearn had known that he was at the Rand house, but, remembering Mr. Two, he requested the men quickly not to go into the library. The only lights burning on the lower floor, however, were in that room, and Hearn was already on the threshold.

"Why not?" he responded carelessly. "What the devil——?"

Before the Countess could enter, Warner hurried forward, annoyed, and placed a blanket over the face and body of the Chinese. "Rand's servant," he explained briefly, "dead in an accident. Sorry I can't be more hospitable, Hearn. You know this isn't my house. Come into the drawing-room and talk, if you wish."

But the promoter and Camprubi were staring curiously at the table, at the bronze disc. The woman glanced at them fleetingly and turned to Warner with a slight shiver. "Thees fog, so many things 'appen in him. I do not mind. He is a Chinese, eh? I do so love the Orientals. Tell me, was he killed by the tongs?"

"Fell against a flight of steps."

"Ah," Camprubi picked up the disc of the eight *kua* and held it under the reading lamp. "A perfect example of the trigrams. This is Mr. Rand's, of course."

"No," said the collector shortly. The staring and questioning seemed to him out of place in the presence of the dead, even though Mr. Two were a yellow man. A faint odor of cordials and cigarettes hung around the Italians.

"Yours?" asked Hearn.

"In a way, yes."

"Want to sell it? Ray, here, sets big store by such things." Hearn took the medal from the Italian, who appeared reluctant to give it up. He turned it over, tapped it, and stared intently at the trigrams, changing the position of the disc in his hand constantly.

"No, I don't."

Hearn frowned. "You wouldn't draw much of a prize for company manners, Bob. Guess you've forgotten the dinners I staked you to when you were living on books, mostly, at college." Seeing the collector flush, he tried to cover up his lapse. Hearn, in his youth, had been one of those who believe that restaurant spreads and invitations to ride in his car were the desideratum of friendship. "Look here, Bob, why don't you pick up and make the trip with us? I can promise you one thing. These jewels are there, in the Singan-mu place, and I'm going to get them."

Still, he turned around in his powerful fingers the bit of bronze as if it were a

combination he would like to set aright.

"Thanks," said Warner thoughtfully. "I've decided not to go with you."

Hearn looked at the Italian moodily. Camprubi, expressionless as ever, shook his head slightly. "May I ask, Mr. Warner, how you are acquainted with Professor Rand?"

"Some years ago," explained the collector. "I came down sick about a week's trek out in the Gobi during a famine when the tribesmen were particularly unruly. Rand heard of my fix from one of his native servants and came out, alone. He nursed me through the fever. Took a good ten days to do it, and I only learned afterward that he was on starvation rations the while—no food to be had, except what he brought, and he would not leave me. After we got back he was laid up in the Lanchow hospital. He wasn't strong enough for a thing like that. I owe him my life, of course."

He held out his hand for the bronze. But Hearn's fingers closed about it. "Give you a hundred for this, Bob?"

"No!" Warner stepped forward. "It belonged to this servant, and I promised to pass it on to his son, whoever he may be. Anyway, I can't sell it."

Once more the mask of good fellowship fell from the heavy countenance of Hearn, and his jaw set. But, swiftly, the woman stepped between them and took it from him.

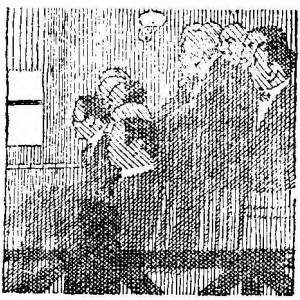
"Why," she cried, "it is what you call a charm! I have so many given me by Raimundo—Egyptian, and Arabic. It would make a so splendid pendant." She held it admiringly against a pearl necklace around her throat. "You will be charitable, Mr. Warner? You will let me keep it and then you can choose another from those of mine, eh?"

By way of answer Warner held out his hand for the bronze. The Countess studied it, pursing her lips reflectively. Then, with a smile, she placed it in a pocket of her coat.

Glancing down at the Italian, Warner saw that the slender man was poised on the edge of his chair, an unlighted cigarette in his hand, as if he were watching a clever bit of repertoire on the stage.

It was not clever enough to interest the collector. These three wanted the eight *kua*, for some reason, and wanted it very much. That they were so casual in attempting to gain it showed that they must have a poor opinion of him. He spoke to Camprubi.

"In court, my dear Count, three witnesses can overrule the testimony of one, as you are doubtless aware. But still, in this country, a charge of theft means a jury trial. And that means delay. Perhaps three months, perhaps twenty. You would not want to miss your boat."



Camprubi lighted his cigarette and answered indifferently.

"My dear fellow, you should know the jealousy of collectors. Frankly, I covet the eight *kua*, and you have no interest in it. Almost, I should be willing to pardon my wife if she should be so unkind as to carry off the bronze in her coat."

Hearn broke into hearty laughter. "What a show you guys are staging! Bob, you can't deny a pretty woman what she wants. Besides, she'll make good her promise to let you choose your recompense."

"Consider, Mr. Warner," elaborated the Italian, "that my wife does not accompany us to the Orient. Your charge would necessarily be laid against her. What a spectacle you would make, in court, accusing a charming young woman of robbing you of a servant's trinket that did not belong to you."

Anger seized upon Robert Warner. The metal disc was worthless to him, he had no notion of why it was valuable to the others, but he meant it to go to the son of Mr. Two, if possible.

"Right!" he said calmly. "I'll be the spectacle, and you two will be accessories to the theft. You'll be summoned as witnesses, and that means you'll stay within the borders of the United States until the trial is over."

Camprubi drew in his breath sharply, and Hearn swore softly. The Countess alone seemed pleased with the situation. In the silence, Warner heard distinctly a light *tap* within the room, as of steel striking against glass. The woman's eyes traveled behind him, and she smiled.

"I am sorry," she observed pleasantly, "that you are angry. Please take the thing. I am afraid you look at matters too seriously, Mr. Warner."

With that she laid the eight *kua* on the table and drew her coat about her. Hearn remarked that it was late; they had stayed too long. Camprubi tapped the collector

lightly on the shoulder. "A word to the wise, Mr. Warner. You have a stubborn streak; you do not take advice well—such as the friendly prompting of our Cliff. So, I add my humble word. Do not meddle; that is foolish."

Warner picked up the bronze disc, put it in the side pocket of his coat and led the way to the front door, through the dark hall. Without answering he opened the door and watched his three visitors go down the steps into the fog. The blurred lights of a motor showed in front of the house. A gust of cold air swept the entrance, and Warner, in the act of closing the door, paused, his faculties alert. He had heard nothing unusual, but in the hall he had sensed a new odor, something stale and warm—something that reminded him of the presence of animals.

He wondered if a dog were quartered in the Rand residence. He had found no trace of one, but the smell in the hall——

His right wrist was caught by chilled fingers and bent up sharply. In the utter darkness he could make out nothing. Starting back he tried to wrench free. No weakling, the collector knew that the fingers of the unseen assailant were immensely powerful.

As if he had been a child, he was whirled off his feet and flung to the floor behind the door. Feet padded away from him. He sprang up, glancing toward the yellow glow that came from the library, shooting into the fog veils that had drifted in from the street.

A shadow passed across the library entrance, and Warner, gathering himself together, raced down the hall and into the lighted room. It was empty, a hasty glance assured him of that. His nerves tingled as he glanced at the blanketed form on the couch. Mr. Two was there—or was he?

Warner was not easily startled, and it was said of him that he had no nerves. Perhaps this was because he had spent the best years of his life outside the beaten track; he had faced opposition in lands where few of his kind strayed, and he had matched his wits against formidable powers—forces that emanated from evil minds of great intensity. Such forces were hardly understood in his own country, where even crime runs in accepted channels, and the criminal is usually more frightened than the man he attacks—where the stimulus of drugs is called upon to nerve the housebreaker or the safe blower to his task.

But, as he drew back the blanket from the form on the couch, Warner's nerves were alive with an impulse of fear. Impalpable voices were calling to him to take heed, to protect himself.

The lined face of the Chinese revealed itself, as before, lifeless and tranquil. No doubt that Mr. Two was dead, and so had not moved——

Out of the corner of his eye Warner saw one of the window curtains sway toward him. Half of one of the long, French windows was open, and in the opening a face, outlined against the fog that pressed in around it.

It was the face of the Chinese who had bent over Mr. Two in the alley some hours ago. No mistaking the bald forehead, scarred by pock marks, or the pointed teeth. The left hand of the man was raised over his shoulder, and Warner swayed his body sharply to one side, drawing back against the wall without wasting time in shifting his feet.

The raised hand of the intruder held a thin knife by the tip, and the slanting eyes glinted with an evil relish.

As the white man moved, the knife flashed toward him. The point thudded into his coat, under his left arm, pinning him to the wall. If he had not shifted his body it would have struck under his heart. The attack was unprovoked, reasonless.

The yellow face withdrew into the fog as the white man, jerking loose the knife, went to the window. No use in going further; the rear porch of the old house, the back yard—everything was veiled in the mist.

"Now why?" Warner murmured. "Why was that done?"

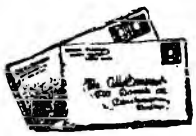
Inspecting the side of the window frame he noticed an abrasion of the wood where the slender blade of the knife had slipped through the crack to raise the simple latch. Yellow Fangs, as he mentally christened the powerful Chinese, must have been standing on the back porch, looking in at the white men. When they had left the library he had entered, followed Warner into the hall—for what reason?

"I wonder?" He slipped a hand into his coat pocket. The bronze disc was gone. He remembered that Yellow Fangs had been searching Mr. Two's clothing in the alley when Warner disturbed him. Many people seemed to desire the replica of the eight *kua*. Yet the thing itself was not of great value. As a curio, possibly,

but intrinsically the bronze was worth no more than a few dollars.

He shook his head thoughtfully. No reason to associate Hearn and Camprubi with a brute type like Yellow Fangs. More likely, the Chinese had seen the white men quarrel over the medal and had coveted it, believing it valuable—as a monkey snatches at anything bright in another's hand.

Looking down, the collector saw he held in his hand the letters brought from the hotel, that he had removed from his coat in searching for the lost disc. Until now he had had no time to read them. Two, advertisements of real estate firms, he tossed into the waste-basket. A third, bearing a Chinese postmark, he opened with the knife. It was in a woman's hand, one that he could not place.



Warner read it through slowly, then seated himself at the table and for a half-hour pored over it, weighing each word. When he had done he sat staring moodily in front of him, seeing nothing.

The letter was from Margaret Rand, the daughter of Professor Rand. It had been sent from the mission college at Lanchow. She had written, the letter explained, because Robert Warner was her father's intimate friend and because she knew that he would be expecting Professor Rand to join him in San Francisco.

Warner had not seen Margaret for several years, as she had been living for that time in San Francisco while she finished her course in the University of California. Rand had come to the States every other year to be with her. Warner knew that it was for the girl's sake that the professor had resigned his post in Lanchow, to come to San Francisco.

He remembered her as a shy child, devoted to her father, a little spoiled perhaps. She had been born in China, and the servants of the household were her slaves. She used to ride a shaggy Mongol pony in the hills, her long hair flying over her shoulders, and a troop of pet dogs after her. Rand, in their conferences, had admitted that Margaret was a wild little thing, domineering over the servants, stubborn in her ways; and that she had not relished college. He had wanted to give her the social advantages of life in San Francisco——

And now, Margaret wrote, her father was dead.

Professor Rand had been engaged in research work beyond the edge of the Gobi, north of Lanchow. He had made camp there with one of his native helpers. One night, the camp had been attacked by wolves or one of the formidable bands of wild dogs that roamed the uninhabited wastes of the Gobi. The men had been asleep in their blankets on the ground, and when the native boys had gained their feet and their rifles and beaten off the savage invaders it was found that Rand had been fatally injured.

So Margaret wrote, adding that she intended to remain where she was, until the work of excavation that Professor Rand had been engaged upon at Singan-mu was completed.

Chapter III

The Voice of the Past

FROM the neighborhood physician who called in late that night, having been out of town when the ambulance surgeon notified his home, Robert Warner learned two things. One was the name and address of a firm of lawyers who managed Rand's affairs in San Francisco; the other was the fact that Mr. Two had died of heart failure, caused either by the shock of the fall or by severe fright.

"Oh, either," the yawning practitioner had answered. "Shock or fright—it comes to pretty much the same thing. Take an automobile accident, for example. You hear constantly that So-and-so suffered from bruises and shock. The injured man may only have a few skin abrasions, but the mental ordeal of facing death or mutilation has raised havoc with his cardiac system and brain cells. Quarts of blood have been drained from his brain and forced at high pressure through the heart. He suffers from it. Why——"

Warner had smiled, thinking of the knife of Yellow Fangs. "I see your point. Taking an opposite instance, a drunken man can roll out of a second story window, fall a dozen feet or so, and think nothing of it, after the hootch is out of his system."

"Yes. His nerves are normal, because his imagination has not been aroused. Preconceived—or, you might say hereditary—fears play havoc with the high-strung mentality of our modern human beings. I had a case once—a lady half-drowned herself by jumping in the Oakland estuary because a cur dog came nosing around her. The patient's sister had died from the bite of a mad dog, twenty years ago."

After the physician's car had purred away into the fog, Warner had returned to his table and reading light, to reason out the letter of Margaret Rand.

Professor Arthur Rand had been excavating at Singan-mu, when he died. The archeologist, of course, had known the legend of Chong-Wang's hunting pavilion —had related it to Warner.

But, a year or so ago, Rand had not been aware of the situation of the hunting pavilion of Singan-mu. Evidently, he had hit upon a clue to it since his last trip to the States. How? If Mr. Two could talk—

Mr. Two had pointed out the book on the table. Within its covers there must be something he wished the white man to read. Sleep, during the remainder of the night, was out of the question, and Warner, lighting his pipe, took up the bulky tome.

A few minutes' scrutiny convinced him that there was no marker in it, nor had Rand penciled any of the pages. Patiently, he began at the first page of the Travels, and glanced down the fading print. He had the knack of old newspaper men—could grasp the contents of a page by running his eye down it.

Several hours later he set his pipe aside and sat up alertly. Near the end of the volume he had come to "Travels in Weftern Tartary *by order of the Emperor of China, between the years* 1688 *and* 1698—*by* John Francis Gerbillon, Jefuit."

"The Emperor intended by this Progress to avoid the excessive Heats at Peking during the Dog Days; for in this part of Tartary there blows a cold Wind during July and Auguft——"

Warner read on with keen interest, until he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"July 1, being the fourth moon of the Chinefe calendar, the Jefuit, Father Gerbillon set-out with the Imperial retinue, to go beyond the Weftern border. A little after we paffed the Great Wall, which is here of baked clay, yet has the Wind driven upon it the Sand from the defert, so that the horfes eafily encompas'd its paffage... This, Father Gerbillon learn'd, is the South-weftern end of the Great Wall. ... ...

"From the Wall we journey'd due Weft for three days over a plain, very bare and sandy. The firft day we progreffed 60 li, the second 70 and the third 55 to a ring of mountains about 300 geometrical paces high, all of black rock.

"Rather than crofs-over these black hills, the Emperor went around, although the country was treelefs and swept by high Winds and we lacked of Water.

"Father Gerbillon was told by a Mandarin that the ring of mountains was an ill-omened place. In the center of the ring are ruins called Singan-mu, which is to say Caftle of the Weft, where a former Emperor died, leaving a Treasure very fair and great in some place under the mark of Earth.

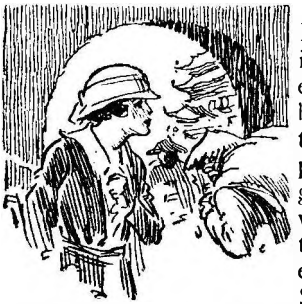
"The Mandarin related that thefe black hills are accurfed by reafon of a Tau Wu, which signifies Untamable.

"That Evening we had a Storm with Hail and Thunder, which vastly frighten'd the Travellers. The Court Aftrologers proclaim'd that this Storm was cauſed by the evil Tau Wu, and the next day we marched in hafte 90 li to an oasis——"

After copying down this portion of the journal of the priest, Robert Warner returned the heavy volume to its place on the shelf. The message of the missionary was clear enough—a little uncanny, it was, this voice coming out of the past. He wondered how Mr. Two had known of the book. But of course, Professor Rand, after discovering the portion relating to Singan-mu, would have questioned Mr. Two, who was above the average intelligence. Doubtless they had discussed it——

What was the Untamable? It might be anything; probably one of the myriad Oriental superstitions connected with places where men had died.

So Professor Rand was the archeologist who had hit upon the ruins of Singan-mu! Camprubi had seen fit to conceal this fact. Warner suspected that the Italian had been told about the narrative of Father Gerbillon by Rand, who was honesty itself, and as confiding as a child. The seeker after knowledge would not now stand in the way of the seeker after wealth.



But there was Margaret, alone in a city at the edge of the Gobi, not far from the southern point of the great wall. She would remain there until the excavation at Singan-mu, begun by her father, was ended.

She had no business out there—a scatter-brained girl of nineteen. The young

flappers of today were always running wild, getting into trouble. She ought to be here in San Francisco. Doing what?

Warner smiled ruefully, visioning the slip of a girl, on her shaggy pony, racing across the edge of the desert. After all, he had no authority over her, and—he had planned to forget everything West of the Golden Gate.

Determined to think no more of Singanmu or Margaret, he went upstairs, made a bed and was soon sound asleep.

In the morning he found that he was still thinking of Rand's girl. He walked to the business district and sent a cable to Lanchow, advising Margaret Rand to return to San Francisco, and prepaying a reply.

After seeing that Mr. Two's body was turned over to a Chinese fraternal society, and that Rand's attorneys had the keys to the house, now closed up, he retired to his hotel. Two days passed restlessly and he found he had no inclination to look at real estate, fruit ranches or bungalows.

By inquiring at Hearn's hotel, he learned that the promoter and the Italian had taken the steamer bound for Shanghai by way of Japan. Also that there had been many inquiries about the foreigner. He had, it seemed, been one of the principals in an oil swindle, and now faced suit for using the Government mails for fraudulent purposes.

Warner heard rumors, too, that Hearn had been interested in the oil leases sponsored by Camprubi. Those leases must have lost him a good bit of money. Talk in the restaurants around the San Francisco Stock Exchange confirmed the fact that Hearn's fortune was balancing precariously, and that for the second time Government agents were trying to lay hands on him. He had pyramided land profits into oil stocks and, in the vernacular, was "hung up." That is, unless he could produce several hundred thousands in cash his stocks would be sold.

Clifford Hearn needed money badly.

That afternoon came a reply to his cable.

Have promised friends to finish important work mentioned in letter. Can not leave. Best wishes. *Margaret Rand.*

Upon receiving this, Warner swore effectively and whole-heartedly for a quarter of an hour. It was like the girl—stubborn! If she had made a promise she would keep it. Most likely her friends were natives, or she would have named them. He did not relish it at all.

Then the Countess called him up. Would he come to her hotel? She was so worried. She did not know anything about her husband's affairs, but people, the police, were constantly questioning her, and she had so few friends.

Warner decided to call on her. He did not think she was Camprubi's wife, but merely one of the trio of adventurers. Nevertheless, the woman was pleasing to the eye and her distress had not prevented her from achieving a careful toilette. Her accent made conversation delightful.

She was thinking of leaving San Francisco. The fogs were bad for voice, and now that Raimundo had abandoned her so heartlessly, she would need to eke out a living by her singing. Yes—she flushed at the confession—she had to go on the stage, now and then. Times were hard, very hard for the old families of Europe; but America was so, so hospitable.

She turned dark, inquiring eyes on Warner.

"I'd advise Chicago or New York, in that case," suggested the collector reflectively. "San Francisco is unhealthy for some people."

The Countess assented. That was what she had in mind. But she knew so very little about ter-rains. From where did they go? How did one secure a compartment?

Warner thought this over for a while and then announced that he would see that her trunks were cared for and that she got on the right train—would accompany her to the station, because he was leaving the city himself. She was pleased, decided to go on the morrow.

"You will accept a little gift, for the journey, Countess?" he answered. "One of the curios that you are pleased to gather?"

"Not the Chinese disc?" Her eyes flew up to his, startled.

Warner handed her the thin-bladed knife with the ivory handle that had been thrown at him by the visitor of several nights ago. The effect upon the woman was a little surprising. Her fingers curled inward, went to her supple throat with a gesture of instinctive dread that was not acting.

"The dagger of that savage! What you do with it? Where do you get it?"

"What savage?"

Her eyes lost their stare, became thoughtful, unreadable. "Ah, you pardon my very bad Englees, yes? Raimundo 'as so many enemies. They 'unt for him, and that is"—she hesitated—"the Chinese stil-

etto, a throwing knife. It frightened me." Appeal crept back into her voice. "I am so lonely."

"Still," suggested Warner, "it might serve as a memento."

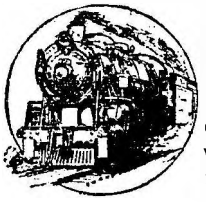
The next evening he ushered her to the Los Angeles train, bound for the East. When he had sorted the numerous boxes, hand-bags and coats into her compartment, the bell began to clang, and the porters entered the vestibules. Warner had along only a large bag, containing a change of clothing and some books.

"I have not quite decided where I'm going," he confessed. "When in doubt I resort to the toss of a coin, my lucky piece."

The Countess glanced at him questioningly. "You spoke as if——"

"Here goes. Tails Los Angeles, heads Canada." He flipped the coin and showed it to her. It was a Chinese *tael*, of old-fashioned coinage, and clearly the side uppermost bore the stamp of the Government. "Heads wins." He caught up his bag. "Luck to you, Countess!"

She mustered a rueful smile as he darted out of the car before the porter closed the vestibule. He did not again set eyes on the Countess.



As the train pulled out he turned over the lucky piece with a grin. Both sides were alike. Pocketing it, he made his way to the ferry, to catch the evening train north. He stopped long enough to send a second cable.

Taking the C. P. boat, Vancouver, arriving Lanchow early in six weeks. Want to look over your friends.

Robert Warner.

The cable was addressed to Margaret Rand.

Although Warner's steamer left port a full week after the boat bearing Hearn and his party, it made a faster run across the Pacific and docked in the northern port shortly after the other vessel was due in Shanghai. He wasted little time in Peking, but took the southern express as far as Honan.

Here it was necessary to hire a cart, horses and servants for the overland trek —five hundred miles due west to the wall and Lanchow. Experienced in the vicissitudes of travel in China, the collector made rapid progress. Which means that he negotiated slowly for his boys and the cart, drew up a signed contract, and rejected four of the first five riding ponies offered him at extortionate prices. Having convinced the natives that he did not mean to hurry, could not be cheated, and knew where he was going, he was ready to start a week sooner than any novice in the interior of China.

Two things caused him some uneasiness. He heard at Honan that a strong party of bandits, under unscrupulous leaders, had held up the crack Peking-Shanghai express and carried off a number of Americans and Europeans, holding their captives for ransom in the hills. During the fighting several of the "foreign devils" had been killed. This meant that the bandits of the interior would grow bolder.

The Government at Peking had practically no control over the roving bands of former soldiers, and the factions of the rebel chieftains. Lanchow was hardly a safe residence for an American girl, unattended.

Again, as he was following his mule cart out of Honan under the ancient arch that spanned the road along the Hwang-ho, he passed a cavalcade of riders entering the city, and noticed that the leader pulled up his pony to gaze at the American. This was natural enough. Warner, accustomed to take note of passers-by, observed that the head man was powerful in build, with a broad, pock-marked face. The smallpox scars around the eyes held his attention.

He could not be certain, but he fancied that this man resembled the creature of the fog who had tried to kill him in San Francisco—Yellow Fangs, he thought of him. It was difficult to believe that the man of San Francisco could be in Honan. For half a moment he contemplated halting and accusing the other of stealing the bronze disc. Then, with a shrug, he passed on, following the unmelodious *tunk-tunk* of the bell on the mule cart.

Granting that the rider was the thief, he knew the uselessness of bringing a charge against the Chinese without evidence. Moreover, the man in the black hat seemed to be in a position of some authority. Warner did not care to be delayed.

Glancing back he caught the eyes of the Chinese Moslem fixed on him with evil satisfaction.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE RAND COMPOUND

ALTHOUGH the American was eager to make good time, obstacles seemed to multiply in his path. One of the cart mules died; the axle of the cart came

apart; his tinned food was stolen from the supplies; guides were never to be found when wanted.

Gradually he worked forward, into a world unchanged since the middle ages—a world of primitive inns, shrines on the mountainsides, of half-naked peasants digging patiently in the fields with the tools of Biblical times. San Francisco, with its hotels and echoing streets slipped away into the limbo of dreams. Warner jogged interminably after the *tunk-tunk* of the cart bell, alert for any sign of aggression on the part of bandits.

He saw nothing suspicious, but was perfectly well aware that his progress was being retarded by some powerful influence. His servants announced that they would go no farther from their home, and he paid them off, hiring inferior coolies at a mountain village.

The new boys, from head-boy to cook, wilfully misunderstood his orders, prepared uneatable meals, quarreled among themselves, until Warner dismissed them, put his remaining supplies on a pack animal and pressed on with a native picked up from an inn.

His last man-of-all-work bore the harmonious name of Sing Low, and moved in an everlasting silence, tinted rosily with forbidden opium. He was proud in the possession of rusted metal spectacles from which the glass had been broken long since. Notwithstanding, his sight was keen, although Sing Low's emaciated limbs and creased, leather-like countenance bespoke untold years. He was a hunter who had drifted in from the western plain, and a long Russian rifle of the Crimean War era formed the sum of his worldly goods. It never left his hand.

Warner discovered that Sing Low could bring down game for the evening meal, and what was more to the point, cook it tastefully. Also the hunter never tired, and they were able to make thirty miles a day. Silence and red clay dust held them in a never ending pall.

Once Sing Low expressed an opinion upon the bearers who had been discharged. He shook his head contemptuously, spat toward the east, and scanned the white man sadly from wrinkled, hairless eyelids.

"Plenty tlouble belong you," he croaked. "My word!"

Warner was fast becoming convinced that plenty of trouble was in store for him. It was in no particularly pleasant frame of mind that he made his way into the narrow streets of Lanchow.

Lanchow, he reflected, was unchanged since the day of the priest, Father Gerbillon. To avoid the piles of refuse and the packs of snarling, misshapen dogs, he turned his horse toward the main thoroughfare. Sing Low cleared a way methodically through the snapping curs with the butt of his long rifle. He cracked upon the skull of a creature with the head of a bulldog, the body of a greyhound. Warner glimpsed a small monster with the muzzle and pointed ears of a wolf and the dwarf trunk of a spaniel. The dogs of China!

Out in the central street they pressed into a mass of stolid camels, and sweating

donkeys, of cursing men and howling, filthy children. A caravan was setting out into the Gobi. Their ponies moved with difficulty in the trampled mud, shying at the camels. Overhead the sky hardly showed, for the ramshackle wooden houses nearly met over the street. From littered windows stained and evil faces peered down at the "foreign devil," and the clucking of human tongues, the grunting of animals, was a veritable bedlam.

Warner wondered whether the caravan he passed was bound for Russia, Turkestan or India. His pony became jammed in between the beasts of the camel men and, perforce, he halted.

"Eh, you stop! I saying you stop!"

Turning in the saddle, he beheld a ragged soldier shoving through the crowd toward him, followed by half a squad of riflemen dressed like the army of Falstaff, yet armed, he noticed, with serviceable carbines.

"Have got passpo't?" demanded the English-speaking non-com, who was distinguished by a badge on his shoulder. "You showing me passpo't plentee quick!"

His tone was surly, and he elbowed aside the staring camel men viciously. He had the broad face and round, black velvet cap of a Chinese Moslem. Warner suspected that this was a patrol of some kind that had missed meeting him at the

city wall. Now, he had no passport. The provisional Government at Peking had been too disorganized to supply such a thing, and would have refused to allow him to proceed if he had applied. But, foreseeing such a contingency, the American had in his pocket an elaborately written menu, a souvenir of a dinner, years ago, with one of the greatest diplomats of the old regime, in Peking.

The official crest, and the flourishing characters that set forth the list of delicacies, with the signature of the guests below, did somewhat resemble the all-important passport. At least to a low-class Chinese who could not read. Warner's guess was that the blue-clad soldier could not read.

The man took it and squinted thoughtfully. Over his shoulder, the American caught a glimpse of a tall mandarin standing composedly with folded arms. Then the——

"No have got passpo't! *Mei shuo shen mo*—it does not say anything." The sergeant spoke to one of his men, who began to undo the fastenings of the pack on the led horse. Another tried to take the reins of Warner's pony.

"You come stop along governor's *yamen*," ordered the non-com with surly satisfaction. "You catch double along passpo't."

Suddenly the man in front of Warner struck the pony savagely over the head as it dodged back from his upraised hand. He used his rifle barrel and the injured animal reared. When its forefeet came down, Warner's Colt was pointed at the chest of the sergeant.

"I'll call on your governor," he said slowly, "if you have one. Meanwhile, order your men away from my horses, *pronto*, and keep your distance. Understand—hands off?"

If he had allowed the soldiery to plunder the pack animal, he would have lost prestige at once. Worse, the mob might have seized the occasion to rush him. Tried by heat and weariness, his temper flared.

Silence held the immediate vicinity of the American, while the slant eyes of the soldiers glittered and they fingered their weapons. A forty-five Colt usually ends an argument.

The mob, instead of giving ground, drew in closer, like animals, sensing a kill. Haggard, leprous faces peered up at Warner. Then the mandarin who had held himself in the background stepped forward.

He did not wear the usual red button, or official cap. In fact his simple outer robe was threadbare; but his height and splendid head stamped him as a mandarin before he spoke, in the soft inflection of a scholar.

"Ignorance is a misfortune," he said in Chinese, "but lying is a misdeed."

The sergeant, finger on trigger, lifted his lip in a snarl. Warner saw two or three of the rifle muzzles moving up toward him and realized that he was faced by men bolder than the usual run of provincial soldiery.

"How could you, who are of little worth, read the passport when you held it upside down?" said the mandarin again. "No governor sits in the *yamen*. Lanchow is in the hands of the rabble. By what authority do you accost a foreign gentleman?"

This time, hearing the chuckles of some members of the crowd, the soldier turned angrily. He handed the mandarin the official-appearing menu.

"Then do you read it, who are meddlesome, and say what it contains."

Warner, who had followed the conversation, glanced at the mandarin curiously. The tall man in gray took the paper and read it through. Not a muscle moved in his olive countenance.

"It says," he announced, "that this honorable person is to be permitted to go where he will in the Empire, and it is signed by the highest officials."

The soldier glared, and looked around irresolutely, unwilling to release his captive. Warner glanced quizzically at the tall scholar, who folded the menu and handed it back to him impassively.

"Who is lying now? I don't know what game you're up to, old chap," the American said to himself, "but the world lost a grand poker player in you."

Just then came a diversion. A pony, driven fast, twisted its way through the throng. A girl's face, framed against the ugly heads of the camels, turned to Warner and a clear voice cried:

"Welcome to our city! Gracious, what a reception committee! Where's your outfit, Mr. Warner, and why in the world did you come?"

It was Margaret Rand. He had no chance to answer because one of the soldiers failed to get out of the way of the pony and was knocked down. To Warner it seemed as if the native deliberately allowed himself to be struck.

At all events he rolled clear of the dancing hoofs, none the worse for the impact; but one of his comrades shouted angrily at Margaret and reached for the horse's

head. At once the girl struck down vigorously with her riding crop, and the soldier, obeying a muttered command from his leader, let the rifle fall and reached up with both arms.

By intent, or ill chance, his claw-like fingers closed around her throat as she tried to avoid his grasp. Warner's revolver roared. The soldier spun around and fell ten feet from where he had been standing.

He had been hit in the lower shoulder, and a bullet from a Colt's forty-five knocks a man down—no matter where he is hit. That was why the white man carried it.

Like an echo of his shot, the rifle of the patrol leader barked and flame seared Warner's cheek as a bullet whistled by the base of his skull. The Chinese had jerked the trigger too hastily, or he could not have missed at five yards. Even so, the faculties of the white man were numbed by the shock of the discharge.

He heard the *click* of a fresh cartridge forced into the chamber of the rifle, and swayed forward in his saddle. As he did so, there was a thudding report from behind him, and swirling smoke enveloped the American and his now frantic pony.

Warner, forcing his eyes to function, beheld a bluish spot that seemed to leap upon the forehead of the patrol leader, as the native's head jerked back. The mouth of the Chinese fell open and his body crumpled down slowly.

Sing Low had not been interested in the attack upon Margaret Rand, but as he understood his duties as handy man, it was right and expedient to shoot down the man who threatened the life of his master. And Sing Low never liked to waste a cartridge. Warner had deliberately avoided taking the life of the soldier who had grasped the American missy—Sing Low understood that, but the hunter did not hold to such foreign ethics—on the edge of the Gobi.

Now there were only two of the patrol on foot and armed. Chinese Mohammedans are more unruly than the orthodox Celestials. They are swayed by the influences sent out from Mecca, and by wandering *mullahs*. But they are cleverer. The two who remained erect saw Warner's Colt upraised alertly, as the head of the white man cleared, and they beheld the long rifle of Sing Low loaded again. They vanished into the crowd.

Warner reined his pony beside Margaret Rand and waited for the volley of stones, knives and abuse that he fully expected from the mob in the alley. But in front of the two Americans the tall mandarin now stood with lifted hand.

"Slaves of impulses," he addressed the throng in tones that carried up to the housetops, "are you likewise fools—as these dog soldiers? The man who was killed was a bandit. If you lay hand on these barbarians, an electric letter will be sent to Peking and a devil soldier boat will come up the Hwang-ho, and the devil soldiers will carry off many of you to Peking, where those who are taken will be shortened at both ends."

(By this the mandarin meant that if the crowd attacked the Americans, a telegram would bring a foreign gunboat up the river and the marines would seize prisoners, who might have their heads and feet cut off by the Chinese authorities in Peking.)

The restless throng listened, as mobs will listen when a leader speaks up, and presently indulged their feelings for the moment in making fun of the two soldiers on the ground. The mandarin made a sign to the girl.

"Come to the compound," urged Margaret, her cheeks pallid in the gloom of the alley. "Oh, why did you do that?"

Warner was looking around for the tall man in gray who had disappeared in the crowd—wishing to thank him for his intervention.

"He'll turn up at the bungalow," she explained, "of course."

"Who is the chap?"

"Just Yuan Shi—Mr. Three. Now tell me, please, Mr. Warner, just why you came halfway 'round the earth to see my friends?"

The small compound that had housed Professor Arthur Rand for a quarter of a century was almost deserted. No servants were visible about the laundry shack or the kitchen. Margaret herself, assisted by a pretty, plump Chinese woman, prepared tea for her visitor while Warner cleansed himself of some of the red dust, and shifted to clean flannels. He had seen that the room used by Rand as a study was shut up.

The garden inside the wall of the compound showed traces of neglect, but the house was neat as ever. Accustomed to

observe his surroundings minutely, Warner hazarded a guess that the bungalow had been kept up by the two women, without any men servants for some time. Only one horse, beside the two he had brought, stood in the stable shed—Margaret's pony, Rex, now grown stiff and notional with age.

Evidently the girl had very little money.

"I think, Miss Rand, it was on account of—a hunch. An idea, you know, that I might find work here."

"Work?" Her brows went up. "But you have always been so busy. Father"—her under lip quivered just a little—"said that you had been employed by the State Department at Washington, to get information on the Shantung question and your collections were to go to the Metropolitan Museum."

"Where they are now," he nodded. "I've heard about the discovery of Singan-mu and wish to look at the ruins."

Over the samovar she studied his dark face, with the high cheek bones and the deep-set gray eyes. It was so difficult to tell what Robert Warner was thinking.

"Why," she asked suddenly, "did you lose your temper this afternoon in the bazaar quarter? Your servant killed one of the Moslems. Their bands have been drifting into Lanchow lately, and they may make a great deal of trouble for you."

His lips tightened and his eyes lost the glint of humor. "I couldn't stand for it, Mar—Miss Rand. For that scoundrel laying his hands on you. Have they bothered you before?"

"In a way, yes. After dad left me, I dismissed some of the servants. Then the horses were stolen, but Rex—my pony chum, you know—found his way back again. Another time, while I was in town doing the marketing, thieves entered and ransacked the house, especially father's study. They took some ornaments and a little paper money that was in his desk. I think that frightened our remaining cook and house-boy, because they deserted me without their last month's wages, which is unusual. I'm sorry your man killed the soldier."

"I'm not," responded Warner. "To my mind the bandits were determined to pick a fight. They got what they wanted. That mandarin is a cool hand, and he certainly did us a good turn. Know him?"

Margaret smiled. "Mr. Three is the only friend I have, except, of course, Miss Thousand Pieces of Gold, who is more devoted than a sister could be."

At that moment the pleasant-faced servant appeared to remove the tea things, and, under her breath, Warner heard her

croon a phrase that she did not know he understood. "Ah, my Most Precious Pearl, when your honorable mother left you, to go to the spirit world of the ancestors, who was there but the humble and unworthy Thousand Pieces of Gold to minister to you, to wipe away your tears when the exalted scholar, your father was also called to the world of the elder people?"

A shadow passed across the face of the young American girl, and her eyes closed. For a moment the death of Arthur Rand held the thoughts of the three. Margaret's fine head drooped as if the weight of her coils of bronze hair was too great.

Warner hardly knew this slender, quietly moving woman for the healthy little animal in pig-tails and knickers that had raced around the compound four years ago. Knowing the fidelity of native women like Thousand Pieces of Gold, he was sure that she would allow herself to be cut to pieces before permitting harm to come to her mistress. But concerning Mr. Three he was doubtful. The name was a common one in the Celestial kingdom, where large families are the rule.

"Your father knew this mandarin?" he asked gently. It surprised him that he should dislike the warmth with which Margaret spoke of the Chinese.

She nodded, without replying. The strain of the fight in the town was beginning to show in her manner.

"Trusted him?"

Again a nod.

"Then Mr. Three knew of Professor Rand's discovery of Singan-mu?"

"He worked with him, at the excavating," Margaret explained. "They never permitted me to go out into the desert, although daddy was so full of the possibilities of finding inscriptions and weapons that he hardly came home at all."

"Then, this Mr. Three is the friend whom you promised to help, with the completion of the work?"

"Yes. He asked me for a particular reason not to leave Lanchow until all the

site of the pavilion had been explored. Daddy's notes are all in English, and the account of the priest——"

"Of Father Gerbillon?"

"How did you know of it?" She studied the collector curiously. "But, then, you always did know everything——"

"Not quite, Miss Rand." Warner laughed. "I happened upon the book in your father's library in San Francisco, where I went, hoping to see him."

"Yes, daddy noticed it the last time he was in the States—at my graduation. That was why he brought me here for the last time, and gave up his position in the university. The prospect of uncovering one of the residences of an emperor of Tsin excited him tremendously, and he lived in a kind of day dream until he started out into the desert.

"You see," she went on, her chin on her hand, her eyes moody, "daddy never thought that the hunting palace of Chong-Wang could actually be found, until he happened to read the travels of the old priest. The fact that Singan-mu might exist so near here settled his determination."

"Did you know"—Warner was about to tell her of the unfortunate fate of the servant in San Francisco, but changed his mind, seeing the girl's fatigue—"that jewels of stupendous value may be somewhere on the site of that pavilion?"

"Yes, of course. Daddy talked that over with you, didn't he? But all he thought of was uncovering some data to throw new light on ancient history."

"Then Mr. Three, this mandarin fellow, was aware of the possibility of finding jewels worth more than the treasure of a Moghul—or a Czar, for that matter?"

Again the girl nodded. Warner leaned forward impulsively. "Margaret, why don't you go back to San Francisco?"

"I'm afraid," she smiled wryly. "I haven't the money. You see, we're very poor. Daddy's pension has stopped, of course, and he never saved anything."

Warner was silent for several moments. "Your father once did me a service that would be impossible to repay in any fashion. He saved my life. There's no reason why you shouldn't draw on me for any sum that you need for the trip home, and——"

"And a course in secretarial work, I suppose—and then, after I've proved that I'm not a business woman, a living income. Certainly not, Mr. Robert Warner! I've a perfectly good reason why that can't be done. I'm not going to do it!"

She rose and went to lean against one of the bamboo posts. The glow of sunset was behind her, touching the shimmering bronze of her head, and glowing upon the white of her dress—for Margaret had chosen the native custom of wearing white in mourning for Arthur Rand. Black made her unhappy.

Considering the fairness of the woman, the twisted brow and resolute lips, Warner wondered if the quest for the jewels had not drawn her thoughts toward the desert. From the earliest times the sheen and the splendor of precious stones had been craved by women. If a struggling stenographer in prosaic New York would sacrifice half of her living for a real diamond, what would a girl like Margaret, brought up in semi-poverty, on the very edge of the caravan traffic with Asia, give up for a treasure like that of Singan-mu?

A puff of air stirred the mulberry trees by the veranda and Robert Warner was aware for the first time of the harbinger of the desert—the warmth of countless miles of sun-beaten sand, borne into the strip of cultivation around Lanchow. Margaret, too, sensed it, and raised her head.

Then he thought of Hearn and Camprubi, coming to search the Gobi, and the amiable Yellow Fangs, feared even by the Countess.

"Don't be an utter child, Margaret," he said slowly. "This is not the place for you. Of course, you must leave it."

"No, I love it." She did not turn her head. "I—I can't leave the place where daddy is."

Suddenly she faced him, her eyes closed. "I thought that was what you came for. It—it was kind of you. But you had my cable. Please go back, before you come to harm at the hand of the bandits. No one around here would do me any injury. You saw this afternoon how different it is with you. And, if you are thinking of going to Singan-mu, it is useless. You would not be permitted to search. What we are looking for belongs to others."

Again came the breath of warm air,

bearing the infinite particles of dust that hang over the floor of the desert. The vast crimson panoply of sunset softened to a purple shroud.

A hundred questions pried at Warner's brain. Why would Mr. Three not permit him to go to Singan-mu? Who had been robbing the compound? But he saw that Margaret was over-tired, and forbore questioning her.

"I'm going to see this thing through." was all he said.

A light step on the veranda, and the soft voice of Thousand Pieces of Gold. "Dinner served, all ploper."

As the collector was following Margaret into the hall of the bungalow, he turned and whistled softly. Out of the gathering shadows of the courtyard there stole a tall figure, emaciated as a skeleton, draped with odds and ends of clothing tied about with rags, and odorous of sheep and horses.

"You watch the compound gate, Sing Low," ordered the American. "You watchee one piece door, sabe no fellow come—can do?"

"All li," crooned the ancient huskily. "Can do."

Whereat the black shadow faded into the twilight as noiselessly as a ferret seeks its den. Lights, glowing through the lattice screens of the veranda, illumined the clay courtyard faintly. Sing Low was no longer to be seen. From the open door of the bungalow a broad path of radiance passed over the front steps and reached as far as the gate of the compound.

An hour passed, and Thousand Pieces of Gold was heard to gather up the dishes; then Margaret sought her bedroom, with a weary good night to her guest. The gate in the compound wall swung open soundlessly and a gray figure stepped into the path of light. It halted.

Sing Low had risen from somewhere, and drawn near. Although he made no noise audible to European ears, the visitor had heard his approach. The faint voice of the hunter muttered a question, followed by an objection to the stranger's further approach.

Sibilant monosyllables came from the lips of the man in gray, and the word *T'au-wu* repeated several times. As if satisfied, Sing Low retired again into invisibility and the newcomer advanced to the veranda, seating himself in a chair at the right of the yellow glow from the open door

Chapter V

THE UNTAMABLE

SEVERAL minutes later Robert Warner strode out of the door with a firm step of the Anglo-Saxon who cares not who hears his approach. He was smoking a pipe, and, halting for a moment, he fiddled with the bowl, prodding it with his knife. When he had it adjusted to his satisfaction, he reached carelessly into his jacket pocket with his left hand. Drawing out a match he moved, to his right, out of the illumination from the door. Before striking the match against a post he faced around and thrust his right hand into his side pocket. When the match glowed, it was cupped in his left fist and the fingers of his right hand were touching the Colt.

"Hm," he murmured, "thought I smelled musk and silk. So Mr. Three spends his evenings on the front porch?"

He was studying the slant eyes and the firm, smiling lips of the tall mandarin who had taken a seat in one of the chairs in the shadow. Mr. Three appeared not in the least surprised. Warner wondered how he got past the vigilant Sing Low.

"It is more fitting, honorable guest," he added in the quick monosyllables of the mandarin dialect, "that a distinguished visitor should cross the threshold and take his seat in the light. Then talk is easier and no suspicion, like a snake, could come between us."

A slight movement of the hand was the only sign of surprise made by Mr. Three at being addressed in his own tongue.

"Those who sit in the light can not see into the shadows," he responded. "Here it is possible to watch the gate in the wall. You could not have forgotten your enemies of this afternoon."

The man was right, Warner admitted to himself. Lighting his pipe, he blew out the match and settled down in a chair on the other side of the glow from the door. It was useless, he knew, to wait until Mr. Three should speak. His companion was the son of noblemen—could, perhaps, trace his ancestry back to days when the Mayflower and the Normon conquest were yet in the limbo of future things. Blue blood ran in his veins, his was the courtesy of the elder world, and the wisdom of the ancients, to whom time is nothing, and the warfare of men no more than the squabbles of children. Warner felt like a schoolboy in the presence of an all-knowing teacher.

Yet he must make Mr. Three talk, and from his words separate truth from evasion, if he would safeguard Margaret Rand. After half an hour's thought he chose the one opening that would serve him.

"Mr. Three, is it not true that profit avails nothing when honor is smirched? So the venerable masters of wisdom have announced."

"It is most true."

"This afternoon you did us a service, and for that we are grateful. Will you consent to answer one question, to relieve my stupid mind?"

"I will answer."

"Why do you permit the barbarian girl-child to remain in this place that is dangerous to her, in order to serve your interests? Will your honor be clear if you permit the daughter of your friend to be sacrificed for your profit?"

The mandarin was silent a long time. "It is not I who keep the American missy in Lanchow."

"She made to you a promise, and that binds her."

"True. Yet of her own will she desires to learn the secret of Singan-mu."

Warner thought this over. "Will you forgive my unpardonable curiosity if I ask whether the American missy hopes to gain the jewels of Singan-mu? Remember that I also was the friend of the honorable scholar, her father."

"Most true. What will you advise her to do?"

The quick question brought an emphatic answer from Robert Warner.

"To return with me to the coast, and to sail for my country, at once. She should not go into the desert."

Warner sensed a certain hostility in Mr. Three's silence. Then——

"The beautiful girl-child of the distinguished barbarian desires to avenge the murder of her father."

Before Warner could say anything, the mandarin launched into a detailed account of the fate of Arthur Rand. Listening attentively, the American perceived that it agreed with all that he had known. Mr. Three, whatever his motive, was speaking the truth.

When Professor Rand returned to Lanchow for the last time, full of his purpose to uncover the ruins of the palace that might be at Singan-mu, he set out almost at once with a small caravan of half a dozen natives, some ten camels and Mr. Three. They ascertained the southwestern point of the Great Wall of China, two or three days' ride from Lanchow. The wall ended in precipitous hills.

Striking due west from here, following the directions in the narrative of the priest, they sighted on the fifth day, the ring of black hills rising from the floor of the desert. These mountains, being treeless, were marked by outcroppings of black basalt, which gave them their distinctive coloring. And, on the inside, they sloped so steeply as to be really precipices.

It was the work of a hard day to get the camels down into the basin of sand that formed the core of the ring of hills. Professor Rand's hopes were raised by the discovery of a Chinese hieroglyphic character chiselled upon one of the cliffs along which they descended. Other inscriptions were found at various points in the hills.

They set to work, digging in the approximate center of the circle of cliffs. Months passed. They uncovered, some ten feet below the surface, traces of walls, and several teak beams, preserved by the sand and the dry climate. Scattered bronze weapons and clay images enabled Rand to decide that this was actually the site of the hunting palace of the long dead emperor of Tsin.

Especially, a jade necklace, from which the jewels had disappeared, aroused their hopes.

Mr. Three interrupted his tale long enough to explain that the best of the weapons and pottery were then placed in the study of the dead scientist for safe keeping. All but the jade necklace. That had disappeared while they were in Singan-mu.

Possibly one of the natives had stolen it, but Mr. Three himself believed that a European tourist who heard of the excavation work and wandered out to the hills from the Great Wall, had bribed one of their followers to steal it for him. This tourist had manifested an interest in archeology, and Rand had discussed the ruins with him frankly.

The tourist was an Italian, named Camprubi.

About a week after Camprubi left, they noticed tracks of an animal about the camp. The beast had approached during the night, evidently from its lair in the

hills. The prints left in the sand resembled those of a wolf, but were too large to belong to a wolf of any known species. They were as large as a man's fist, doubled up.

Sight of them aroused the superstitious fears of the natives, who had not relished the trip in the first place. That day they deserted in a body, and that night Mr. Three distinctly heard an animal howling on the heights above them. The remaining camels became very restless, and Mr. Three advised Rand to leave the basin of Singan-mu.

The American had scoffed at the idea of danger—had refused to abandon his work of excavation which was still incomplete. When evening came they sat about the fire for a considerable time, until the professor sought his blankets, and Mr. Three maintained his vigil alone. Believing that he heard something moving in the direction of the cliffs, he left the fire, to investigate.

Immediately in front of him the savage baying of a beast resounded. Involuntarily—he was without a weapon, as he never carried one—he fell on his knees, and pressed his head against the sand.

Nevertheless, he had half a glimpse of the thing as it hurtled past him, going toward the fire. It was larger than any dog the mandarin had ever seen, and too solidly built for a wolf. In its long leaps it resembled a tiger, and yet it bayed. It seemed to be on the trail of one of the two men.

Briefly, Mr. Three was aware of a shaggy mane around a fierce head, and of a muzzle that gleamed whitely in the clear starlight. He ran after the beast, as soon as he could pull himself together. He heard Rand scream and beheld the hind quarters of the huge animal standing over the white man's blankets.

Stooping and turning aside for an instant to snatch a burning log from the camp-fire, he made for the spot where Rand lay, to discover that the beast had escaped into the shadows. Once the mandarin saw a pair of green eyes glowing at him in the darkness. The throat of the white man had been torn out.

"But," objected Warner quickly, "you said Professor Rand had been murdered."

"No," responded Mr. Three out of the darkness, "I did not say that. It was his daughter who thinks so."

"And why is that?"

The mandarin took his time about answering. "A woman's intuition is a thing that takes no account of logic or of impossibilities. She believes that I did not see an animal, but a man. When one is afraid one sometimes sees a pagoda instead of a tent, or a lion instead of a cat. That is true, I admit. And it is also true that I was very frightened."

Somehow the idea of the quiet mandarin becoming a slave to fear struck Warner as a monstrous thing. As if divining his companion's thought, Mr. Three went on.

"The former emperor, Chong-Wang, the illustrious, was slain on that spot by an animal that appeared to be a hunting hound. But among my people this is believed to be a *T'au wu*, a demon. We call it the Untamable, and from time to time it is related by those who live at the edge of the desert that this monster is heard howling upon the heights.

"Professor Rand, also, was slain by the *T'au wu*."

Mr. Three said this as one would state an obvious fact. Just as definitely, he might have remarked that Rand had died from blood poisoning. The Chinese of the old school believed in demons as firmly as in the existence of their fathers' spirits. Warner moved impatiently; to him this hypothesis was absurd.

"By the Untamable, Mr. Three? What is that—a ghost?"

"A demon. Do not the incarnate powers of evil walk upon the earth, my friend? Does not your Bible speak of unfortunate men possessed by devils, and of the Arch-Demon who comes forth from the kingdom of darkness to visit the earth? *Kai*, that is so."

"Nonsense. Either you suffered from hallucination, induced by heat or overanxiety, or you saw a man of flesh and blood that night."

The quiet voice of the mandarin dealt with this as he might have silenced the questioning of a fretting child. "The surgeon's assistants in the Lanchow Mission hospital examined the body of their late master—no other white men remained here, because of the troubles. They assured me that the throat of my unfortunate friend was lacerated by the fangs of an animal, by long fangs that could not pos-

sibly have been human fingers. So, the Untamable was not a man. I did not add that I brought the body of my friend hither in a sling between two camels."

"It might have been a wolf, running *amok*, stricken with madness."

"A wolf does not bay." The mandarin leaned forward to peer into the shadows, and Warner saw that his face was set, his powerful shoulders rigid. That afternoon Mr. Three had stood among flying bullets without as much as moving his eyes. Yet now the trace of devastating fear, strong and primitive, was upon him. "Nor was it an hallucination, my friend. By its twisting trail a snake is known. By its odor, an animal. The sense of smell, of all our senses, is least susceptible to illusion. When the *T'au tou* passed me I caught distinctly a fetid odor, indescribably repulsive, that suggested death and decay."

He withdrew into the shadow again. "The words *T'au tou* signify lust of eating and slaying. Is it too much to believe that, out in the desert, the spirit of evil has taken the form of an animal?"

For once Warner had no answer. Into the screened veranda crept the scent of the desert, of the vast, unchanged expanse of gray sand, misshapen clay and tortured rock, where life sprang only from death and where the hand of man had made no impression. What secrets did it hold?

"Whoever ventures against the unknown," the voice of Mr. Three concluded, "follows the path of danger."

Warner reflected that this was what he himself had said, in the club in San Francisco, some time ago.

Chapter VI

Sing Low Makes Magic

LATE the next afternoon a boy came into the compound with a note for Robert Warner. The native said a foreign devil had given it to him twenty-four hours ago, on the western caravan road.

It was from Clifford Hearn, and it ran as follows:

Warner: You are a damned sneak. If you try to follow us further you will get what is coming to you, for using the information given you in confidence. Get out of Lanchow before sunset and keep going, east.

This brief missive was signed merely with the letter H. But Warner knew the promoter's handwriting. Without comment he showed it to Margaret Rand. She was able to tell him that two white men had passed through Lanchow a day before he arrived, and that the caravan he had seen in the town had been their supplies, following after them.

Evidently the camel men had reported, on joining Hearn out on the western trail, that they had seen Warner in Lanchow. The boy who brought the note added the information that the white devils had a score of armed men with them, and supplies for a month or more, with a number of rattan baskets and shovels for digging into sand.

So Hearn and Camprubi had reached Lanchow ahead of him. He smiled, reflecting that they had suspected at once he had come to try for the jewels of Chong-Wang.

"I don't intend to follow the beggars, Margaret," he observed, "but I'm getting pretty tired of threats and I'm going to stay here as long as it suits me—which is until you decide to go home."

"And if I go to the desert?"

"You are not going." He thought of the tale of Mr. Three, and, although he did not share the superstition of the mandarin, he did not like to contemplate Margaret Rand in the black hills. "I'll see to that."

"Indeed?" She glanced at him fleetingly. "What did Mr. Hearn mean by 'information given in confidence?'"

Warner told her of the interview at the club and his refusal to join the promoter's party. They were walking out of the compound at the time, into a grove of firs, carpeted with lilies of the valley, that had been a favorite playground of the girl in other years. "I don't think any jewels of value are left in the ruins, Margaret," he ended thoughtfully. "If there are, the chances of finding them seem slight. Your father did not discover a sign of them."

"Mr. Three believes they are there. The site of the pavilion is very extensive."

"But in three thousand years the part in which they were buried—remember that the Jesuit said they were *under the earth*—may have sunk thirty feet. Unless a searcher had a real indication of where they had been placed, he might dig for years without result."

"Mr. Three is certain they will be found this year. And it's autumn now."

Warner halted and flung out his hands. "Margaret, everything you do or say seems

to be ruled by Mr. Three. Why, in the name of all that's logical, does he feel certain the treasure will crop up this year?"

"Because it was placed there in 1077. That date, added to 1923, makes exactly 3,000. He says that in three thousand years the earth will give up what is hidden, and whoever seeks will find it."

Again Warner was faced with the reasonless superstition of an alien mind. That the working of nature itself was governed by any such law, he couldn't admit. The movements of the surface of the earth had hidden the pavilion for ages; it was true that now, after generations had passed, the desert was changing again, and the ruins of Tsin were near the upper level of the sand. But this was nothing more than chance.

"Are you turning into a confounded Buddhist, Peggy?" he groaned. "You used to have a mind of your own. Who is Mr. Three?"

It struck him suddenly that in the talk of the evening before, the mandarin had failed to establish his own identity.

Margaret glanced at him in surprise. "Didn't you know? Of course, though, you have not been with father for the last year. Why, Yuan Shi is a descendant of the former Tsin emperors. He used to hold an important diplomatic post in Peking, but the revolution brought him back into private life, and he came to live near the ancient home of his people."

"I've heard of people tracing themselves back to Adam," Warner grinned, "but this is quite a family tree—thirty centuries old!"

The girl was quite serious. "It does seem a long time. But father told me the family traditions of the upper class mandarins went back to legendary times, when the dragon was supposed to be alive in China. Mr. Three's father had a kind of family coat-of-arms, that had been handed down for hundreds of years——"

"One of those *kua* things?"

"With an imperial dragon on it," she nodded. "Why, did you see it in San Francisco? Mr. Three sent his father there, with daddy the last time—to keep him away from harm, I suppose."

Warner drew a long breath. "What was he called—this parent of Mr. Three?"

"Yuan Sha—Mr. Two, I suppose we would say."

"Then I've seen the *kua* emblem—had it in my possession, and lost it again." He related all that had passed on upper California Street, including the visit of Hearn and his friends, their offer for the bronze disc, and its seizure by the pock-marked Chinese.

Stooping over a mound of the green lilies, she listened in silence, and uttered a little exclamation of regret at the end. "Mr. Three will be very sad, and—he valued the bronze *kua* more than anything else. He will not blame you, because he is very just, and you did your best, didn't you?" She bent her head for a moment and stood up. "Daddy is here," she added softly. "He liked this spot, and—we used to sit here and read—" Tears gleamed on the lids of her half-closed eyes, and the pulse in her slender throat throbbed. But when she looked at him again her expression had changed; she paled and her eyes seemed to grow darker, as if she were listening to sounds unheard by the man.

Before now he had observed this rapt concentration in Margaret Rand. Raised on the edge of the barren lands, among natives and animals, she was more at home in the open country than in the compound. Her world was the open trail of the gypsy.

"I had no one but daddy," her words came in a whisper, "and *they* took him away from me. I am not afraid of them! Daddy never harmed them, and they took his life cruelly, wantonly. So I am going to punish the one who did it, and—I know he can be found in Singan-mu. We will start for there tomorrow, Mr. Three and I."

"But the Italian, Camprubi, could not have killed your father." Warner made a quick calculation. "He must have been in Shanghai at the time, in order to reach the States a week before I did."

Margaret nodded, and with a last glance at the grave under the firs, began to walk back, toward the bungalow. Warner fell into step beside her, moodily. At the compound, she ordered Mr. Three to go into Lanchow and hire four pack camels. The small outfit they were taking was already assembled in the bungalow. For some reason the mandarin did not seem to like being away from the house at night, and would not go until the white man promised that he would see that nothing went wrong.

"You are welcome to stay as long as you like," she assured the collector quietly. "Daddy brought in a good many things

that would interest you, and you will find them in his study. Mr. Three tells me he would rather you did not come with us."

While the maid served tea, Warner talked frankly to Margaret Rand, explaining what kind of men she would face in Hearn and Camprubi. They, of course, would assume that she was on the trail of the treasure. There was not another white man within five hundred miles of the black hills. Singan-mu itself was in the desert; whatever was found would be taken by the strongest hand on the spot; Hearn had a dozen rifles with him. Then, the bandits must be considered. It was utter folly for her to go to Singan-mu.

The only response she made was to point out that his presence would add to her troubles, by enraging Hearn. She would go with Mr. Three and the Chinese woman.

That evening Warner sat on the porch, smoking and thinking things over. Confronted by the peculiar mind of Mr. Three and the uncertain moods of a young girl, he was decidedly perplexed. It did not add to his comfort to think he had lost the valuable token that belonged to the mandarin—that he had promised to give to Mr. Three.

He meant to have a return match with Yellow Fangs, and to recover the bronze disc. If he could persuade Margaret to remain a while in Lanchow, with Mr. Three, he could follow Hearn and Camprubi and try to drive a bargain with them, on behalf of the girl and her Chinese friend. It would not be much of a bargain—Warner grinned, at thought of his reception.

"What in thunder are you up to?" he exclaimed suddenly.

Sing Low for some time had been busied in the semi-darkness about the veranda. First fetching an armful of sticks from the kitchen, he had kindled a tiny blaze just beyond the steps in front of the door. Warner, believing the hunter felt the night chill, had hardly noticed the man's occupation, until Sing Low appeared again from the rear of the house. This time he had a dishpan and a wooden spoon.

Upon the tin pan he now began to beat with the spoon, emitting from time to time a husky shout.

"Sing Low makee light, makee noise. So fashion, flighten devil." The hunter paused long enough to explain.

"What?"

"Devil, him catchee 'fraid. Go away."

"What devil?"

Sing Low shook his head ominously and pointed a skinny finger toward the gate of the compound. Then he listened intently for some minutes. Warner gathered that the hunter had heard something that aroused his superstition—an almost daily happening among the natives. But when the old man began again on the dishpan, Warner called to him sharply to stop.

"I'd rather have a visit from your spook than that," he growled. "Go and watch the gate."

For the first time since they had become master and man, Sing Low balked at an order. He ceased his uproar reluctantly, and sat down close to Warner, shutting his eyes. "Watchee man, can do," he crooned. "Watchee devil, no can do."

For a while they were silent as Warner listened to the night sounds. A bat or two flitted almost soundlessly overhead, and somewhere near at hand a dog howled. Nothing alarming in that, and, ascertaining that the compound gate was still closed, Warner was thinking of other things, when he saw that Sing Low had faced about and was craning toward the rear of the compound. His eyes still shut, the expressionless mask of the hunter's face was drawn and intent.

"What's the matter, Sing Low?"

A finger pointed toward the stable and a shake of the head was his only answer. Warner strained his ears without hearing anything more than some restless movements of the ponies. Behind him the bungalow door opened and Margaret looked out.

"Something has frightened the horses," she said quickly. "They may break loose. Perhaps thieves are here again. I'm going to look——"

"You're not!" Warner rose. By now the animals were plunging against the sides of their stalls, and snorting. "I'll take a look around. Where's the mandarin?"

"In Lanchow, burning prayers for his father. He knows now that Mr. Two is dead."

"Go to your room, Margaret, and lock the door." Seeing her hesitate, he turned and caught her up in his right arm, walking through the living room into the girl's

sleeping chamber. Thousand Pieces of Gold appeared, and surveyed them with surprise.

Warner set down his burden, placed the key, which had been on the bureau, in the lock. As Margaret started to object, he handed her his Colt. "Sing Low has gone balmy for the time being, and the noise he made was enough to scare a New York police horse. Probably the neighbors are coming to investigate, but I want you inside this door, and the key turned in the lock. I promised Mr. Three that I'd look after the house."

"But you haven't any weapon——"

"No need of one. Just the same, Margaret, if anyone monkeys around your window, shoot. And hold that six-shooter tight, if you do. It kicks."

"Nonsense." She flushed, and glanced amusedly at the quiet maid who stood close to her. "I don't intend to lock myself in."

"No," said Warner, closing the door, and holding it, "but you see I'm going to stay here until you do, and those horses want looking after, judging by the racket they're making now."

He heard an exclamation from the women within, and presently the click of the key in the lock. Going to the veranda he found Sing Low kneeling by the fire with his head on the ground, and his rifle for once abandoned. Leaving his ally in this position of defense against evil spirits, the white man smiled and made his way to the stable.

It was an open shed, and he found the three ponies half out of their stalls, kicking and tugging at the halters.

After several moments of talking to the animals and handling them, they stood quietly shivering, with ears pricked back. "That's that," said Warner and started to walk back toward the house. At once the ponies commenced cutting up again.

As he swung around to go toward them, the white man halted in his tracks. In the deep shadow at one side of the stable shack a pair of green eyes glowed.

They were near the wall, and must have been, he thought, a full three feet above the ground. Some animal of considerable size had entered the compound—how, he did not know. Feeling along the earth, he picked up a stout fragment of wood and hurled it at the eyes.

They vanished at once, nor did he hear anything move. It was not altogether a comfortable situation, afoot in the dark and unarmed, possibly with a panther for neighbor.

Something soft and loose fell about the white man's head. The edge of a bag slipped down over his nose and mouth. Warner moved without a second's delay—he dropped to the ground, jerking his head free of the sack as he did so.

Once on the ground, he rolled and kept on rolling, until he brought up against a post of the stable. Looking up, toward the lights of the house, he made out the figure of a man moving over him—caught the gleam of steel in the man's hand.

He could not have gained his feet before the half-seen assailant struck. But as the knife flashed down, something moved over Warner's head. Something thumped against the chest of the other man, who fell back and down as if struck by an axe.

Warner had rolled almost under the hoofs of one of the ponies. The frantic animal had lashed out above him, knocking his foe aside. Once more he moved over, but this time stood up unharmed, crouching, to see the bulk of his adversary against the light when the other rose.

Footsteps pattered behind him and he turned in time to swing his fist into the face of another almost invisible antagonist. He heard the man grunt, and stepped forward, hitting out hard and straight. This time the man who had come from behind went down.

A roaring report from the house told him that Margaret had fired the Colt. No other weapon sounds exactly like a service forty-five. It was followed by a woman's scream.

It was like a girl, he thought, as he ran toward the house, to shoot first and cry out afterward. Pitching against the back door, he found it to be locked, although to the best of his knowledge it had been open before then.

Rounding the bungalow he came upon the form of Sing Low, outstretched by the veranda steps, his head twisted on his shoulders. Catching up the rifle, the white man plunged into the drawing-room. This was empty.

A glance into the dining-room and kitchen convinced him that no one else was on the lower floor.

"Open the door, Peggy," he called. "This is Bob."

When no answer came he rammed the butt of the long, heavy rifle against the door, over the lock, with all the strength of his shoulders. This he followed up with

his foot, flat against the lock. The light door shivered and swung away from him.

Entering, he saw, through floating wisps of powder fumes, Margaret Rand standing facing the window, which had been opened from without.

"That face—that evil face!" she cried, and dropped to her knee, over the form of Thousand Pieces of Gold. "Poor little thing!"

From the breast of the young Chinese servant the ivory hilt of a native knife projected. Her silk tunic was stained, and Warner saw that the long blade had entered just under the heart. The eyes of Thousand Pieces of Gold opened feebly, fastened upon her mistress and stared rigidly.

"A man—something looked in at us," cried Margaret. "He was pushing open the window blinds when we heard him. Then he drew back his arm, and she jumped in front of me. I fired the revolver over her shoulder, and she began to move queerly. I didn't know until now that the man had thrown a knife, but she must have thought he would do it, and put herself in front of me. What—what is happening?"

Warner took the weapon from her limp fingers and drew the girl to her feet. Miss Thousand Pieces of Gold had given her life for her mistress—she would no longer minister to the child with whom she had been raised.

"There is danger," he said quietly. "Three men at least—thieves, probably—are within the compound. Stay close to me, Peggy."

Moving swiftly to the lamp he blew it out. Drawing the girl to one side of the bedroom door, out of the path of illumination from that quarter, he stood still and listened. These invaders might be native thieves, but they were knife men, fully prepared to kill. Granting that his fist had laid out one enemy, two were still to be dealt with, and he could not venture out into the drawing-room or porch until he located them.

A movement was perceptible in the room next to Margaret's bedroom. This would be the study. Warner could make out a subdued crackling, as of papers being shuffled hastily. Without hesitation he fired through the thin wooden partition.

The sound grew louder and the smoke in the bedroom thickened. He could hear the horses plunging. After a moment he drew the girl toward the door.

"I'm afraid they've set fire to the house, Peggy—probably entered the window of the study. We'll have to go out. Keep behind me."

In the drawing-room the lamp glowed yellow. Wraiths of smoke curled up from the cracks in the study partition. Tears, born of helplessness, stood in the eyes of Margaret Rand. They could not fight the fire with these knife throwers—these assailants of the night—outside the bungalow.

The heat grew oppressive all at once.

"Kitchen's on fire, too," muttered Warner, his six-shooter poised, his eyes vigilant on the windows. "Pick up that chink's rifle, Peggy. Good. Keep behind me. The front door's the only exit left."

Sweeping books and ornaments from a small ebony table, he turned it on end, picked it up by one of the lower legs, resting the upper edge against his shoulder. With his gun hand clear of the table he walked out of the house.

"Cleared out, I think. Stay behind this parapet, Peggy. That's good." The compound, now clearly outlined by the red glow of flames, was deserted. Flames were breaking from the kitchen windows, in the rear of the bungalow, and Warner made certain that their foes had left the compound. The gate now stood open.

"The poor horses!" cried Margaret. "We must take them outside."

"Tie those empty sacks over their heads—a blanket will do." He caught up a pair of heavy bags, one of which had been destined for him, it seemed. Tossing them to the girl, he ran back to the house, toward the half-made packs stacked in the drawing-room in readiness for their intended departure the next day.

The native he had knocked down and the one kicked by the horse had moved themselves or been moved away.

For several minutes, while the roar of the flames in the lightly built house grew rapidly, Warner carried out the packs containing blankets and food staples, his spare ammunition, and Margaret's personal belongings. The articles in the study of Professor Rand were doomed, and it was impossible to remove the body of the unfortunate Chinese girl. Dropping the last bundle, beyond the reach of the flames, he

ran, panting, to the stable, took the halters of his two ponies, and led them outside the gate, followed by Margaret with Rex, her saddle pony.

Leaving them still muffled in the sacks, he returned to the stable shack. The thatched roof was now blazing, but he was able to rescue two saddles.

As he passed the bungalow he thought of Sing Low. Perhaps the hunter was not dead. Smoke enveloped the veranda, and embers from the roof fell thickly around the lank form of the native. Crawling forward, Warner seized his legs, and dragged him clear. The bald forehead of the hunter was scorched, and his singed rags were odorous, but a pulse still throbbed in his wrist, and he groaned as he was deposited on the cool earth outside the compound.

Margaret was there, safe, with the horses, standing in a throng of staring natives, who had been attracted by the fire. Silently they watched the bungalow crumble into the maw of the flames.

"I was warned by old Sing Low," the white man said grimly, "but I failed to protect the house or to guard the life of the serving maid."

So he admitted in his fluent mandarin dialect to Mr. Three, who had come up with the camels from the streets of Lanchow and who now stood looking gravely at the scene of desolation. Mr. Three had changed his attire to white linen, from head to foot, and the crowd gave back at his approach respectfully, beholding this evidence of mourning in a man of high character.

"Water flows down," responded the mandarin impassively, "but man looks up. You have saved the life of the young mistress, and the blame for the misfortune is mine. I, filled with unworthy grief, neglected my friends."

Warner shook his head. He had been worsted for the second time by a clever enemy. He was no believer in excuses. The attack had been well planned, and executed with devilish ingenuity. Every move he made had been anticipated by these relentless foemen. If it had not been for the sturdy hind leg of a pony, he would have been killed and Margaret Rand as well. As it was, her home was gone, and with it whatever relics the professor had brought from Singan-mu.

The wanton attack on the girl filled him with a cold rage. Who had ordered it? What manner of man was it whose eyes glowed at night like an animal's? He kept these thoughts to himself, but Mr. Three seemed to guess them.

It was evidence, the mandarin explained, of the power of those who guarded Singan-mu. The raid had been launched after it was known in the town that the Americans were preparing to go into the desert.

But another explanation was offered from an unexpected source. Sing Low had recovered consciousness, and now retrieved his rifle from a native who sought to steal away with it.

"Number One piecee devil come," the old hunter murmured tranquilly, feeling his sore forehead. "He hit Sing Low on him head. He lookee horses, they catchee flight; he lookee house, him catchee fire."

Margaret touched Warner on the arm. "I'm going to start for Singan-mu at once. These men who killed poor Thousand Pieces of Gold are the same who fought my father, and I'm going to fight back."

"Right!" responded the collector. "The Gobi can't be any worse than this, and it's time we acted for ourselves. And if there's anything in the legend of the treasure, no one has a better right to it than you and Mr. Three."

"But I thought you would not go to Singan-mu."

Warner was busy tightening the cinch on one of the ponies. "I want to have a look at this *T'ao tei*, Peggy. Collecting demons is a little out of my line, but this one seems to be a rare specimen."

He knew Margaret well enough to be sure that nothing could turn her back from the venture now. When Mr. Three, assisted by some of the crowd, had adjusted the packs on the kneeling camels, Warner suggested they make a feint of starting east, toward the railroad, to throw off pursuit. Lanchow was hardly the place for Margaret to spend the night, and they were safer on horseback than near the scene of the raid.

The mandarin smiled. "Surely you are too intelligent to think that our enemies could be deceived by a child's trick."

Warner swung himself into the saddle and gathered up the reins. The mandarin was riding one of the camels, as their

stock of supplies was barely enough for three loads. "Right!" Warner admitted. "Then we'll head west from here. But, my honored friend, I wish one thing to be clear between us. I shall give the commands, and you will obey, unless you do not agree with me. If so, you will discuss what is to be done with the American missy and with me, openly. You have a proverb that says, 'There can not be two suns in the heavens, or two generals to an army.'"

Quietly Mr. Three bent his head. "Let it be so. We have also a saying that a blind man can not see a ghost."

Chapter VII

The Finger of Mr. Three

THE malignant power that had struck at the Rand household did not molest their journey to the Great Wall. They made good time; the native inns where they stopped were clean—fairly so, at least—and the innkeepers accommodating. For a moment the adversary left the trail clear for their passage; the tiger sheathed its claws.

They skirted the gray remnant of the ancient wall, and passed through the foothills where it ended. Due west, toward the setting sun they turned the camels. They met with no more villages—nothing but the rolling brown knolls, the gray-white alkaline deposits, and the sharp rock pinnacles that form the edge of the Gobi, the most barren of deserts.

Margaret called Warner's attention to a change in Mr. Three. He seemed to grow taller, as he sat his camel, his inscrutable eyes searching the horizon. Warner heard him chanting a song that went somewhat as follows:

"The dragon sleeps on the mountain top,
Where the clouds rest. . . . . .
A thousand chariots go to the west,
On the heels of the sun.
Ten thousand banners flutter like birds
Under the sun's rays.
The plumes of the warriors are tossing like grass
When the wind blows.
And the fires of the host are a myriad stars,
While the dragon sleeps on the mountain top."

Sing Low, as well, seemed at home on the plain. The two Chinese chose the route for each day, and Warner left the guidance to them, merely checking up by compass. Before they left behind the last of the rolling country, Sing Low bagged a pair of gazelles for the pot. He made an extraordinary shot of it—knocking over two animals at nearly three hundred yards.

That night they dined well, and Margaret contributed raisin muffins to the repast. Warner was glad to see that the cooler air and brisk wind of the higher altitude restored the color to her cheeks.

They progressed steadily upward, coming out upon a vast level of clay, without any vegetation. As if they were entering a world without life, the desert was bare of human beings. Occasionally, however, they passed by fragments of old ruins that gave indication of former habitation. Warner himself was glad to be out of the towns of middle China. On leaving the last village inside the Wall, he had noticed the body of a child, half-devoured by wolves or dogs that had uncovered it.

On the third night the sun set behind a ridge of rocky hills that jutted up from the plain.

"The black hills," said Mr. Three.

He led them, the next day, to a winding ravine that offered, he explained, the only feasible path for camels to enter the ring of hills. Without comment he pointed out the tracks of numerous horses that had gone in before them. The trail, such as it was, twisted among outcroppings of the blue-black basalt, at times skirting a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. Once Mr. Three stopped and glanced at Warner inquiringly, pointing to a strip of cardboard nailed to a stunted fir.

Scrawled in charcoal were these words:

Best available detour.

He smiled and explained the meaning of the message. After a little scouting they decided to follow the advice given by the sign, and take the turning indicated by the arrow that accompanied the placard.

A short distance up he came upon a second sign.

Highway under construction. Dangerous but passable. Proceed at your risk.

Margaret laughed whole-heartedly. "Someone seems to have gone to a good deal of trouble to mark the way"—as they crossed a natural bridge of limestone, difficult indeed, and left the gorge behind them. They stood now at the summit of the pass. Five hundred feet or so below them was a sandy valley, almost circular.

It must have measured a mile across, but so clear was the air that they made out

distinctly the wall tents of a large caravan pitched near the center of the bottom.

Around the tents were tiny depressions and mounds, and miniature portions of stone walls, looking from the heights like ant hills.

"This is the best view," observed a pleasant voice beside them, "of the ruins of Singan-mu. From here you can readily discern where the work of excavation has been carried on. I am glad to see that you took advantage of my signs. We lost two pack horses and one man in trying out other routes to the pass."

Raymund Camprubi sat within a stone's throw, perched in a nest of boulders, as well groomed and as much at ease as if he had been on Market Street. His glance flickered over Mr. Three and dwelt for a long moment on Margaret Rand. With a quick indrawing of breath he stood up and removed his cap.

"Singan-mu welcomes you, Miss Rand. If I had known, if I had enjoyed the pleasure of your acquaintance, I should have gone to the foot of the descent to guide you up. As it is, being incurably lazy, I watched from the summit." He shifted the strap of a field-glass case on his shoulder. "You are on time."

Margaret met his gaze without confusion. "It was kind of you to wait."

"Ah!" The Italian shook his head. "We have been expecting Mr. Warner. He is invaluable; we could do nothing without him. Your arrival," again he bowed his slender shoulders, "makes—how do you say it?—a pleasure of a business trip."

The man was undoubtedly in high good humor. Warner glanced down at the camp. "Your partner's note did not read that way."

Camprubi shrugged indifferently. "Cliff must have his jest, you know. But then, it was the best way to bring you here. Have you forgotten we offered you a large sum of money to assist us? Well, here you are, for nothing." He started down the trail, ahead of them. "Allow me to act as your guide, Miss Rand. There are no points of interest to casual travelers until we come to the excavation. I take it that you are here merely as sightseers? What else?"

Humming to himself and paying no further attention to the men, he led the way for Margaret's pony. The camels took up their grunting progress after the slender girl. Mr. Three sat wrapped in impenetrable silence.

They dropped steadily down the almost precipitous descent. Warner was struck by the wild desolation of the scene—the black walls of the cliffs, the grotesque pinnacles and towers of red and white sandstone. All these formed a frame for the level stretch of gray sand.

It was like the descent of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado—like a colisseum of the giants. He glanced down quizzically, observing that this was the only feasible way from the summit to the ruins. The sand was the floor of an amphitheater, where tiny gladiators moved about in the sand. Here, unless a miracle happened, Mr. Three would be pitted against Hearn and Camprubi, and there would be blood upon the sand. Warner was sorry that the Italian had seen Margaret Rand; he did not like the way Camprubi's eyes rested on her.

Only once during the descent of the cliff did Mr. Three display interest in what was happening. That was when, halfway down, the trail ran horizontally under a face of black rock many feet high. At this the Chinese glanced swiftly, and then at Camprubi. But the Italian evidently attached no importance to the rock.

Scrutinizing it carefully, Warner made out a series of abrasions several inches deep and six feet in length. They were chipped and scarred where slabs of stone had fallen away, but he made out three lines that formed the following figure:

He remembered that Professor Rand had discovered Chinese hieroglyphics on these cliffs, but this was not a Chinese character. A moment later he started. This was one of the eight *kua*, the trigrams that had been on the bronze disc!

He heard the Italian address Margaret.

"I trust, Miss Rand, that you will accept of our hospitality. We are camped at the only waterhole in the valley, so you must share our—what you say—quarters, eh?"

The girl shook her head. "Thank you, no. We will make camp near the cliff."

"But you would lack water!"

"We have plenty."

Camprubi studied the few goatskins carried by one of the camels, and glanced reflectively at Warner. "Miss Rand, she has plenty of the great American bluff," he whispered to the collector. "Ah, a fine spirit, and *Santa Maria*, what a figure!"

As they entered the camp of the adventurers, Warner seized an opportunity to ask the mandarin if what Camprubi had said about the water hole was true. Mr. Three agreed that it was a fact.

This was serious.

Hearn looked as if he had been hard at work, and had not enjoyed his task. In contrast to the neat Italian, he was unshaven, his skin streaked with grime and mosquito bites. His white teeth gleamed through a stubby beard in recognition of the collector.

"Thought you could beat us to it, Bob? The Countess is a little too clever to be outguessed as easily as you figured. She had her doubts about your intentions, my boy, and cabled to Honolulu from Los Angeles that you might be crossing from Canada. We arranged to have you checked up, at Honan, and here we are ahead of you."

Warner surveyed the camp silently. In beating Margaret Rand to the excavations at Singan-mu, the promoter had scored a point. His tents surrounded the digging, and his men were at the well.

"What's Rand payin' you, to work for him, Bob?"

"Nothing," Warner responded briefly. "He's dead."

There was no mistaking the big man's surprise and interest. "So? Well, that leaves the girl. Where do you stand with her?"

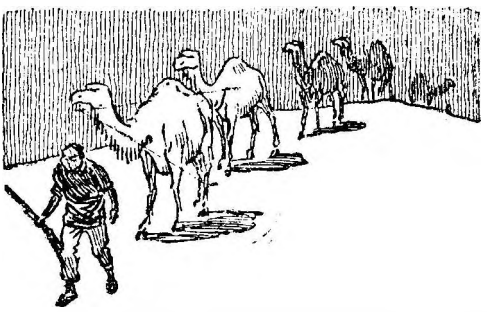
"Nowhere, except that I'm trying to get her out of Singan-mu unhurt."

"Keeping your mouth shut, I guess, is more like it. I know you're a stickler for keeping your word. If you haven't a working agreement with her, why not pack her back to Lanchow and come in with us? My offer is still good. Chances are she will be better off that way."

"No, thanks." Warner decided that King Cliff had run up against obstacles in his search—obstacles that the collector could deal with.

"All right." Hearn tipped his wide-brimmed hat over his bloodshot eyes. "I've been treating you like a friend. The stakes in this game ain't lollypops, even if you've been a sucker, right along. You and that flapper stand as much chance as —hey, you son of blazes, what the hell you doin'?"

This last remark was addressed to Sing Low, who had come up with the pack animals. "Camel wantchee dlink, all velly ploper," husked the old native.



Hearn tapped the butt of a heavy automatic in his belt. "Keep away from that water hole. I won't have your stinking beasts fouling it. Camel catchee bullet, you sabe?"

Sing Low looked at Warner inquiringly.

"That well was found by Professor Rand," observed the collector quietly. "Otherwise, it's common property. This is desert country and Miss Rand has a right to use it."

"Miss Rand can make terms with me, if she wants to use it."

"You mean you want her to pay for water?"

"I don't like being double-crossed." Hearn twisted his head and called out something to one of his men. A Mohammedan coolie who had been squatting nearby sprang up and ran to head off Margaret's pony. The little animal, left to its own devices by its mistress, had started toward the smell of water.

"Do you figure to keep our horses from water?" demanded Warner.

Hearn merely nodded.

Warner flushed and stiffened in his saddle. Then a hand touched his shoulder and Mr. Three's voice spoke in his ear. "When a man is angry he should take care where he places his foot. Six ill-born Mohammedans with rifles are watching us. If anything should happen to you what would become of the American missy?"

After a moment's silence Warner signed to Sing Low to accompany him with the animals. Going back a quarter mile from the main camp, he pitched the one tent

with the hunter's assistance on a clay knoll midway between the water hole and the path up the cliff.

Then, leaving Sing Low to attend to the animals and unpack their scanty stock of blankets, he returned on foot to the dining tent where Margaret and Mr. Three sat. Hearn had invited them to dinner, saying that he had a good deal to talk about, and Margaret had accepted.

"The thing shapes up like this," Hearn began, as coffee and cordials were served. The dinner had been excellent, the Chinese servants efficient and the red wine cool and good. The promoter usually managed to make himself comfortable, wherever he might be. "We've come a few thousand miles to dig up the jewel hoard of the dead emperor. You are here with the same idea. The treasure was buried somewhere within the circle of these hills, presumably in the site of the pavilion that Professor Rand uncovered. He knew it was somewhere about, but failed to hit on it before he died. This Yuan Shi"—he glanced at the impassive Mr. Three—"knows it is here. Its value is fabulous, but if Chong-Wang, the old emperor, took such pains to hide it we can expect, logically, that the rubies alone will be worth tens of thousands—the diamonds more."

He made his points concisely, speaking, as he had often done, at the head of a table of directors.

"Gentlemen, the value of jewels changes with the centuries. Sapphires are more common now than rubies, but these—to be collected by an emperor of Cathay, must have been of remarkable size. Such stones are hardly on the market today—outside of the crown jewels of the late lamented Czar, in Petrograd. Values are high, just now, and if these stones of Chong-Wang are sold gradually by *one person* and not dumped on the market by several, or a dozen natives, the profits of our adventure will be enormous."

He turned to Margaret who sat at his right hand. "Miss Rand, given time I am sure to unearth the hoard. But your Chinese friend—who I believe is a descendant of the Tsin dynasty—may have a clue to where to search within the limits of the pavilion, which is large. My men occupy the site of the excavation, and I hold the well. I have supplies enough for months and means of getting more from inland villages."

He paused to crumble a piece of bread into his empty glass. "I hold all the trumps, as you might say. But I want to deal with you fairly. I'll offer you a fourth of all net profits, for any information you have."

"We have no more knowledge of the treasure than you, Mr. Hearn."

"To sell?" Camprubi leaned forward.

"No, to use in any way."

Hearn and Camprubi exchanged glances. Warner reflected that, in coming to the camp, he had noticed that the excavations had been purely guesswork. Here and there a stone door lintel, or the rocks of a wall had been uncovered. In a few weeks frost would set in and snow might come. The night air was very cold, after the sun left the basin of Singan-mu. Hearn was anxious to go to work with some purpose in view.

"I have come," said the girl slowly, "partly to help Mr. Three recover the jewels that belong to him rightfully. But I want to find the men who murdered my father."

"Murdered?" Camprubi was frankly startled.

"Yes. I think the natives are watching Singan-mu. Or—or something is. I intend to find out."

"What are the strangers saying?" Mr. Three asked Warner politely. The collector explained and the mandarin considered, his hands thrust into his sleeves. "Tell them that I, too, desire to avenge the death of my honorable father, in San Francisco."

"But," objected Warner, "your much respected parent died accidentally. It was my ill fortune to be present."

"When a thing happens twice it may be coincidence; when it occurs three times the chance of accident is almost eliminated. The fourth time brings certainty."

"Show me what you mean."

Drawing one hand from a sleeve, the mandarin gave to his friend a scroll of rice paper. On it was written in Chinese characters, in Mr. Three's fine hand, the following cryptic sentences:

The revered emperor, Chong-Wang, slain by a hound of the hunting pack.

The worthy Professor Rand, killed by an animal resembling a dog.

The honorable Mr. Two, dead of heart failure, when pursued by a dog.

Warner recalled the fog of San Francisco, the sudden fright of the old Chinese, the pattering run of the dog. He had hardly thought of the animal again. "There was no fourth time," he pointed out.

"There was a fourth time, my friend, yet, thanks to your energy, with no fatal result. In the attack on the bungalow of the young American missy you heard a dog howl, and you saw in the dark the eyes of an animal."

The roundabout reasoning of the mandarin did not carry much weight with Robert Warner. He knew the superstition of the Chinese. But Mr. Three was in earnest. "Say to the strange barbarians," he demanded coldly, "that I am prepared to deal with the *T'au wu*, the demon that slays. From the elder days the men of my family have feared the *T'au wu*. If the two barbarians"—he nodded at Hearn and Camprubi, who were looking on curiously—"would keep their skins whole, they must leave Singan-mu. Tell them that."

"He says," explained Warner quizzically, "that there's a special demon in this place—a kind of four-footed devil that he can handle. But he warns you to leave while you are still unharmed."

Margaret glanced up in surprise, but Camprubi's dark face was serious. "It's the native legend again. I don't like it particularly."

Warner had his own suspicions about the *T'au wu*. In San Francisco he had seen a powerful Chinese with a disease-scarred face stooping over the dead Mr. Two. Yellow Fangs, as he christened this individual, certainly had an interest in the treasure, because the man had attacked him to get the bronze disc given him by Mr. Two.

And Yellow Fangs had known of Camprubi's search, because the Countess feared the fellow. The native was savage enough to have killed Rand with his own hands. True, Mr. Three had seen the thing that attacked the professor, and had said that it was an animal. But Yellow Fangs was not far above the animal order.

Clothed in sheepskins, and seen on hands and knees, the powerful native might have been mistaken in the dark for a dog or wolf.

And yet—Warner had beheld, distinctly, the green eyes of a beast looking at him in the Rand compound. Possibly, human beings existed with eyes like that.

His meditation was interrupted by Margaret, who declared that she was going to her tent. Camprubi offered to escort her, but Warner and Mr. Three rose to take their leave in spite of Hearn's pressure to stay for another round of coffee and cordials.

The Italian, however, accompanied Warner and the girl. Midway between the camps he halted and bowed, much amused, it seemed, at something. "Here is our Rubicon. It is a pity that we must be adversaries in this small matter of a treasure. Really, Miss Rand, do you think I swallow the stories about revenge and all that sort of thing? Good night *signorita*—good night, Warner."

He went off, and not until they reached their tent and the vigilant Sing Low did they notice that Mr. Three was not with them. The mandarin had a habit of going and coming as he pleased: still, Warner waited up for him until the light went out in Margaret's tent, and Sing Low appeared to replenish the scanty fire of dried camel's dung.

Stretched on his blanket, he smoked a last pipe, staring up at the constellations, ringed above him by the circle of black hills. Hearn and Camprubi had things pretty much as they wanted them, he thought.

He noticed that a light was still burning in one of Hearn's tents, and decided to investigate, to make certain that his friend was not in the other camp. Instructing Sing Low to keep watch while he was gone, he made his way toward the lighted tent.

The low voices of men, talking lazily, halted Warner midway between the camps. Listening for some moments he identified the speakers as two of Hearn's Mohammedans. Evidently they had been posted as sentries to guard against intrusion. Moving more carefully, he circled the natives and continued on, keeping out of the direct line between the guards and the tent. Reaching the picket line of Hearn's horses, he squatted down and waited patiently.

As he expected, a tall native appeared presently out of the black void, stared around, and moved down the line of ponies to where the camels grunted and wailed in their sleep. This would be the horse guard.

On hands and knees he moved past the embers of a camp-fire toward the red glimmer of the tent that was his objective. In so doing he risked a shot from the natives,

but he desired to find out if Hearn or Camprubi knew anything about Mr. Three, and if he came openly to the tent he would not discover anything useful.

Creeping to the edge of the canvas, he listened long enough to make certain that the two adventurers and another man were within. He heard Camprubi laugh, and Hearn's answering growl.

"He's stubborn."

A shadow moved across the light and Warner waited until it had passed, before he raised the lower edge of the canvas enough to look into the tent. On a cot not four feet from his eyes lay Mr. Three, bound, or rather swathed from head to heel.

Only the mandarin's left arm was free of the cotton wrappings. By the table on which the lamp stood Camprubi sat in a wicker chair. Hearn he could not see. The shadow of the cot prevented them from noticing him, so intent were they on what was happening to Mr. Three.

Over the cot—it was his shadow that Warner had seen—stooped a grinning Mohammedan, a long, delicate knife in his hand. His left hand grasped Mr. Three's wrist, and Warner set his teeth as he perceived that two joints of the mandarin's little finger had been cut off. The native's knife wavered over the bloody stump, and Camprubi remarked with the interest of one supervising an absorbing experiment, "The thumb comes next, I believe. Yuan Shi, the torture of a Thousand Pieces, an ancient and honored expedient of the Chinese, will deprive you of your left hand in half an hour. In an hour, you will lack a foot. Why not tell us the meaning of the bronze disc before the tent of my honorable friend becomes a slaughter pen."

But the set lips of the mandarin did not open.

"You infernal beast!" Warner rolled under the tent wall and came up on one knee. As he did so the Colt which had been lying in a shoulder holster under his coat rose in his right hand. Camprubi made a covert sign to the native and sprang to his feet.

The fingers of the Mohammedan opened and his wrist snapped forward. His eyes gleamed, and then opened full as he spun around and fell heavily upon the rich carpet. Warner had fired as the knife moved in the native's hand, and the heavy bullet of the forty-five tore through the man's heart, driving his body back and down.

The dagger dropped harmlessly on the cot.

A second time Warner shot, the heavy weapon flashing toward Camprubi, who had drawn an automatic from his side pocket. The right arm of the Italian was jerked back as if hit by a sledge hammer, and he staggered to the far wall of the tent, cursing and staring. His forearm had been broken.

So quickly had Warner acted that Hearn only had his automatic half drawn from its belt holster. Seeing the Colt's muzzle swing toward him, he raised his hands, empty.

"Keep 'em like that," said Warner quietly. At the same time he placed the knife in Mr. Three's bleeding hand. The mandarin worked quickly and silently at his bonds.

"Take his many-shot gun," the collector advised his friend when Mr. Three had freed his feet. "Don't move, Hearn. So you wanted to buy me over, in order to get at this mandarin without my interfering? That's like you, Hearn. Yuan Shi never harmed a man, that I know of, and he doesn't carry a weapon. He was your guest, here, and——"

"The Mohammedans are coming to the tent entrance," observed Mr. Three.

"If you lift a hand against Miss Rand," continued Warner, "I'll carry this fight right to you. You can still do the decent thing and get out of the site her father discovered."

Hearn made no response. Waiting until he heard the natives' voices outside the closed flap of the tent, Warner slipped under the side after his friend. A caravan man, running toward them, turned at the sight of the weapons and fled into the darkness. Before others could come to that side of the tent, the two had made good their escape past the horses. No attempt was made to follow them.

CHAPTER VIII

WATER

SHELTERED by the canvas covering from the sun that made a furnace of the valley of Singan-mu the next morning, Warner questioned the mandarin

and learned that he had been set upon as he was following them out of the camp the evening before. His arms had been caught and a sack flung over his head. Bound and gagged, he had been carried back into Hearn's tent.

When Camprubi returned, the adventurers had tried to make him admit that he knew something of the exact location of the jewels. Failing in this, the Italian had recourse to the Chinese torture of the Thousand Pieces, which consists merely in slicing a prisoner gradually, cutting into his limbs until he confesses or dies.

Margaret Rand listened, white of face, but no one suggested that they abandon the valley. Mr. Three would not forsake his quest.

About the main camp, the natives were at work, digging and hauling the sand from the pits in large baskets. Through his field-glasses, Warner could make out Hearn bossing them, and judged that the promoter was driving his men hard. Meanwhile, they could do nothing.

"Hearn seems to know that you—or your father—possessed the bronze disc of the eight *kua*," he observed thoughtfully. "What was it, exactly?"

"A symbol of rank," responded the mandarin, "handed down for many generations. My venerated father believed that it afforded a clue to the place where the jewels were hidden, but we could discover no such meaning in it."

"No inscription was on it—no characters?"

Mr. Three shook his head. "Nothing, except the dragon, and the eight trigrams. The five-clawed dragon is, as you know, a mark of imperial lineage."

"And the trigrams?"

"Represent the elements, in this fashion: three parallel lines represent the sky, three broken lines the earth, two broken lines above one straight line the thunder. And the others, mountains, fire, water, steam and wind."

"Well," smiled Margaret, "we have the sky here and the earth, and the mountains. I suppose wind and thunder happen along—and steam could be managed; but we have mighty little water. I had to give half of one goatskin to the poor ponies."

"That leaves us only enough for three days," Warner observed.

"Less, with the horses. I don't care so much about the camels, but I can't bear seeing Rex and the others suffer, when there's water so near."

"We haven't made much out of the trigrams," he pointed out. "Although—I say, Peggy, the cliff by the trail is marked—seems to be one of the trigrams carved in the rock. A long time ago, too."

Mr. Three nodded. "That is the symbol *Kon*, mountains."

"Why, so they are." Margaret glanced up at the overhanging precipice. "Someone has put up highway signs, hundreds of years ago."

"Signs!" Warner frowned at the black rock. "Signs—hundreds of years." Never a talkative man, he fell silent, and occupied himself for the rest of the morning in examining the valley carefully through his glasses, while Mr. Three slept. Sing Low did not seem to require sleep—at least no one had ever seen him at it.

Nearly across the valley from them the collector fancied he made out a dark object moving into a nest of rocks. The distance was too great to be certain. The bed of the basin quivered under heat rays and the very towers and pinnacles of stone seemed to move under his gaze. Yet Hearn did not knock off work until the sun set.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Margaret asked next morning, when Warner resumed his scrutiny of the landscape.

He suggested, with a smile, that they could saddle two ponies and examine the geologic structure of Singan-mu. "Mighty interesting, this mingling of basalt with sandstone strata. The granite has been in place three thousand years, or twice that; the limestone is a *parvenu*. See how those black cliffs stand up in almost a perfect circle, Peggy? Tempting to an artist, I'd say."

"To paint?"

"To paint on, Peggy, or rather sculp. Who is that American sculptor at work chiselling a Civil War panorama on Lookout Mountain? The Chinese have done the same thing before, as usual. I've seen the giant figures, in half relief, on just such cliffs——"

He went off to saddle the horses, leaving the girl more than a little puzzled. Although the two Chinese said nothing, they as well were a trifle disturbed by the white man's course. From the tent they watched the two riders make the circuit of the cliff walls, choosing the hardest going, climbing slopes above the bed of sand, disappearing into gullies, passing through nests of boulders.

For hours they were out in heat-ridden Singan-mu, and when they came in from

the far side the ponies were dark with sweat, and restless.

"No wonder!" cried Margaret excitedly. "We saw a tiger's tracks. Sing Low."

The mandarin glanced at Warner quizzically. The white man helped Margaret down, and led her into the shade, ordering Sing Low to water the horses after a while.

"They've earned it. And that warm, goat-ridden liquid isn't fit for you, Peggy. We'll get some fresh, tonight."

"How?"

He looked at his watch. "Time for your siesta, young lady. I've been a brute, dragging you through that rubble. But I wanted to take you: something always happens when I leave you behind."

"That was why you desired my company?"

Warner studied the circles under her bright eyes, her flushed cheeks. The ride had exhilarated her, but the girl was not far from the edge of illness. A hot anger against those who had hurt her seized upon him. "Yes, that was why," he forced himself to answer lightly.

When she had withdrawn into the tent, he led Mr. Three to the shadow of the knoll, out of hearing. Then he threw himself down in the sand and fished out his pipe. The mandarin regarded him calmly, and observed, "My friend, you, too, have seen the tracks of the *T'ai wu*."

"Um. These were fresh, clear enough in the sand. A tiger has its lair in Singan-mu."

"A beast, but not a tiger. You know the animals of the desert. Was it not a dog?"

Warner hesitated. "The tracks were too large. A tiger made them."

"The paws of the cats resemble not the mark of a dog. You are too wise to mistake them. It was not a tiger that I saw the night the merit-deserving barbarian died."

Puffing at his pipe, the white man studied the shimmering sky, his thoughts elsewhere. "Yuan Shi, all the eight trigrams are carved on these cliffs. Was that known to you?"

The mandarin started. "It was not known to me."

Leisurely Warner explained that he had noticed through the glasses some marks resembling the trigram over the trail. Investigation disclosed a companion inscription a thousand yards or so to the left. The third, badly obscured by the action of the elements, was visible on close inspection an equal distance along the face of rock.

Knowing by then where to look for the others, approximately, Warner had hit upon six out of the eight. Two were no longer visible—probably destroyed by a fall of rock. Some were carved on flat-faced boulders, where no other surface offered, but all were on a level with the one over the trail, and all seemed to have been made about the same time. Unless one sought them out, they would not be noticed among the cracks and scars of the hard granite.

"However well one hides the eggs, the chickens will hatch out," quoted the mandarin philosophically. "The eight *kua*, then, are here, but their meaning is as far from our understanding as ever. It is possible they were cut by the followers of Chong-Wang, as a talisman against evil spirits."

"I'd give a mint-ful to look over that bronze disc again," sighed Warner to himself. "Wonder what Yellow Fangs got out of it, and where the devil that demon keeps himself."

Mr. Three stared thoughtfully at the black cliffs that, three thousand years ago had looked down upon his ancestors. To him, it was a significant thing, that finding of the ancient trigrams. He did not know how, but he was morally certain that in some manner the treasure of his ancestors would be revealed to him before long.

If either of the two had known, that afternoon, what results the quest for water in the night would bring home, Warner would have been astonished, but Mr. Three would have been satisfied that the spirits of his forebears were working in strange ways for his own good.

CHAPTER IX

MORE TRACKS IN THE SAND

CONVINCED that Margaret must have fresh water, Warner announced after the girl had retired for the night, that he was going to penetrate the enemy's camp to the well and endeavor to fill two of the goatskins. The mandarin, who was no adept at scouting, insisted on accompanying him as far as the horse lines.

Sing Low, when the matter was explained to him, had an alternative to suggest. Although he failed to exhibit any feeling in respect to Margaret, the white

man noticed that the hunter went to a deal of trouble to provide little comforts for the girl, and suspected that he was attached to her.

Now Sing Low declared that he would go for the water, because he could enter unheard and unseen where the big barbarian would attract attention. "More better Sing Low him catchee water," he ended emphatically. "More better you watchee, so." He pointed at Warner's Colt.

The white man saw the wisdom of this, and it was agreed that he and Mr. Three should establish, as it were, a line of support, midway between the camps, while the old hunter stole forward to the well. Then, if Sing Low were discovered and pursued, they could cover his flight.

Water they must have. The supply on hand would not take them back to the Wall, if it should be necessary to retreat from Singan-mu.

Their small camp in darkness, they waited until the beginning of the third watch of the night, called by the Chinese the Tiger Watch. Even then, although the air was bitterly cold, Hearn's tents were lighted. Unwilling to wait longer for their adversaries to settle down, Warner gave the word to go forward and cautioned Sing Low to watch for the outpost of natives he had encountered two nights ago.

The hunter slipped ahead of them, and Warner and the mandarin followed slowly, peering into the hazy illumination—bright starlight and a crescent moon, close to the mountain ring, clear in the cold air. Although their eyes were accustomed to it, this half-light was more trying than greater darkness, owing to the absence of shadows on the gray sand.

Reaching a rock-strewn knoll several hundred yards from their objective, they found Sing Low awaiting them, and halted when the hunter held up a cautionary finger. Another rise, a crest of sand, hid the camp; but they heard with uncanny distinctness Camprubi's high tenor voice singing a profane hymn. At times hoarse laughter reached them, over the sand, and Warner wondered whether Hearn's party were celebrating a discovery of some kind. They seemed to be drinking.

This was favorable to Warner's plan, and Sing Low departed on his quest, carrying two empty goatskins. Almost at once he merged into the swells of sand. They saw him cross the rise ahead of them.

The minutes passed slowly, and the two watchers were gripped by the chill of the Gobi night, the harbinger of the long winter that was almost upon them. Warner moved his right arm, to keep the circulation going in his fingers. Holding his watch close to his eyes he made out that Sing Low had only been gone forty minutes, although it had seemed hours.

Then he replaced his watch quickly and caught up his revolver.

"Great Scott!" he whispered involuntarily. Even Mr. Three caught his breath.

The sound that reached them was the whimpering of a man, of a human being that choked and panted, drawing nearer them. It was hard to decide from what quarter it came.

Another moment and Mr. Three pointed toward the crest in front of them. Over the ridge came a misshapen form, a thing that ran on two legs, but bent nearly double, with a great hump where its back should have been.

As it dropped down the slope toward them, the gasping became clearer. The figure staggered and swayed from side to side yet moved forward with a gliding motion utterly unlike the walk of a man. Mr. Three caught his companion's shoulder.

"It is Sing Low with the water skins—filled. He is frightened."

No one but a Chinese or a Himalayan coolie could have run at such a pace bearing such a weight on his shoulders. A white man of Sing Low's age barely could have moved with his burden. He gave a curious clucking groan as he staggered through the sand up the slope.

As if in answer came the savage baying of a dog behind him—a snarling wail that brought the watchers to their feet at once.

"The *T'au wu!*" Mr. Three took a step back, to flee, but held his ground by an effort of will. Warner ran down the slope, perceiving as he did so, a dark form sweep over the rise in front of him.

He passed Sing Low, and kept on toward the thing that was drawing nearer over the sand. Then he made out the gleaming eyes of an animal, for a second. The eyes were stationary now, and, as Warner advanced, ready to shoot, they disappeared.

"You can't get away this time, my friend, the devil," he muttered, casting about for a trace of the beast. Pulling out his electric torch, he threw its beam in a quick circle around him. Where he stood, in the depression between the two ridges, the sand had formed into hollows and gullies, any one of which might conceal the thing that had chased Sing Low.

Advancing cautiously, he made out in front of him a line of heavy tracks in the sand—tracks similar to those he had come upon the day before. They turned aside into one of the hollows and thither the white man ventured.

He had not progressed a dozen steps before he switched off the light. Too clearly for any doubt on his part he caught a message of danger in the wind. An odor, stale and animal-like, penetrated his nostrils. And memory, rendered acute by the suspense of the moment, identified the taint as the one he had noticed in the hall of Rand's San Francisco house months ago. He held his breath, straining his ears.

The odor grew stronger and he whirled to face the direction of the light wind. And fear clutched at his heart.

A shadow, a dark form, rose against the stars. Something that clutched and snarled fell on his shoulders, bearing him down into the sand. Claws tore at his chest and teeth snapped at his ear; a foul breath sickened him.

His right arm, with the revolver, was pinned to the ground. His adversary was upon his chest, and pain seared his throat as it was gripped by iron muscles.

Warner was no weakling. Fighting off the loathing—the inertia that saps the strength of a man who, unwittingly, has put his hand on a snake or a creeping thing—he twisted his body. The claws tightened, although his adversary was thrown prone on the sand beside him.

He could hear the panting of the other, and the grinding of long teeth. He struggled to keep the head of the thing from reaching his throat—anything but that! But now his breath was shut off, and his lungs ached.

Feeling weakness flow through his limbs, Warner made a new effort. With the electric torch he struck at the dark blur of his antagonist's head. He could feel it thudding against hair, or fur, but the grasp on his throat did not relax.

Desperately, he pulled up his knees and thrust out with his legs. For a second the grip on his throat was broken and air rushed into his laboring lungs. With renewed strength he brought down the heavy torch and this time was rewarded by the dull impact of metal against a skull. The claws fell away from his chin and he was conscious of two dark figures that stood over him, shutting out the stars.

Blood in his eyeballs obscured his sight and his head swam. While his right hand groped vainly for the revolver he stared up at the newcomers.

"*T'au tcu* catchee master," quavered the voice of Sing Low.

His Chinese friends, in spite of their dread, had drawn near the scene of the fight, and had heard the struggle. With a hoarse chuckle he propped himself up on an elbow. "No, Sing Low. Master—catchee *T'au tcu!*"

He tried to switch on the light, found it dead, and struck a match, shielding it against the wind. Bending over the form that lay stretched on the sand beside him, he beheld a powerful man clad in greasy sheepskins, a bearskin wrapped around his shoulders.

Strongly the stale odor emanated from the unclean body. And, clearly, he made out the evil countenance of Yellow Fangs, the loose lips parted to show the pointed teeth, the shining, pallid skin, and the pock-marked eyes, now closed. Blood flowed from a cut on the man's forehead, and beside his head lay a dirty sable cap.

The match burned out, and Mr. Three and Sing Low helped him to his feet. He had to hold their arms for a moment while his head cleared. His chest was strangely warm and he had noticed blood on the long nails of the man's claw-like hands.

"You are badly hurt, my friend," said Mr. Three.

"Cheap enough, if we've ended the *T'au tcu*," Warner thought, puzzling over the circumstance that he had heard the baying of a dog distinctly and had seen the tracks in the sand. Yellow Fangs, whatever else he might be, was certainly a man. Warner scratched another match.

The body was gone.

Sing Low muttered under his breath and Mr. Three sighed. The glow of the match disclosed prints in the sand, marks of hands and toes, and then of feet leading away from the spot. Yellow Fangs had made off without a sound.

"Playing 'possum," grunted Warner. "Saw those two chaps come up and tricked us neatly."

But to Sing Low the disappearance of Yellow Fangs needed no explanation. The *T'au tcu* had taken the form of a dog to

pursue the hunter; then it had turned itself into a man to attack Warner; when it wished to go away it had simply changed to a spirit again, and vanished. True, there were traces of its going, but a demon if it so willed, might leave traces. Surely it could do stranger things than that.

Yellow Fangs had a good start, among the dunes, and Warner was too weak to attempt pursuit. The Chinese would not think of it. Recovering the Colt, they turned back to where Sing Low had left the water skins.

These they carried to the tent, and Sing Low listened at the flap to make certain from her even breathing that Margaret Rand still slept within. Meanwhile by common consent they kindled a fire and Mr. Three dressed the white man's throat as well as their scanty means permitted. The long nails of their enemy had pierced the skin and torn the flesh in a dozen places. Infection might set in, but the hurts were not serious in themselves.

Warner thought that Mr. Three appeared pleased. The mandarin smiled at him and drew something from his long sleeve.

"The spirits have been kind. On the sand by the body I found this."

In his hand was the bronze disc, the talisman of his family, more precious to Mr. Three than the jewel hoard of Singan-mu.

"Now," observed the mandarin, who was polishing the tarnished bronze with a clean chamois, "a way is opened to attain what we desire and to defeat our enemies."

Placing the disc on the cloth upon the sand he surveyed it intently, with the greatest satisfaction, his lips moving the while. After recovering from the first force of his elation, he explained to Warner that his father's spirit, and perhaps that of his venerable ancestor, Chong-Wang, would undoubtedly slay the *T'au wu*—the three being together in the spirit world—and in some way, even as the disc had been returned to him, the hiding place of the jewels would be pointed out.

Was not this the three thousandth year since the hiding of the treasure?

"And the two barbarians—what of them and their caravan?" Warner asked curiously.

Mr. Three waved his mutilated hand indifferently. They were only barbarians; they had many rifles, true, but this struggle with the *T'au wu*, the Untamable, was not to be ended by rifles.

"Well," responded the white man grimly, "we need all the help we can get. If you have any more allies in the spirit world, summon them up. But be sure to have them do away with those rifles."

This levity seemed to hurt Mr. Three's feelings and he became silent. But Sing Low, who had been occupied by his thoughts for a long time, looked at the white man curiously.

"Wish someone could tell me," muttered Warner in English, "who the devil this *T'au wu*, alias Yellow Fangs, alias a dog, alias a tiger, really is—and what he is. He stole the bronze disc in San Francisco and dropped it here in the Gobi. Apparently he has killed two good men, Rand and Mr. Three's daddy, and he just missed three tries at me——"

"Can do," observed Sing Low.

"What?"

"Can do. Sing Low tellee name belong *T'au wu*, velly ploper."

CHAPTER X

DIGGING IN

THE fourth morning of her stay in the Singan-mu basin found Margaret Rand called upon to assume a new responsibility. As soon as she realized Warner's injury, she bundled him into blankets under canvas, and washed his throat with a reckless quantity of the fresh water secured by Sing Low the previous night. Her patient was feverish and insisted upon talking in spite of her effort to keep him quiet.

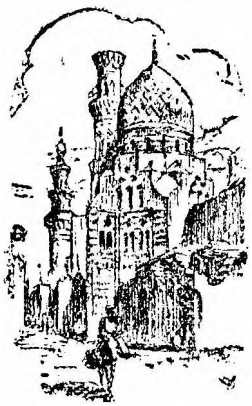
"Sing Low has cleared up most of this confounded *T'au wu* puzzle, Peggy," he proclaimed. "He's knocked about the edge of the Gobi for years, from Tibet to Peking. As soon as he had a good look at Yellow Fangs, he classified him and gave him a name and occupation. Yellow Fangs really is Gepa, a native of Tibet."

Margaret sighed. She had heard many times of the people of Tibet, who lived in the heights of the Himalayas, cut off voluntarily from the world. Isolated, worshipping the devil for the most part, they were one of the most degenerate races of the earth. Their dead they placed in the village streets to be devoured by the fierce breed of dogs that they seemed to be attached to.

Utterly remorseless, they had the brains

of ten-year-old children. It was seldom that one of them ventured down from the frozen heights of the Himalayas; the natives of China—Margaret's companions—feared them as workers of black magic. Professor Rand had maintained that the Tibetans were the men Marco Polo had mentioned as having the heads of dogs instead of human beings.

"Gepa," assented Warner, "is no more than an animal. His dominant instinct is hatred of civilized man. Why Camprubi lugged him along from Tibet, I don't know—except that it amused him, and, of course, provided him with a guide from India to China."



"Camprubi——"

"Lied to me when he said he had merely touched at the treaty ports before he came to the States. He wandered over from India, and the collection that the Countess is keeping for him is really loot of various kinds that he has bought up cheap along his route. He kept Gepa as a servant—a useful kind of bodyguard. The Countess was afraid of the native—called him a monster, I remember. Gepa is cunning enough, and Camprubi must have used him to spy on the Rand house in San Francisco. That was how Mr. Two came to be killed, and how I lost that talisman."

"And then," Margaret added thoughtfully, "this Tibetan recognized you at Honan, and at Lanchow——"

"Camprubi left a few of his Mohammedans to make trouble for me. They did. After he heard that they had not put us out of business, he must have sent Gepa with a couple of hangers-on to raid your house, and steal your ponies. Left to his own devices, the Tibetan came near killing us both."

She glanced from the tent, and shivered. "No, no! I can't believe it. Hearn used to be your friend——"

"He isn't any more, Peggy. Besides, Cliff is wanted in the California courts. He's playing the last card in his last hand, to get money. At that, I don't think he knew much about Gepa, or the attack on you."

"But Camprubi?"

Warner lay back, his eyes closed. "The Italian is the kind of man you meet sometimes in this world of ours, Peggy. He's the mere shell of a gentleman. His code begins and ends with himself. He'll kill a man or woman as quickly as you or I would shoot a wolf—if he had something to gain by it. After all, this isn't Market Street, or Times Square"—he smiled reminiscently—"and they warned us off. That Italian is clever, Peggy. Think how he pretended to believe the native legend, and escorted us on our way that night he had Mr. Three trussed up for torture. He'll make trouble for Hearn yet."

His hand touched hers. "Peggy, this fever—if anything happens to me, don't trust either of those men for a minute. If Camprubi comes near you, shoot him! If we were only able to carry the fight to them!"

"Please lie down—Bob!" Her fingers, cool and firm, pressed upon his forehead. "You're making yourself worse."

"Lord, what a fool I've made of myself," he groaned. "I never trusted Mr. Three until now. And I was blind not to see through Camprubi's tactics——"

"Bob!" She sat up quickly, her curving lips drawing into a level line of determination. "Do you think Camprubi had—did he plan the death of my father?"

"Give the devil his due, Peggy. The Count was not here when it happened, and Mr. Three vows it was an animal, though he can't put a name to it."

Her eyes softened as they rested on his flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes. "If you try to talk any more I'm going to leave the tent. Please!"

Warner fell asleep presently, his mind still dwelling on the mystery of Singan-mu. All that he told Margaret he believed, but two things he had not been able to explain to himself. One was the fact that Gepa could not have been at Singan-mu when Professor Rand was killed. The other—and this troubled his sleep—was the green eyes he had seen in the night.

Out of the back of his consciousness came memories of other days, when the witches' sabbath was kept upon the earth and human beings lived in fear of werewolves, the creatures of darkness that assumed the form of a beast at night.

In this fantastic dream he heard the howling of the huge dog packs that ran through the vast, primordial forests of the elder world. Unseen wings beat the air around his head, and formless shapes flew past, toward the tryst of Satan. He felt

that he was flying with them, to the altar before which a young girl was to be offered as sacrifice.

From a great height he looked down upon this woman, and saw that she was Margaret Rand. Around her, in the darkness, he beheld a circle of fiery eyes.

Then the eyes vanished, and he saw only the face of the girl, felt her hand on his forehead. The nightmare ended and he slept quietly.

Margaret came out of the tent and sat down by Mr. Three, who was contemplating the work in progress in the excavations, below him. In spite of the heat, Hearn was driving the natives again to their task. Mr. Three deduced from this that no discovery had been made, as yet. But Margaret was uneasy. The injury to Robert Warner left them without any idea what to do. She realized for the first time how much she had depended on him.

"Is that the bronze tablet?" She leaned over the metal disc that Mr. Three had polished to a gleaming brightness. "And there's the dragon. Yuan Shi, I dreamed about the dragon last night, before I saw it. That was strange."

Mr. Three's expression indicated that nothing was strange or curious. Still, he waited with interest for her to say more. Dreams, in his philosophy, always meant something. They were the means by which the spirits of the other world communicated with human beings.

"We must think of something to do, Yuan Shi." She frowned determinedly. "Surely the dragon must have a meaning."

He nodded patiently.

"And the white man found all these symbols carved in the cliffs. That, also, has some meaning."

Again Mr. Three made a gesture of assent. Margaret continued to gaze at it hopefully. "Yuan Shi," she whispered, "see—the dragon's claw points toward one of the characters! Which one is it?"

"*K'un,* the earth."

Margaret smiled ruefully. "The two barbarians are digging in the earth, sure enough." Suddenly she sprang up and went into the tent. Returning a moment later, she spread on the sand the copy of the narrative of the priest that Warner had brought with him. Once or twice they had read it over, without learning anything new.

"Listen, Yuan Shi. This reads, *'under the mark of the earth.'*"

The mandarin's glance traveled to the cliff on their left, and his eyes brightened. It was a slender clue, but Mr. Three reminded himself of the proverb that if you never climb a mountain you will never see a valley. Moreover, the dragon had appeared to Margaret in a dream. This, to him, was most significant.

They decided to move their camp that afternoon to the cliff, under the next inscription of the *kua,* and to search there for some indication of the hiding place of Chong-Wang.

It was just after the little cavalcade led by Margaret Rand had left the knoll that destiny brought about a change in the affairs of Singan-mu. Or, as the mandarin believed, the ancient gods of his people manifested their power at last.

To the girl it seemed an ominous event. They had covered half the distance over the sand, toward the cliff, heading diagonally away from the trail upon which they had camped when a fusillade of shots resounded from the other camp.

Warner, thinking they were being fired upon, tumbled out of the hammock in which, slung between two ponies, he had been dozing. Puffs of smoke spurted up from Hearn's tents and gray figures ran from the camp, following a stampede of ponies and camels. But no bullets came in their direction.

"The barbarians and the black-hearted Moslems are fighting among themselves." Mr. Three explained the mystery, and Warner took out his glasses. The mandarin had spoken the truth. Hearn's fol-

lowers were fleeing the other camp, shooting as they ran; several of the natives carried bundles that might contain their belongings, or loot. And they were driving before them all of Hearn's animals.

He saw the big man run out, his automatic flashing. Two men reinforced him, and Warner made them out to be Camprubi, shooting with his left hand, and a powerful native in sheepskins—Yellow Fangs, or Gepa.

The Tibetan pursued one of the fugitives, overtook him and pulled him down.

Then he kneeled on the unfortunate Mohammedan, and when he stood up the other lay prone. Several of the caravaneers, mounting the running ponies, passed near Gepa and fired at him, but he remained on his feet unharmed.

Warner observed that the deserters now numbered no more than a half-dozen, with three rifles. The tide of pack animals and men, fleeing the rain of bullets from the automatics of the white men, passed over the knoll that Warner's party had just left, and a pair of the Moslems swerved out, toward the four camels that were slouching along behind Sing Low.

Seeing this, Warner ran back to the rear of his short column. But the camels —always perverse animals—broke away, toward the others of their kind, carrying with them the bulk of Margaret's supplies.

Sing Low, enraged by the loss of the valuable beasts, had dropped on one knee, sighting his long rifle at the galloping Moslems.

"Hold the ponies!" Warner shouted over his shoulder at Margaret, who had Rex by the head; Mr. Three lost no time in grasping the bridles of the other two horses. "No use," the white man warned Sing Low. "Let the camels go—they'd die, anyway, because we have no water for them."

He was too weak to run farther and most of the natives were out of range of the hunter's antiquated piece. Sing Low muttered crossly, and, carrying his rifle, began to make his way nimbly up the rocks, back toward the trail. He was in time to hail the last of the fugitives, when all the pack animals were well up the mountain.

Rejoining Warner, he explained, as they moved toward the new site under the cliffs, that the Moslems were headed for Lanchow.

"They sellum camel; they sellum pony." Sing Low pointed down at Hearn's camp. "They catchee too much work, too much kick." He held up four fingers. "So many, they catchee die. Gepa, him number one devil. They lun away—you sabe?"

"Yes," acknowledged Warner. "I understand." Hearn's followers had become disgruntled at the hard work, and the dangers of Singan-mu. One had been lost in the pass, another Warner had dispatched, and two more had been killed in the recent fight. No great wonder that the Moslems preferred the more remunerative banditry of the Chinese towns.

Their departure left Warner with a minimum stock of food and water and ammunition, but deprived Hearn of all his animals. This, he pointed out to Margaret, would make it necessary for them to keep a careful watch on the three remaining ponies. Undoubtedly, Hearn would try to get his hands on them, because it would be impossible for the white men to walk the distance to the Wall, carrying the necessary food.

"They have water, grub and firearms," he summed up, "while we have the horses. Without the ponies, we're at their mercy. Have Mr. Three and Sing Low throw up a barricade around the animals and our camp site—I'm walking in my sleep. That mandarin must have given me a sedative and sleeping powder in one dose."

"No," the girl smiled, "I did."

She arranged his blankets in the shadow of the rock, and he dozed off again while the two Chinese tied the horses in a clump of dry tamarisk, and proceeded to roll and lift stones to form a wall.

They were directly under the inscription in the rock. Margaret could reach up and touch the lowest line, that, chipped and defaced, was still clearly visible. This character consisted of three broken lines, each a yard long, a couple of inches wide, and as deep.

Toward sunset she saw Hearn come out and approach the base of the slope on the summit of which, against the rise of sheer rock, they were quartered. He had glasses, and spent some time in studying their new camp. It was impossible to conceal the horses, but she reasoned that Hearn would conclude that they were fortifying themselves in a better position than the knoll.

Hearn walked back to the camp at the well, and Margaret found herself sharing the subdued excitement of the two Chinese. Mr. Three and Sing Low were laboring as they had not worked heretofore —digging out the stone and rubble from the base of the cliff, directly under the inscription. The crescent moon gave them light enough to see by—Margaret had forbidden a fire—and the girl watched the valley below, rising at times to change the cold compresses on the head of the sleeping man.

Toward midnight Warner awoke, very weak but rid of the fever. He stared

for a few moments at the tireless Chinese who had succeeded in hollowing out a space about six feet square against the cliff.

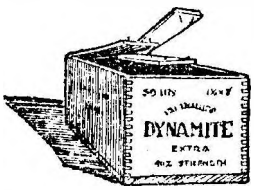
"Great Scott, Peggy," he said bluntly, "no earthly use in doing that. Granting that this inscription marks the hiding place of Chong-Wang's private stock, it must lie a couple of hundred feet under us."

"Why?" Margaret was keenly disappointed.

"All this slope, up to this point where the cliff rises out of it, is debris, fallen from the precipice or swept up against it for three thousand years."

"Then the level of the ground in Chong-Wang's time must have been——"

"The level of the ruins, or a little above. To get down that far we'd need a steam shovel. Or else a hundred coolies, an outfit of dynamite, and a couple of months—all of which we haven't got."



Even Mr. Three saw the force of this, and their labors ceased. The slender clue they had hit upon had led to an impasse. But the efforts of the Chinese brought to light a slight discovery. Some three feet under the lowest line of the inscription a narrow ledge ran along the face of the cliff. It ascended from one side and ended under the carving.

Chapter XI

The Weapon of Mr. Three

IT WAS said of Robert Warner that he had a stubborn streak in him, running all the way through. Which was only another way of saying that he never gave up, once he had started after something. Mr. Three pointed out with philosophical resignation, that they might have expected to find a ledge leading up to the inscription. How else could the man who carved it have reached the spot?

"Quite true, my friend." Warner stepped to the granite ridge and found that he was obliged to grip the edge of the lowest of the three indentations in the rock to hold himself in place. With his free hand he reached up toward the second line. Although he was a tall man, he could not touch it. Satisfied of this he fell to brushing leaves and grit from the lowest cut. There was just space enough to insert his hand, and he kept on until he came to the end, where the line broke off at the center gap.

Here he paused. More bits of rubble fell, and his fingers failed to encounter the solid rock as before. Presently he found that he could insert his arm up to the elbow. Where the line of the inscription ended, a hole went back into the cliff.

"Great, jumping hoopsnakes!" he cried softly.

Margaret started. "Snakes! Bob——"

"A handle—a lever of some kind, rusty as the devil! We've found it, Peggy. Yuan Shi, here is the place!" He worked away with his arm for some moments, without being able to move the ancient lever that ran through a slot in the solid rock toward the center. "Hand me up a pick, Sing Low. That's right."

Whatever the mechanism within the cliff might be, time and disuse had put it out of action effectively. Warner began to tap with the butt of the pickaxe on the surface of the rock, sounding it. The cliff was solid enough except at the center slab, between the lines of the inscription.

"Something behind here, folks!" he chuckled. "What a donkey I've been, not to tap it before. A hollow compartment's in back here, somewhere. The lever must be designed to open it. Funny no cracks showed. Here goes!"

"Be careful, Bob," warned Margaret breathlessly. "It might be dangerous."

He paused, to glance back at them. Mr Three and the girl were close to him, below, in the shallow excavation. The mandarin's hands were quivering. Sing Low sat tranquilly at one side. All were watching the gray wall of rock, vaguely outlined in the moonlight.

"Right, Peggy. You and Mr. Three stand clear." Warner began to probe with the pick, seeking to get a purchase on the mechanism within. Perspiration streamed into his eyes, and he brushed it away. "Give me the crowbar, Sing Low. This is no good." He discarded the pick, and lifted the heavy iron bar slowly to his shoulder.

From the boulders surrounding their camp a man spoke. "We will attend to that for you, Warner."

It was Camprubi, leaning over the barricade, automatic in hand. His right arm was in a sling. On the other side a tall figure climbed over the rocks as Warner let fall the bar and drew his right hand up toward the opening of his coat under which hung his six-shooter.

"Hands up, Warner!" Hearn's com-

mand rasped quickly. "None of that! Gepa is here, and he'd like nothing better than to chuck that knife of his. That's the way we want things done"—as Warner stepped down from the ledge and moved beside Mr. Three, who stood impassive as ever in the face of this new misfortune, his hands folded in his sleeves. "I told Ray that you'd lead us to the treasure if we gave you rope enough."

Hearn advanced behind Sing Low, who for once was far from his rifle. The powerful form of Gepa took shape beside them. Mr. Three, the hostile party knew, had brought no weapon to Singan-mu. Margaret, palpably, was unarmed.

Satisfying himself that Warner was covered by Hearn and Gepa, the Italian advanced to the cliff. "So there is a compartment behind this center point," he smiled. "And it can be pried open from this hole? Good!" His eyes gleamed as he surveyed the girl. "Miss Rand, I am afraid we must take you with us, when we have the jewels of Chong-Wang—as a hostage, is it not so? Your friends—ah, that is another matter."

"I will not leave without them," the girl said resolutely.

"No? Unfortunately you may find it undesirable to accompany Yuan Shi, who is going to join his venerated parent. Gepa will see to that."

"You coward!" Margaret's cheeks went pale with anger. "You planned my father's death, when you were his guest, and your servant attacked him after you left. And you sent the men who killed that poor Chinese girl. Why don't you shoot me—if you want to leave China alive?"

Warner whispered to her, cautioning her to silence, but the harm was done. For once Camprubi's poise forsook him and his thin features were twisted by vindictive rage. His left hand, holding the weapon, quivered like the head of a snake about to strike.

"Ah, so that is it?" he whispered. "Then your friend, the chivalrous Mr. Warner, must remain at the pass in the hills. It will be necessary for him to fall. An unfortunate accident"—he laughed, seeing the girl's quick distress. "As for you, my talkative lady——"

"Cut the chatter, Ray!" Hearn snarled. "Tell Gepa to use the crowbar on that opening."

The Italian spoke to his follower in a dialect unknown to Warner, and the giant Tibetan slouched down beside his master, picked up the bar and stepped to the ledge, replacing his knife in his girdle. Once more Warner was aware of the stench of sheepskins and grease. From between set lips he cautioned Mr. Three, who had stirred restlessly.

"Do not move, my friend. The yellow barbarian seeks a pretense to slay."

Gepa lifted the heavy bar as easily as a bamboo cane and plunged the point into the opening. Hearn urged him on profanely, and he strained against the bar, which was now wedged in the interior mechanism. Something grated loose, a stone dropped within, and Gepa heaved on the bar with all the strength of his knotted shoulders.

"Heads up!" cried Warner, involuntarily. But Camprubi, suspecting a trick, was half a second late in glancing up and back.

The entire center slab, half a ton of rock, had been pried from its resting place. The oblong stone, like the lid of a sarcophagus, swept out and down. A whining cry from Camprubi, a thudding impact, and the body of the Italian lay prone in the excavation, crushed by the slab.

Around his faintly stirring limbs a dark pool spread swiftly. A dozen feet above, a niche, six feet high, was hared in the cliff. And, upon the back of the recess, as vivid as when it was first painted three thousand years ago, the figure of a yellow dragon met their eyes.

Warner had pushed Margaret back. The movement caught Hearn's eye, and the man, startled by the crushing down of his companion, shot hastily at the two young people.

The red flash of the gun and its echoing roar let loose a dozen devils. Or so it seemed to the bewildered girl. As if a hidden spring had been touched, five men were galvanized into action, so swift, so shadowy to the sight, that Margaret could only stare in dumb horror. First to move was the old hunter, Sing Low. Unarmed, he stretched a bony hand up and back and gripped Hearn's ankle, muttering his rage at the bullet fired at the young woman.

Sing Low did not dislodge Hearn from his footing, but the big man staggered and caught the hunter's pigtail to steady himself. One after the other, he fired three shots into the thin body of the Chinese.

Torn by the heavy bullets, Sing Low still kept his grip on Hearn, who had to struggle to win free. In the moonlight he beheld the slanting eyes of the old man fixed upon him in a kind of wild triumph.

Almost at the same instant Sing Low had moved, Gepa leaped from the ledge. Frightened by the fate of Camprubi, all his cruel instincts aroused, the giant Tibetan sprang a full ten feet from the cliff —as it happened, toward Mr. Three. The mandarin, arms folded and head bent, stood like a statue, only his eyes moving.

When the figure of his foe was in midair, Yuan Shi withdrew his right hand from his sleeve. Warner, glancing toward him anxiously, saw that he held, pointed toward the native, the blue-barrelled automatic that he had picked up in Hearn's tent three nights ago.

Mr. Three, perhaps, had never taken into his hand a barbarian weapon, but he knew how they worked. He had nerves of steel, and he waited until Gepa had leaped before he pulled the trigger.

Twice the automatic barked, before it was knocked from the mandarin's hand by the body of his antagonist. Mr. Three went down, and as he fell, gripped the hand of Gepa that held the knife. They rolled over on the stones, the Tibetan grunting hoarsely.

Hearn lifted his gaze from them and found Warner eyeing him from behind the muzzle of the long Colt.

"Drop your gun!" The collector spoke quietly, but there was in his voice the tension of nerves strained taut. In this last fight, under the painted dragon of Singan-mu, there was no room for hesitation. With Gepa loose the lives of all the Americans were at stake. Hearn knew this—understood that his own life was forfeit, and cast down his weapon hastily.

"I'm through, Warner!" he cried huskily. "Don't shoot, for God's sake! I'm through."

From the corner of his eye Warner watched the two forms lying beside him in the shadow. One rose, and he saw that it was Yuan Shi, once more slow moving and thoughtful, the son of a line of kings. The mandarin glanced at the dying Sing Low and moved toward Hearn. In front of the big man he paused and there was silence for a long moment.

"Ask the worthless one," he requested Warner, "what part he played in the death of my honorable father."

Hearn was voluble in his reply, feeling that he was being judged. Camprubi, he said, had not told him of the fate of Professor Rand. The Italian had lied cleverly, making out that Rand and his daughter were trying to solve the secret of Singan-mu ahead of them. Unable to converse with the natives, Hearn had been forced to rely on what his companion explained to him of the events that transpired.

The torturing of Yuan Shi had been Camprubi's idea, and Hearn had barely seen Gepa, who kept away from the other natives. As to Mr. Two, Hearn thought the old Chinese had died in the San Francisco street of fright, following upon his flight from a dog that happened along by chance, in the fog—of fright, intensified by the shock of his fall, when he felt Gepa's hands at his throat and saw the evil face of the Tibetan close to his own. Camprubi had said that the family of Mr. Two had a hereditary fear of dogs. Gepa on the other hand, had often been seen accompanied by a black dog, in the hills around Singan-mu.

"I will not ask for further punishment of this robber," Mr. Three announced after an interval of thought. Glancing down at the remains of Camprubi, he added scornfully, "A snake can not creep without its head."

"You are our prisoner, Hearn," explained Warner coldly. "And you will be until we reach the States."

"Please," said Margaret, "let him go."

Warner made no response. He kicked Hearn's automatic away in the rocks and bent over Sing Low. The eyes of the old Chinese were still open, and Sing Low shook his head slightly when the American tried to search for his wounds.

"Sing Low him catchee die," the gentle voice crooned. "You belly him, master?"

Knowing the dread of the Chinese—that they should go unburied, Warner gave his assurance earnestly. Mr. Three stepped to his side.

"O servant of proved fidelity," the measured tones of the mandarin proclaimed, "your burial will be in a coffin that we shall make. Prayers, properly written, will be burned upon the spot. Rice, silver, dates, clothing, slippers, and a walking stick will be burned likewise, so that your journey

in the spirit world will not be without comfort. Your native village will hear the praises of Sing Low, who was faithful. My word is given."

The failing ears of the old man, who clung tenaciously to the thread of existence, drank in every word, and a complacent expression replaced the anxiety in his wrinkled face.

He looked at Warner, smiling. "Catchee number one piecee fun'lal. First chop, velly—ploper. You watchee Lady-Missy? You catchee she wife? Can do?"

Warner did not have the courage to look at Margaret, who had drawn near. "All right, Sing Low—can do," he responded quietly.

The Chinese did not speak again and presently they saw that life had left him.

Whereupon Mr. Three turned and went to stand under the yellow dragon. The Americans saw him bend his head and fall on his knees. He remained thus for so long that Hearn moved restlessly and whispered, "Why don't the blasted heathen fetch out the treasure? It must be there."

"Because," responded Warner grimly, "he isn't a blasted heathen. That dragon, set up ages ago, represents to him the incarnate spirit of his ancestors."

"This isn't a church," went on the promoter, his eyes greedy for a glimpse of what the niche contained. "Say, Warner, if there's something in it—you know—why, we're two against one."

Something in the other's silence warned him that he was on dangerous ground, because he hastened a further assurance.

"I don't ask for anything, much, for myself, Warner. But there's the girl—she ought to have the big share of it. You don't mean to let him get his hands on it, do you? Why don't you go up there and look?"

"Hearn," said the other contemptuously, "Mr. Three doesn't know how to double-cross a friend. And," he smiled, "if you talked for the rest of your life you couldn't convince him that his imperial ancestor did not kill Camprubi by letting that stone fall as it did."

Yuan Shi began to search the niche with his eyes, then with his hand. Apparently there was nothing concealed in it, but presently he began to sweep out sand from the bottom of the recess. Deeper his hands went until he leaned forward and pulled out a small black box.

This, too, bore the dragon crest, and they waited until the mandarin had saluted it respectfully in its turn. The casket was ivory, tarnished by age to its present color, and after a moment's scrutiny Mr. Three drew off the cover deftly. He now held a bundle of silk, that fell to pieces on contact with the outer air.

Mr. Three crumbled away an inner covering of brocade, brittle as gold leaf. Then he showed to Warner his two cupped hands and what they contained.

"Blazes!" whispered Hearn. "What a find!"

In the moonlight a mass of jewels as large as cherries shimmered and flashed. Dark for the most part, there were many diamonds of prodigious size among them. Upon the diamonds the faint light fairly glowed, and Hearn gazed, open mouthed.

In his hands Mr. Three held an emperor's ransom. How long the four stood looking at the hoard they do not know. But presently Mr. Three turned away and replaced them in the box. He took the casket under his arm and went away from the camp. Margaret, meanwhile, fell asleep where she sat, and Warner tucked a blanket around her. This done he faced Hearn grimly. "Lie down—I'm going to tie *you* up."

But before he could do so he heard across the valley the long drawn howling of a dog. On the light wind it rose and fell, seeming to draw nearer, and retreat as they listened. Warner heard a step at his side and Mr. Three's voice.

"The *T'au wu*—the Untamed."

Chapter XII

THE END OF THE TRAIL

ONCE more, just before their departure from the valley, they heard the howling. Echoing among the high rocks, the sound defied any sense of direction. Powerful and menacing, it hung in the air—the voice of a chained devil.

Once Sing Low had been buried, and the other bodies disposed under a pile of boulders sufficient to keep off prowling wolves, Warner hurried matters as much as possible. Margaret was feeling the strain, and he was afraid the plucky girl would break down.

Taking only what they needed from

Hearn's outfit, they packed the supplies on one of the ponies. Margaret rode Rex, and Mr. Three and Warner took turns in the other saddle.

It was late in the afternoon before they left the pass behind and dropped down toward the outer plain. A cold wind was blowing from the frozen tundras of the north, and a fine dust of sand swirled in the air. Hearn, footsore and nearly exhausted—he had followed as best he could—drew up to the other man's stirrup.

"Ain't you goin' to camp on the slope, here?"

Warner shook his head. For the sake of the girl, he wanted to put as much distance as possible between them and the valley of Singan-mu, where the yellow dragon on the cliff stared down at three graves.

"Tonight we'll get that Chink to show us the sparklers again, eh, Bob?" Hearn lowered his voice. "He carries the casket, slung over his shoulder all the time. If you don't make a list of the stones, he may hold out some of the best on us—on you, I mean. He knows their value."

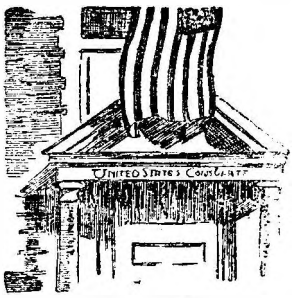
"Yes," responded Warner, "he does."

"How will you split with him—three equal shares? You can claim a third; Miss Rand won't kick at that. Say, look here, why do you let him get away with a third? Make him split here, where he's at your mercy, before we get into the towns.

I'll see that you draw the best of the lot, and as for my share"—Hearn pondered, mastered by his great desire for the diamonds—"I just want enough to live on, out Shanghai way. You know, Bob, I don't figure on going back to the States for a while."

"Figure on this," said Warner gravely, "a while. Those jewels belong to Yuan Shi. We are not going to ask to look at them. Miss Rand will not take any, and I can get along without them."

Hearn spat out a mouthful of sand and grit, and looked at his companion incredulously. He knew Warner well enough to be sure that he meant what he said. "How about me?" he asked anxiously. "I'm not going any further than Shanghai."



"Yes, you are, Hearn. As far as San Francisco. Your debtors and some officers of the law are waiting for you there. By this time extradition papers will be ready for you at the American consulate in Shanghai."

Hearn winced, remembering the collapse of his fly-by-night oil companies in California. Then his heavy lip lifted in a snarl. He could make his escape from Warner before reaching Lanchow—could steal enough of the supplies to get him in as far as the railroads. Besides, he had money.

So, keeping his thoughts to himself, he lagged behind the others. His mind would not keep from the casket for long. He would make his try for that, too, when he took his leave. If Warner was fool enough to allow Mr. Three to keep the treasure, he, Hearn, was made of better stuff. He would show them!

Only, he wished the sand would stay where it belonged, on the ground. It was in his eyes and mouth, making the task of following the trail of the horses difficult. A brown murk hung around the plodding man. Presently he noticed that the sun had gone down. A red glow marked the west, and, before him the moon rose, a silver ball shining through the haze. And still Warner had not made camp!

About this time Warner called a halt, arranged blankets for Margaret, and a canvas screen to keep off the bite of the wind. While Mr. Three set about unpacking, he scouted around for the sparse fuel of the Gobi—bits of dried camel dung and branches of tamarisk that clung to the hollows in the sand. So it happened that he was several hundred yards from the camp when he heard the baying of a hound.

Making his way to the top of a knoll, he listened. It was coming down the wind, in the quarter from which they had approached the camp. And, as he listened, Warner caught another sound that chilled his blood.

Above the sobbing wail of the beast rose the hoarse screaming of a man.

"Hearn!" Warner leaped down from

the hillock and began to run toward the trail. Nothing was visible in the gray pall of dust, in the silvery half-light of the moon. But he ran as he had never run before, to intercept the fleeing man and the thing behind him.

He could hear no footfalls in the loose sand; only, nearer now, the screams directed his steps. Plunging over a crest, Warner saw Hearn emerge from the outer murk. The big man was fleeing with uncanny swiftness, his arms flung over his head, his mouth open.

"This way!" Warner shouted.

But Hearn kept on, toward the camp, passing fifty feet from Warner. As he did so, from the gloom behind him came something that halted Warner in his tracks, his pulse leaping.

Luminous eyes glowed from a dark muzzle, foam-flecked, almost brushing the sand. A black, shaggy mane bristled around the hideous head of the beast, that advanced with the long leaps of a tiger. It was as large as a small pony, and its hide seemed shrunk on its bones.

A strong, fetid odor was in the air. Hearn turned his head and faced about, swaying on his feet. The beast leaped, striking him down. It loomed over him, snarling, its muzzle hanging above his throat.

Warner shot once at its flank, away from Hearn's head. As the animal staggered and raised its muzzle, he fired again, and again.

The heavy bullets drove it away from the prostrate man, and when Warner ran up, reloading his weapon, the long limbs of the animal were threshing in its death agony. He waited until it no longer moved.

"Good Lord!" he breathed. "What is it?"

Hearn clutched at his wrist, quivering. The man's nerve was broken, and his teeth chattered as Warner drew him erect. "It was on my trail. Gepa's hound! Don't leave me behind again!" He began to sob, his shaking fingers brushing at his eyes. "Take me with you, Bob—anywhere. I never saw—this thing before. Camprubi told me—the native had one."

"Steady!" whispered Warner. "Buck up; here comes Mr. Three."

He bent over the prostrate animal, studying its long mane and enormous, yellow fangs. "It's larger than any dog—by Jove, I have it now! This is one of the mastiffs of Tibet."

With the toe of his boot he touched the gaunt ribs of the beast. "They are the largest breed of dogs in the world, and are used as guardians of the temples in Tibet. There is bloodhound strain in them, and more than a little wolf, and—they subsist on the bodies of dead human beings. You know the Tibetans throw out their dead to be devoured by dogs. These temple beasts are peculiarly savage because no one in Tibet is permitted to harm them. Gepa brought the hound with him when he came to the Gobi in Camprubi's caravan."

After a moment's thought, he added, "Here is the murderer of Professor Rand. Gepa must have left the beast behind when he went to America with Camprubi. Half-starved in this barren country, the dog attacked the first humans who ventured here. And the natives, hearing its howling, took it for an incarnation of the *T'au wu* legend." He glanced at Hearn coldly. "I suppose you know Gepa had this thing along when he raided Miss Rand's bungalow?"

"Ray—Camprubi only said he had a scheme to frighten Yuan Shi."

"Well, it didn't. But it nearly did for Sing Low, and for you, just now. Gepa must have kept it tied up in one of the gullies in Singan-mu, waiting his chance to set the dog on us. I saw it once, at a distance. Probably Gepa loosed the hound when you made your last attack, and, being half-starved, it followed the trail of the only game that offered."

Hearn shivered.

"If I hadn't promised to take you to the States," Warner added grimly, "I don't know that I would have troubled to shoot it, a moment ago."

But Mr. Three had another theory, and he explained, with satisfaction as they walked back, that the *T'au wu* was ended. It had been killed, Mr. Three said, in its human form when Gepa died, and now in its animal incarnation. The evil spirit of Singan-mu was no more.

At the camp Warner heard his name called by a frightened girl. Hastening to her, he felt his hands caught in an eager grasp.

"Bob—*Bob!* You must never leave me again. I'm so—every time you go away for a while something awful happens. I want you to take me home."

Her voice broke as she remembered that she no longer had a home, in China.

Smiling, he took her hand in his. "Peggy, some time pretty soon, when you are rested up, I'm going to take you to a shack on the edge of the Imperial Valley, in our country, and I'm going to ask you if

it measures up to your idea of a home, with—with Rex and a desert and all thrown in."

Something caught at his throat and he, too, found no more words.

IT WAS almost a year later that Robert and Peggy Warner heard from Mr. Three again. During that time "King Cliff" Hearn had faced his trial in the Federal courts and had been sentenced to serve from two to five years at hard labor.

One summer evening there came to their bungalow in Southern California an old Chinese man of business from San Francisco. Warner was a little surprised at the respect the stranger manifested for them—a respect that sprang from something other than their ready hospitality and Warner's ceremonious greeting in the mandarin dialect.

Not until they looked at the contents of a package that the Chinese handed to Peggy, did they understand.

"It is a matter of business," observed the stranger, "entrusted to my undeserving hand by the illustrious and nine times honored prince, Yuan Shi."

"With regret," responded the white man firmly, "do I decline to undertake any business in your thrice-distinguished country. I have retired from my profession to take up the humble pursuit of farming."

The Chinese inclined his head gravely. "You have acquired sufficient merit in my poor country. This is a gift."

When he had departed after a polite farewell, they opened the rice paper package. An inlaid ebony box was disclosed, and within this a necklace of splendid, matched rubies. The crimson stones, varying from the smallest size to one great ruby in the center, clustered around a gold pendant on which was worked the figure of an imperial dragon.

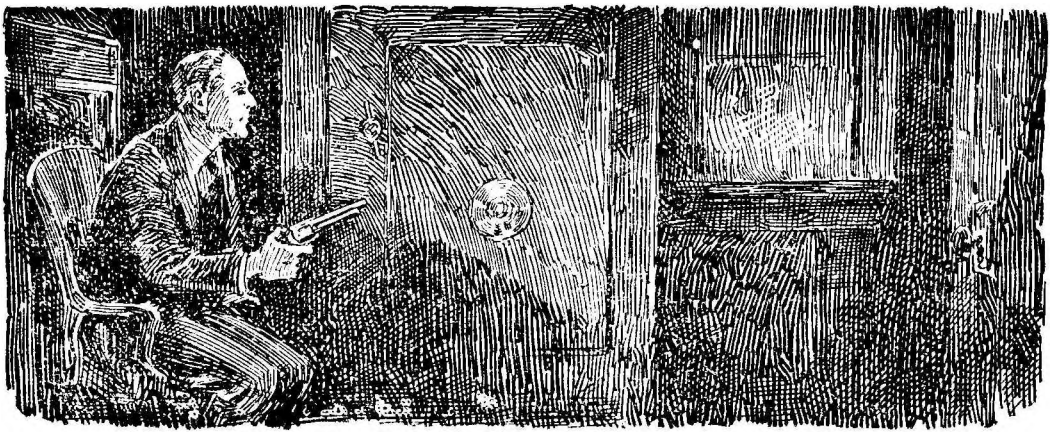
THE PUNCHER'S REPOSE

By CLEM YORE

When a horn-toad is reclinin'
  Just alongside of your ear—
An' your snoot's a-snorin' high
  At a low down prickly pear,
An' your fire is dead from desert dew,
An' the moon through the cholla's shinin'
  through
An' the millin' stars blink down at you—
  Now, son, that's real repose.

When the turtle dove's a-callin'
  Fr'm the top of a mesquite—
An' a yearlin' calf's a-bawlin'
  An' you've got the wild bunch beat,
An' you kick the dawn watch smugly
An' he looks at you right ugly
As you roll in blankets snugly—
  Doggone, boy, that's repose.

When the dusty day-drive's over
  An' the evenin's cool an' fine
An' you've got the herd to cover
  Up among the piñon pine
An' you smell of sweat an' leather
An' you've plumb forgot the weather
An' you're sleepy, altogether—
  That's sure-enough repose.



THE SCAPEGRACE

By R. N. WALL

Author of "Born Mean," etc.

FOR LONG YEARS JAMES BOND HAD BEEN A FAILURE IN BUSINESS, BUT WHEN THE HONOR OF HIS SON WAS INVOLVED HE FOUND STRANGE EMOTIONS STIRRING IN HIS SOUL

BOTH members of the firm of Worth & Bond shared the same office, a second-story room on the street front of their pump works. James Bond, the junior partner, lolled idly at his flat-topped desk in one end; and near the other his son, young Henry Bond, stood first on one foot and then on the other, waiting for old Rowland Worth, the senior partner, to look up.

The corner in which James Bond sat was in the shadow, but the bright April sunshine, streaming through the open windows, threw into bold relief the contrasting figures of the other men.

Young Bond, the firm's cashier, was tall and straight, with a dapper touch in his dress. His features were clean-cut and regular, but they held lines which should not have shown in so youthful a face. There were shadows beneath the boy's fine gray eyes, faint lines etched across the forehead, and still deeper indentations about the mouth, as if restraint had wrestled with desire, and had not always won. Nor could he stand quite still.

Rowland Worth, on the contrary, sat hunched over his old-fashioned, roll-top desk, which was almost hidden beneath heaps of papers, as firm, as substantial, and almost as motionless, as a rock. He was a big man, not so much fat as solid, with great round arms and legs, big hands and feet, and a broad expanse of mottled, clean-shaven jaw. Only his cold blue eyes, now fixed upon the papers before him, were small.

At last he raised his big head and barked. "Well, well, Henry, what is it now?"

"Will you let me see your cost records, sir?"

"What for?"

"I don't believe we're making enough on the R series pumps. We sell more of them than of any other pattern, but it strikes me that their weight, in proportion to the G and K series, must make them cost more to build, while we don't get as much."

Worth's small eyes looked contempt; his long, thin lips curled.

"What's that got to do with you, Henry? Your business is to keep the cash and run the office, not to pry into my private records. I was building pumps before you were born. Think I don't know my job?"

"No, sir. But I thought——"

"You do your thinking in your own department," snapped Worth. "My private records don't need any examination from you. The labor costs ain't as high on the R series as on some of the lighter lines. You just run the office and leave the factory to me. By the way, you look sort of peaked this morning. Didn't I see you out at the Country Club last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Playing poker with that bunch again?"

The young man reddened, but answered civilly. "No, I was with a young lady."

Worth gave an ugly grunt. "When I was your age," he rumbled, "I went to bed nights and I wasn't too nervous to do my work mornings."

"Neither am I, sir," said the boy, and turned on his heel. Discouragement drooped his shoulders. As he passed his father's desk he leaned over and whispered, "Will you come out in the hall a moment?"

The elder Bond dropped the scratch-pad on which he had been marking aimlessly, rose, and followed his son. He was a slight, quiet, pleasant-faced man in his middle fifties, high-nosed, delicately featured, with an air of utter detachment from the business in which he owned almost half.

In the corridor Henry stopped, turned to face his father, and flung out his hands.

"I can't stand old Worth any longer!" he declared. "It's all wrong!"

James Bond regarded his tall son with a whimsical smile beneath which there seemed to lie a shade of anxiety.

"What's the matter now, Henry?"

"Things aren't right here. Every plan I suggest for the betterment of the business that old grouch turns down. I know we're losing money on the R series pumps. I'm baffled at every step. If it weren't for one thing I'd quit this antique dump!"

Mr. Bond's long, delicate fingers caressed his perfectly shaven chin. He looked wistfully at his son.

"Mr. Worth is set in his ways, Henry. Why annoy him?"

"Because I'm not getting anywhere, for one reason. That isn't all of it, but I can't live decently on my salary. I'm told the business doesn't justify an increase, but when I suggest more profitable methods I run into a stone wall. If it weren't for leaving you, I'd quit! By the way, father, could you spare me a hundred personally?"

The elder man's pleasant face grew troubled. He rubbed his chin a little harder.

"I'm sorry, Henry, but I don't see how I can. You know we passed the last dividend, and I have taxes and insurance to pay this month. Do you need it so badly, son?"

"Oh, I suppose I can make out somehow. I shouldn't have asked you. I know I've thrown away enough, but it's hard to hold up my end on——"

"Are you honestly trying to be economical now, Henry?"

"I certainly am, father. But I can't live decently on what I get here, and that's the truth."

He opened the door and entered the general office and James Bond returned to his desk. He wanted to talk to Worth about Henry's salary, but the grim bulk of the senior partner, still hunched almost motionless over his desk, repelled him. Bond knew from past experience how the conversation would begin, timidly upon his part, roughly on Worth's, and how it would end in a torrent of sarcasm and profanity from the senior partner which would send the junior scurrying off, his digestion upset for the day. Bond sighed, pulled his scratch-pad to him, and began a series of stipplings with a perfectly pointed pencil.

James Bond was an idler by nature; a good man, but mild and timorous, with a love for the beautiful things of life, and an instinctive aversion toward the hard and rough. Pumps were necessary, of course; but anyone could manufacture machines of wood and iron to draw water. His true joy flowed at the sight of a fine etching, or the curve of an ancient vase. In his youthful days he had wished to be an artist, of what sort he had hardly known, and he had frittered away a considerable part of his patrimony in France and Italy, trying to decide whether to write or draw or paint.

At thirty he had married a brilliant, ambitious woman who coveted place and riches. While the influence of her desire for material accomplishment was upon him, he had fallen in with Rowland Worth, a struggling young pump-maker, and Bond had invested the remainder of his fortune in the business. At first Bond faithfully endeavored to interest himself in pump-making, but it was hopeless. Never had a man less mechanical ability nor a slighter aptitude for trade, and, after his wife died, he ceased to try.

The business seemed to prosper and Bond contented himself with a casual attendance at the office. Worth ran everything; he was a manager by nature, and he disliked to divide or delegate responsibility. Bond fell into an attitude of easy

acquiescence. He accepted with equal complacency the dividends that came to him and his partner's sneers at his lack of business acumen.

Bond's wife had left him one child—Henry. James Bond was an inefficient and indulgent parent, more kind than wise. He was proud of the lad's fine presence and the quick mind that had come from his mother; and at first he had regarded the boy's high temper, recklessness and love of pleasure as merely the defects of more sterling qualities. From the first he had recognized that the boy had abilities that he himself lacked; and he nursed a vicarious ambition for the child to succeed where he, the father, had failed.

The lad's recklessness increased with his years. One folly followed fast upon the heels of another, and then came the scrape that caused Henry's dismissal from college. He refused to study further and obtained a job which he kept three months. In two years he held three other positions, and he left them all with practically the same verdict from his employers: he was able, clever, capable of industry when he chose, but dissipated, uncertain and unreliable.

At twenty-one Henry came into several thousand dollars which had constituted his mother's estate. For two years he did no work whatever. His days were devoted to pleasure and his nights to folly. Generous and careless, his easy companions stripped him as a farmer husks an ear of corn. He was wild rather than vicious, but the results were much the same.

When his money was gone, the summer he was twenty-three, some basic strain of sense asserted itself, and he went to his father in a passion of shame and remorse. He had been a fool, he acknowledged; he had flung himself and his money away, but his eyes were open, his determination aroused, and, if his father would give him a job, he would turn his back upon temptation and make good.

His father, only too willing to believe, prevailed upon his partner to give the boy a position in the office at a small salary. Henry's promises seemed at first to be justified. He settled down faithfully to routine work and attacked his duties with a zeal that forced his promotion to the cashiership within a year. Beyond this point it seemed he could not go. His endeavors, which in small things Worth had applauded, were balked and resented when he tried to interest himself in the wider aspects of the business.

Now, James Bond, brooding at his desk across from his saturnine partner, considered his son with real, though reluctantly admitted apprehension. He realized that it must be hard for the lad to live on his small salary when for two years he had spent the income of a prince.

When Bond had induced his partner to employ his son, he had again been fired with the ambition that some day the boy might more worthily fill his own place. For the first year he had basked in this dream; he had taken a father's joy in believing that Henry had seen the error of his early ways and that his industry and ability would bring success. In looking at his son, watching his easy grasp of detail, recognizing his excellent business judgment, Bond had been divided between pride and admiration, but of late he had been growing conscious of a certain uneasiness that he was unwilling to name to himself.

So, it was with fear rather than surprise that when, on the following Monday morning, Henry came in and whispered to him that his cash was short, the elder Bond searched the boy's pale face.

Worth, it seemed, overheard the low-toned conversation, for he raised his big head and blurted out, "What's that? What's that? Cash short?"

"Yes, sir," Young Bond slowly turned to face the senior partner. "I was telling father that my cash is shy a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars!"

"Yes, sir," Henry repeated. The shadows were deeper beneath his gray eyes, the lines more sharply etched upon his young forehead. "I can't account for it."

"That's mighty strange," Worth growled.

"Colton and I have gone over every item," explained the cashier. "Quite a lot of money came in Saturday afternoon that had to be left in the safe. This morning there was a hundred less in the drawer than on Saturday night."

His small, cold eyes hard, his underlip thrust out, Worth stared at the young man.

"Did you make a bank deposit this morning?" the elder Bond asked hastily. He reached for his scratch-pad and began

mechanically to stipple it with tiny dots.

"That's the only place a mistake could have been made," admitted his son, "but I'm positive we didn't send them a hundred too much. I phoned the teller and he says our deposit was O. K."

"How do you account for it, then?" demanded Worth.

"I can't," said the cashier simply. His hands were in nervous motion and his face was gray.

A silence fell upon the room. James Bond abandoned the rectangular design he had made upon his pad and began to outline a face in penciled dots.

"Who here besides yourself had access to the safe, Henry?" his father asked at last.

"Several of us know the combination," said the cashier, hesitating a little.

"You've got the only key to the cash drawer, though, haven't you?" sneered Worth.

"Yes."

"Where do you keep it, Henry?" his father inquired. He dotted in the hair on the penciled head and examined it gravely.

"On this chain," said Henry. He pulled from his pocket a ring attached by a chain to his trousers and pointed out the flat brass key that opened the drawer.

"Ever lend anyone the bunch?" asked Mr. Bond mildly.

For an instant the young man's pale face brightened, then relapsed into its worried lines. He answered slowly, "Why—I believe I let Colton take it one day last week to open the stationary cupboard. He'd left his own keys at home."

"You're trailing up a blind alley if you think Jack Colton had anything to do with this, Jim," Worth broke in loudly. "He's been with me from boyhood—one of the best men we got."

With his pencil Bond rectified the outline of an eyebrow. He did not look at his partner; nor at his son.

"Colton is a good boy," he replied gravely. "I'm merely trying to get at all the possibilities."

"Humph!" snorted Rowland Worth.

"I'm sure Jack's all right," said Henry earnestly, as if he regretted having mentioned the loan of the keys.

"You bet your life he is," snapped Worth.

"Might as well have him in, though," suggested the junior partner.

As the younger Bond turned to call Colton, his father held out his hand for the key.

"We should have a Yale lock for that drawer," he said. "It's easy to take a wax impression of a key like this, and any tinker could duplicate it in five minutes."

"Don't see any wax on that, do you?" sneered Worth. "Anyhow, Henry should take care of his keys."

The cashier returned with Colton, a round, rather stupid looking young man, with apple cheeks and a turned up nose.

"What do you know about this shortage, Jack?" Bond asked gently.

"Nothing, except that I helped Henry check up and he is sure a hundred shy."

Colton shifted his feet uneasily, but he kept his somewhat blank blue eyes unwaveringly on the elder Bond, whose white, slender fingers still played with pad and pencil.

"You have a key to the building?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know the combination of the safe?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you have no key to the cash drawer?"

"Of course not. Henry has the only one."

"Let me see your keys."

Colton handed them over respectfully. The corners of his mouth twitched slightly, and his color had risen. Young Bond stood by with a pale and inscrutable face.

Worth broke the tension with a snort.

"What's the sense of all this?" he inquired with a testy oath. "Henry's responsible for the money. It's up to him to find it or make it good. You boys get out of here—and Henry, you locate that shortage!"

The young men went. Worth whirled upon his partner, who sat staring at the drawing on his desk.

"This is a fine example of efficiency!" Worth roared. "You're always telling me how smart your precious son is with his new-fangled schemes! The other day he told me I ought to systematize my private records. Offered to keep 'em for me. A pretty system of cash-keeping he must have that lets a hundred dollars slip away without a trace!"

Bond said nothing. A worried look upon his usually placid face, he listened

quietly while his burly partner stormed on.

"You think Henry is so clever because you know so little about the business yourself. I was making pumps when you were poking around Europe, monkeying with paint-daubs and old crockery. You've loafed while I've kept my nose to the grindstone; if it wasn't for me you wouldn't have a nickel today."

"I might have been happier if I'd stayed in Italy; I wasn't cut out for a business man, Rowland."

"Rats! You never tried to be one. Why ain't you happy now? All I ask of you is to let me run the business without interference. You don't have any of the worries, you've drawn your dividends fairly regular, you work when you feel like it. What have you got to complain about?"

"I'm not complaining. I may not know as much as you do about trade; some things I've never cared to understand. I've been content to trust you and I admit I've reaped the benefit of your effort. On the other hand, you needed my money, and you've profited by having it in the concern."

"Damn it, who said I hadn't?" Worth bellowed. "What I'm kicking about is your saddling your son on me."

Like many mild, ineffectual people, James Bond had a stubborn streak. There was a strain of iron in the man, rusty and seldom seen, but it was there.

"When I brought Henry here you didn't object——"

"I didn't know what a pest he would become. He has gone at the business like a puppy at a shoe, biting and clawing, full of useless motion and damn foolishness."

"That's just his energy, Rowland."

"Energy be hanged! I wouldn't care how energetic he was, but he wants to change everything! He's turned the office upside down. First it was vertical files and then a mimeograph and a dictaphone and finally different colored papers for us to write each other notes on and now——"

Bond, who had resumed his stippling, raised his head from a penciled outline of a palm tree against a pyramid.

"It seems to me that Henry has introduced a number of things that save time and labor," he offered mildly. "Certainly the loose-leaf books are better than that cumbersome old ledger one almost needed a derrick to lift."

"Don't know whether they are or not," Worth grumbled. "I wouldn't kick, though, if Henry kept to things that concern him, but he spends his time poking into my affairs. He's paid to keep the cash and not to tell me what to do!"

"I don't see why you resent his interest," argued Bond.

"Because of his infernal snooping and prying! I don't like it! I won't stand it! And now it seems he can't even do his own work properly! Cash a hundred dollars short!"

The senior partner rose and stamped out in a rage, leaving Bond uneasy and depressed.

His depression persisted, and, on Wednesday morning it deepened, when Henry came again to his father, choosing a time when Mr. Worth was absent.

"Father," he began abruptly, "when I checked up yesterday morning fifty dollars more was gone. This morning still another fifty is short."

Two deep lines seamed Bond's forehead as he gazed at his son.

"What on earth does this mean, Henry? Where does the money go?"

"I don't know," the boy faltered. His eyes were unduly brilliant, his face bloodless and strained. "Something's wrong. I've racked my brains. I've thought until I can't think any longer.

"Somebody is taking money from the safe. Maybe I come down and do it in my sleep," he added, with a half-defiant, nervous laugh.

"Don't be silly," said James Bond sharply. "This is bad. I don't know what Mr. Worth will say. He's getting more and more cantankerous as he grows older, and you realize he isn't fond of you, Henry."

"I know," said the cashier grimly. "He's afraid my methods will show how shiftless his ways are. He's a mean, stubborn, stupid old moss-back, and——"

"Hold on, Henry. It isn't your province to criticize Mr. Worth, and this has nothing to do with the missing money. Who could get at the cash drawer? Do you think Jack Colton——"

"I can't imagine it. He's a faithful chap."

"Mr. Worth believes so," said the elder

man slowly. His slim white fingers caressed his chin. "Sometimes Colton strikes me as sly, and then again he seems merely stupid. Is he hard up, do you know?"

"Probably. Anyone working on a salary for this concern is bound to be," shot out young Bond bitterly. "If old Worth would only pay decent wages——"

"Don't get off on that track again, Henry. I do the best I can with him."

"I know; I'm not complaining of you, father. But Worth makes me sick—the big stiff! I wish I could——"

Bond sighed. His eyes searched the boy's angry, half-averted face.

"It is obvious the money goes at night," he said. "Do you think it would do any good to hire a temporary watchman?"

"I don't know," said the boy sullenly.

"I think I'll suggest it to Mr. Worth," Bond decided. "I wonder if Colton——"

His question was cut short by the entrance of the senior partner, who eyed the pair inquiringly. The cashier slipped out.

Worth walked over to his partner's desk, kicked a chair into place, and sat down. "Anything more turned up about that shortage?"

"It has doubled," Bond admitted reluctantly. He reached for his pad and began to outline a ship.

"Doubled?" roared Worth. "Do you mean to tell me that two hundred dollars has been taken from the safe and your clever son has no idea where it went? Bosh!"

His broad face was purple; he leaned forward and shook a pudgy finger under Bond's nose. Bond looked him in the eye, his placid countenance darkening.

"Steady, Rowland. Let me understand you. Are you insinuating that Henry has taken the money?"

"No, I ain't insinuating! I'll bet anything he took it! Now, keep cool! Henry has pulled the wool over your eyes with his grandstand plays. By Jove, he even has the nerve to criticize me! He thinks I'm slow and old-fashioned. I think he's a crook, and that's that!"

The lines that ran downward from Bond's nostrils deepened and showed white. Rage surged in his soul. He wanted to dash his fist in his partner's leering face, but something uncertain within him held his hand. Oh, if he could be sure!

"You're talking about my son," he said thickly. "Henry—" his voice failed.

"I am!" thundered Worth. "And I'll tell you the trouble; the money he inherited spoiled him. For two years he lived like a lord, and now he can't get back to earth. He spends more than he earns."

"He'd have hard work not to on what you're willing to pay."

"That's no excuse. He gets all he's worth, but he throws it away. He runs with a fast set, plays poker—the market, too, maybe. You brought him here when he had failed everywhere else, you got me to make him cashier against my judgment, and now, because his salary ain't what he thinks it ought to be, he——"

Bond's pencil dropped from his shaking fingers. He rose.

"If that's the way you feel perhaps we'd better both get out!" he cried.

"Now, Jim! Keep calm, can't you? You ain't going to do anything of the sort. Ain't we been friends and partners all these years? Better men than you have had their sons go wrong. I got your interest as much as mine at heart. You're no business man; I got to look out for us both. If Henry is taking this money the sooner we know——"

"He isn't, I tell you!" Bond denied, but his voice quavered. "He has been wild, but he isn't crooked. To take money in this way would be childish. Why do you suspect him? Several of the clerks know the safe combination. Any one of them might have a key made."

"Henry is trading on that realization," sneered Worth.

Bond dropped back in his chair. He stared at his burly partner; he had great confidence in Worth's acumen. Always in the back of his mind was the memory of Henry's early escapades, his need of money, his resentment at Worth because of his meager salary and sarcastic treatment. Bond was shaken to the core by doubt and fear. Yet it was unthinkable that his son should be a thief!"

"I won't believe it," he asserted stubbornly. "There's some other explanation."

"What?" Worth snorted.

"I don't know," Bond admitted heavily, looking down at the outline of the ship upon his pad. Mechanically he picked up a pencil and outlined a yard. "I wish I knew a little more about accounting; I'd like to check those figures myself."

"Rats!" sniffed Worth. "You don't need to know anything about accounting. This ain't no bookkeeping mistake. No, Jim; the thing to do is to let the boy go. We won't have any argument, we won't

say anything more about the money. He can even resign, if he likes."

"But Rowland, nothing's proven! He can't be guilty. Suppose we hire a detective."

"Aw, them fellers ain't no good! Besides, we don't want any scandal, do we?"

"Why not employ a night watchman, temporarily? The money goes at night. Wait a little—something may turn up!"

"Oh, well, I'll wait until Saturday," said Worth contemptuously, "but no longer. And, if it will make you feel any better, I'll see about a watchman."

He rose, and stalked off to his own desk.

The private office of the partners was divided by a glass partition from the general quarters in which young Bond, Colton, and the rest of the office force worked. From his desk Bond could see his son, busy in the cage that fenced from the rest of the room the big safe.

For the remainder of the day the junior partner made it his business to watch unobtrusively both the safe and the office people. He hardly knew what he expected to see, but he sat patiently at his desk and drew an endless series of little pictures on his pad and waited. He saw nothing suspicious. No one except Henry entered the cashier's cage.

Bond remained after the others had gone, pondering and puzzling as he stippled, and he made it a point to arrive early next morning. He usually breakfasted and walked down with his son, but Henry, out the night before, was late at the table and Bond swallowed his coffee and went on alone.

As soon as Henry entered the office and unlocked the safe, Bond joined him.

"All right this morning?" he inquired.

"Tell you in a moment," said the boy shortly. His manner was nervous, and his eyes looked as if he had not slept. He referred to the cash book, opened the drawer, and leafed swiftly through the sheaf of bills. Again he ran over the pile. His hands trembled a trifle, but his face was expressionless. A third time he counted the money.

"Fifty dollars more gone," he said at last.

"What!" Bond stared into his son's clouded face. The boy's eyes met his but he could not read them.

The heavy step of Rowland Worth sounded on the floor. He came across to the cage.

"Well, Jim," he gibed, "checking up, yourself?"

There was contempt in his voice. He turned to the cashier and barked. "Found anything, Henry?"

"I've found fifty dollars more short."

"Fifty more!" Worth exploded. He broke into a very tantrum of violence before which Henry stood silent and white.

"Young man," Worth ended his tirade, "you are responsible for the money. I shall wait until Saturday night. If by that time the shortage is not satisfactorily accounted for you will settle it and hand in your keys."

He turned abruptly, giving Henry no chance to answer, and swung off into the private office.

Bond looked at his son, who stood with his eyes fixed on Worth's broad retreating back. His hand sought the boy's arm.

"Henry," he pleaded, "have you told me everything?"

"I've told you all I know," answered Henry defiantly.

Bond went helplessly to his desk. Worth looked up and glared but said nothing.

The long day went by. Again Bond spent the hours in anxious thought and futile observation. He could not believe that his son was the culprit, and yet he could not understand the boy's queer, strained attitude. The record of his past was a cruel witness against him. Had the lad come by false and fatal reasoning to that unhappy frame of mind in which he would try to collect by force or stealth that which Worth refused to grant?

Then Bond's mind would turn to Colton, busy over a ledger in the corner. He fancied the fellow's movements were furtive. Did his slow, almost stupid manner hide the slyness of a criminal?

Just before closing time he approached his partner.

"Have you arranged for a watchman, Rowland?" he asked.

Worth glowered.

"I told you I'd tend to it," he snapped. "I couldn't get in touch with the right party yesterday. You leave it to me."

Bond had to be content with this assurance, but he was too unhappy to leave the matter to anyone. He went home and

took from a drawer an old-fashioned, single-action Colt's forty-five, which his father had carried in the army. Bond handled it gingerly, as all his life he had touched dangerous things. He carried the revolver to a gunsmith, who cleaned and loaded it for him and showed him how to fit the nipples with percussion caps.

Henry did not appear at supper. His father ate little, his mind far from food. About nine he returned to the office, the old revolver rubbing awkwardly against his hip. Bond could hardly have given a clear reason for carrying a weapon; he had a vague idea that if he discovered the thief he might need it to capture him.

Bond saw nothing of a watchman. He turned on the lights, opened the safe, and, carrying the journal, the cash book, and the ledger to his desk, pored over them. He tried to decipher the last trial balance, but to him it was no more intelligible than Sanskrit. He could see, however, that the business was not doing well. Their sales were not so large as they had been; a lot of money seemed to be past due. He remembered Henry had suggested to Worth that some special effort be made toward collection, and that Worth had flown into a passion and accused the cashier of wanting to alienate old customers.

Bond leaved the pages unhappily. Mingled with his apprehension of disaster was the sense of his own futility. He had wandered through life as a man walks through a darkened wood. He had tried to fill a place for which he was not fitted. His partner had used his money, tolerated his presence, and given him contempt. He had failed in the career he had not had the strength to follow, in the business he had entered, in the upbringing of his son. Bond folded his arms over the ledger and dropped his graying head upon them in an agony of shame.

The building was chilly and silent; the wall clock ticked on interminably through his despairing thoughts. At midnight he rose and walked downstairs. Then, as he threw out the light switch the conviction of his own imbecility struck him. Naturally the thief would not stick his head into a lighted trap. He might be stupid, but not so stupid as that.

As he stood upon the threshold he saw a figure move in the shadows across the street. The pump works was faced by a straggling row of dilapidated negro dwellings. As Bond gazed more intently, the figure vanished between two houses; and with a sharp constriction of the heart, Bond recognized his son.

Henry had not returned when he reached home, and, lying awake in the darkness, Bond waited for some time before he heard his son enter and go to his room.

At the breakfast table Henry would not talk. He seemed sullen, and to his father's questions as to his whereabouts the night before, would only mumble that he had been "several places."

Friday passed in ominous silence. No further shortage had appeared, Henry told his father. Worth shrouded himself in a baleful ferocity. Bond said nothing further about a watchman; he would do the thing himself.

At night he again girded the pistol to his chafed hip and returned to the office just after dark. This time he did not turn on the lights. His steps were hollow in his ears as he crossed the main floor and ascended to the second story. The office ran across the street front of the building and the big safe was in one end, against a brick wall, enclosed by the wire grill that formed Henry's cage.

Bond groped in the semi-darkness to a chair behind the high bookkeeper's desk opposite the safe. As his eyes, aided by the faint light that filtered through the dirty windows from the street lamps, became used to the gloom, he could discern the shapes of the desks and the black bulk of the safe.

It was chilly and Bond wanted desperately to smoke. The clock ticked on and on. The place smelled like a vault; the windows closed, it held the stale atmosphere of the day's spent life. Bond had waited perhaps two hours when he heard the street door open and close softly, and then the faint sound of footsteps upon the stair. He drew the pistol and held it awkwardly in front of him. In the long hours he had made a decision. The weapon was to enforce his own uncertain will rather than to execute judgment; but if need be he would not shrink, no matter whom the muzzle covered. His heart beat like a racer's, his hands trembled, and sweat beaded his forehead.

The office door opened and closed again. Bond strained his eyes. He could see

nothing, yet he knew someone had entered. With the pistol in his right hand he groped with his left for a light button behind him.

Then, as his fingers found it, he heard the street door open and close once more; again there came the soft shuffle of feet upon the stairs. As he peered into the darkness, Bond saw the first intruder glide from the gloom of the doorway into a corner.

The feet of the second comer paused at the door; it was gently opened, a man entered and went straight to the safe. Bond waited, straining forward, every sense alert. He could hear the man at the safe breathe heavily; from the other, hiding in the corner, came no sound.

An electric torch glowed suddenly upon the combination dial, the tumblers clicked, the heavy door swung open. The man knelt and placed a key in the cash drawer.

Cold chills shook Bond from head to foot; the blood roared in his ears. His throat seemed filled with cotton. One hand lay upon the light switch, the other pointed with the pistol. He willed to shout, "Hands up!" but his voice came out in a ragged, uncertain whisper. Nevertheless, it was loud enough to make the man at the safe jump up and turn, throwing the light of his torch straight into Bond's face.

Dazzled, blinded, scarcely knowing what he did, Bond pressed the light button, and the same nervous action crooked the trigger finger of his other hand. The frontier forty-five roared like a cannon. The room was flooded with light and filled with acrid smoke. Bond leaped forward in panic. He had not intended to fire, his nerves had betrayed him. Had he shot his son?

Then, as the smoke settled, and the whirling room took familiar form, Bond saw in front of him, with his big, distorted face the color of cheese, Rowland Worth, stricken with amazement and terror.

From the corner leaped Henry, excited, but coherent.

"There's the thief!" he charged, and pointed to the senior partner. "I knew it! I've been watching, but this is the first time I could catch him at it!"

"What do you mean?" bellowed Worth. "Haven't I got a right to go to my own safe? What were you trying to do, Jim, kill me?"

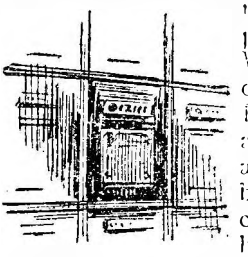
"You ought to be killed!" cried the cashier. "Look at him, father!"

In Worth's right hand was a mass of bills.

"This is the answer, father," young Bond explained. "He's been robbing you right and left—for years, I think. He's been hypothecating the firm's securities, holding out cash payments——"

"You lie! You can't prove it!"

"Can't I? Wait until your private records are examined in court! I've suspected it for a year, but I haven't been able to get hold of any proof until lately. What's in your safe deposit box at the First National? What about those dummy accounts at Heeny's bucket shop? You could deceive father, but you knew I was getting wise, so you tried to discredit me and drive me out under a cloud. You're a clumsy crook!"



He snatched the revolver from his father's trembling hand and turned it upon Rowland Worth.

"Put up your hands!" he ordered "Father, you telephone for the police!"

The elder Bond had dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands. When he looked up, tears were streaming down his cheeks but his eyes were strangely bright.

"No, I don't think this is a case for the police, Henry." He spoke gently, but in his voice there was a new ring of authority. Behind his hands, his covered eyes had caught a vision that was still old. He saw for an instant the justification for his life, the redemption of its failure.

"No, Henry," he repeated. "Let us sit down and talk this over. Sit down, Rowland," and Worth let his big bulk sink meekly into a chair. He was shrunken and collapsed like a frosted apple. Henry remained standing, his features stern and hard. James Bond sat erect. He who had been, perhaps still was, the weakest of the three, for a moment ruled by the strength of his dominant purpose.

"What do you mean, father?" Henry questioned impatiently. "You aren't going to let him off?"

"Not exactly. I want you to go over the books—through his private records. Find out how we stand, how much he has stolen. Then we'll have a settlement—a restitution, and an adjustment of our affairs. There is going to be a new firm—and I think the name of it will be Bond & Son!"

HEAVY MONEY

By BARRY SCOBEE

HEAVY MONEY—STOLEN MONEY—WAS NO STRANGER TO THE WOLF OF THE WATERFRONT. BUT HE WAS YET TO LEARN SOMETHING ELSE ABOUT IT

HE WAS the fop of the waterfront. A serious-minded old flatfoot gave him the name of Wolf of the Waterfront, but those of his own ilk called him Polkadot, perhaps in vague allusion to his foppish clothes.

Polkadot idled by a corner telephone pole and covertly watched old Wu, the Chink, and his girl bride fresh from the land of the poppy, as they worked in their open corner shop or waited on the occasional night customers.

Polkadot had heard talk for a year or two that Wu had a heavy brass chest, all carved with dragons, hidden somewhere in his hutch and filled with money. He had sauntered past several times of late, tempted more and more by the story, wondering how to find a key to the strongbox.

The girl bride, a graceful, shy little rice-powdered thing whose name in English was Little Flower that Shines—might she not be the key? Polkadot stepped across the sidewalk to buy a bowl of chop suey at the little counter where people stood on the walk to eat.

Now it was an oddity in itself, for the Wolf of the Waterfront to stop at a Chink place on the street to eat, but he was careless of that. Wu's inscrutable eyes regarded him without the slightest readable expression. At a word from the customer the fragrant chop suey was forthcoming, and Polkadot set himself up pleasantly to make the acquaintance of these two.

"How's business?" he asked, delving into the steaming bowl.

"Allee samee," murmured old Wu with a crinkly, meaningless smile.

Polkadot next turned his attention to pretty Little Flower that Shines. "Howdja like a white man's country, what you've seen of it?" he inquired, smiling engagingly and calling attention to his yellow, red and green silk neckscarf by appearing to adjust it.

There under the one incandescent light, the far-away porcelain-faced girl came to sudden, eager life. Possibly this was the first American to address her directly, personally, in her month in this strange and interesting land. She glanced at her husband to see what he thought about her answering. He nodded almost imperceptibly, and that nod was a sort of introduction saying that this handsome, thin-lipped young man was acceptable to the house of Wu.

Brightly she answered Polkadot. "Ver' fine!"

"Y'ever go out for a little jazz?" he asked.

She did not understand, but she kept smiling.

"Whadda you think o' the bob-haired janes that come jazzin' past here every night? Some class, hey?"

When he saw that again she did not understand he made a compliment, certain she would understand then, being a woman.

"You sure got a winnin' mop there yourself, Mabel—all them raven tresses." He wiggled a hand through his own hair, then pointed to her head and said, "Nice!"

She laughed out, pleased as a child, her laughter like the sweet tinkling of a bell. Abashed, she stepped to a curtain that let into an inner room from the shop, and paused, murmuring "Good-by," and disappeared.

Polkadot was pleased with this start on the road to the brass money box—if there was such a thing. Little Flower that Shines might indeed be the key to it. He returned the next night, and the next, finding the girl eager to learn new words. Old Wu may have seen profit in her acquiring the American tongue, for he smiled inscrutably and permitted the talk across the counter.

Coming up unexpectedly once, Polkadot found Wu in the act of counting his receipts—American coins in a cigar box, mixed with a few old Chinese *cash*.

When Wu finished counting his money he took part of it and passed the curtain into the dwelling rooms of the place, and a moment later Polkadot's keen and greedy ears heard a remote, muffled, heavy click, like the weighty lid of a brass box being closed. The sound made him itch to see and feel and steal. It said as plain as words that there was heavy, hoarded yellow gold.

The Wolf of the Waterfront rapidly acquired a knowledge of Wu's daily habits, learning for one thing that the old man spent the quiet hour from six to seven, or thereabouts, of evenings, with old cronies at what the newspapers facetiously referred to as the capital of Chinatown. There, it appeared, Wu was welcomed and respected and his wisdom listened to with eager ears. He was something of a boss Chinaman. Sometimes later at night Wu had friends in his own home, behind the shop.

This daily evening visit may have explained why he got an intelligent wife from China. He wanted a person whom he controlled and, at least in a measure, could trust, to handle his money when he was away.

The Wolf was wary of Wu's inscrutable smile. He was soon regularly and stealthily watching for the Chinaman to leave the shop before going to the counter and talking with the little wife. One night as he watched from a dark nook, Evensen, the serious-minded policeman who had given him the name of Wolf of the Waterfront, unexpectedly stood before him.

"Polkadot," said he, "aire ye tryin' again to burden yourself down with heavy money?"

"Who wants to know?" retorted the Wolf, sore because he had been caught stalking.

"Ye've been standin' here too long for any honest intentions, me frisky lad, as if ye might be getting ready to weight yourself."

By heavy money, Evensen meant stolen money. It was his serious way of speaking about the matter.

"I can watch me goil, can't I?" demanded Polkadot, trying to get away from the subject.

"Chink girl! Be careful, Polkadot. Heavy money pulls a man down to his ruination."

But the Wolf, used to preying on his fellow men, in boarding-houses and backrooms of this street that faced the restless tides, was in a mental rut and could not heed a warning or take a lesson from the nameless fears that somehow haunted him.

He kept on working his way into the graces of Little Flower that Shines, across the counter when her old husband was with his cronies of evenings.

One night he seized her hands and asked her if he might not enter the shop and go behind the curtain with her out of the chilly wind and rain. Her eyes opened in wonder at him, and that awful change passed over her face which is innocence giving place to suspicion and realization. She pulled her hands away and fled to the curtain, pausing there to look back like a startled fawn.

"I'm comin', kid," he said gruffly, and

started to lift the hinged section of the counter to pass through.

"No! No!" she cried, and disappeared behind the swaying cloth.

Polkadot turned away half-satisfied. It would give her something to think about, and he had no doubt but that thinking would result favorably to him.

The next night he pleaded wheedlingly with her to enter.

"Why you want?" she questioned.

"You and me, we'll go away together."

"Why?" she insisted.

"Why?" he repeated, trying to suppress his ever rising impatience at her alien stupidity. "You no likum this street. No likum old husband. You like the sun. Nothing but rain here, and the wet tide splashing under the house. You and me, we go where we can see the sun on the grass. Don'tcha know, you say yourself you like it. We'll see the birds in the sky, the blue sky."

"Ye-es," she acknowledged, doubtful and wondering.

Without invitation Polkadot raised the hinged counter top and entered. It was the first time he had been inside the shop. But he did not pause. He went on past the swaying curtain, the girl on his heels.

In the little room that was revealed to him was a table, two or three chairs, a little kitchen stove, a bare, clean floor, with driftwood from the water cut into short lengths and stacked along the wall behind the stove to dry. Above the cord of wood was a window, and he saw that it looked out upon the water.

Two doors gave off this main room, and he boldly opened them and peered beyond. One was a storeroom crowded with odds and ends. The other was a sleeping room, two-thirds dark.

Polkadot struck a match. In its flicker he saw the glinting of a brass box in one corner. He seized one of its handles and tugged, but the box was so large and heavy that it scarcely budged. He tried the lid, but it would not come up. The box was carved with dragons.

Little Flower that Shines stood on the threshold looking at him. When he went toward her she gave back, so that in a moment they were out in the first room. Perspiration of excitement stood on his face like a fine mist. He took hold of her shoulders and made her face him, and looked into her eyes, as he had looked commandingly into many a girl's eyes.

"Will you go away with me?" he whispered.

She tried to draw herself loose but he would not let her go. He set his fingers into her shoulders until she winced.

"I—don't—know," she gasped. Then, "I see about it."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Ye-es. I tell you somethings tomolly night."

"No, no, will you go tomorrow night? Run away with me?"

She looked into his eyes, searching, weighing. He crushed her fiercely to him, in the way he had with women, kissing her lips and face as probably she never had been kissed before. When he relaxed a little she lay in his arms without resistance, looking up at him with that searching gaze that seemed to be discovering and fitting together many things.

"You'll go with me?" he begged and declared at the same time.

"How we go?"

"What does that matter? In an auto. On the train."

"But—you have moch money?"

He flicked a thumb toward the sleeping room. "Money in that brass box," he said. "All we need is the key. You can get that, can't you? So you can go with me away from this stinking tide and the seagulls' clatter?"

She drew out of his arms, as if her questions were sufficiently answered. "Tomolly night sure," she said, and ran into the shop to answer a man pounding on the counter for chop suey.

Leaving, Polkadot congratulated himself that he had added a Chinese scalp to his trophies, but, knowing women, he knew that he had not won until he had both the girl and the money away from the house.

He laid his plans. These included two important points. First, if the girl resisted him as to the money chest—he had no other thought than that the weight of the brass box was caused by the heaviness of much gold and silver—he would have access to the strongbox anyhow, at any cost. And second, he would take no chances on a frame-up with the police, in case the girl told old Wu.

The Wolf of the Waterfront ensconced himself in the room of a dilapidated hotel across the street in the course of the night, and from daybreak until noon watched Wu's place to see that no officers went there. At noon he went down for food, and ordered chop suey at the counter from Little Flower that Shines. As he ate Wu conveniently disappeared for a moment,

and the wife took advantage of his absence.

"Tonight!" she whispered. "Bring

boat. Tie it under the window to the pilings. Savvy?"

"Under the window in the room there?"

"Ye-es."

"Just what's the idee?"

"We go in boat—slip off in night, nobody see."

"I getcha," he praised. "Fine girl! Great scheme!"

The winter darkness was on before five o'clock. That gave Polkadot an hour in which to arrange about the boat before Wu would leave for the club. He would join the girl immediately Wu was gone, at six or thereabouts.

When the city lights came on, Polkadot left the hotel again, with the coast all clear, and struck out along the wharves for a nook where the salmon fishermen's boats lay. Among them he knew he would find small rowboats, for he had done so before in cases of need like this. As he had anticipated, he had no difficulty in finding just what he wanted. It was a gusty, rainy night and nobody was around to bother him.

He chose two boats, placing plenty of line in the one that he rowed, and set out, towing the second skiff.

He knew the waters well enough to go straight to the piling that held up the tenement where Wu lived. He was an indifferent swimmer, so he made his way over the filling tide and the choppy waves with all the caution of a man who fears the water. The rain whipped at him and the wind pulled and tugged, but he was playing for big stakes and he forced himself to keep on in spite of his fears and difficulties.

The window was easily picked out. Polkadot knew his waterfront geography well. Besides, a candle burned in the window. Its meaning thrilled the Wolf. She was giving him her active assistance! Also, it meant that Wu was gone.

He tied the nose of the boat to one piling and the stern to the next piling. This left it directly beneath the window. He saw the girl's plan, called it good—to drop from the window to the skiff and row away, thus avoiding the lighted street and policemen.

With the boat secured, a pair of oars within, and sufficient slack for it to rise with the tide, but not enough to let it get from beneath the window, Polkadot got into the second boat and rowed away a short distance until he found a landing place. There he went ashore and hurried to join the girl. It was past six o'clock and Wu would be gone.

Polkadot, in his arrogant way, was too near his quarry to be cautious now, but there was no need, for Wu was indeed gone. Little Flower that Shines was waiting behind the counter, wearing a heavy American coat and a snug cap. She nodded to his question as to Wu, and he plunged through the shop into the living-room. She was on his heels.

"The boat?" she demanded breathlessly.

"It's there," he assured. "All tied up ready for us."

She shoved a key into his hands.

"The money," she whispered, all excited, and went pushing him toward the inner door.

Polkadot was not beyond all caution. He gripped his automatic, lest there be officers behind the door. But there were not. A light burned. The glimmering brass box was on the floor.

Polkadot used the key, lifted the heavy lid. Within lay four new leather money belts, unsoiled, smelling leathery. He seized one. It was heavy—as heavy as gold!

He tugged at one of the flaps, to open a pocket. It did not respond to his tugging. The girl pulled the belt away from him. She twisted at another flap, and it came up. She shook gleaming ten dollar gold pieces out into her hand, and, smiling, pocketed them.

"Money for chop suey," said she.

She dropped the belt and began to tug at his coat and vest, unbuttoning the latter.

"Put the belts under," she said, "the vest over."

Her fingers fairly flew. She seemed to be doing things more than he. He wanted to look in other pockets of the belts, but

she laughed and hurried on, helping him get the four belts around his body. When buckled on securely they formed a stiff and weighty leathern barrel about his torso, from waist to armpits. She held up his vest and coat, then his overcoat, for him.

"Now," said she, "come!"

She led him to the window over the cord of broken up driftwood. She unlatched the window and flung it outward on its hinges.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she urged. "Wu maybe come."

Grunting because of the heaviness and stiffness of his burden, Polkadot got upon the wood in a sitting posture with his feet hanging out. Then he twisted and turned and finally slid through with his stomach across the sill. He could hear the wash of the swift, deep tide below his dangling feet.

The girl snatched up a bundle, stood waiting for him to slide on out, apparently ready to follow after him.

He wiggled and shoved, the stiffness of the belts binding him a great deal, but at last he was through. He checked himself momentarily, clinging with his hands to the sill, so as to acquire a perpendicular position before he let go his hold and dropped to the boat.

The girl put her face into the window above his, looking at him. He let go, to drop into the boat not three feet below.

But the boat was gone.

The girl heard a great splash. She listened for a full minute, then closed the window and latched it. She dropped the bundle and threw off her cap and coat, and stood there with her delicate little hands over her face. At first she trembled, but this left her, and presently she took her hands away. Her lips moved as if in prayer.

She went to the door of the room that was used for junk and opened it. She turned on a light. Old Wu, wrinkled and ugly, sat cross-legged like an idol on a pile of old burlap sacks.

"It is done," she said, "exactly as you suggested, from the first unto the last. But the pruning hook with which I cut the ropes of the boat is very dull."

Early next morning the body of the Wolf of the Waterfront was found on the tideflats. The afternoon papers said that four money belts about his body were filled with Chinese *cash*, that were worth only a few dollars, but were sufficiently heavy to sink a man, and that the pockets of the belts were sewed shut, save one that was empty.

EVERY APPLE TREE ITS OWN BASKET

WIND is one of the greatest enemies of the apple farmer, September storms frequently breaking off the loaded branches. All sorts of devices for bracing the limbs of apple trees to withstand hurricanes and the weight of extraordinary crops have been tried, but the Wooster, Ohio, Agricultural Experiment Station has developed the most ingenious of these. This consists of interlacing the limbs of the tree in such a way that they brace each other. It has been found that branches up to ten years old can be so crossed and attached that they actually grow together, so that the crown of the apple tree may, in a sense, be woven into a basket which will withstand any storms short of tornadoes.

INDIAN COLORS

SOME of the squaws were quite expert in dyeing; and nearly everything an Indian owned, including their own bodies, were dyed or painted. They got their yellow from the bow wood—and from a light yellow moss found on the branches of the fir trees in the Rockies; their light red they got from an ochre; bright red from the bloodroot, from a root of one of the madder family, from ochre and from the buffalo berry; their black from the juice of the white walnut, the bark of the elder, from one of the aster family, from clay and from plumbago. Orange they obtained from the roots of a sorrel and from ochre. When the traders came they brought with them other colors, especially the much prized vermilion, and they had the missing blues and greens.—C. E. M.

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

YOUR PREFERENCE

EAST is East and West is West, but there is at least one attribute held in common by both, and that is—material for a rattling good story. And, though some of us may prefer the West and some the East, some the North and some the South, when a really talented writer starts spinning an absorbing, rapid-fire yarn, be it short or long, he gets our attention, and SHORT STORIES readers are quick to give him their generous applause.

The Readers' Choice Coupons have now been in operation for almost a year and are acting as a reliable guide to your likes and dislikes. The long stories have the advantage, of course, and lead the shorter material by a considerable margin. Especially interesting is the fine showing of Western stories. Frank C. Robertson's "The Range Defender," Robert Ames Bennett's "Tyrrel of the Cow Country," B. M. Bower's "Power," Romaine Lowdermilk's "Tucker's Top Hand," and W. C. Tuttle's "Cultus of Cuyamac" and "30-30" all met a fine reception. But a good story, be it Western or not, gets your recognition, as is proved by T. Von Ziekursch's Northern story "Empire of Timber," H. Bedford-Jones's Chinese story "East!" Bertrand Sinclair's Northern story "Test of the North" and Hapsburg Liebe's Southern tale "The Iron Chalice," which made their way right up with the leaders.

AMONG THE NOVELETTES

L. Patrick Greene is another popular favorite who scores repeatedly with the Major. "A Matter of Range," "Concessions," "A Major Development," and "A Personal Interview" found places among the leading novelettes and long short stories, keeping company with H. Bedford-Jones's Eastern tales, "Everything for Nothing," "A Tale That is Told," "The Murder Ship," and "The Black Dragon."

LEADING SHORT STORIES

In the field of the short stories we find Robert Ruddy, A. E. Ullman's happy-go-lucky reporter, sprinting along with the leaders, "Alias Santa Claus," "Front Page Stuff," "Mr. Fido," and "Too Many Crooks" carrying him well up to the front. Again the choice was well distributed over the four major points of the compass—"Hawkeye Sam's Banking," a Western story by J. Allan Dunn, "The Head Hunters," which goes into South America with Robert Lenmon, "The Cajun of Bayou Lafourche," Meigs Frost's story of the South Coast, "The Code of the Pony Express," Earl McCain's story of the 1880's, "Under Fire," Edwin Hunt Hoover's forest fire story, and Robert Russell Strang's Northern story "Make Gold While the Water Runs," sharing honors among the leaders.

Altogether the registering of your preferences through the Readers' Choice Coupons, is not only very interesting, but a big help to us in our efforts to make SHORT STORIES just what you want in every particular. Many of you say it is that now—fine; but we'd like to make the vote unanimous. Keep up the good work with those Coupons!

THE BALIZE

VERY interesting indeed is the quaint old ruin in which Meigs Frost has laid his story, "The Penance of the Marshes," in this issue. The story of The Balize is one of the most colorful in American history, yet it is a safe bet that not one out of a thousand has any idea what "The Balize" means. Of this queer place and of his adventurous trip to it, Mr. Frost says:

> Two years ago I made a trip down there with boat and crew. Then when I got back I dug after the data in the Louisiana archives. I gasped when I found it. All that remains today of The Balize is the old iron tomb—all that is left above the ooze, of this remarkable settlement. The door has been shattered by vandals hunting for pirate treasure. Inside were two quaint old cast-iron coffins of the 'sixties, which, too, had been shattered by sledges. One was a woman's; one a child's. Amid the child's rigs were intertwined the iridescent skins of snakes that had crawled in there to shed.
>
> By the way, getting to the tomb, I nearly

cashed in. My six feet and hundred and ninety pounds made a sweatful job of leaping from tuft to tuft of marsh grass, chopping through the roseau-cane with a machete, and carrying a graflex slung at shoulder, with rolls of film and stuff, at the same time. I slipped. By pure luck as I went into the slime feet-first, my arm clamped over a grass-tuft. Helpless! Did I holler? I'll tell the world I did.

That cast-iron tomb, after nearly half a century or more exposure to wet salt air, was rustless and rang like a bell. The epitaph, used in the story, is an accurate transcription. The only survivor of The Balize I have been able to find is an aged, very aged, Mrs. Laurie, now living out her few remaining years at Pilot Town. The tomb is all that stands. The rest is sunk in immeasurable alluvial ooze.

We had to slash our way with machetes through the roseau for several hundred yards from the shore at the very head of Redfish Bay. At the time when The Balize was founded, a little more than 200 years ago, when Iberville first raised his sea-beacon—the "balise"—it was the outermost point of land at the mouth of the Mississippi. The Gulf of Mexico stretched beyond. Now all that's built up beyond it is seven miles of marsh! The river siltage has built all that up since then.

GOVERNMENT LOTTERIES

THE story of how a story came to be written would in many cases no doubt be as interesting as the story itself. A wooden vessel that was fitted out as a floating cannery in Seattle, Frank Richardson Pierce confesses was the inspiration for his novelette, "Deep Sea Dollars," in this issue. Of the Government lottery which helped to get the story under way, he says:

It is a surprising fact that the Government frequently resorts to a lottery to give something away. However, the illegal lottery is one requiring the payment of a fee for a chance, whereas Uncle Sam has something he wishes his nieces and nephews to have. To be fair and not favor any particular individual he awards it by lot. A cannery site on the Columbia River was recently awarded in this manner.

Reds, as they are called in Alaskan waters bring the best prices, so naturally, it was the Reds that our floating cannery sought. In the Puget Sound and Fraser River country the Reds are called Sockeyes, and in the Columbia River they are known as Blue Back salmon. It is settled, however, that it is the same species.

A FIRST APPEARANCE

IN THIS issue it is Barry Scobee who makes his first appearance in SHORT STORIES with his story, "Heavy Money." From his home in the northwestern tip of Washington he writes of his experiences.

Missouri is where I chose to be born, but about the time I was twenty-one I fell in love with Texas at first sight. I've picked cotton, helped survey, soldiered, reported, and run a country newspaper in that state, besides doing several other things.

I put in one hitch in Company H, 9th U. S. Infantry, getting to the Philippines after the troubles were all over, when soldiering had got hard. For a few years I was newspaper writer, doing some of my work out of San Antonio on the Rio Grande as staff correspondent.

The barren Southwest appeals to me—the far views, the clear-cut skylines. I like the Pacific coast, anywhere. Have been up here in the extreme Northwest four years. This is a great country. From my shack I can see three snow-capped ranges—Canadian Coast Range, the Cascades and the Olympics. Do some mountain hiking with my pack on my back, and like to fish, when they bite.

OUR NEXT

"FROZEN GOLD" is the name of Austin J. Small's novel which will open our next number, a novel of the Yukon and Alaska in the days of the great gold strikes. Raw gold clutched in the hand of a half frozen and half-dead prospector sets Cedar Falls and all the Yukon on edge, every musher ready to take the trail when the location is divulged. Honest prospectors, thugs, crooks and claim-jumpers—and the red uniform of the Mounted Police to see that justice is done, are among the characters. It is a colorful action story you will not want to miss.

With it J. Allan Dunn will have a novelette of adventure in the South Seas, a fitting companion to "South!" Among the short stories writers will be our old friends Harley P. Lathrop, H. Bedford-Jones, Meigs O. Frost, and Romaine H. Lowdermilk. And, of course, the second part of "The Desert's Price," William MacLeod Raine's sterling serial.

THE MAIL BAG

WE CAUGHT this reader when he was on a fishing trip and we've held him ever since:

READERS' CHOICE Editor.
DEAR SIR:

The first copy of SHORT STORIES I ever read was along last summer on a fishing trip. We had bought several magazines to read while on the trip and one happened to be a SHORT STORIES. It was my time to stay on duty one night so I picked up the copy of SHORT STORIES and began reading. I was to be relieved at one o'clock but when that time came I was so deeply interested in the story I was reading that when I did look at the time it was near four o'clock—nearly daytime.

Well, I made a night of it with my SHORT STORIES and I have been calling at the newsstand twice a month since.

Yours for SHORT STORIES and more of Tuttle, H. Bedford-Jones, J. Allan Dunn and B. M. Bower.

CLAUD MARLOW,
Wynnewood, Okla.

A cold winter night and "South!"—this CIRCLE member considers it the ideal combination:

READERS' CHOICE Editor,
DEAR SIR:

Enclosed please find four READERS' CHOICE COUPONS. I enjoyed my first pen and ink drawing very much and am looking forward to the next one.

"South!" by Dunn was simply great and would sure like to see more of his stories.

Tales by Bedford-Jones are greatly enjoyed and to sum it all up cannot say enough in praise of your magazine.

On a night like this, which by the way is very stormy, the wind and snow roaring eerily around the house, SHORT STORIES is just like a real pal.

With best wishes for the continued success of SHORT STORIES, I am,

Yours sincerely,
NOBLE O. DENNEE,
53 Forest Ave.,
St. Thomas, Ontario

Another enthusiast of real Western stories is with us:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES for some time. I enjoy every Western story printed. "Tyrrel of the Cow Country," "The Range Defender," "30-30," and several others were especially good. So many writers write about the West and don't know what they are talking about, but the writers of SHORT STORIES are real men. I am sending in six coupons for a pen and ink sketch.

Yours truly,
R. W. HAMILTON,
Box 723,
Hamilton, Mont.

Short and to the point is this one:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

If a book should contain one story 'I didn't like,' I would never handle it again.

That's why I've been reading SHORT STORIES only, for—as long as I can remember.

Yours for SHORT STORIES,
DAVE CERNER,
619 North 18th Street,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Many were the enthusiastic letters brought in by "Power," B. M. Bower's novel of the Colorado River. Take this one for instance:

Editor, SHORT STORIES.
DEAR SIR:

Just a few words about your magazine SHORT STORIES: in my estimation the best magazine on the newsstands, and I have read at least one copy of every magazine printed. Have been reading SHORT STORIES for the last three years.

In a recent issue, "Power," by B. M. Bower, I considered to be a most wonderful story. I have never read a story that took my eye as this one did. There is more to "Power" than just the story.

Western and Northern stories are my dish. W. C. Tuttle and Clarence Mulford are favorites with me.

Wishing you continued success, I am,

ALFRED J. NORMAN,
139 Andis Ave.,
Geneva, N. Y.

SHORT STORIES makes its way to some adventurous places and to some lonely spots. Here is a homesteader in South Dakota who finds it a good companion:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

I have been a constant reader of SHORT STORIES for the past two years, and read same from cover to cover. I like the stories by Hendryx, Raine, Mulford and W. C. Tuttle best of all. They sure make good reading for a homesteader, which I am at present.

ARTHUR C. AVIS,
Dewey, S. Dakota

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

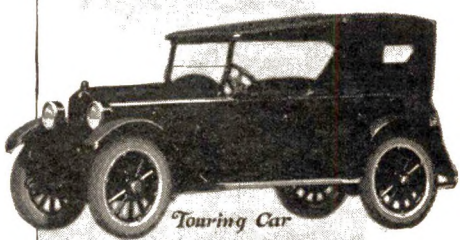
_____ Why?_____

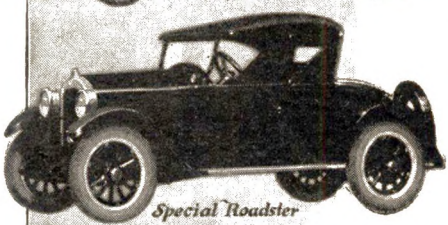
NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

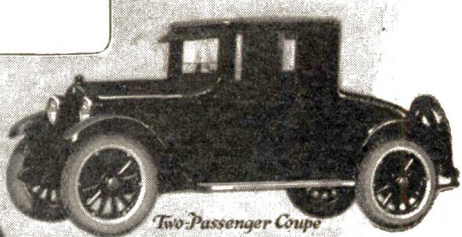
ONE chassis, one standard of quality, with a type of body to meet every personal transportation need.

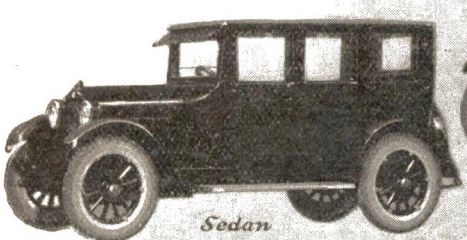
One quality—and that the high Hupmobile standard—because Hupmobile manufactures its product complete in its own extensive factories, and exercises the most rigid control over the raw materials which come from outside sources.

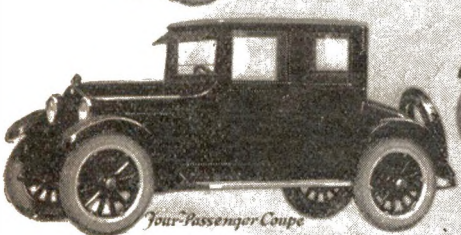
The beauty and value that are built on sound design; and a design that works first and last for the comfort and safety of the passengers, and the lasting satisfaction of the owner.











The New

Hupmobile

Do You Envy the Health of Others?

Read these remarkable statements of what one simple food can do

THERE is nothing mysterious about the action of Fleischmann's Yeast. It is not a "cure-all"—not a medicine in any sense. But when the body is choked with the poisons of constipation—or when its vitality is low so that skin, stomach, and general health are affected—this simple natural food achieves literally amazing results.

Concentrated in every cake of Fleischmann's Yeast are millions of tiny yeast-plants, alive and active. At once they go to work—invigorating the whole system, clearing the skin, aiding digestion and assimilation, strengthening the intestinal muscles and making them healthy and active. *Health* is yours once more.

ABOVE

"UP to a couple of years ago I never have had regular intestinal action. I worked on this defect in many ways—abdominal exercises, vegetarianism, occasional medicine, Dr. Coué . . . Fleischmann's Yeast has been the only agent that, with me, ever produced normal movement continuously. And as a natural consequence, I now feel finer in other ways—enjoy everything more: food, work, play. Even my pipe seems to smoke better!"

(A letter from Mr. Henry J. Carroll of St. Louis)

AT RIGHT

"I AM a graduate nurse. Back in 1911 while in charge of an operating room, I was afflicted with boils. I tried many remedies—still boils came, and I got run down and unable to carry on. Finally a physician told me to take Yeast. . . . That was twelve years ago, and I have never had a boil since. I have used Fleischmann's for hundreds of patients and for any number of different ailments. I am glad to say that twelve years have not dimmed my enthusiasm for Fleischmann's Yeast or staled my appreciation of what it has done for me and for others in the course of my professional life."

(Miss Ann Batchelder of New York)

AT RIGHT

"RUN-DOWN and ill from overwork, I had local neuritis, stomach acidity and insomnia; a formidable array of enemies for the brave little yeast cake to tackle! Yet in two weeks friends began to take notice. . . . In a month my complexion was clear and lovely, stomach in perfect condition, nerves 'unjangled,' gone the 'All worn out' feeling, and I was able to sleep like a top."

(Extract from letter of a Chicago business girl, Miss Dorothy Deene)

ABOVE

"IRREGULAR hours, eating in snatches, desperate hurry . . . nervous, little or no appetite, slept poorly, and worst of all suffered from constipation. Then I tried Fleischmann's Yeast. Almost at once evacuation was easier, no stomach pains, no heartburn.' Today—'practically complete elimination of bowel trouble, clearer skin, sounder sleep, *better health*.'"

(Extract from letter of a New York reporter, Mr. A. Kandel)

EAT 2 OR 3 CAKES A DAY REGULARLY

—before or between meals—plain, dissolved in water or milk or spread on crackers or bread. A cake dissolved in a glass of warm water before breakfast and at bedtime is especially beneficial in overcoming or preventing constipation. Fleischmann's Yeast comes in the tinfoil package—it cannot be purchased in tablet form. *All grocers have it.* Start eating it today. And write us for further information or our free booklet on Yeast for Health. Address: Health Research Dept. Z-1, The Fleischmann Company, 701 Washington Street, New York.

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Quality Cars at Quantity Prices

Chevrolet now leads all high-grade cars in number sold.

Our new low prices have been made possible through doubling our productive capacity.

We are now operating twelve mammoth manufacturing and assembly plants throughout the United States in which thousands of skilled workmen are turning out two thousand five hundred Chevrolets per day.

Notwithstanding our recent big reduction in prices the quality and equipment of our cars have been steadily increased.

Today Chevrolet is beyond comparison the best dollar value of any car sold at any price, due to its low average operating and maintenance cost.

Chevrolet Motor Company, Detroit, Mich.

Division of General Motors Corporation

Chevrolet Dealers and Service Stations everywhere. Applications will be considered from high-grade dealers only, for territory not adequately covered.

Prices f. o. b. Flint, Michigan

SUPERIOR Roadster	$490
SUPERIOR Touring	495
SUPERIOR Utility Coupe	640
SUPERIOR Sedan	795

Commercial Cars

SUPERIOR Commercial Chassis	$395
SUPERIOR Light Delivery	495
Utility Express Truck Chassis	550

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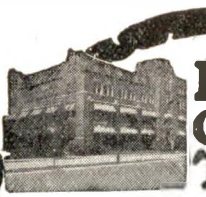

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Cream shortening; add sugar and cream again. Add one egg at a time and cream thoroughly after each addition. Add fruits, nuts and raisins, then milk, and stir well. Sift flour, salt, spices and baking powder and mix well with rolled oats; fold into first mixture. Drop from spoon on cookie sheet. Bake in hot oven (400 degrees) for 15 minutes.

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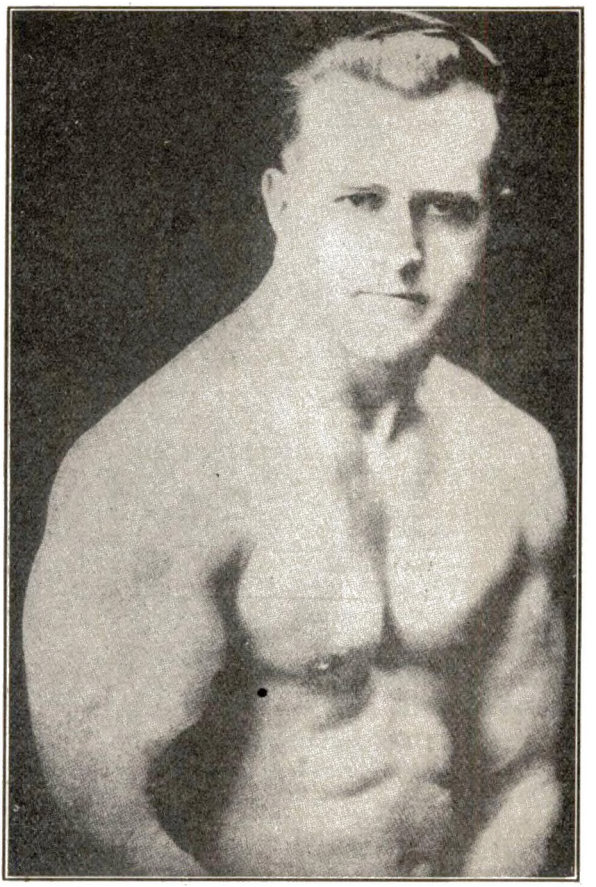

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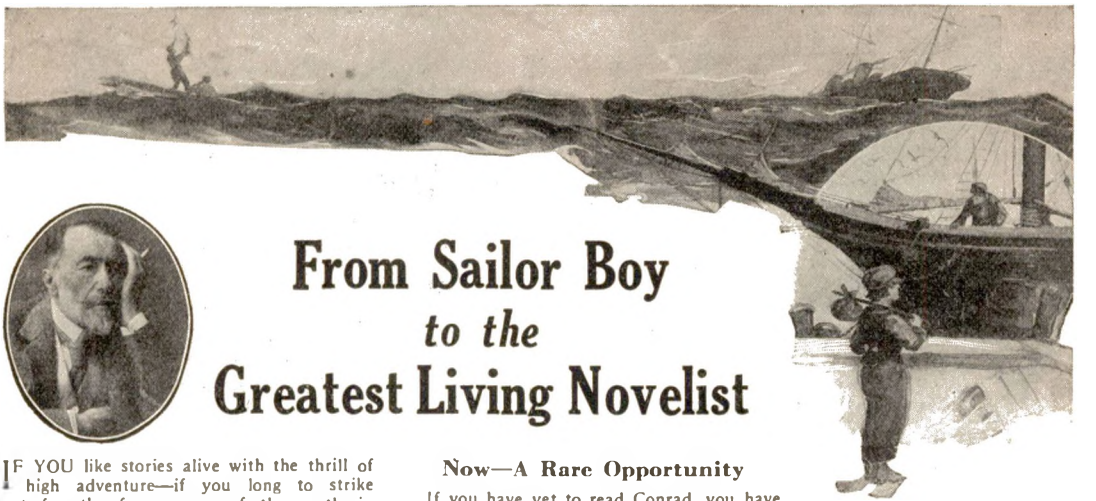

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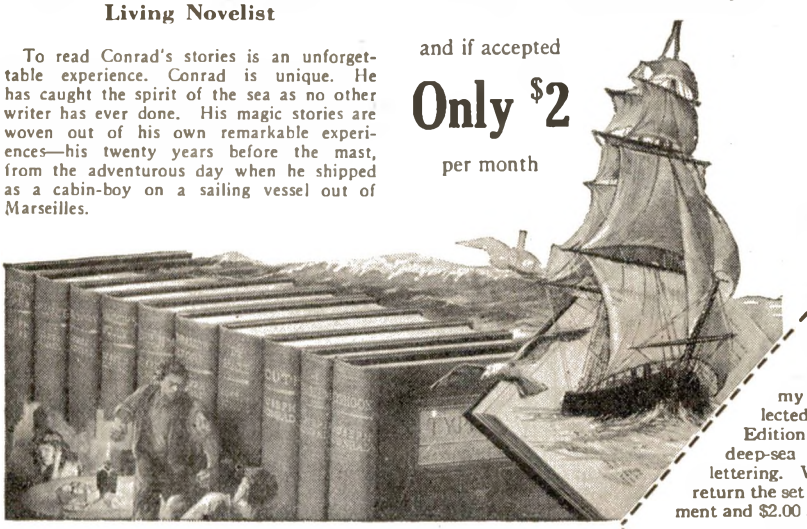

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FLASHLIGHTS
& BATTERIES
–they last longer

BOTH PREMIUMS

FREE

50 inch Table Cloth and 6 Napkins. 6 Silver-Plated Knives and 6 Forks

This superb 110-piece set, with initial in 2 places on every piece, decorated in blue and gold, with gold covered handles, consists of:
12 Dinner Plates, 9 in.
12 Breakfast Plates, 7in.
12 Soup Plates, 7¾ in.
12 Cereal Dishes, 6 in.
12 Fruit Dishes, 5¾ in.
12 Cups
12 Saucers
12 Individual Bread and Butter Plates, 6¼ in.
1 Platter, 13½ in.
1 Platter, 11¾ in.
1 Celery Dish, 8¾ in.
1 Sauce Boat Tray, 7¾ inches
1 Butter Plate, 6 in.
1 Vegetable Dish, 10½ in., with lid (2 pieces)
1 Deep Bowl, 8¾ in.
1 Oval Baker, 9 in.
1 Small Deep Bowl, 5 inches
1 Gravy Boat, 7¼ in.
1 Creamer
1 Sugar Bowl with cover (2 pieces)

1 Brings 110-Piece Martha Washington Blue and Gold Decorated Dinner Set

Send only $1 and Hartman, the Largest Home Furnishing Concern in the World, will ship this complete 110-piece set of exquisite dinnerware and with it, absolutely **FREE, the beautiful 7-piece genuine "Indian Head" linene set and also the six silver-plated knives and six forks (pictured above).** *Use all these things on 30 Days' Free Trial.* Then, if not delighted for any reason, send everything back and Hartman will return your $1 and pay transportation charges both ways. If you keep them, take nearly a year to pay for the Dinner Set—a little every month. Nothing to pay for the Linene Set and Knives and Forks. They are Free.

IMPORTANT!

Dinner Set guaranteed absolutely first quality—no "seconds." Standard "open" pattern. Replacement pieces may be had of us for 3 years. Each piece wrapped in tissue paper. Packed to prevent breakage.

Your Initial in Gold, Surrounded by Gold Wreath, in 2 Places on Every Piece (Gold Covered Handles)

Beautiful, clear white Colonial Martha Washington Set. Every piece decorated with rich gold band edge, mazarine blue follow band and 2 pure gold initials in Old English design, surrounded by gold wreaths. Handles are entirely gold covered.

Just Pin Dollar Bill to Coupon and Mail Now!

FREE Bargain Catalog

Over 300 pages (of which 68 are in actual colors) of the world's greatest bargains in **home furnishings,** jewelry; also farm implements and accessories, etc., **all sold on easy monthly payment terms and 30 days' free trial.**

Free Gifts

Book explains how you get glassware, jewelry, table linens, etc., FREE with purchases. **Send a postal today.**

"Let Hartman Feather YOUR Nest"

FREE "Indian Head" Linene Finish 50-inch Round Table Cloth and 6 Napkins to Match—also 6 Silver-Plated Knives and 6 Forks.

With every Dinner Set we send Free a handsome 50-inch round table cloth and six 17-inch napkins to match—all of famous "Indian Head" linene with scalloped embroidered edges. Also 6 knives and 6 forks of fine, heavy silver-plate in fleur-de-lis pattern. Send at once. Offer is limited.

Order No. 320FMA22. Bargain Price, $33.85. Pay $1 now. Balance $3.00 monthly. The 7-piece Linene Set and the 6 Knives and 6 Forks are FREE.

HARTMAN
Furniture & Carpet Co.
Dept. 6070 Chicago, Ill.

Largest Home Furnishing Concern in the World

HARTMAN Furniture & Carpet Co.
Dept. 6070 Chicago, Ill.

Enclosed find $1.00. Send the **110-Piece Dinner Set No. 320FMA22, Price $33.85** as described, and with it the 7-Piece Linene Set and 6 Knives and 6 Forks absolutely FREE. It is understood that if I am satisfied I will send you $3.00 monthly until full price of Dinner Set, $33.85, is paid. Title remains with you until paid in full. If not satisfied, after 30 days' free trial, I will ship all goods back and you will refund my $1.00 and pay transportation charges both ways.

Print Initial You Want Here

Name .....

R. F. D., Box No. or Street and No. .....

Town ..... State .....

Occupation of Head of Household .....

How long have you lived at present address? .....