"Pleased to Murder You"—a mystery novel—PAUL ERNST

Short Stories

January 10th — Twice A Month

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Beginning . . .
A great new novel of
Chinese adventure
AN INCH OF TIME
by
James Norman

Why not try a SHAVING CREAM *Guaranteed not to contain any SECRET WEAPONS !*

Why try to blitz your beard, when you can smother it with kindness!

In every way worthy of the name, because made to the Listerine standard of quality

Men, if you want your whiskers to surrender unconditionally, why rub 'em the wrong way? You may only provoke extra resistance if you attack your beard with mysterious ingredients and secret formulas.

There's a better way, a gentler way, that is easier on your temper and the temper of your blade.

You begin by squeezing just a little of that fine, concentrated super-soap from the big sea-green and white tube of Listerine Shaving Cream. Then you quickly brush it up on your face into a cool cloud of moisture-laden lather.

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THE 35¢ TUBE THAT LASTS AND L-A-S-T-S

month after month after month

REMEMBER, THERE ARE 2 TYPES OF LISTERINE SHAVING CREAM

Out of this tube come swell shaves for men who prefer no-brush cream

J. E. SMITH
President
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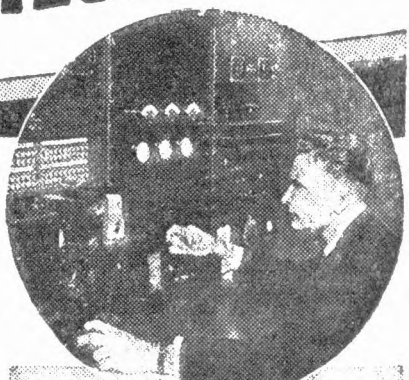
(Our 30th year)

I WILL SEND A SAMPLE LESSON FREE

to PROVE I can Train You at Home in Spare Time to

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN



BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying, technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS (bottom illustration), a booming field today, pays many Radio Technicians $30 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week EXTRA fixing Radios in spare time.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

I Trained These Men

$200 a Month in Own Business

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1st Lieutenant in Signal Corps

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"I am engaged in spare time Radio work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy."—THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Pa.

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The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show you how to earn extra money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week EXTRA in spare time within a few months after enrolling.

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The opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE Lesson and 64 page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4AM, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY

Short

Every author's finest and

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LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

JANUARY 10th, 1944

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COVER—Benton Clark

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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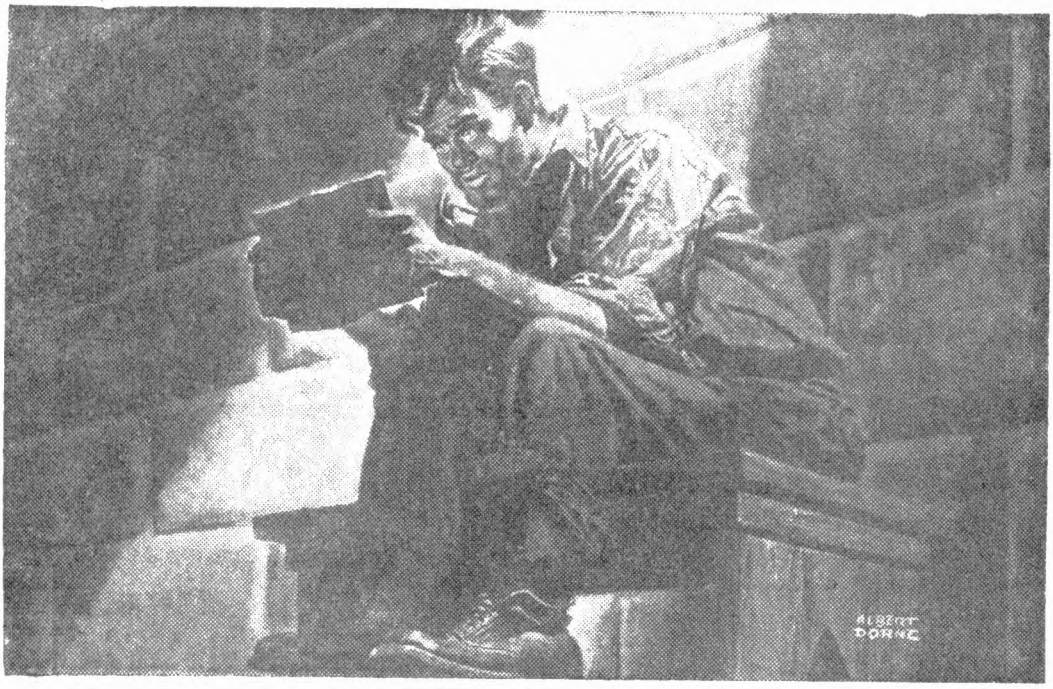

Letter to a P.O.W.

WILL YOU WRITE a letter to a Prisoner of War . . . tonight?

Perhaps he was left behind when Bataan fell. Perhaps he had to bail out over Germany. Anyway, he's an American, and he hasn't had a letter in a long, long time.

And when you sit down to write, tell *him* why you didn't buy your share of War Bonds last pay day—if you didn't.

"Dear Joe," you might say, "the old topcoat was getting kind of threadbare, so I . . ."

No, cross it out. Joe might not understand about the topcoat, especially if he's shivering in a damp Japanese cell.

Let's try again. "Dear Joe, I've been working pretty hard and haven't had a vacation in over a year, so . . ."

Better cross that out, too. They don't ever get vacations where Joe's staying.

Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

But if somehow you find you can't, will you do this? Will you up the amount you're putting into your Payroll Savings Plan—so that you'll be buying your share of War Bonds from here on in?

BY THE PUBLISHER OF THIS MAGAZINE

This advertisement prepared under the auspices of the War Advertising Council and the U. S. Treasury Department.

In Your Mind's Eye

The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

IF you just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must be* brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing*? Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, "If only I could bring it about—*make it real*?"

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

ACCEPT THIS *Free* BOOK

Let the Rosicrucians tell you how you may accomplish these things. The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization), a world-wide philosophical fraternity, have preserved for centuries the ancients' masterful knowledge of the functioning of the inner mind of man. They have taught men and women how to use this knowledge to *recreate their lives*. They offer you a free copy of the fascinating book; "The Mastery of Life." It tells how you may receive this information for study and use. Use coupon opposite.

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(AMORC)

SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA

The Story Tellers' Circle

An Inch of Time Is Worth—Well, Something

JAMES NORMAN, whose novel "An Inch of Time" starts in this issue, tells us that he could stand a couple of inches of time himself. He's got some more writing on the fire, including two books. All this in the shadow of the "father draft" which, we suspect, he secretly hopes won't pass him by. Says Norman about "The Inch":

The Wutai Region wherein the story takes place is an area that is really a lot more exciting than I could ever make it in a book. It is entirely surrounded by Japanese forces who have failed to dislodge or destroy the Chinese Republican forces there. Actually, the Shensi-Chahar Border Government there sort of grew up like Topsy. Chinese organizers from the former 8th Route Army (now the 18th Route Army) penetrated behind the Japanese lines, began organizing points of resistance. The thing grew until now there are over 10 million people in that island of freedom behind Japanese lines. They have their own Kung ho (American, Gung Ho) factories, school, hospitals, etc.

They, thus far have done the major offensive fighting against the Japanese Invaders, have taken the greatest toll of lives and equipment. In fact, their main source of military supplies is the Japanese army for they are constantly raiding supply trains, arsenals, etc.

The government there is built on the Three-Three-Three idea, that is, three elected members from the 8th Route Army (red), three from the Kuomingtang Party of Chiang Kai-shek, and three elected to represent the various industrial cooperatives, farm groups and Taoist and Buddhist centers.

I've based a good deal of my story background on what I know of China, and on information brought out from that region by various observers and friends who were fortunate enough to be on the spot during the present campaigns. Major E. F. Carlson (now Lieut.-Colonel, who organized the Carlson's Raiders of the U. S. Marines) crossed through the Japanese lines with Chinese guerrillas and spent a good deal of time in the Wutai region, bringing back valuable information. Incidentally, Carlson modeled his Marine Raiders on the 8th Route Army Guerrilla pattern. Other men such as the late Dr. Bethune, who contributed all his medical training to causes such as the Spanish Republican cause and the Chinese cause, lived in or near Wutai. Dr. Bethune died there. He was America's first major casualty in the fight against Japan.

I've taken some liberty with Chinese geography and personalities to make the story. Actually, there is no spur running from the Chengtai Railway to Pao-lai. Nor is there a Pao-lai. For story purposes these are my only impositions on the map of China which has been long suffering anyway.

Teng Fa, who appears in the story, is actually Teng Fa. . . . The real Teng Fa, however, is a stocky, sparkling eyed, very lively warrior. He's the head of the 8th Route Army military police. (At least, he was back in 1938. Since then I haven't been able to discover where he is. He may be dead now, though I doubt it, because he has nine lives. I suspect he's somewhere deep within the Japanese lines, causing them a hell of a lot of trouble.) Anyway, he's a fellow who likes to joke with Americans, doesn't mind being written about, and gets a tremendous kick out of confounding China's enemies with his unorthodox methods of operation.

General Nieh is still fighting in the Wutai region. He is quite young and one of China's best tacticians.

Although "An Inch of Time" is primarily an adventure story, I hope it will contribute somewhat toward an understanding or a better understanding between ourselves and China. For SHORT STORIES readers who are interested in getting a still clearer picture of the guerrillas in the Northwest (mainly the Tungpei or Manchurians) I suggest reading "Village in August," by T'ien Chun. It is the most popular book in all China, since parts of it have been dramatized and presented by mobile theaters for those who do not read. "Village in August" was finally translated into English a year or so ago.

James Norman

Guys Who Go for Cash

WILLIAM HEUMAN, creator of "You Dig on Last Down," weighs into the honored argument, college football vs. the pro variety. Bill Heuman knows his sports and, although we like to remind him of his recent World Series choice (the wrong one) anything he says is likely to be pretty good evidence.

Before the discussion is considered closed, though, we want to give enough time for the folks around South Bend way

to write in and inform us in no uncertain terms that some of the great Notre Dame teams could've walloped any pro outfit that ever existed.

Now what was that you were saying about professional ball, Bill Heuman?

"As you may have surmised from my story, I am a pro football bug and would like to give the "guys who go for Cash" a little plug.

"It's been about ten years since I stopped attending college football games to watch the pros. I watched the first great Green Bay eleven at the Polo Grounds and have never seen the equal in sheer power. That was about 1931 or 1932.

"Undoubtedly, anything you use in this vein will be heatedly disputed by the college fans, but a man must stick to his convictions. The pros have the power, the experience, and the pick of the land. Recently they have been getting the best coaches into the business, viz., Jock Sutherland of Pitt, Gus Dorais, etc. These boys must know what they're doing.

"The old argument comes up that the pros don't give their all, and I maintain it's the bunk. When a man's battling for food on the table and schooling for his kids, he'll give plenty in view of the fact that up to the war the competition in the pro loop was terrific. From 1930 to 1940, depression years, the college boys were coming out in droves without jobs and trying to hook up with the various pro clubs. A man who wasn't on his toes every minute of the game would be kicked out soon enough, and big boys knew it. They gave till it hurt and I saw them Sunday after Sunday—Ken Strong, Bronk Nagurski, Dutch Clark, Ace Parker, Benny Friedman, Cliff Battles, Baugh, Luckman, Nevers, Hubbard, Hutson, Isbell, Herber, and I could name dozens of others.

"These boys got their training in the colleges, but their diplomas in the toughest loop going. Who developed the "T" and who made the passing game what it is?" *Bill Heuman*

Happy Killer

PAUL ERNST, whose complete novel appears in this issue, is becoming increasingly well-known for his detective yarns. Apparently these come easily, for his wife reports that when he's pounding away on tales of strange death his expression is most peaceful; occasionally he does some of his most gruesome work with a purring kitten in his lap. Love stories, on the other hand, often throw him for a scowl or a frown.

Strict advocate of office hours for writers —although he doesn't always keep them himself—Mr. Ernst says that he got out of every day business ten years ago after having dug up the old rhetoric to find out again what a split infinitive was. Frankly, we haven't looked to see how many split infinitives there are in *"Pleased to Murder You,"* but we know you'll agree there's a whole lot of other things.

Scribe from Down Under

"ARCTIC PASSAGE," William Lynch's tale in this issue of SHORT STORIES, is a far cry from the author's own native paddocks—fields as we call them here. Lynch is one of those writers from "down under"; he tells us he was born twenty-nine years ago in New South Wales, Australia. His education was strictly Australian, too—St. Patrick's College and the University of Melbourne.

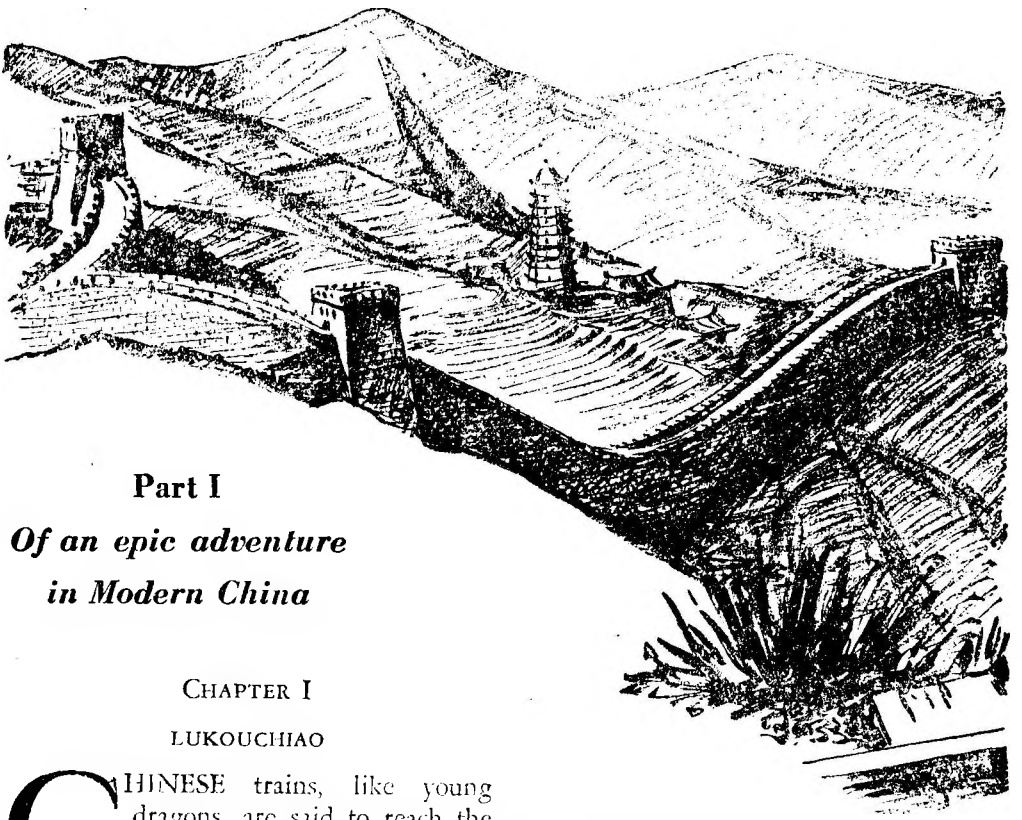
Says Mr. Lynch further:

Began writing at the age of 20. The first two years' output was characterized by a continuous stream of rejection slips. During that period I was cursed with a love for attempting to write good stuff as opposed to the average magazine story. Probably in this I was influenced by my past life of roving and near escapes. I fell into line and wrote formally (although firmly convinced that life does not fall into any format) and had little trouble in achieving continuous publication.

But the Australian market does not allow too much success, consequently, like every other Australian writer, I had to take a job. Grape-picker, gardener, sub-editor of a provincial weekly, proprietor of the same journal, lecturer in literature at Hopewood House Girls' Finishing School,

(Concluded on page 97)

An Inch of Time



Part I

Of an epic adventure in Modern China

Chapter I

LUKOUCHIAO

CHINESE trains, like young dragons, are said to reach the age of reason on their twenty-eighth birthday. Of all trains, the Chengtai Express, which works its way out of Peiping and runs toward Taiyuanfu without always getting there, has the greatest backlog of reasonableness. This line has fifteen elderly, wooden, first-class coaches, seventeen accident-cars and a few accidents a week, which means hardly any by war standards.

The invading Japanese Army, which controls the railroad, blames the Chinese for the accidents. When questioned, the latter blandly admit nothing. They silently maintain that the Express does its own reasoning.

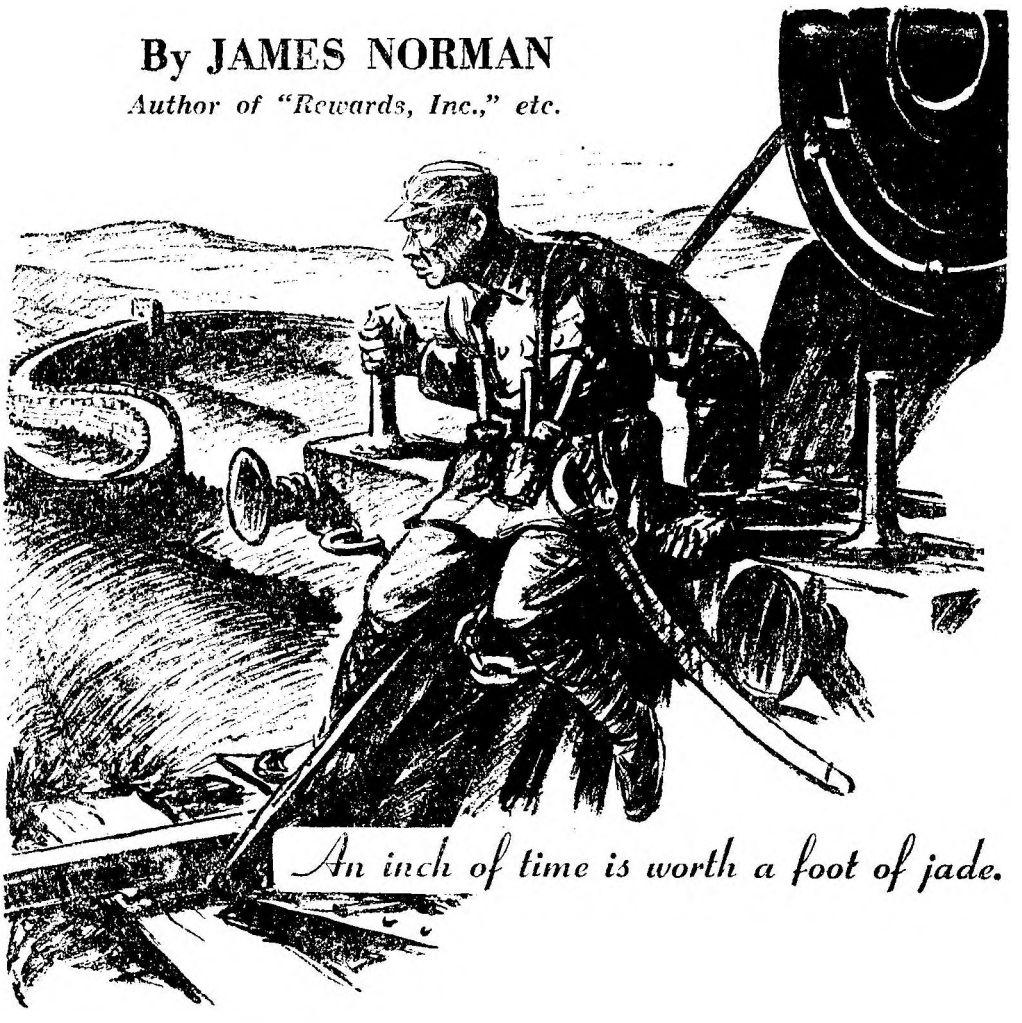
Chugging beyond the ancient Tartar walls of the Forbidden City one cold December evening, the Chengtai Express threaded its way fifteen bleak miles to Lukouchiao where it rubbed the western end of the Peiping-Tientsin Railway. Here it paused in the frigid darkness, patiently considering history. A few hundred yards to the west, the Yunting River slipped by with dark, lacquered, icy smoothness.

At Lukouchiao crowds milled across the tracks. Strange voices, Chinese and Japanese, lifted toward the coach compartments or were whipped away by the cold, dry December wind, sweeping on toward the walled town of Wamp'ing which commands both the steel railway trestle and the marble, thirty-arch Marco Polo Bridge spanning the river. Through the frost-etched train windows one glimpsed sober northern faces as they momentarily reflected the yellow ripple of the station lights.

Endless numbers of shivering Nipponese soldiery patrolled the platform. They wore baggy pants and sweaters, and

By JAMES NORMAN

Author of "Rewards, Inc.," etc.



An inch of time is worth a foot of jade.

looked like badly wrapped brown paper packages. Their short, cocked carbines frowned upon the Chinese coolies loading Japanese heroin supplies which came in heavy black cartons from Darien to Tientsin to Lukouchiao.

While the edged northern wind whipped along the flanks of the train, an American in one compartment watched the laboring coolies. He stared at their quilted blue jackets and the bent, overloaded shoulders with a quick drawn sympathy.

This sympathy had run strong in Paul Courtland during the past few days. It was bred in the certainty that he, like these coolies, was caught on the wrong side of the war and was constantly surrounded by an abeyant danger. But in Courtland, the awareness, the dividing line stood deeper. It had come with him from Manila, just as he had followed the black packets of heroin into Occupied China.

Trailing Japanese heroin distribution was a queer task for him. Normally, he was a business man, an exporter of jades. He was known among jade men as a hard-traveling, shrewd trader. His long, loose figure had become familiar wherever good jade was to be bought. There was a reflection of unhurried sureness in his gray appraising eyes, a deliberate and thoughtful severity. Chinese connoisseurs would say that whenever he saw jade he started with a sharply figured price, but he would always raise it to the maximum, after going through all the elaborate formality of

polite Chinese bargaining. It was his way of helping a good war.

The sight of the heroin being loaded aboard the train made him alert. It turned his thoughts to the coin in his wallet. A Mexican silver dollar with a *chop* mark stamped into it. The dollar was his passport to trouble; the kind of trouble a man must go into blindly, not knowing whether he will come out and start life afresh, or never return. The dollar was linked with the loading of this train, and with the direction this train would take into the night.

Ahead, the locomotive emitted a heavy sigh of steam, mildly intimating it had investigated history sufficiently and was a little disconcerted by the results. Courtland glanced at his watch. Midnight. It was time to leave Marco Polo's Bridge where the first China Incident had occurred. He pulled his coat closer. The cold within the wooden coach cut into him. Outside, the engine bell clanged in the bitter night as the train gave a tentative jerk, rolled forward a few feet, then halted.

Within his compartment, Courtland wiped away the steam dimming his window. Staring out impatiently, his attention paused on two figures near the train: A Japanese major who leaned heavily on his military saber, and a girl. Suddenly his interest sharpened.

IT HAD taken a moment to make sure the girl was a girl and, until he was certain, he showed a momentary alertness that was quick and hard. The girl wore brown slacks tucked into the tops of half-height boots and a heavy, hard-worn corduroy jacket. Her head was bare and her hair was clipped close, boyishly. The way her hair glowed, almost luminous in the dark, reminded him of moonlight striking across fields of wheat. She bent her head as though she were listening, not to the wind, nor to the Japanese officer, but to something within herself. For a second, Courtland thought he recognized her.

The Japanese major's tight lips moved rapidly as he spoke to her. Sounds carried away upon the wind. The major was scarcely five feet tall. He looked as though the cold had contracted him. He leaned on his Samurai sword, gloved fingers toying with the yellow tassels looped through the hilt. His bright, ubiquitous eyes danced up and down the bleakly lit station. He gave the impression that he was disappointed with the station's illumination. It did not properly set off the sparkling medal on his chest—the First-Class Order of the Rising Sun.

Both the girl and the major went toward the train steps. As they passed beneath Courtland's window, the officer spoke in Japanese.

"So, tell General Huang so."

Tell Huang! The sentence was enough to throw Courtland upon his alert. He stepped back from the window. It was then that the girl raised her eyes to his compartment. For an instant she appeared startled, her eyes holding him searchingly, then running beyond.

"Pretty one-piece lady, *ayi?*"

He whirled, hearing the Chinese voice behind him. A boy stood at the compartment doorway. For a moment, he was annoyed that his compartment which he had occupied alone out of Peiping, would carry another passenger. No ordinary passenger at that. Then, a sure gleam of humor replaced his annoyance as he stared at the young Taoist monk who hastily shut the door and pulled all the compartment shades tightly.

The boy-monk faced him. His broad, coppery face glowed with feeling and abundant good humor. Garbed in voluminous yellow robes and wearing a green skull cap with a single quivering yellow feather in it, he seemed utterly outlandish in this first-class railway carriage. Somehow, his appearance came to a climax when he carefully deposited an enormous bird cage upon the seat. The cage was stuffed with shoes, each oddly swollen as though it had been occupied recently

by a foot blown up with elephantiasis.

"*Tsou pa,* let's go," said the monk, waving his hand as though personally directing the train.

A moment later the train began rolling forward slowly. The monk shot Courtland a mischievous glance. He raised the outside window shade and grinned at the darkness and wind which swept by. The train clattered beyond the steel bridge.

Face now wreathed in an informative smile, the monk turned to Courtland again. "Wamp'ing," he said in spotless, precise English. "It means Obliging Peace. War started in Lukouchiao. Incident Seven-seven. You know that, Mr. Courtland?"

Courtland's attention remained on the Taoist as a sharp, constant appraisal. China was large enough to hold a dozen English speaking Taoists. But what was the precise pattern which brought this particular man on this train, knowing his name, seeming to know even more? Except for a single Japanese Special Service Corps officer, no one in Peiping had known that he would be on this train. He had been very sure and careful about that. He had expected trouble in Tientsin, then in Peiping. But not from the Chinese. He had expected, when the time came, to be faced by another—a white man.

THE monk seemed delighted.

"Please," he said, in the same precise English, "you are surprised I know you, Mr. Courtland?

Courtland's eyes were dry of expression. There was something wrong here. Something he had not bargained for. He considered the other slowly, thoughtfully. He remembered Tungwen University in Shanghai where Japanese who looked like, and could pass for native Chinese, were trained as agents.

"Police?" he asked flatly.

"Japan police? Oh, no," replied the monk. He tugged a string of wooden prayer beads through his supple brown fingers. Courtland noticed cigarette stains on the fingers. "But you really do not know me?" the monk asked again. He blew on his hands, warming them.

"No."

The monk sat down.

"So many people know me. Not always distinguished personages like you, Mr. Courtland," he sighed.

Courtland listened carefully and watched the other's expressive dark eyes. They were eyes that told him absolutely nothing. He understood, now, that the monk knew too much about his movements in Occupied China. And the same inner voice warned him that he was seeing this man superficially. Perhaps the Taoist's real self was hiding behind that ridiculous bird cage as men hide behind masks.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

The monk ignored the question. Instead, he lifted the shade covering the corridor window for a second, and Courtland glimpsed the Japanese major who had boarded the train with the American girl. The officer entered the next compartment.

The shade snapped down once more.

"I am to be excused, please," the monk murmured hurriedly. He bent an ingratiating smile toward Courtland and stood up. From his yellow robes a pile of small, paper-covered blue books spilled forth—the *Kan Ying P'ien* or Taoist Book of Rewards and Punishments.

Grinning, he gatherered them up, added the shoe-stuffed bird cage to his load, and left the compartment with his robes swishing colorfully behind him like those of a medieval ascetic who goes around confidently believing that the world is flat. Courtland watched him work his way down the crowded corridor, cheerfully distributing the blue books and crooning anti-evil-spirit incantations.

Settling back in his seat, Courtland smiled, faintly amused and yet keyed by the restless anticipation that lay in the atmosphere of the train. The train's rhyth-

mic movement through the darkness shuffled his thoughts into conflicting patterns. He could still feel the direct impact of the girl's stare and her sense of being startled upon looking into his compartment. He felt the sudden rankling within at the thought of an American girl traveling with a Japanese officer.

The cold crept into the compartment. He moved around for a few minutes, then sat again. A car-boy opened the compartment door, stuck his head in and offered a tea bowl. Courtland took it and paid a few coppers. He glanced at his watch. The night still had five hours to turn. His thoughts raced too rapidly now to think of sleep. He sipped the weak, bitter tea and its warmth made him realize that his body had grown taut.

He felt instinctively sure that new elements were working upon his coming into Occupied China; that before long his own singleness of purpose would be complicated and endangered. The sounds and appearances were there for the reading, even in the chilled air of the train. His glance turned toward the thinly frosted window and he gazed blankly at the sweeping darkness.

Clattering over its aged rails, the Chengtai Express skirted the ominous Taihang Mountains and drove steadily into the night. A flurry of snow met it at one point. It passed through Cho-chau at three o'clock, and Pao-ting at four without so much as awakening either town; then it made for Chengting Junction where, unlike many trains in China, it had a choice. It could either proceed toward Taiyuanfu or branch off toward Hankow.

SHORTLY before the train reached the junction, the compartment door slid back and the young Taoist whirled in. He struck Courtland as a peppery young version of Lao-tse, the founder of Taoism. Lao had been a realistic, chuckling anarchist whose revolt against the three hundred rules of ceremony and the three thousand rules of behavior had set China on its ear during the fifth century before Christ.

He watched as the bird cage was returned to its original seat. "So many people to visit General Huang," said the monk. "You are going to see General Huang, Mr. Courtland?"

Courtland watched the Taoist obliquely His gray eyes ran steadily over the monk's now serious, coppery face.

"Never heard of Huang."

"*Ayi.* You fool me," said the monk. "But I know. I always know everything. If I do not know everything, then I am ready to start knowing everything." His voice lifted, speaking against the clatter of the train.

Courtland shrugged. His bluff was dead. He asked:

"Who else is seeing Huang?"

The long fantastic feather in the Taoist's skull cap quivered tremulously, vaguely pointing to the next compartment.

"American lady."

"I doubt it. The Express doesn't go to Pao-lai. It passes below it. She'd have to walk miles."

"But I know," replied the monk.

"How do you know?"

"Because I am Teng Fa. You recognize me?"

The Chinese looked up, expectantly.

The name was distantly familiar, but since the war thousands of new names had become familiar in China. Courtland noticed the fleeting expression of disappointment which crossed the young Taoist's bright face. The latter quickly rummaged within the folds of his yellow robe and pulled out a tightly rolled poster. He spread it out with excessive pride.

"There, you see, I am Teng Fa."

Courtland scanned the heavily brushed characters on the scroll. A reward of thirty thousand *yen* was offered for the capture of Teng Fa, Chinese bandit. The seal at the side was a Japanese Army *chop.*

"It is very nice, but not accurate," Teng Fa grinned.

"Nice?" Courtland wet his lips slowly with his tongue. "Fantastic—but straight Chinese," he thought. He warmed a little toward the Chinese. A man displaying a reward poster for himself while on a Japanese controlled train running through Japanese occupied territory played with someone else's marked cards. A man to be admired, for knowing that, too.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Information," said Teng Fa.

The smile he gave Teng was wry. "I thought you knew everything."

"Oh, I do," the Chinese observed confidently. "I know you are going to visit General Huang. Is it to purchase jades? I am not sure. I know you are going to die, also."

Courtland showed a momentary, quick alertness, a tightening of his lips. His eyes fixed on that brown, boyish face. He knew, suddenly, that Teng Fa was not as young as he appeared. Somehow, there was a sense of unreality about the entire situation; a bandit in monk's robes, a ridiculous bird cage stuffed with old shoes. He found it hard now to keep his eyes off that cage.

"I am going to die?" he repeated, then laughed softly.

Teng Fa nodded vigorously, without losing the grin on his face. He acted as though death were something highly diverting. Billowing his yellow robes about, he looked toward the window where the first faint banners of dawn spread across the eastern horizon. The Express flashed past a small white town which appeared on the edge of the track like a toadstool bursting through the monotonous earth.

"Of course someone will murder you," Teng Fa explained. "I am not sure where. Maybe in Chengting, maybe Pao-lai." He paused, then added earnestly. "I do not know who will do it, but I am very interested in knowing why you must die."

That Courtland might die was no revelation. His mind was a restless, logical mind, always considering angles, always fitting uncertainties into concrete shapes. Teng Fa's knowing of what he already knew merely added to the determination which had built up within him ever since leaving Manila. But how Teng Fa knew, was another unfitted part for the puzzle. The unexpectedness of that part made him feel curiously detached, and yet understanding. It was the way things went in China. One had to go along with China's ways to make sense out of it.

"Interesting," he countered Teng Fa. "But you've got the wrong party."

"You are Mr. Courtland?" questioned Teng Fa. "Mr. Courtland of Courtland Amerasia Company. You supply American museums?"

Courtland shrugged.

"Oh, yes," said Teng Fa. "But I am sure of it. I am never wrong about these things."

"Sure of what?"

"That you will be murdered."

Something in the Chinese man's sureness abruptly shattered the air of unreality in the compartment. It was like peeling away formalities. Courtland was now certain that Teng Fa knew exactly why he was going to Pao-lai. He watched the bandit-monk dig a handful of roasted sunflower seeds from the mysterious folds of his yellow robe and munch on them animatedly.

"Mr. Courtland, I will tell you something," he said between chews. "I think you will be wanted by the American government."

Courtland's glance grew sharp and unfriendly. He waited, sure of what the Chinese would say next. On the seat, opposite, the bird cage did a small, heavy dance of its own.

"By the Revenue Department," Teng Fa added. "Your company smuggles heroin into the United States in hollow jades. Is it not so? You have left Manila quickly, Mr. Courtland."

Courtland stood, back to the door now. He eyed the other coldly, waiting.

"Please," Teng Fa grinned. "Someone

threatened you in Manila, then? I am very interested."

"So?"

All at once, the Chinese became preoccupied with the clicking of the train wheels over switch tracks as the Express approached Chengting Junction. As the train's speed quickly slackened, Teng Fa went to the window.

"You have a metal-dollar, I think?" he asked, without glancing at Courtland. "Sun Yat Sen variety—no, it would be Mexican?"

Instinctively, Courtland let his hand drop to his side, toward the wallet in his pocket. Then he stopped the movement and frowned. Teng Fa seemed to intercept him.

"No, do not bother, Mr. Courtland," he observed, without taking his eyes from the dawn landscape outside. "We are arriving at the station."

Courtland slid his hand into his pocket. Feeling his wallet, he checked the tautness in his fingers. The last few minutes had drawn on his alertness and he had to force himself to relax and face the window as the new railway junction revealed itself in the bleak morning light. Ten Fa's back was still turned. Even that turned back had its way of talking. The Chinese had succeeded in putting him on the defensive, somehow taking a moment of sureness out of him.

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL'S EGG

ALTHOUGH Chengting Junction is considered the gateway to Shansi Province, the real portal lies forty miles to the southwest where Ancient China built a north-south spur of the Great Wall just to prove that mountains are small things, and as an afterthought, to divide Shansi from Hopei. There, in Shansi, stands the biggest collection of mountains in North China—the Wutai Shan.

Stretching beyond Chengting, the Express tracks cut through a gap in the Great Wall, skirt these snow glazed mountains and curve off toward Taiyuanfu. Halfway between the Gap and Taiyuanfu a new, Japanese built railway spur swerves up from the regular railway line into the smaller mountains to Pao-lai. Being a stone and mud town with but one coal mine for industry, Pao-lai had existed for five centuries without much distinction. Even its name was nothing to remember, for names of Chinese villages, unlike those of cities, are not poetical. The draft upon the Chinese language by the endless multiplication of hamlets and villages is too great to be successfully met. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century, when Puppet General Huang entered history, that the town gained any convincing "face."

But General Huang could give anything face. Writ in very broad characters and weighing within three hundred pounds, he dominated Pao-lai and the surrounding county. He belonged to the old school of high-domed, handle-bar mustachio warlords. His fame was such that foreign-style journalists even came to Pao-lai to cover him. Huang's history was very short and spectacular. He was a man who could burn a candle at both ends with more success than Nanking's traitorous Wang Ching Wei. During the war he became the only puppet in China capable of maintaining relations with the enemy by keeping his *hsien* peaceful so the Japanese could get Pao-lai's coal, and at the same time, he supplied the Chinese guerrillas in the higher mountains with medical goods from Peiping so that the guerrillas would not attack him. He was shrewd enough, however, to know that this was a temporary truce.

Stationed in an elaborate, well-guarded compound, Huang enjoyed life. He absorbed culture in a way befitting his gargantuan size. He collected rare jades without always paying for them. In addition to jades, he had developed a sensitive passion for *pitan,* ancient preserved eggs

which are planted in lime soil, in dated rows, and after a passage of time, make good eating.

Railroading was another of the general's hobbies. In a moment of affluence, mixed with a little *Tiger Passion* wine, he had traded a priceless jade incense urn for a locomotive direct from England. The locomotive was brought to the mountains by truck and packmule and there assembled. Since Pao-lai had no railway spur at the time, Huang had the five hundred yards of track which came with the locomotive laid out on the main street. The tracks never went anywhere, but Huang was temporarily satisfied. When the whim struck him, he climbed aboard his locomotive with a few of his personal mercenary guards and chugged slowly up and down the main street, five hundred yards forward, five hundred yards back.

Later, the Japanese built a spur into Pao-lai, attaching it to Huang's five hundred yards of track. This gave the general a lot more leeway. He could go down to meet the Chengtai Express and wave at the passing engineer. At times, the Japanese controlled Express stopped, delivering him a package of rare eggs from Peiping, or some fine, uncut jade.

AT THE same hour that the Chengtai Express carried Paul Courtland into Chengting Junction, General Huang had just finished his first breakfast. He napkined his heavy under-lip when Gimiendo Hernandez Quinto was announced. Quinto had come down from the guerrilla stronghold in the Wutais.

Huang went to his office and squeezed his bulk into a swivel chair placed in the exact center of a huge tiger rug. A moment later, Quinto entered. His heavy fur-lined jacket was thrown open and his sheepskin-lined boots moved silently across the tile floor. Huang watched with absorbing interest. A fleck of admiration for the foreign man showed in his eyes.

Quinto, or G.H.Q., as he was called in parts of China, was a man to be admired —even as an enemy. He was also a huge man with dark, military cropped hair and a broad face burned to the brownness of saddle leather. He had the walk of a hunting cat, yet, when he was not hunting, he looked large, mild-mannered and smudgy-eyed. Mexican, with a great deal of revolutionary practice behind him, he trained Chinese guerrilla fighters for the Chinese Republican government.

He stood there for a moment, his eyes, for all the world like dark intelligent thumbprints, taking in the character of the room as they had done times before. His gaze passed from the porcelain drum stool to the cases filled with jades, then on to the scrolls on the walls. It was as if he were sensing whether something could be out of place. With a final deep sigh, he gazed at the general.

Huang's large, bullet-shaped head was closely shaven, giving him a monastic appearance. *"Qué cabeza!* Like a lemon," thought Quinto. But he had no illusions about the general. Huang's eyes were capable of swift transitions of expression, from narrow craftiness to bland caution, while behind them, stood a shrewd and deadly mind. Quinto accepted all this in full value, and remained always as a cat dozing with one eye upon the mouse playing before it. He and Huang were enemies, thoroughly distrusting each other, yet he allowed Huang a temporary existence in Pao-lai because the latter sold sorely needed medicines to the guerrillas who were entirely cut off from Free China by the Japanese and Japanese puppets. Huang also sensed this, so he burned his candle cautiously at both ends, hoping that some day a wind would blow one flame out.

But, for the moment, the general's mood was affable. He lifted his attention from the jade chop sticks thrust in Quinto's boot top.

"How are you?" he asked in Chinese.

Quinto shrugged. *"Ch'a pu to,* the same."

Huang waited with Oriental patience while the Mexican built himself a cigarette from loose shreds of Fu'ping tobacco. His fingers patted the tobacco in at the ends.

"Señor General Huang," Quinto spoke at last. "I wish to rent the locomotive for this morning, you understand, eh?"

Huang frowned heavily. He did not enjoy thinking at this early hour. The weight of his eight course breakfast rested easily beneath his bulging Sam Browne belt and thoughts disturbed his stomach. This was the first time Quinto or his Chinese guerrillas had ever asked for his locomotive. They usually did not bother to ask. Generally, they stole cars from the Chengtai Express. He recalled rather bitterly that the guerrillas, while raiding the Express during the summer, had accidentally captured the only shipment of *pitan* eggs which his agent had been able to purchase in Peiping.

"You are not going to Chengting?" he asked.

"No."

"To Taiyuanfu?"

Quinto sucked on his cigarette and walked the fringe of the tiger rug, slowly circling the general. He looked through the glass window of Huang's office, pausing a moment to observe the detail of snow upon the Wutai Ranges rising beyond the town. Daylight was beginning to etch out the sharper ridges.

He turned toward Huang, saying, "Only to the hole in the Great Wall."

"That is on the main line," said Huang. "The Japanese forbid me to run on the main line."

"I will run," Quinto replied.

The general frowned again and forced out his thickly rolled lips thoughtfully. He considered the possibility of seizing the Mexican. The reward was large, perhaps fifty thousand *yen*. The Japanese would be pleased. His bland eyes shifted hesitantly toward the smooth handle of Quinto's service revolver. The edges of his mouth dropped and he decided against the reward for the time being. Most likely, a few of Quinto's guerrillas were outside somewhere. Furthermore, had he not launched himself upon a strategy of working off one enemy against the other. Quinto against the Japanese, and remaining safely in the middle? An honorable strategy. General Huang Ti, his namesake, had used it with admirable success during the Sung Dynasty.

"What is at the Wall?" he demanded cagily.

Quinto pursed his lips, speaking without removing the cigarette. "Mountain of Virtue," he answered.

"Ah!" The name struck a responsive chord in the general. He blushed faintly. He had given a great deal of thought to this Eurasian girl, Mountain of Virtue, the one woman in all the Wutais who was *hsiaochieh*. The word itself made him color again; it meant, a woman who was born dangerous—a clever, elusive and attractive woman. There was only one such woman in every century in China.

LOOKING at his watch, the general made rapid calculations. It was just six o'clock. His second breakfast would not be ready until nine. In one hour and a half the Chengtai Express would be cutting through the Great Wall Gap. There was just enough time for Quinto and the locomotive to get there. Huang's fat, stubby fingers smoothed the arm of the swivel chair and his gaze returned to Quinto's revolver butt once more. Finally he sighed.

"The locomotive is very valuable. It is English," he said.

"I am full of understanding," Quinto replied. "There is nothing as valuable as something rare, eh?"

Huang nodded sagely. The conversation had now come to a point where both men could be direct. Both seemed immeasurably relieved.

"One *pitan* egg," Quinto offered shrewdly. "It is worth no more."

"But with the coal-car," Huang protested.

"One egg, *nada más.*"

The general shook his head, but began considering his position. He saw that the Mexican's expression was as bland as his own. The Mexican was very Chinese when it came to a bargain. He displayed an understanding of eggs; that is to the right person, a preserved egg of the right vintage year was worth the price of a small, somewhat old battleship.

"The coal-car will be full," Huang made this concession.

"To the top?"

The general agreed. Quinto came to a halt near the tiger head. Huang breathed a sigh of relief. He knew he had won. The dealing had come off better than either man had anticipated.

Quinto fumbled in his jacket pocket and brought forth a lacquered box. Within its sawdust lined interior, a very ancient, unkempt egg, nested. *"Magnifico, eh?"* Quinto said. Staring hungrily at the ancient egg, Huang considered thoughtfully. Which was worse; his locomotive in strange hands, or the egg? He looked a little depressed.

"Perhaps, if you have a second egg, *Tuchum*. I would go with you to meet the Chengtai Express and Mountain of Virtue," suggested Huang.

THE general's private locomotive, unaccompanied by the general, ran down the sloping spur track from Pao-lai in record time. It broke the icy morning air in sharp streamers of sound. At the point where the spur joins the Chengtai tracks Quinto cut the throttle.

Three broad-faced, Shangtung boys, guerrillas from Quinto's training school in Lingtung, near Sianfu, dropped to the tracks. Two raced for the junction guardhouse, rushing it with spitting guns. The Japanese had no chance. The third boy ran ahead and threw the track switch. The locomotive rumbled on, its clatter muffling the sound of grenades back at the guardhouse.

Gaining speed as it shot along the Chengtai railbed, the engine and coal-car rocked wildly, as though they had lost their grip on reality. One of Quinto's three remaining fighters rode on the cab roof, his peaked cap fluttering in the wind, his submachine-gun ready for action. Another lad maintained steam while a third, a sixteen-year-old Hopei veteran known as Company Three, clung to the cow-catcher. Company Three wore a saber twice his size, and a leather apron suspended below his chest. The apron had stitched pockets, filled with hand-grenades.

THIRTY minutes later the locomotive clattered around a curve and came into full view of the Great Wall and the blue mountains rising in steps beyond. Panting and letting out gusty expressions of steam, the locomotive rolled to a halt and waited, looking utterly bewildered in an expressionless, mechanical way.

Quinto dropped from the cab, then paused to fix himself a cigarette. The cold had died a little on this valley floor, the early sun driving in up toward the mountains. Smoke drifted idly from the Mexican's broad lips as he scanned a rocky footpath which descended from the north and crossed the railway tracks. Then he nodded, satisfied.

A small group rode toward him. There were three more guerrillas and a girl. The guerrillas led a string of shaggy Mongol ponies. Quinto's smile opened as the girl came ahead. She was Mountain of Virtue. The slanting morning sunlight reminded him that Virtue was beautiful, as only Eurasian girls can be beautiful. Her shoulder-length black hair, cut page-boy fashion, framed a face set with dark almond-shaped eyes and lashes that swept her cheeks with an air of constant surprise. Her skirt was western style, but her scarlet, quilted winter jacket was Chinese.

"Good, You are on time, Gimiendo,"

she greeted Quinto upon reaching the tracks.

He lifted her from the pony. "The army camion?" he asked.

"On the little road, a mile in the hills. I did not come in it; but it is there and waiting," Virtue replied. Her Chinese was lilted by soft, pliable tones, the accent of a woman from Soochow.

Quinto nodded, studying his large, ornate pocket watch, measuring the minutes with abundant calm. "Twelve minutes," he announced. "We have much time." He took Virtue's arm and strolled to the locomotive's head where Company Three and the guerrillas fastened heavy logging chains to the tracks ahead. He frowned a little.

The girl read his thoughts and she spoke again.

"Remember, Gimiendo, there must be no shooting of passengers when we take the train. Not until we are certain the one we want is aboard. He is very dangerous."

Quinto clucked in agreement.

"*Pues,* then, of course, he will be shot."

"Naturally," replied the girl.

The Mexican's brown eyes darted toward his six guerrillas and the Mongol ponies, then up the tracks to the Great Wall Gap. His gaze turned to the highway which parallels the Chengtai tracks a short distance southward. A dozen peasants were repairing the road. Quinto raised his arm. One of the peasants returned the signal. They were partisan fighters.

"Seven men and the partisans with their poor weapons are not enough to capture an eight-car train," Quinto observed. "It will leave one car too many. This is very difficult, no? We should derail the train?"

"No," Virtue replied flatly. All at once, she became alert.

Beyond the Great Wall Gap, the wavering whistle of the Chengtai Express sounded. It echoed in waves against the walls of mountains and faded among the pines. "It passes Pei-ling," said Virtue. "That is five *li* distant."

"*Hao,*" Quinto called to the guerrillas. He hurried back to the locomotive.

Swinging into the cab, he signaled the guerrillas to clear aside, then eased the throttle open. "You will watch now," he instructed young Company Three who was at his side. "It is always good to steal freight cars and blow up bridges, but when these are replaced too quickly, or if Virtue does not want anyone hurt on the train, you take a locomotive and chains—*mira*—"

The locomotive gave off a deep, defiant hiss. Its giant drive-wheels spun on the track an instant, flaring up showers of steel sparks. Slowly the engine tugged backward, bolts and plates screaming as the logging chains ahead drew taut.

"You see. It is simple, eh?" Quinto exclaimed with a touch of pride.

Company Three's eyes bulged and his Chinese face lighted as the rigid steel rails resisted momentarily, then yielded. Ties, rails and all slowly curled backward into a gigantic hoop behind the tugging locomotive.

"Each time, it always reminds me of a big watch-spring," Quinto smiled.

CHAPTER III

MANILA JEFF

PAUL COURTLAND watched Chengting slowly unfold as his train rolled into the junction. He noticed Teng Fa withdraw to the far corner from the window, ignoring him, silent.

Even at this early hour Chengting was already prepared. Bells clanged, vendors moved up and down the double platform and the whole train shed filled with a lively mixture of high, piercing voices and sounds. Sandbags surrounded the station. "To remind the Invader that even here he is still a prisoner behind his bright circle of unsheathed bayonets," Paul Courtland thought. A clock with Roman numerals showed six o'clock.

Japanese military police boarded the train, examining hands and fingernails of Chinese passengers. Smooth young hands were dangerous—they belonged to students and agitators.

Courtland glanced curiously at Teng Fa's hands. They were not too smooth. They looked like the hands of a soldier, he thought. Teng Fa seemed to have the same thought in mind. He tucked his hands well within his yellow sleeves, curled up on the compartment seat and promptly went to sleep. A moment later, the station guards looked in the compartment, then went on. Teng Fa slept on.

A tiny gleam of humor crossed Courtland's features as he eyed the sleeping, adaptable Chinese. Then, slowly, the humor changed. His own trouble began darkling within his mind.

"—very interested in knowing why you will die—" Those precisely spoken words of Teng Fa's had a terrific impact when he stopped to think them over. They summed up an abeyant tingling in his body, a building up of tensions. He knew well enough why he might die. That was, at least, more than the Chinese seemed to know.

He wet his lips with a tongue that was strangely dry. His eyes were smarting and tired from the long night. He let his lids drop, but his mind, no longer at ease, traced back to a beginning. He had been at Sianfu then. Buying jades. It had begun with the cablegram. He could still remember it, letter for letter:

PAUL COURTLAND: GUEST HOUSE, SIANFU. RETURN IMMEDIATELY. SIMMS OF FRISCO MUSEUM ARRESTED YESTERDAY. CHARGE SMUGGLING HEROIN IN HOLLOW JADES. OUR CONSIGNMENT. WE BEEN DONE DIRT. AM CHECKING. MEET YOU HERE.

JEFF, MANILA 11-1-41

It had come as an abrupt, sickening shock. A man can make a living in a dozen ways in China. For him, the buying and selling of jades had been the best. It was his way of helping China; of getting her money for food and supplies. He had operated out of Manila, with one field-man hunting out good jades on the South Coast of Free China, while he scouted the jade-rich Northwest provinces himself. It was there that he had found the Ch'ien Lung bowls which had earned him his reputation as a buyer. He shipped his jades back to Jefferson, his partner, who managed the Manila office and supplied a string of American and European museums and dealers with collector's items.

He recalled the feeling that had gone through him when Jeff's cable had arrived in Sianfu. The whole thing was incredible. A mistake. But an hour later he knew there had been no mistake. He had gone to his room in the Guest house to examine the jades he had recently purchased from Kung, the antiquarian, in Sianfu. Fifteen of his jades were hollow, he discovered. As the heroin from each poured out into his palm, he felt sick and washed out, completely stunned. He had been shipping this to the States!

Still dazed, he re-examined the jades. They had been cleverly hollowed out and so perfectly cut their authenticity had fooled even his expert eye. He wondered how long they had also been passing the Customs experts and museum people in the States? Suddenly, he thought he should call in the local authorities and turn the jades over to them. No, Kung would have disappeared by then. News had a subtle way of getting about in Sianfu. He'd be left with no answers and endless suspicion upon himself.

Instead, he had gone downstairs to the bar for a drink. He had needed one.

AND it was there, in the northwest city's fantastic Guest House Bar that he received his second shock. He remembered the sallow, angular cheeked blond man who had dropped, unasked, into a chair beside him. The man was soft voiced and tough. He had reminded Court-

land of a high type Pittsburgh gangster.

"You Courtland?" the man had begun. Then he ordered an undrinkable Chinese whiskey, and drank it.

He himself had remained coldly civil. He had not liked the man's abruptness.

"Just got a cable, eh?" the man spoke again. "Don't let it frighten you. His voice carried with an easy iciness.

Courtland had simply stared at him, still dazed.

"Found the heroin?" the man asked.

"Yours?"

The man smiled at that. His expression was cold and chiseled, like the smiles Japanese silk painters put on geisha girls. The man leaned forward then, talking swiftly and softly.

"You can't go back to Manila, Courtland. Maybe you knew the stuff was being smuggled through your company, maybe you didn't. But you can't go back. And don't dump the stuff upstairs. Take it to Chungking. Wait there until you hear from me, understand? And keep your mouth shut."

His eyes had widened. Anger filled them against this man. Who the devil was he?

"Is that clear?" said the blond one.

Courtland shrugged. The blond man nodded and stood up. The angular lines of his face seemed deeper drawn, threatening. Again, he gave his chiseled smile and left.

That was not the first time Courtland had been threatened. But it was the first time his life had ever been threatened by a soft inflection and a smile. He had sat there alone and very still, aware now that he was involved in something deadly. It was more than incredible now.

But when he thought of Jeff, caught in something that neither of them understood, he made up his mind to ignore the threat of the American in the bar. That afternoon he cabled Jeff to sit tight. Then he packed the heroin filled jades, chartered a plane to Hongkong, and left the Guest House. From Hongkong, he Clippered to Manila.

Arriving in Manila, he had found no Jeff. His partner had died an hour before the plane had come in. Instead, a Spanish-Filipino police inspector had met him.

"Oh, exactly, Señor Courtland," the inspector explained in a sad-eyed way. "He drink too much. *Borrachin.* He drink so much all week, this morning he fall over and break his head. Naturally he dies."

"Normal death?" Courtland had inquired.

"For *Americanos*, yes," replied the inspector.

All this had been said aloud at the Clipper quay, where others could listen. But once free of the crowds, the inspector had taken his arm, showed him to a cab, and then driven him to the Manila Hotel.

At the hotel they had gone to a third floor room.

"Go in, please," the inspector had bowed. When he had entered, the inspector shut the door, leaving him there alone. Then he had noticed that someone was washing his teeth very dramatically in the bathroom. A moment later, Malone had appeared, still carrying his toothbrush.

"Well, Courtland," Malone gave his free hand cheerfully.

Courtland smiled, but poorly. He wondered if he were being arrested now. He had known Malone in Manila, Hongkong and Shanghai. The latter, a plump, grinning American was connected with U. S. Army Intelligence. That, in itself, was an ominous sign.

NOW, while waiting in the train compartment and watching the thin morning sunrise stab coldly at the flow of figures across the Chengting Junction platform, he remembered how startled he had been when he had finished with Malone.

Back there in that hotel room, overlooking the bright, peaceful Manila Bay, Malone had come to the point almost instantly.

He had only taken time to make one drink and he had gestured with toothbrush in one hand, Scotch in the other, while talking.

"Listen, Courtland," he had said."Jeff's been murdered."

Courtland had nodded, suspecting it from the inspector's story. It made him angry, but he buried his anger for the moment.

"Jeff discovered your Amerasia Company was being used by smugglers to take heroin into the States. Apparently you fellows have been buying without knowing it. Heroin."

"He wired me."

"Yes, that's right, but that's not all. You boys have been taken in by a good-sized racket. And Jeff was murdered because he tried to buck it."

"But what?"

Malone had paused, his scrutiny become sharp. Then, slowly, he had shaped out what Courtland now knew and what had driven Courtland into Occupied China. The information was still scattered, but there had been enough.

The Japanese were processing heroin from opium at the port of Darien in Manchuria. From there it was passed by sea to Tientsin, then up into the interior of Occupied China. There, the Japanese passed it over to a middle-man who smuggled it into Sianfu and Free China. From there it went abroad.

The smuggling was done through jade dealers who passed the heroin filled jades from village to village, all the way across the battle lines. The jades were sold to reputable dealers in Sianfu. When they had been bought by exporters like Courtland, the shipment was closely followed and repurchased by the smugglers in America. Courtland's company had been used as a means of transit and a good, safe front.

"There's this jade route, this chain of village dealers who pass the stuff across the lines," Malone explained. "We don't know who they are exactly. We suspect a puppet general named Huang, who lived in the Wutai region, as the source of the hollow jade. He may control the whole dirty business.

"Someone is going to a lot of trouble to see that Japanese heroin gets distributed. There are more direct routes for running the stuff into America than through China. We want to know why it's being done that way and we should stop it."

"It is stopped," Courtland had replied. "My company is wrecked. My partner's dead."

Malone sniffed. "They'll still get it out. We want it stopped, but we can't."

"Why?"

"We're still at peace with Japan and we're not sure if Japan or one of the puppets is running the heroin racket. Officially, we can't do anything about it, and at the moment, Intelligence isn't in position to send a man in to check on General Huang and stop the business, if he's the one."

Now, still standing in the train, he thought of Malone's words. His glance crossed the compartment. Teng Fa still slept, snoring a little. The cold within the compartment was unchanging and compact. Out upon the Chengting station it looked warmer. The train gave a tentative jerk forward, then halted again. The delay piled up his inner emotions.

He felt the same inner tension, the sensation of being trapped by something greater and more dangerous than himself, that had come to him there in the Manila Hotel. Malone's argument came back to his thoughts. The argument that had worked out and shaped his coming.

"War is just around the corner, Courtland. For the interest of China and the United States, that heroin traffic must be stopped. You know China, and you know jade, Courtland."

HE SMILED now, seeing the guards at the station, the men who rode with this shipment of black packets aboard the Express. He even smiled at Teng Fa whose

information was not fully exact. He wondered, now, why Malone had thought it so logical that he should come into this part of China as an unofficial, unaccredited agent of the American government. Perhaps Malone had made a neat balance of the fact; had known that his feeling for Jeff, his desire to help his own country and China, and his anger at having been tricked in Sianfu, would tip the scale in favor of action.

He had agreed, and he had picked up the heroin route at Tientsin a few weeks later. It was almost December then and the rains had set in. At Tientsin he also sensed that he was being watched closely. The feeling grew steadily as he went to Peiping. But then it dropped again, lost in the abundant, strained talk of war which occupied the few foreign journalists and merchants remaining there.

He was sure that the American from Sianfu had seen him again in Manila and in Tientsin. And he was certain that he was being followed. He wondered if he had been seen with Malone.

When he applied for a *lu-t'ao* or military pass at the Japanese Military Office in Peiping, the clerk there startled him by pulling out a dossier marked, *"Courtland."*

"You go Special Service Bureau," the clerk said.

"Who?" His surprise had carried over a minute.

"Special Service Bureau. Take care of all business in China for Japan army. Downstair."

He had gone down a flight to the Special Service Office where a bespectacled, stubby officer waited expectantly.

"You wish to go see General Huang? Why?" the officer asked with superficial politeness.

"Business."

"What kind of business?"

"Jade business. I buy for museums."

The Japanese smiled toothily. "Good jade in Peking."

"Better with Huang."

The officer bowed, out-stubborned. "Very difficult see Huang," he said, pouring himself wine from a clay teapot. "You wish see Huang? Need introduction." The officer made quick, bird-like motions with a drawer and pulled out a *lu-t'iao,* already signed, and a Mexican silver dollar. He offered them, adding, "Special *chop.* You give Mr. Chang, has got curio shop at Pao-lai. Will recognize coin. Fix you to see General Huang. You got American cigarette?"

He had exchanged the cigarette for the pass and Mexican dollar. The dollar, he felt, was his link with danger. Once he had used its peculiar value there might be no turning back. And now, he realized, it had already begun to show its value. Teng Fa was aware of it. Then he thought of the American girl, recalling her strange, startled look.

Suddenly his compartment door opened again, and a passenger shoved his way in, taking the seat beside the sleeping Teng Fa. Teng stirred, sat up, looking at the newcomer. His lips parted, then shut tightly. Courtland found himself staring curiously at the new man. He was a gaunt, wiry missionary, wearing a soiled Roman collar and a threadbare, Prince Albert mode overcoat with a velvet collar.

The man looked inordinately stern and prim—as if to make up for the smudged Roman collar. Courtland smiled faintly, thinking of lines he had once heard about a Mr. Eliot.

"How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
With his features of clerical cut,
And his brow so grim
And his mouth so prim. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

HSIEN PING—POLICE!

THE missionary had scarcely settled when the compartment door shot open again. The Japanese major, the American

girl and two brown-clad soldiers looked in. The major's face was eager and ambitious. He carried one of Teng Fa's little blue books in his hand. The girl stood a little behind him, very, still, her eyes impassive.

Courtland saw Teng Fa stiffen, and instantly he sensed an impending disaster, a drawing together of lines and hatreds.

"It is Teng Fa. I'm certain," the girl's quick, even voice warned the major. She spoke in Japanese *kata gana.* "He is quite dangerous."

Courtland felt her stare at him. Their eyes remained engaged for a long, stilled moment. In the corduroys and boots he saw her as slim and straight. There was not much hint of sex about her, he thought. Perhaps she wanted it that way. Her eyes had a manner of looking cool and blue, as if she knew what she was doing. Her mouth was a trifle hard, purposely. Something familiar about her features drew at his memory, annoying him.

The Japanese major listened until she had finished speaking, then he bowed to Courtland and the New England missionary, his face complete and alive with polite, sibilant grimaces. "Sorry, bother you," he apologized. To Teng Fa who now stood, rigid and alert, he was curt, adding, "You give this book?"

Teng became passive, his eyes and face expressionless. The major hissed a little. An atmosphere of rising tension overlapped the thread of politeness injected into the compartment by the major's military bow. Courtland's senses began to measure the change, rounding out and understanding what was happening. It sent cold dry anger into his mind.

The officer repeated, "You give this book?"

Courtland spoke abruptly.

"What's wrong with it? It's a prayer book!"

"Prayer book?" The major bowed politely once more. "Prayer book first three pages. Next twenty pages anti-Japanese propaganda tract. So inopportune."

Courtland saw the girl's glance come toward him, her eyes quickening. "Please stay out of this," she said. Then, shifting easily into Japanese, she spoke rapidly to the major. Courtland interpreted snatches of what she said and his anger went out against her. "He is Teng Fa," the girl said. "He's chief of the *Hsien Ping*, the North Army Secret Police. These are anti-Japanese guerrillas. I've seen Teng Fa in Shanghai before. He's a spy."

Courtland's expression darkened and his thoughts went cheerless and bleak. He glanced at Ten Fa's passive Chinese face, and at the grim-mouthed missionary, feeling an inward shame for this girl was an American, and yet spoke with the Japanese of China. This girl was drawing upon herself all the bitterness the past month had aroused within him.

The mere mention of Teng Fa's name had other effects, too. Both Japanese station guards became wary. They shoved their bayonets at the young Chinese as though he were loaded with dangerous explosives. Teng himself seemed more interested in his bird cage. He retrieved it, then went with the guards with a confident air, as though this were an old and very enjoyable game. His silence heightened Courtland's growing anger.

"Very sorry, disturb you," the major bowed again. He whirled smartly, his *samurai* sword clattering against the door panel, and left the compartment. The girl followed him without glancing back.

SUDDENLY Courtland stepped into the passageway and caught the girl's arm, swinging her about.

"Listen! That was no thing for an American to pull," he said. His voice came tight and deliberate.

She let him hold her arm for a second, exerting that angry pressure. Her eyes met his, and for an instant they showed antagonism and a brief flicker of fear. Then they froze over.

She jerked her arm free and hurried

to the next compartment and stopped at the door, looking back. "Please," she said. "I asked you to stay out of this."

Courtland watched the door slide shut. Shrugging, he returned to his own compartment. From the window he could see the Japanese guards running Teng Fa and his shoe-stuffed bird cage across the platform, into the station shed. His thoughts, seeing this, were suddenly dissatisfied and bewildered.

The train whistle blew a warning signal that broke, mournful and thin on the morning air. The coaches began to roll. Courtland sat down, his eyes swerving from the train shed as Teng Fa was hurried from sight. He glanced at the missionary inquiringly and the latter seemed to understand what was on his mind. The missionary pursed his lips, nodded toward the outside platform, gave a stern clerical cough, saying:

"Friendly chap, wasn't he?"

Courtland felt the lean New Englander's eyes go over him with cold, minute scrutiny.

CHAPTER V

WITH HIS FEATURES OF CLERICAL CUT

COURTLAND stood, shoulder to window, quietly watching the new sun reach tentatively across the land as the train curved out of Chengting Junction and made for the Great Wall Gap. Here, the land was rocky and tortured, at one with his thoughts. It was guerrilla land. Japanese concrete blockhouses, showing up beside the tracks at intervals, gave proof of that. Along the roadbed peasants gathered dead wood, while in some sheltered spots where the thin blanket of snow had not come, farmers prepared the yellow soil for the coming planting of *kaoliang* corn and millet. On the bordering hillsides the lower branches of trees had been broken away by wood thieves, giving them a tufted appearance. In the rising distance bluish hills and bleak white rugged ranges became visible.

He stared at the seat which Teng Fa had recently occupied, and felt a new regret. He had come to like the spirited nannerisms of the young Chinese in spite of his puzzling activities. Teng Fa's presence had kindled a fresh awareness in his method of thinking. The conviction that he alone was responsible for his own destiny had suffered a shock. He knew, now, that there were others, in addition to the American gangster from Sianfu and the Japanese who might be working with or against him. If the American and the Japanese were not aware of these others, then he knew his own strategic position, but without yet having the means to formulate a full strategy. It was like being forewarned. The advantage was his.

From Manila to Tientsin, to Peiping, he had sensed the American's presence. Now, on the train, other and more powerful elements overshadowed it. He had come into this business with his eyes open. It had seemed simple and clear cut. Now, he realized, he had over-simplified. One has a way of forgetting that things are never simple in a war.

He ran his appraising eyes around quickly, letting them search out the missionary again. The New Englander was deeply engrossed in his small, dog-eared Bible. For a few minutes after Teng Fa had been taken from the train, the missionary had warmed up enough to say a word or two. He had applied an old Chinese proverb to Teng Fa. "To be honored is all right; but to be famous is a nuisance." He made it sound personal. And he seemed sorry that Teng Fa was gone.

Now, suddenly, he looked up at Courtland. There was something just a little formidable about him. He nodded toward the window.

"Nice country," he observed in a dry, deliberate voice.

"Poor," Courtland replied.

The train rushed through a cluster of

brown and white blocks, a village. The *Hsin Min Hui*, Japanese sponsored New Peoples Association, flag fluttered over the village.

"Interesting village," the missionary went on. "It is one of the Railway Loving villages. The Japanese have so much trouble protecting their communications from the guerrillas and bandits they make these villages responsible for the safety of the tracks." He leaned toward the window, his eyes brightening. "Did you hear the new law?"

Courtland looked questioningly. The missionary unbent his lips a little, showing the slim suggestion of a smile. He said:

"The Japanese have ordered that no high crops of *kaoliang* or bamboos are to be planted within five hundred yards of the railway. Last year where high corn grew near the tracks, one hundred and nine trains were blown up. It is quite dangerous riding."

With that the missionary turned primly to the subject of the Park Hotel on Bubbling Well Road where certain high Shanghai officials kept their concubines in black marble bathtubs. He was disturbed by vice in China. It was worse than war. And his jaw suddenly grew grim.

Courtland stared at the other with cold-eyed appraisal, trying to make him out, looking for a proper notch that would fit and explain the thin-mouthed New Englander. But his attention swerved to the passageway window. The American girl passed. For a second his eyes clashed against hers. In that instant she measured him; the lash of his muscles, the weight and shape of his character. Then she went on toward the dilapidated second-class dining car which had been added to the train at Chengting.

The odd forwardness of the glance she had given angered him, crystallizing the resolve which had remained latent within him through the night. He passed the missionary, who gave him a straight-laced frown, and went into the corridor. Reaching the dining car, he paused. Most of the reed chairs and tables were occupied by Japanese officers and business men. Their talk rode above the sound of the train in loud, sharp tones. For a moment he stared at them with alive caution, and at the same time inwardly weighing his reasons for following the girl.

He edged down the aisle toward her table, noticing strongly her burnt wheat hair and its look of trimness. She wore an orange scarf at her throat, and the corduroy jacket. She looked up. This time her eyes met his in a friendly stare.

"American?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Mind if I talk?"

The girl nodded toward the empty chair opposite her. "Sit down, Courtland," she said.

His mouth tightened as he slid into the chair. He said, "Where did you get my name?"

He felt her stare run across him with a glimpse of studied interest deep down within her blue eyes. Her face was round and well made. She had a nicely chiseled nose and warm, sensitive lips.

"Where does anyone get a name?" she passed his question back. Then, her entire mood changed. "Mine is Reed. Marta Reed. Let's keep on that subject."

IN SPITE of her abruptness, he sensed a quick open friendliness in her; a friendliness she suppressed against her will. He read this and took the easiest tack, asking:

"Where you from? Frisco?"

"Burma," replied Marta.

"Good raw jadeite there. Upper Irrawaddy River."

"What are you trying to say?" she asked quickly.

He looked down at his watch. In a short time the train would pass one Great Wall Spur, and in another hour at most be at the Pao-lai switch. He raised his eyes again, saying, "Nothing. Nothing at all."

The girl tilted her head and the sun, lancing obliquely into the window, drew golden, burnt threads out of her hair. A train boy set two bowls of tea before them. The girl broke jasmine leaves into her tea and the delicate scent spread through the car.

"Fine warm outside now," the train boy observed, then disappeared.

Marta smiled and glanced from the window to Courtland. A tiny light of surprise showed in her eyes as she stared at his face. The face was composed, but there were angles there which showed a stubbornness and a deliberateness. His mouth was hard and knowing, a mouth that spelled sureness in a man.

Suddenly she reached across, touching his hand, saying:

"Well, ask me, Courtland. Ask me why I turned in that Chinese? You want to know, don't you?"

"I didn't ask," he replied.

"Then I'll ask," she said quickly. "Why are you going to Pao-lai?"

"I'm buying jades."

She gave him a direct glance. "Are you sure you're buying jades, Courtland?"

He nodded, watching her closely, noticing the play of her mouth. She sipped slowly from her jasmined tea, adding, "All right, if you want it that way, Courtland."

His annoyance grew. It edged against something that was familiar about her appearance, and the manner in which she always tacked his name to every sentence as though some underlying significance were attached to it.

"I'm purchasing for Sassoon," Marta's voice broke in again. "Any objections?"

"Sassoon?" He digested the fact undecidedly. Anyone buying for the Sassoon Collection had the largest and strangest fortune in the Orient to bargain with. But, he wondered, would Sassoon send a woman? He doubted it. Presently he found himself feeling warmer toward the girl. Perhaps it was because he had caught her in a lie and she did not know it.

He was on the point of pushing his advantage when her attention lifted brightly to the Japanese major who had been in her compartment. The officer came directly to the table and bowed stiffly.

"Major Tanaka," Marta smiled. "Please meet Mr. Courtland." She looked at Courtland, saying, "The major was Chief of Staff under Kuni during the taking of Nanking."

The Japanese bowed again.

"Beneath honorable General Prince Naruhiko Higashi Kuñi," he corrected the girl. He sat down and his features parted in a formal smile. "You are American, too?" he asked Courtland in Japanese.

COURTLAND ignored the major. Nanking had not been taken as armies take cities. It had been raped and violated. What little warmth he had held for the girl now evaporated and the cold civility built up between them again.

"Americans always such good friends of Japan," Major Tanaka spoke in a crusty tone, shifting from Japanese to English and pulling his breath in noisily with each syllable. "Miss Reed special friend. Very sharp eyes recognize bandit, Teng Fa."

Courtland's voice sounded like an icicle snapping off short. "I thought he was a spy!"

"Spy? No. Very brilliant bandit," Tanaka replied. "Japan always unhappy to shoot brilliant man but Teng Fa has dangerous thoughts, think we have war in China. Is really only China Incident."

"And the war in Europe?" Courtland cut in.

"World Incident, quite unfortunate," Tanaka answered complacently.

Marta interrupted, pointing to the window. Ahead, a half mile, the sprawling arms of the Great Wall spur converged toward the tracks. "The Wall," she said. "In another minute we'll cross into Shansi."

"Chinese poor soldier," the major went on. "Must have wall for protection. Is

therefore proof Incident in China is no war."

Courtland gave an ironic glance and a softer reply. "The Chinese have always fought with success, when they think about it. They're beginning to think about it quite a lot now."

Suddenly he saw Marta attempt to stand. He saw the quick change of expression on her face as she watched the window.

Then the train lurched tremendously. Sunlight stabbed into the windows and stood still. Major Tanaka plunged across his lap, and he spilled his chair back, leaping free. Throughout the diner there was noise and confusion, the clatter of tea bowls upon the floor, men shouting and the hissing of steam.

The two great arms of the Wall outside, having crawled down over endless mountains like a huge caterpillar, seemed to pin the train in the Gap. Courtland felt all motion completely stopped. For a second he had taken Tanaka's plunge toward him as the beginning of trouble. His nerves had gone out coolly to meet this trouble, but now he stood taut and puzzled.

Looking about swiftly, he saw Marta leaning against the table, watching the outside.

Major Tanaka righted himself and, seeing him, began to apologize. The attempt suddenly stopped as the officer's eyes passed the forward door of the dining car.

Tanaka sucked his breath in. "Bandits!"

Courtland's glance followed quickly. He felt his own breath drop coldly into his stomach.

The American missionary stood in the doorway, dominating the car. He looked gaunt and stern, like Don Quixote in his more thunderous moments, and he stared disapprovingly at the confused men and officers in the car. The lean fingers of his left hand tightly clutched the dog-eared Bible as though he were prepared to smite Philistines. The Lüger automatic in his right hand was no decoration either.

CHAPTER VI

PUEDE SER QUE SI

COURTLAND made a gesture with his shoulders and saw the missionary wave his gun. "Your hands up, please," the missionary said in English. His tone was dry as sand, a voice full of the unconscious authority of a man accustomed to making people stand up, sing, kneel and pray without the persuasive need of an automatic pistol.

Courtland lifted his hands slowly, elbows close to his sides. It was incredible that the missionary should be the man Teng Fa had warned him about.

"No movement," the missionary's voice crackled again. This time he spoke in Chinese and repeated it in Japanese.

The passengers drew together in tight little groups and shifted their bodies nervously from foot to foot. Major Tanaka flashed the New Englander an injured glance, as though pleading that this were a matter for personal *hara kiri.* Courtland smiled grimly, remembering Nanking. He hoped it was.

The atmosphere in the car drew out in a quick, rising tension which overshot the utter silence as the train stood motionless on its tracks. Here and there the sound of an indrawn breath betrayed a personal fear that could no longer bear the suspense; a fear that swiftly laced through countless minds. Courtland wondered at the silence outside.

Presently an answer came. The window at his right splintered, glass scattering through the car. Someone gave a cry of pain and collapsed upon the floor. Dropping swiftly, he grasped Marta and dragged her to the floor at his side.

She was silent, but did not resist him. Her attitude, filled with the bland passivity of the Chinese, showed no fear. Her lips were down curving and set and her body seemed slimmer and taut.

From his place on the floor, he could

see a patch of rocky slope through the broken window. Suddenly, a movement traced itself across the slope. A small group of horsemen raced down, clattering around boulders, brandishing carbines and charging toward the train. From somewhere ahead came the dry chatter of a machine-gun.

"Chinese guerrillas," he said, his voice emotionless.

"Bandits," Major Tanaka corrected. The Japanese officer had also dropped to the floor and the color of his cheeks had turned a fine blending of green and gold.

Courtland released Marta's arm. She glanced at him quickly; in her eyes a flash of anxiety, seeing again in this man the sureness, the capableness in danger which she did not want to see in any man now. His sureness was contrary to her needs, standing against them.

Bullets gouged the wooden sides of the diner with leaden insistence. Twice, louder explosions of grenades shook the train. The grenades were answered by fire from the Japanese guards and *ronins* aboard the train. The headlong rush and fury of Mongol ponies clattering in the track-bed, flanked the train. Courtland listened and knew the tide of battle.

"They'll capture the train," he said. "Never miss."

"Who?" Marta asked. Her question sounded mechanical.

"Guerrillas, partisans."

"Then what?"

He shrugged. "Firing squad for the enemy. Their enemy."

Marta seemed to think this over.

"I don't like it," she said slowly. "Why don't you do something, Courtland?" She crouched now, with her shoulder against his.

"I'm not an enemy," he answered quietly.

She blushed a little and drew away, ignoring him. Her reaction was different, and more subtle than he had expected. But he was aware that his remark had put a chasm between them that could not be bridged. It would become a chasm and a torrent not to be crossed while the high tide of war affected each in its own way.

The firing outside let down slightly. The Japanese guards must have surrendered. He saw that the missionary had disappeared. As he started for the door, a Chinese boy, just old enough to be having trouble with short-division, confronted him. The boy valiantly tried to keep the coned muzzle of his Bren gun leveled. A heavy, two-edged Tartar sword hung from his side, its tip scarring the floor. A red tassel swung from the sword handle.

"Get back to place," the lad cheerfully ordered him. To the rest of the passengers in the diner he added, "All stand now. You quiet."

Only half the passengers understood his North Hopei accent and dialect, but he grinned nevertheless. The grin widened on his handsome young face when a quick volley of rifle fire outside announced the business of a firing squad.

Courtland returned to the table. He noticed Tanaka again. The major was gulping swiftly and looked as though he were thinking a great deal about the Emperor and patriotism. The rifle fire repeated and he looked at Courtland. "Unhappy circumstance," he said.

"Very," Courtland replied coldly. An uneasy idea had formed in his own mind. Teng Fa had known that his export company was involved in heroin smuggling. Teng Fa had not known the entire story. If the guerrillas also had only as much information as Teng, they might regard him as an enemy.

He looked outside and there everything beyond the shattered window had become deceptively peaceful. A man rode by on a pony and disappeared from view. He wondered if he should break his promise to Malone and tell them he was working unofficially for the U. S. government. A pitchfork passed beneath his window, its wooden prongs the only thing visible.

Then two figures approached along the track-shoulder and his interest livened.

THE one on the left was a well composed army man with a bandoleer of bullets wound across his great barrel chest. A cigarette dangled from his heavy lips and the smoke curled casually in the chilled air. He was a strangely out of place figure in this corner of China—he was a Mexican.

Walking at his side, arm linked in his, was a really beautiful Eurasian woman. *"Chi mulan,"* thought Courtland. That was what the Chinese called them — female magnolias. She wore a red quilted jacket, a western skirt and lamb's wool boots. Together they strolled up and down in the crisp morning sunlight. The girl's hands fluttered as she spoke earnestly to her companion. Then they came toward the dining car.

"Quinto—Mountain of Virtue," Major Tanaka sucked his breath in gravely.

Courtland was familiar with the names; names which seemed more like legends in China.

The remainder of the passengers in the car were also intensely familiar with those names for when the Mexican and the Eurasian girl entered, a heavy, dead silence held the car. Quinto seemed quite pleased by it. He rolled his cigarette between his white, even teeth and surveyed the passengers. His eyes quietly singled out Courtland and Marta.

"You have found the one?" he asked the Chinese lad with the Bren gun.

The boy gestured toward a goggle-eyed Japanese business man behind Courtland. "Him, maybe," he grinned.

Mountain of Virtue's brows knit in a delicate frown. She pointed out Major Tanaka and protested. "He is the one you must shoot, Gimiendo. The major. He was second in charge of raping and looting at Nanking. I saw him there."

Courtland's full stare went toward her. The one you must shoot! Then the others— He let the thought hang, watching Quinto's smoky eyes flatten upon the major for a piercing instant. Quinto still amazed him. When the Mexican stood, as now, with those giant legs of his spread apart in a characteristic solidness, he seemed rooted in China.

The Mexican was the most natural human being he had ever seen—natural in the sense of a tiger. Yet, when the big man's mouth hung open a trifle, he succeeded, even without smiling, in looking very gentle. Everything about him was large, rugged and gentle except his eyes. They were never still, and were as intelligent as hell. And as merciless.

"Virtue would like the major shot," Quinto explained to the Chinese boy, Company Three. "You will do this favor, no?" His glance encompassed the remaining passengers. "The others will be taken out. All except these." His extraordinary, simple and direct hands made an eloquent little circle to include Courtland and Marta. Then he added, "Officers above *sargento*, you shoot. Other Japanese we must save for educating. Education is a wonderful thing, eh?"

He beamed at Courtland.

Courtland did not let his expression change. His senses remained sharp and attentive, whittled to a point on the thin edge of Quinto's smile. He felt a quickening of admiration for the Mexican and the Eurasian girl. This was war, and even Mountain of Virtue had grasped an understanding of its needs and demands. It was also China, this readiness to give and accept death when the need arose, as though death were something which came at the end of a sentence like a period when there might still be chapters to be written. Indeed, he might be the period at the end of the Mexican's next sentence.

Quinto regarded him whimsically, and then Marta.

"You do not mind if the major is shot?" the Mexican asked abruptly.

"No," he replied, his tone deliberate.

"And you, Señorita?" Quinto questioned Marta.

The girl ignored the question.

"You do not mind?" Quinto now asked Major Tanaka.

"I get military trial, no?" Major Tanaka squared off proudly.

"*Ciertamente.*" Quinto nodded. "We have held this trial yesterday. You were guilty. It was bad you were late for the trial."

The major stiffened. Then young Company Three guided him to the doorway where the other passengers waited to be escorted from the diner. Tanaka no longer trembled. He was deeply preoccupied with the inevitable choice of dying according to the rules of *Kodokai,* the Way of Kingly Men, or, of *Bushido,* the Way of a Warrior. The Emperor would naturally prefer *Kodokai.*

"*Pues, gentes,*" Quinto sighed, after the car was cleared and only he, Virtue, Courtland and Marta remained. "I wish to see the *lu-t'iaos.*"

COURTLAND held out his passport and military pass. He saw that Marta also carried an American passport. Virtue took the papers, studying them. Once or twice her brows arched interestedly as she went through Marta's papers. "The papers are for Pao-lai," she finally announced. "They are both interested in General Huang, I believe."

"Huang?" said Quinto.

"This one," Virtue nodded toward Courtland, "he is interested in jades."

Courtland wondered at the last glance she had thrown him—so personal, so direct. Then her smooth lids narrowed when she turned her gaze toward Marta. He sensed the distinct and embodied antagonism which suddenly sprang between these two women without outward reason. And he knew, in Virtue, he was watching one of the world's best natural poker players.

"Miss Reed," said Virtue, "is also looking for jades, perhaps. You will find her interesting, Gimiendo. She is very rich. A sporting woman. Her grandfather was an imperialist pirate. He built a great fortune upon opium in Calcutta and Burma. But now the Reeds are respectable."

Courtland's glance cut to the window. A nerve shattering volley of rifle fire echoed upon the thin, frosted outside air.

"The major," Quinto commented. "The poor partisans were all very anxious to shoot him together. That is why it was so loud." He moistened his lips and looked at Courtland thoughtfully, adding, "It is a long distance in enemy territory to come for jades. *Venga,* Señor Courtland, you will explain." He took Courtland's arm, guiding him toward the door.

A quick tightening came into Courtland's shoulders, and the knowing that in the next minute there would be a dividing between himself and the guerrillas, or a closing of ties. His thoughts came with an easy, cool swiftness; the ability to calculate and to play the game out as well as the Mexican.

"You are nervous?" Quinto asked.

"Why?"

The Mexican looked enormously tolerant, as though he were accustomed to nursing men along to a firing squad. His fingers held Courtland's arm. They were amazingly powerful fingers, Courtland realized. They directed him down the train steps to the flat, cold sunlight.

"You think I will shoot you?" Quinto asked. "*Puede ser que si, puede ser que no, pero lo más probable es, quien sabe?*" He smiled most expansively over this bit of native philosophy, then translated it. "It might be so, it might not be so, but the most probable is, who knows?"

A railway carriage ahead was burning. Spirals of thick, bitter smelling smoke coiled into the sky while a squad of blue-clad Chinese peasants, armed with every manner of old fashioned weapon, fed the fire with lumps of raw coal.

"Heroin burning?" Courtland remarked.

Quinto frowned. "*Si, hombre.* The Japanese bring much heroin and opium into China to buy out traitors and to break morale. It is a fifth column."

Still unsure of his ground, he glanced at the Mexican. He was finding Quinto more and more incredible.

"What I wish to know," Quinto suddenly asked, "is, do you come with this American woman? Virtue has just warned me that she is not quite friendly."

"Not friendly?" he parried.

"Do you come with her?" Quinto repeated.

"Yes and no."

"The answer is too Spanish," said Quinto. "Who is she?"

"I don't know. She came aboard at Lukouchiao."

"She was with the major, yes?"

Courtland nodded, glancing toward the dining car and wondering what had happened to Marta and the Eurasian girl.

Quinto made a motion with his hand. "Then she is not friendly to China. She will be watched. If she is a spy, she will eventually be shot. I will wait until I get Teng Fa's advice on the shooting of American spies."

"Teng—" He clipped the startled word short. Looking at Quinto, he knew that the Mexican had not caught the momentary change in his expression.

"You know Teng, eh?" Quinto seemed pleased, almost as though knowing Teng could be a passport itself.

"I know him, yes." He kept his expression guarded now, waiting.

"I must take you to my *yamen* in Wutai," Quinto went on. "You will not mind, of course, Señor Courtland. It might be six weeks, or six months."

CHAPTER VII

WUTAI SHAN

HE STARED at the Mexican quietly, sensing the subtle reaction in the latter's voice. The Mexican was deeper, and much keener than he appeared. The fine underplay of his tone had made it seem that he was playing an ace only as a gambler, as a careful picker of men's minds can play his cards. Courtland recognized the tactic; the Mexican's deft turning of the question of Teng Fa back upon him.

He held his silence a moment, considering. He had a few cards in his hand, too. He could tell about the girl and Teng Fa, or not. Then, it occurred to him that since the stopping of the train, the stern New England missionary had vanished. An opening card, he thought. He asked Quinto.

The Mexican looked puzzled. "A missionary *padre?*" he said. "I have seen no one."

"He held us up."

"I think you are mistaken," Quinto shrugged the problem aside. "I, Gimiendo Hernandez Quinto did the taking of this train."

Again he sensed that queer byplay; the feeling that things were occurring around him, things involving his own mission into China, yet he could not penetrate into the knowledge of what they were. But in another moment, he saw the direction of this byplay.

Young Company Three approached, saluting Quinto smartly. He carried a bundle —fur-lined boots, a sheepskin jacket, a felt, peaked Chinese Army cap.

"Mountain of Virtue take American lady to transport," the boy announced.

Quinto nodded pleasantly and took the bundle of winter clothes. "Here, Señor Courtland. It is very cold in the mountains."

"Mountains?"

"*Si, hombre.*"

He was now certain, and it was a chilled, indrawn certainty that ran through him. Quinto knew as much as Teng Fa. The pattern of logic within his mind became glass clear: Teng Fa knowing of the hollow jades; Quinto knowing Teng; the fact that the train had been seized rather than de-

railed or blown up. Quinto, as an adopted Chinese patriot, had decided to eliminate him quietly in the mountains where it would cause no diplomatic problems. Courtland swore quietly at both Malone and Teng Fa.

Company Three interrupted his thoughts.

"All ready," said the boy, speaking to Quinto. "Kao takes General Huang engine home."

Courtland looked quickly at the boy. "Huang's engine?"

"The general's," Quinto nodded in affirmation. He waved his hand toward the lone locomotive and coal-car slowly backing away beyond the point where the Chengtai rails had been ripped up and bent like giant hairpins. Courtland watched the engine disappear. Closer at hand, he saw something that stirred his imagination. The armed peasants had succeeded in tilting the Chengtai Express locomotive and were busily removing the wheels.

"You are amazed, eh?" he heard Quinto ask.

"Why that?"

Quinto's smudgy eyes brightened. "A people who build a Great Wall do not need a derrick to do a simple thing like stealing the wheels from a puppet locomotive." He smiled, eyeing the locomotive wistfully, as though he were unhappy that the entire engine could not be slipped into his voluminous pockets.

With a careless shrug, he mounted one of the lively Mongol ponies a guerrilla held. He pointed at a second pony, saying, "We will ride to Wutai. But be careful, Señor Courtland. They bite."

Courtland slipped into the boots and coat, then mounted the pony silently. He looked at Quinto.

"The cap," said Quinto.

He hesitated, then took the peaked army cap Company Three handed him. Quinto and the young guerrilla seemed to attach some peculiar significance to his wearing the Chinese Army cap with its insignia, a silver sun standing upon a white star. Quinto and the guerrilla boy laughed heartily.

He smiled also. A tight, quick smile that changed with the tempo of his thoughts as his gaze turned toward the wide range of dark and light, solemn mountains ahead, the Wutai Shan. He felt an inexpressionable tightening of his nerves.

A QUARTER mile beyond the railroad and waiting on a rutted, narrow road which followed the Great Wall spur a distance northward before striking off bravely by itself into the Wutai Range, an olive-green army truck waited.

Marta and Mountain of Virtue were already in the cab seat. The back was piled high with equipment seized from the Japanese run train. The booty was guarded by six Chinese, regular army soldiers who went with the truck as auxiliary equipment, much the same as hub caps, tires and carburetor.

The chauffeur wore the uniform of the Chinese 20th Division. He now jerked on a pair of yellow kid gloves and slipped behind the wheel just as Quinto and Courtland appeared.

"*Ho. Tsou pa,* we march," Quinto shouted in Chinese.

"*Ho,*" replied the driver.

A second Chinese boy who carried a briefcase crowded with maps, including one of South Dakota, U. S. A., leaped to the running board as the truck's engine burst into sound. The chauffeur flashed his yellow glove. Rapid fire instructions flew from one tongue to another. The truck jumped a few feet and stalled. The instructions flew all over again. Conducting a truck in China is both a science and a matter of State. In addition to the chauffeur who maintains the high dignity of his office, there are five or more *kench'e-ti,* or petty officers to aid in the ceremony of trucking. One man is a mechanic,

another fills radiators, a third changes tires, a fourth is gasoline-boy. Second in importance is the co-pilot who carries maps, clearance papers, and could sometimes use a sextant and two-way radio.

As the truck lumbered ahead, slowly clawing uphill toward the vast, complicated mountain ranges, Quinto reined his shaggy pony beside Courtland's. He rode easily, his huge body looking top-heavy on the small beast, yet being at one with its broken motion.

"We go this way, Señor."

THE pony veered from the road and picked an almost invisible trail that struck out directly into the hills. A restless anticipation stirred within Courtland.

"It is a short trail," said Quinto. "Very beautiful. You will see."

Courtland stiffened in the uncomfortable saddle. The heavy boots and sheepskin coat weighed him down. His mind ran ahead, playing with the increasing certainty that this would be a trap. A man could lose himself in these mountains, suddenly find a bullet in his chest and who would know? He considered the truck and its cargo. It was quite clear why he had been the one singled out to ride alone with Quinto.

As they rode, Quinto glanced back at him from time to time. The big Mexican, perhaps understood something of what was on his mind for his teeth flashed and his smile melted into a provocative version of an old Mexican campaign song, Zapata's *Valentina.*

Valentina, Valentina,
Listen to what I shall say,
If I am to be dead tomorrow
Let them kill me right away.

His voice rang, full of vigor. It improvised cadenzas in the flamenco style, with rapid savage outbursts of melody and quavering falsetto embellishments that sent a sharp chill running up Courtland's spine. It was like the night songs of the Moros in the Philippines.

"A *bonita* song, no?" Quinto said at last. "You must hear Virtue sing it. *Una muchacha magnifica,* this Virtue."

"Soochow, isn't she?" Courtland asked. "What brings her north."

"I won her. A poker game in Sianfu," Quinto replied.

"Sianfu!" He repeated the name slowly. So Quinto and Mountain of Virtue had also been in Sianfu. Then he asked, "A poker game?"

"Seguramente," replied Quinto. His response came slowly and a little perplexed. "That is something which still bothers me, that poker game. I play with an aviator who has Virtue. The deal of cards gives me a pair of deuces and three little ones of no value. A bad hand, *comprende?* I put it down to roll me a cigarette. Then I pick up these cards again, and—*lépero,* I have three queens and a pair. That is how I win Virtue."

"You dealt?"

"Me? No." The Mexican shook his head. "Virtue did. It is something, eh?"

COURTLAND smiled and relaxed a little. The Mexican was, at least a whimsical hangman. There was something a little too fantastic about the entire situation: a Mexican who wins women in card games; a missionary who is present, then vanishes; a dozen men dismantling and stealing a locomotive piece by piece. Even the hard frozen ground beneath the clattering hoofs of the ponies, and the snow, heavy upon the shoulders of the stunted pines, as they climbed higher appeared unreal. Then to add a final touch to all this, he heard Quinto say:

"You know, I am nothing but a ghost."

He stared at the Mexican.

"I will tell you," said Quinto. He was apparently in an expansive mood. "When Manchuria was invaded by the enemy. Japanese General Honjo thought it would be wise to create situation Number Seven

so he could take Tsitsihar. You have been to Tsitsihar, Señor Courtland?"

"No."

"*Bueno.* Tsitsihar is a city. It was the last provincial capital left to the Manchurians in the far north." Quinto waved his hands eloquently to indicate a sizeable city in cold weather, then continued. "We made a fine fight, my friend General Ma of Manchuria and I, Quinto. It was a wonderful battle except that we did not have any ammunition."

"But you lost," said Courtland, recalling the battle of the Nonni River.

Quinto returned a broad smile. "Temporary," he exclaimed. "General Ma and I have been fighting in the mountains of the north and west ever since. The Japanese are embarrassed they cannot catch someone as big as I am, and someone as small as Ma. So they offer a respectable reward. They kill us many times, but one day we are both absolutely dead."

COURTLAND turned to view the sweeping back trail below him, felt the bitter wind cut numbingly at his face, then turned back, eyeing Quinto again. He held a faint smile on the edge of his lips; an inheld warmth and understanding aroused by the Mexican's story. He was enjoying this, although apart, his instinctive and wary self was on the alert.

"You doubt me, eh?" Quinto demanded.

"Well?"

"*Pero, es verdad,* it is true. I was killed," Quinto went on in a manner unruffled by momentous doubts. "The War Office in Tokyo officially killed Gimiendo Quinto and General Ma. They even captured our uniforms which were being washed. The Emperor took a personal interest in these uniforms. One day he exhibits them to the public of Japan. It is said that he showed the bloodstains, but—"

The Mexican turned slightly, full of the airs of one who is about to spring an important surprise.

"It was discovered that we were in Moscow," he added, blandly. "Only the uniforms were in Tokyo. High Japanese officers became very sick. They offered a new reward, but now, for two ghosts. This is because the Emperor is an infallible man. If he says Gimiendo Quinto is dead, it is necessary that Quinto remain dead, *comprende?*"

With that, the Mexican lapsed into silence, but only for a few seconds. All at once he began swearing in the Shansi dialect at the ponies who obviously only understood Mongolian and flaunted the fact with an independent twitch of their stiff, furry ears. The ease with which the Mexican changed from Mandarin Chinese, to Shansi dialect, to English, impressed Paul Courtland more than the story of Tsitsihar. Quinto seemed to know half the dialects of China, and always with a Mexican accent.

"After Moscow," Quinto began again, "I returned to China; to Lingtung near Sianfu, where I train *guerrilleros* for the Republic. The Chinese, they make wonderful *guerrilleros,* you will see. I am now in Wutai to watch General Huang."

"Huang?" Courtland's interest grew pointed.

"You do not know about Huang, eh?" The Mexican turned, looking at him very thoughtfully.

"That depends."

"*Qué?*"

"Warlord and so on."

HE WATCHED the Mexican riding sidewise on his saddle. He recalled what he had heard of Huang—that the general had once been a model bandit, doing everything foreign editors expected of a Chinese bandit. Huang had somehow gathered a well-trained band of mercenary gangsters and had risen to the status of warlord.

"Huang is clever," said Quinto. "When the Japanese invader pushed beyond Peiping into these provinces, Huang became a politician. He suggests to Japan that he

can be a puppet government. It is something the Japanese need. But, a little later, Chinese *guerrilleros* and partisans come in behind the Japanese lines and accumulate in Wutai and Fuping. Here a great, free family is formed—a family of ten million, and this family makes a Shansi-Hopei-Chahar Border Government which works with Chungking. Naturally, General Huang is worried.

"But he is clever, *un hombre muy pinto*. He follows the strategy of *yu shih wu ming* —reality without a name, and, *yu ming wu shih*—a name without reality. For you Senor Courtland, this is nothing more than splitting a difference with your enemies. General Huang splits differences. Huang becomes a puppet for the Invader and, at the same time, he steals medicines which he sends to our forces in the mountains. It is very satisfactory for General Huang. He stays safely in the middle—for the moment."

There had been an odd accent on the last three words. Courtland's eyes narrowed, staring at Quinto. "For the moment?" he asked.

"Si, claro." Quinto shrugged. "Huang will eventually die."

"You sound positive."

"Oh, yes. Sometime I think I will have to shoot him."

A LONG, drawn out pause followed. Courtland wondered how much the Mexican imagined he would believe of all that had been said. It seemed as though the talk were a trap to lead him into saying something the Mexican wanted. He remained silent now.

The trail had become tortuous and the cold chilled his perspiring body as they climbed higher into the Assyrian-like land formations. They wound through gorges where swift running water cascaded in spite of the intense cold. Slowly, the landscape changed. Now, only the deeper valleys showed marks of the terraced, mountain cultivation which had gone on in this region for endless centuries. The valleys were fewer now, being replaced by rocky, sharp ridges and deep canyons. This was the territory into which the Japanese fighting forces were afraid to penetrate. There was no toe-hold for a tank, no place for a cannon. Here every rock was an ambush. The Chinese had picked their ground well.

The constant upward motion of the pony wore his body to a point where every motion was an intense pain. He fought now to remain alert, to keep the cold and the thinness of the air from numbing his mind. Twice, partisan guards who knew Quinto, suddenly appeared to challenge their course. Then, when the trail traversed a foot-wide mountain ledge, Quinto halted.

Directly beneath the barrel bellies of their ponies, the trail-edge sheared away a thousand feet. Instinctively, Courtland tightened his knees against the saddle.

"Quibo pues, how goes it?" Quinto's greeting seemed to drop, echoing in the abyss below.

"Cold," he answered. Then, all at once, his body went rigid, seeing the tell-tale motion of Quinto's arms just ahead.

The Mexican's elbows had lifted slightly, a motion of pulling off gloves. A quick sense of timing raced through and across his own nerves. He ripped at his glove, jerked it off and slid his hand down for his gun. The reins slipped and the pony danced nervously upon the trail.

Obliquely, he saw that Quinto was again sitting sidewise. The Mexican rested his service revolver on his knee casually. "You are too slow, Señor," he said, his tone soft and tempered.

Courtland gave a slight, taut nod, but without changing the set mask of his features. He had had no illusions that he could draw or fire faster than the Mexican. It had been, as from the first, a matter of sheer chance; a matter of how much coldness could numb a hand; of how much the nervous movement of a pony might create a margin between life and death.

His hand stopped at the cold metal butt of his automatic, for suddenly Quinto lifted his revolver and slid it back into its holster.

"We will begin over again, eh, Señor Courtland." The Mexican showed his teeth.

THE American's nerves loosened and relaxed. The shape of the trail, the downward plunge of the abyss on his left and the rocky shoulder to his right returned within the rim of his vision. His alertness was still unchanged and fastened upon the Mexican.

"What was that for?" he demanded.

Quinto hunched in his saddle, pulling on his glove, presenting his broad back as a perfect, confident target. He urged his pony ahead, beyond the narrowness of the trail. Where the trail widened, the two ponies came abreast.

"You are a little suspicious of me, eh?" said the Mexican. "But you are at least friendly. Otherwise you would have tried to shoot me long ago. I am satisfied."

"I would have shot you," Courtland put in.

"No. You would have *tried* to shoot me," the Mexican made the firm correction. "But the thing that interests me, is, why are you suspicious of me, a *guerrillero?*"

Courtland grinned, spurring his pony along the up trail. He felt as though a weight had lifted from his shoulders and gone crashing down the canyons bordering the trail. Quinto had not been advised concerning his role in the heroin smuggling.

He was now able to watch the mountains with fuller interest. To his left and south, over the heads of countless smaller mountains he could see the steady drop of the land. Somewhere below, invisible at this height, was the Yellow River; and in the great southern range beyond it, *Hwa Shan,* another of the five sacred mountains of China.

At length, the trail crossed a mountain shoulder and, upon reaching the crest, Courtland had the sensation of being on top of the world. The cold here was endless and impregnable. It cut in beneath his boots and the sheepskin jacket, raking his body with intense icy points.

"You see, Señor Courtland," Quinto shouted above the torrent of mountain wind about them. "I told you it would be beautiful. I am one who likes beauty. That is why I fight."

Courtland inclined his head, unable to speak against the wind and his own weariness.

"To the west," Quinto gestured broadly, shouting, "you see the Tung Pu Railroad. You see it if you are higher. The Invader holds it. To the north is the Kalgan Line which they hold too. You see, we are surrounded—but we grow. Wutai and Fuping are the anchors of a big republic behind the Invader's lines." He dropped his hand, pointing to the valley below. "Wutai."

Courtland squinted to keep the snow dazzle from his burning eyes. He saw, below him, one of the most spectacular sights in all China—a breathtaking, mountain locked valley. It was as if it were in miniature; the tiny canals winding in and out lightly snow covered fields; paths dotted with camphors and willows; here and there an ancient shrine, built on an outcropping of rock.

Halfway across the valley stood the town of Wutai itself. Snow and cold blanketed its high, crenelated walls. The snow had melted in places, revealing iridescent blue tile roofs of the city's temples.

"It is a place where only patriots can afford to live," Quinto shouted against the wind.

Courtland glanced at the other and smiled, taking this as a warning.

(*Part II in Our Next Issue*)

Nothing Made Bat Jennison So Rarin', Tearin' Mad as to Be Described as a Hired Gunman

On the Slumgullion Trail

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

Author of "Seven Occasional Ghosts," etc.

"HOW are you hired killers paid? So much per man or so much per bullet?"

If the interlocutor had only been a man! For this chance trail companion who had swung the pinto across the way with sudden violence and volleyed Jennison with this double barreled insolence was a woman!

Jennison squinted hard before he answered and when he did it was in far harsher tones than he had ever used before to a woman.

"Ma'am," he said acidly, "should you be pintin' that disnoble question my way, you can unpint it. My guns ain't fur sale, never was and never will be."

"Yeh!" And her voice crescendoed to a near shriek. "That's what all *paid* gunmen say! You wear two guns and you've got a killer's cold eyes. And you fit the description. Well, we Bulls know how to deal with your kind of bugs! We squash them! I could handle you myself." And her quivering hand like a bird coming to perch fluttered to her pearl-handled revolver.

To Bat Jennison, who had lived for years within whispering distance of death, this was the one unique moment in which he ever experienced fear. Not from her small

calibered pistol; he disregarded it utterly, but rather that for a split second his mind was a sterile field without even the tiniest shoot of an idea that might shunt the hysterical girl from folly. For a moment only. He was master of method and plan when he spoke.

"Ma'm," he stated soberly, "had you achully looked into my eyes, you'd know they wasn't a killer's eyes. As fur your neat little pistol, forgit you've got it. Of course I wouldn't shoot at *you*, even if you popped away at me till doomsday. But I'd hafta shoot your pony, bad as it 'ud hurt me so to do. Fur if I ain't mistook, he's a genuine Apaloosa and I'm guessin' you're overfond of him. Runs like all sixty, I betcha and never sweat up a hair."

It was the one perfect approach, the only usable trail, the sole causeway over a fathomless morass of suspicion and hate. Instinctively her hand retreated from the neighborhood of her revolver to the saddle horn, then on to caress the curved glossy neck. Some of the hot anger died in her brown eyes and the white pinched-in base of her nose fulled out to beauty. Momentary advantage gained, Jennison purposed to exploit it.

"And now," he said whimiscally, "let's you and me return to our flapjacks. What give you the notion that I was a hired gunman fur anybody?"

"Because," she shot back impetuously, "Jim Pike hired one at Walla Walla and I meet you on this road which leads from Walla Walla. And even if you're *not* that man," she hedged slightly, "you fit the description."

"You happen to meet me on this road here in Split Pot Valley," Jennison explained, "on account of the undoubted fact that it straddles my way to the mines on Slumgullion Crick. Thar's where I'm headin' fur. As to Jim Pike, I don't know him, nor Jim Trout, nor Jim Fish, nor any other fin bearin' animule in this said valley. Did he tell you himself?"

It was a probing question buttressed on a solid reason, and for the moment she did not answer.

"No," she admitted finally, "but he bragged to somebody who told *me*."

"Ma'am," Jennison observed shrewdly, "I've traveled up hill and down dale fur more years than I likta think on and my judgment is that this said Jim Pike either never hired a gunman, or if he did, he'd a kept it to himself. Usual men don't tip thar hands that way. My final guess is that somebody made the tale up outen thin air."

"Yeh," she countered bitterly, "but you don't know Jim Pike—"

SHE stopped and Jennison lifted the broken sentence from her hesitant lips.

"I done told you," he reminded her, "that I don't know him. That's final. And now I'd likta ask you a question. Did this *somebody* by any chanct name this reputed gunman?"

"Yes," she nodded, "his name is Bat Jennison."

Not a flicker of an eyelash to indicate surprise, but rather a genial smile greeted her triumphant announcement.

"Ma'am," he said sunnily, "you can sure rest in pieces as the poet tells it. Fur I happen to know this Bat Jennison and whilst he ain't no angel, still and but he ain't a man to hire out his guns to nobody. You ain't in no more danger frum him than frum me."

Chance and an insatiable wanderlust had brought Jennison into the Split Pot Valley. The wonderlust was doubtless congenital. Chance cogged the dice so that his route from Walla Walla to the mines on Slumgullion Creek bisected the trim little valley. And it was a trim little valley housing perhaps fifty thousand acres within its tight ramparts.

Almost round, with a long diameter of some ten miles, a creek halved it neatly. This quarrelsome little creek ran east to west and in bygone ages had carved its entrance and its exit corridors. Deep V

shaped canyons they were that had furnished some fanciful wanderer with the euphonious name, Split Pot. When settlements grew up in the wilderness a freight road felt its way into the valley. Pushing in from the west it traversed the twin canyons, thence on to service the newly established Tenino Indian Reservation and its guardian fort, Mattoon. Recently its head had reached out to the new mining district along Slumgullion Creek some twenty miles beyond the Reservation.

The valley at the center was remarkably level and the turbulent creek ran a course so straight that it gave the distinct impression that it had been laid out on a surveyor's plane. The creek walls were steep though rarely over a dozen feet in height. The freight road ran the entire distance on the south side.

An observant man both by nature and training, Jennison had noted certain oddities about the valley that had been resolved into conclusions even before he met the girl. At intervals on both sides the steep banks of the creek had been cut down to the water's edge, so furnishing drinking fords for the cattle. But these artificially made water gaps were staggered. Never once did they meet face to face. And the bed of the stream above and below these watering places was heavily fenced. Patently there was planned and determined effort to prevent any mingling of stock. It was so unusual that Jennison verified it a good dozen times before he was fully convinced.

Nor was this all. Time was when there had been a good many chummy water gaps where cattle from both north and south could have fraternized or battled as the mood prompted. This, too, had been abated. Each bank of those former trysting places was now barricaded heavily. The conclusion seemed obvious. Whoever the owners north and south of the creek, they were not friends. And because the fences were spanking new and the down cuts showed the indelible stigmata of recent pick and shovel work. Jennison concluded that the rupture in amenities had been recent. What the girl had said was but a corollary to an already established axiom.

A few more miles farther on at the end of the valley and Jennison reached his projected camping place for the night, the town of Rahab. It was a town by courtesy only.

Certain it was that it did stark violence in the way of gaud and tinsel to that warranted by its Biblical connotation. Here the road crossed the creek from south to north and immediately the shallow ford was passed, you were within the corporate limits of Rahab. Three buildings comprised it, grading justly in size from the ford upward. A store-saloon, a stage stand, a hay barn, that was all. There was not even a wood shed nor a cellar.

WHEN his pony in deference to the icy water had drunk daintily, Jennison approached the first building. A man in shirt sleeves stood in the doorway, a man whose body fitted it snugly, though the crown of his Stetson was a foot shy of the low lintel. Jennison gave the conventional greeting while still in the saddle, then dismounted.

"How as to a drink?" he queried.

"I've got some," the man admitted, "if you ain't too choosy."

He could turn in the doorway and did, and despite his bulk, Jennison observed that he moved as if his body was articulated on well-oiled springs. The room held assorted goods of a limited variety, two tables, presumptively for card games, a short bar backed by two rough shelves holding sparse liquor supplies. Between the two shelves was a fly specked looking glass, venerable and cracked. And though the proprietor's face was mirrored in it but briefly, Jennison detected the laborings of wonder and some surprise registered in that passing glimpse. When he turned about it had been sponged away. Yet questions

were forthcoming, itself an oddity in the fiercely individualistic west.

"Meet a young woman down the road a ways?" he asked casually as he sat Jennison's drink down on the bar.

Jennison sampled the liquor before replying.

"Seems to me," he answered after apparent thought, "that a rider who mebby might a been a woman streaked by me on a roan pony."

"Pinto," the other corrected. "Didn't ask you any questions then."

"Well," Jennison lied fluently, "if she did it was either beyond hollerin' distance before or behind. Why, should she ask me questions?"

"Oh, because she's great on asking questions," the other said lamely. "No other reason as far as I know."

Jennison reverted to his drink while the man fingered the bottle absently. He picked it up, set it down and lifted it once more. Springs of curiosity seemed seething and now a question bubbled to the surface.

"Know a man in Walla Walla named Hub Roundtree?"

"I stopped overnight in Walla Walla," Jennison fabricated in his best judicial manner, "on my way frum the Prairie City mines. Walla Walla's quite a town. Hub Roundbush, you ask? Seems to me—"

"*Roundtree,*" the other insisted.

"Roundtree it is," Jennison nodded. Now he seemed busy thumbing over memory pages and scanning each with care. Then triumph beamed forth.

"Sure I remember now," Jennison chuckled. "I changed some gold dust into greenbacks at the bank in Walla Walla. Roundtree's the ramrod of that said bank. I figgered he set the price of the dust a dollar per ounce too high, but he wouldn't have it so. Friend of yourn?"

"In a way," the man hedged. "Wish I knew him better."

"A thing I can believe," Jennison declared as he held out his glass for another drink.

Now Jennison became expansively garrulous.

"I'm on my way to the Slumgullion mines," he announced, "but I've gotta lay over a day or so here. Sunflower, he's my pony, had the bad judgment to set his foot into a badger hole down the road a piece and strained his stiffle jint. Any objections to me campin' back up on the bench?"

"Of course not," this with a doubting glare at Sunflower who most emphatically gave no outward sign of a wrenched joint. "Still, it's too bad. They say that the mines, the good ones, anyway, are just about all staked out. A day may make a lot of difference."

"Well," Jennison said easily, "I ain't worryin'. Me and Mr. Pick and shovel ain't on good terms anyway. Hand me out a couple of cans of salmon and one of greengage plums. Also I'll take a can of Pioneer bakin' powder. Sure thar's no objection to my camping back up here?"

"Sure not," the other assured him. "You'll find good grass close and wood to cook with. Maybe you're not interested, but my name's Ples Beekman."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Beekman," Jennison said heartily. "My name's Jim Hood. See you later."

Leading Sunflower, he of the chimerical injury, Jennison topped the slight rise from the creek and emerged within a dozen yards upon the level first bench just back of the empty stage stand. "Empty," was a word of human connotation only. Two-legged creatures were absent, likewise the all but ubiquitous packrat, for timber was too far away. But the lowly mouse was present as a legion and that other scourge of the too soapless west, bedbugs. Like a hibernating bear this loathed fauna could live foodless for months, to leap with sharpened appetite upon the first luckless voyager that chanced his way.

Back of the stage stand Jennison found a square of yard grass, whose flat green velvet furnished ready made a veritable mattress for his bed. Unloading his dun-

nage, he adjusted his picket rope to Sunflower and led him a couple of rods where uncropped bunch grass was knee high. Driving the iron picket pin in to the head, he left the pony to his own diversions.

Turning back to his camp, he paused a moment to inspect the barn and its surrounding feed racks. All was enclosed by a pole corral, its entrance a single leaved gate just opposite the stage stand. The hay came from a beaver meadow a few hundred yards above Rahab, cut in the summer cut and stored in the barn, it was a priceless boon to freighters. This night, however, the big feed yard was empty. Jutting from the town side of the barn was a tiny cubicle, a miniature cook shop, if the smoke lazing up from a badly canted stove pipe told truth.

Jennison built his fire, trusted his coffee pot to the friendly flames and set about mixing flapjacks, now decadently named hot cakes. Just as the batter assumed the proper consistency, his attention was diverted to the supposed kitchen. A fanfare of noises first issued, followed by men, two in number, big and little, able bodied and crippled, threatening and cringing. The big man flourished a blacksnake, whose two foot handle of leather was ballasted with buckshot. Clutched as it now was by the small end it was as formidable a weapon as a policeman's truncheon. As the sidling retreat and menacing pursuit moved Jennison's way the big man was bellowing.

"I told you, Abe, I'd beat your head off if you got too much soda in the bread again and by God, I'm going to do it."

"It was an accident, Godfrey," the other squeaked defense of his act. "The sody slipped."

"Yeh," the big man taunted ominously. "Well, here's something that *won't slip.*"

APPARENTLY neither of the men had seen Jennison—now at the fence, his chin clearing the top rail by six inches, a pistol resting across it. But as the big man poised his bludgeon in tantalizing slow motion, he was made aware of Jennison's presence. A forty-five slug passed within smelling distance of his hate-flared nose before the sound of the shot had crashed on his startled eardrums. Clipped seconds too late his head rocked back from the threat that had already scurried by. It was now that he had his first glimpse of Jennison. A little man, empty hands grasping the top rail, gray eyes full of guileless good nature, stood there to confront the foiled Simon Lagree.

"Did you shoot at me?" he demanded heavily.

"Not *at* you by a good six inches," Jennison answered truly. "I did shag a bullet under your hod nose through which you mebby smelled."

The bite was in the adjective "hod." Big, but caved in at the bridge, the bulbous flanges had suggested to Jennison the not inept simile. While the big man simply gaped at such insolence, Jennison amplified as to motives.

"You see," he explained, "I hate yaller bellied bullies."

"Hold your tongue," the offended man growled. "I don't like your talk!"

"I mebby don't talk your *wawa.*" Jennison apologized. "But then a gun talks man language and I see you lug one at your hip."

There it was square in his teeth, without bravado and without an unduly inflected word. Reared to the West and its codes, the big man did not mistake the challenge. Yet after a long painstaking look, he chose to by pass it. Turning to the cripple, he grumbled,

"Abe, let's go back to our supper."

But Jennison had another notion.

"Abe," he said cheerily, "I'm invitin' *you* to eat with me. Jest room fur two, but thar'll be grub fur three. Come a runnin'."

Like a dog who has cringed long before a brutal master, the derelict hesitated. Then like that dog who has at last been smiled

upon by a friendly stranger, he capitulated to kindness. His thin shoulders straightened and cocking his battered hat rakishly over one eye he moved Jennison-way.

"It's an invite I'm sure accepting," he said grandly. "I don't like too much saleratus in biscuits myself."

He was shorter than Jennison and thinner and he limped on a leg that at the knee was crooked at a half right angle. Without ostentation, Jennison helped him through the fence and set him an immediate task for the good of his morale.

"S'pose, Abe, you rustle up some wood and whoop up the fire," he suggested. "Lucky the coffee was set too fur away to boil over. Likely didn't boil atall which is better luck still. I'll slice up some bacon into the skillet and watchin' the same 'ill be your job. Then I'll mix up flapjacks and thar we'll be."

"And there we'll be," Abe giggled ecstatically. "If that won't be a feed, what would be?"

With the bacon sliced prodigally into a capacious frying pan, a momentary dilemma appeared.

"I've got two tin plates," Jennison indicated, "and my pocket knife fur a eatin' tool, but I ain't got but one cup fur coffee. You've probable gotta a knife yourself, but no cup. Let's see," he puzzled as he ran his eye over meagre possibilities.

"I've got it. Let's eat them greengages first then we'll melt the top offen the can and thar'll be your cup."

"Greengages!" the other said rapturously. "Hell, I ain't et a greengage plum for ages. Let me hack that top out, pardner. I've got just the blade for that kind of work."

How many slices of bacon they ate, how many flapjacks, how many cups of coffee were consumed, for the quart pot squatted the hot coals three separate times—all this if chronicled would be but to record, a gastronomic feat from which neither took harm, nor felt shame. Contented, though surely not surfeited, they drew back to smoke and to talk. And they had dined early. Even now dusk had not fallen.

AT FIRST Jennison thought it was a coyote. The thin face that appeared furtively at the hole under the rear wall of the stage stand gave that impression. Scrutiny dispelled the first impression. Not a coyote, but a dog, thin to emaciation, warily suspicious, yet drawn by the magnet of smellable food, it thrust its head out from its burrow and moved it from side to side. Jennison observed its nostrils twitching as odors delectable assailed them. As kind as he was brave, Jennison moved nearer to toss a handful of bacon rinds toward the dog. But the moment he reached for the rinds, the head disappeared like magic. Jennison turned to his guest to ask harshly:

"What kind of brutes live around here to make a pore dog act like that?"

"You said it," the other nodded soberly. "He got lost from an emigrant train a week or so ago. He's been beat and shot at and throwed at ever since. I sneak him grub when I can, but I've got to be careful."

"By God!" Jennison swore. "I don't hafta be careful. Got a name?"

"I call him Rags," Abe told him, "when we're here alone. He'll come to me then."

"He'll come to me," Jennison said confidently. "And I'll feed him till he busts his breechin's. See them two cans of salmon? Unhead 'em both whilst I stir up some more flapjacks."

Presently armed with an open can of salmon, Jennison approached the seemingly deserted hole. And he had a way with him, both with man and beast. Half an hour later and Rags, stuffed to repletion, lay at Jennison's feet, his worshipful eyes on the face of the quixotic person who had wooed him back to companionship and pari-faith in man.

It was now that Beekman on his way to the feed barn noticed the tableaux and stopped.

"That dog's a damned thief," he re-

marked. "I've been trying to kill him for days."

"Keep your gun in your holster, Jennison said flatly, "unless you want to elbow into trouble. I'm not warnin' you, Beekman, I'm *tellin'* you!"

"Well, I'm not elbowing into trouble with you," Beekman said peaceably enough, "though what I said about that damned dog still holds."

A few minutes later, Beekman and the stable man were back leading saddled horses. Beekman turned to his hulking companion to say simply:

"Mr. Stoddard, meet Mr. Hood."

"I've met Mr. Hood already," Stoddard grinned widely. "And I owe you or I guess it's Abe an apology. But the fact is the first biscuit I shoved into my mouth had about a thimble full of saleratus in it."

"Too much sody in the bread is a sure enough temper upsetter," Jennison observed judicially. "Little wonder you got het up under your flannel collar."

"Still," Stoddard insisted, "I hadn't ought to have acted that way. And, Abe," he addressed his helper, "me and Ples may be gone for a day or so. If any freighters pull in take care of them. Remember they pay for the hay in advance, two bits per fork full and don't make 'em too *full.*"

JENNISON had noticed that behind their saddles were strapped a short-handled shovel and a pick. It did not take a Solomon to divine that they were out on prospecting bent. And because they traveled at night it was plain that it was a very private mine.

When the men had ridden away, Jennison turned to Jones sitting silent across the camp fire, to ask abruptly:

"Was that the first time Stoddard ever beat you?"

In answer, Jones shot his thin arms out of his flapping sleeves. Bruises there were aplenty, not all the trademark of a blacksnake and not all recent.

"Ain't thar no whiffle trees nor neck yokes layin' round?" Jennison demanded. "Even a wolf hasta sleep on occasions."

"Of course," Jones nodded miserably as he fumbled at his sleeves as if to cover up his shame. "But the fact is," he said pathetically, "I've lost my sand. I was a rider of wild horses up on Milk River," he reverted to happier days. "And I wasn't afraid of nothing. But an outlaw horse smashed me up and all but killed me. Wish to God he had! Anyway that finished me on the range. Last fall I got this job as helper to Stoddard. He owns the barn and hay meadow. He ain't never paid me a cent. I ain't got any money, nor clothes, nor nothing."

"Sand," "nerve," such was the nomenclature before "intestinal fortitude" became coin current in the descriptive realm of courage. It was "the pride of a man" once lost, seldom regained. Yet that near miracle had sometimes been accomplished.

"If you ever had it, Abe, Jennison said with sureness, "it ain't lost permanent. She's like the sun when a storm cloud covers it. The wind pushes the cloud away and thars the sun. You and me have gotta do some pushin'. And as fur the money Stoddard owes you, I've gotta hunch you're goin' to be soon paid. But how comes it this place is so damned quiet tonight? Is it accordin' to usual?"

"Wednesday nights and Thursday nights is always like this, Jones told him, 'less some freighters pull in. You see," he amplified, "Monday nights and Friday nights Jim Bull's boys ride into drink and play. Same for Tuesday nights and Saturday nights, only it's Jim Pike's boys then."

"The Bulls and the Pikes don't drink simultaneous at the same bar then?" Jennison puzzled.

"Not now they don't," Jones nodded. "Not for several months neither. Before that they were thicker than fleas."

"What happened to bust 'em apart?" Jennison queried.

"Fall weather," Jones began ambiguously. Then he explained. "You see when

the fall rains set in stages can't make the distance they can in good weather. Then the stage company opens up this stage stand here.

"Last fall they did so with a widow woman, Mrs. Dalzell, to run it. She was a lady if you ever seen one, to say nothing of her good looks. Well, Jim Pike and Jim Bull, both bachelors according to their own telling, began courting the widow. She didn't play no favorites and it was a neck and neck race for some weeks. Then they both got disqualified."

"Some little black shadders in their happy past arrived," Jennison chuckled.

"Somebody's told you," Jones accused him. "No? Well, that's just what did happen. *Somebody* told Mrs. Dalzell that Jim Pike had been a squaw man on the Flathead Indian Reservation and had left a couple of half-breed youngens there, to say nothing of the squaw. Also that Jim Bull had did the same thing nearly on the Yakima Indian Reservation. Well, the funny thing was that both the men had spent some years where they could have been guilty all right. Of course both swore they was pure as the driven snow, but if you know women you can guess what happened."

"I don't know women," Jennison admitted without reservations, "but I'll bet she sent 'em both kitin'. Also she wouldn't tell who told her."

"Just exactly," Jones admitted in wonder. "So—"

"Each figgered the other man guilty," Jennison finished the thought, "and oiled up their mutual artillery."

"That's the way," Jones corroborated in awe. "When the shooting was over both men had got a couple of bullets, Mrs. Dalzell left on the next stage, and then the trouble really started. Since then stampedes, poisoning and cows shot mysterious. But it's going to be worse. They're working up to wholesale killings and it 'ill be men, not cattle. And there ain't no sense to it.

They can sell every animal they can raise to the Injun Agent at the Tenimo Reservation at their own price."

"Purty soon," Jennison said thoughtfully, "when they git frazzled out somebody 'ill toddle in here and buy 'em both out fur a song and make them two bosses sing it themselves. I've seen it happen moren seldom."

"It's already happened," Jones told him. "A man named—I can't remember, from Walla Walla, has offered through Ples Beekman to buy 'em out for three thousand dollars apiece. That's maybe a quarter of the value."

"How'd you hear it?" Jennison asked.

"I heard Beekman tell Naomi Bull," Jones answered, "but he didn't know I heard him. She's Bull's niece and a mighty fine girl. Beekman leans their way, I figger, on account of Naomi. Stoddard leans toward Fish."

"You takin' any sides?" Jennison grinned.

"When you do," Jones nodded.

AT LONG last Jones got up to go and there was a lilt in his voice as he declared buoyantly:

"Mr. Hood, for the first time since I was hurt, I feel like a real man."

"You feel jest what you are," Jennison ably assisted the faith cure. "You *are* a real man."

"You bet I am," Jones asserted with satisfied conviction.

"Thar'll be no more beatin's per Godfrey," Jennison catalogued future impossibilities.

"No more beatings," Jones determined. "And Mr. Hood," he confided, "in my war bag I've got a snub-nosed thirty-eight. I'll be toting it around tomorrow."

"Git it out tonight," Jennison prodded him to immediate arming, "and see that it's in workin' order."

As the resurgent Jones crippled blithely away, Jennison smiled happily. His trek to Slumgullion-way had not been entirely

bereft of events, incidental and unplanned as they had been.

Pearl dawn found him awake, rafted instantly from deepest sleep by the throaty growl of the dog, lying guard near by on Jennison's mackinaw. His ears had detected sounds not yet audible to Jennison's, keen as they were above the ordinary. Yet presently, Jennison heard them too, telegraphed to him along the ground, the steady unhurried advance of hoofs. Jennison tossed aside his blanket, pulled on his boots, belted on his guns, settled his Stetson on his brown hair, slipped into his mackinaw and was ready for the world.

Six men rode out of the north, Jim Pike's men if point of compass told truth. As leader rode a very tall man, with authentic walrus mustache, yellow to grayish. At heel were five younger men, cowboys by every sign. All were armed with pistols and each balanced a rifle across the pommel of his saddle. In silence they passed Jennison not ten yards away. Unspoken, yet not unseen. Not much. From long leader to tag end guard, Jennison was the recipient of glances, none friendly, all pryingly suspicious to cold certainty.

Bent as the six plainly were on a stern mission, yet their natural absorption did not explain the episode. In Jennison they seemed to recognize an enemy. With a hunch as to its genesis, Jennison moved for concrete knowledge. They had halted at the ford to water their horses and by slipping along the side of Beekman's store, Jennison was easily in hearing distance.

"That's him all right," the leader affirmed. "He fits the description like a number ten foot in a number eight boot."

"He sure does," another growled agreement. "But what's he doing here instead of there?"

"Maybe," Pike hazarded," he figgers he hid enough last night. Anyway, I'm glad he's here instead of with the Bulls if he's half equal to his reputation. On our way back we'll gather him in too."

Jennison returned to his camp and lighting his pipe sat down to think. Apparently Bat Jennison, the superlative gunman, was to be the ally, both of Jim Bull and Jim Pike. Then there was the double check story, fairy or otherwise, oozed into the sensitive ear of the desirable widow. Last there was the mythical story of the prospective buyer of the two ranches, one Hub Roundtree of Walla Walla. At that Jennison grinned sardonically, for he knew Roundtree. Yes, all these things were patterned into a sinister plot, a flawless plot except that by a whimsy of chance, Jennison had come to Rahab in this Split Pot Valley. Was it chance, he wondered, or had he once more traveled at the sure beckoning of fate?

And yet for a man who had lived for years within a span of death, Jennison committed a singular and a well nigh fatal error. Buried in the intricacies of the absorbing problem, he failed to reflect upon his own significance. For if the chimerical tale of Jennison's assistance, doubly told to Bull and to Pike, had been the final spark skillfully touched to a long train of violent acts, then his coincidental appearance here might well snuff out the prospective flame and abort the pretty explosion. His immediate removal would then be imperative. This is what he forgot to his great peril.

THE dog's low growl, a faintly creaking floor board and Jennison was instantly conscious of this, his monumental error. Almost too late. Not quite, but almost. As he leaped to his feet and spun to face the rear end of the stage stand, its span of cobwebby windows had framed two masked men armed with pistols that flamed even as Jennison whirled. The distance was only ten feet, yet incredibly one missed him cleanly. The other's bullet changed Jennison's revolution into a sprawling fall. His head was out of sight now from the angle of vision possible from the windows, but not his legs. When these barometers of his mortal hurt drew up and threshed

out aimlessly, his death was registered to the marksmen. And because the rear door was nailed shut, they clattered over to the front door yelling exultantly at the overthrow of the redoubtable Bat Jennison.

It was a prideful joy that lasted probably for two seconds. Yet a lot of happiness can be crammed into two seconds. It ended when they whooped round the corner to examine at closer range the famous man they had outwitted and slain. If dead, he simulated life amazingly. On one knee, a cocked .45 at rest across his left arm, itself at rest across his flexed knee and commanding it all a pair of cold gray eyes, looking out from a face that was a smear of blood. Once, twice, once, twice, so Jennison platted his four shots, bullets that did not swerve from their targets. Then with his task completed, Jennison collapsed.

The whining of the dog, the shrill shouts of Abe Jones stirred Jennison from his comfortable lethargy. Groggily he steadied himself up on a shaky elbow while he wondered mildly why it had grown dark. Then he knew. With his free hand he skimmed away the scum of blood from his eyes and it was hazily day again. He was even sitting up when Jones crippled excitedly up.

"You ain't killed then," Jones exclaimed thankfully. Then he glanced toward the two sprawling bodies to add with great satisfaction, "but they sure enough are."

"They are," Jennison said soberly, this without looking. "I gotta close call, but that don't count. Take my neckerchief and wet it. We'll know then how much hide that bullet chewed off. I figger it at almost enough to bait a fishhook."

His prognosis proved true and when his head had been draped tastily with Jones' unlaundered bandanna, he got slowly to his feet. Vertigo assailed him briefly, but he quickly mastered it. He had work to do and that swiftly. Between them they managed to carry the dead men into the stage stand and lay them on the dusty floor. Jennison pointed to the left hand of one of them encircled with a blood-encrusted rag.

"He stopped a bullet sometime last night," he observed. Now he made what might seem an off trail remark. "They've got money on 'em but it 'ill stay, I reckon. We've gotta hurry. I'll get my pony and you can ride one of theirn. I notice 'em down yonder. Bring 'em both up here. I want a peek into their saddle bags."

TEN minutes later they galloped out of Rahab, the pup tailing gallantly. Five miles from Rahab and a mile south of the bisecting creek was the castle of Jim Bull. True, it was built of cottonwood logs, yet it was Bull's castle which he was defending spiritedly at that very moment. The attacking baron was Jim Pike, no less, whose siege line was drawn in a neat crescent before the house and outbuildings.

From the crest of a ridge behind Pike's offensive, Jennison surveyed the battle field. Four hundred yards away, cramped together on a slight knoll were the buildings and corrals, sheltering the beleaguered Bulls. A dry wash pushed its circle up to within fifty yards at its apex, which pointed straight at the house. The walls of the dry wash averaged roughly ten feet, but its sides slanted enough to furnish engaging footholds. Here were Pike and his men, all six still able to pull triggers. By counting the smoke plumes of the scattered defenders, Jennison arrived at a count of seven. Jones duly verified the tally.

"Bull's got five men and there's his niece, Naomi. She's pulling a trigger, you can bet."

"Signs say so," Jennison agreed. Following a moment's thought he added. "That long cannonadin' ain't so dangrus, but they're goin' to get het up till they'll range up to close quarters. We've gotta stop it, Abe. Come on."

Apparently unseen, they rode back down from the observatory ridge, rounded its end and were at the mouth of the dry wash. Jennison's plan had the virtue of

stark simplicity as he now expanded it to Jones.

"I'm shaggin' up that ditch till I find Pike," he explained. "I'm goin' to persuade him into a talk atween the lines with Bull. When we git it arranged, I want you."

"You bet I'll be there," Jones declared with vigor. "I've got things to tell."

"You have," Jennison grinned. "When I yell fur you come a rampin'."

JENNISON'S luck was better than he had hoped, for within fifty yards he turned a corner to find himself face to face with Jim Pike. Pike stared at him a moment through dusty eyelashes, then recognition came.

"You!" he swore and he dove for his pistol. But Jennison forestalled his attempt in its very inception. Two Colts' .45s appeared as by legerdemain to cover the fumbling cowman most comprehensively.

"Gut yourself of foolish notions," Jennison advised coldly, "one bein' you can git the drop on me. And now since I see that idee's augered its way into your noggin, I'll tell you something. I ain't here to take sides in this squabble atween you and Mr. Bull. I'm here to drill some sense into two of the damnedest numskulls it 'ill ever be my joy to operate onto."

"Meanin' me and Jim Bull?" The question had in it an element of bleak interest.

"Yep," Jennison confirmed the pat diagnosis grimly. "Now listen."

What Jennison said was potent, yet the stubborn Pike yielded grudgingly.

"It may be worth a try," he stipulated, "but personally I don't believe there's a damned thing in it. But I'll go stop my boys shooting, for a while anyway."

In a few minutes he was back, more sceptical than ever.

"My boys think," he related, "that you are just a spy for Jim Bull and that I'm sticking my neck in a noose."

"You're nothin' but a damned jug-headed jassax," Jennison said angrily, "and I ain't doubtin' that Jim Bull's a full yoke mate. You've got the manners of a Injun and the brains of a sick coyote. So fur as you and Jim Bull are concerned, you can both go to hell!" And he turned his back on the cowman and walked stiffly away. He had taken a half dozen steps when Pike stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Hood," he called. "Maybe it's worth a try. But I ain't making it with Jim Bull, I'm calling the girl."

Firing had ceased, though the battlers of the Bull clan watched suspiciously for the trick they felt would surely follow. So it was that the cattleman's voice carried easily across the half hundred yards that lay between him and the house.

"Miss Naomi," he had broadcast, "this is Jim Pike. There's a man over here who says he talked to you yesterday. He says he's got some new light on our troubles and wants to come over and talk to you and your uncle. I've stopped my boys from shooting, as you've noticed. Will you see him, yes or no?"

Presently the air was fluted by a very pretty voice.

"If this bold stranger dares, let him come."

"Talks nice don't she?" Bat Jennison grinned.

Under the doubting scrutiny of a dozen partisans, Jennison paced the fifty yards from ditch to gate. The girl stood there behind a section of log, a trim rifle in her hands. By her was a small lean man, her uncle, Jim Bull. Jennison fumbled at his Stetson, for women disconcerted him much. The girl was the first to speak.

"Talk and talk fast," she said imprudently. "I see you put in with the Pike outlaws in spite of your denials yesterday."

Jennison was raging angry through and through and his retort was almost cut to masculine dimensions.

"Miss," he said frostily, "I'm *thinking* now what I jest said to Jim Pike when he

called me a Bull spy. Jim Pike has offered to meet with me and Abe Jones and Mr. Bull out thar between the lines to hear what we know. Should Mr. Bull listen to your ignorunce and refuse to go, that's strictly his funeral. Make up your own mind, Mr. Bull."

Jennison had a way with men, if not with women and Bull's answer was prompt and decisive.

"If Jim Pike's game, I'm game."

Jennison turned, waved to Abe Jones and called the words to Pike. There was a grassy patch midway the lines and here the conference met. Pike and Bull without greetings sat down, Bull facing the dry wash, Pike eyeing the house. Jones formed a third side of the tight little square, Jennison the fourth.

Jennison began without preliminaries, nor did he animadvert upon the pleasant weather.

"Men," he stated, "you've both been up agin as neat a brace game as I'm ever meetin' and I've traveled round considerable. I'm goin' to do some talkin' and I'm goin' to ask some straight questions. All right.

"Mr. Bull *who* told you that Mr. Pike had hired Bat Jennison frum Walla Walla to come out here and clean you and your outfit up? And Mr. Pike *who* told you the similar tale, only Jennison was to help Mr. Bull?"

BULL considered the flat query, then hedged his answer.

"I could tell you," he admitted, "but it would be double-crossing a friend."

"Same reason," Pike nodded briefly.

"Well, I ain't so damned squeamish," Jennison said dryly. "Mr. Bull, Ples Beckman told *you!* Mr. Pike, Godfrey Stoddard told *you!*"

Both men fastened astonished eyes on this stranger who seemed to pick their very minds of secrets.

"Which don't make no diffrunce," Jennison added, "only they both lied. And Mr. Bull, did you hire this said Bat Jennison? Did you, Mr. Pike?"

"No, by God!" Bull roared. "I never even heard of him till Naomi brought back the word from Beekman—"

Jennison finished the clipped sentence. "—that Mr. Pike had hired him. What's your say, Mr. Pike?"

"I've got to say the same," Pike echoed Bull's sentiments, if not the words.

"And you're both tellin' the truth," Jennison said complacently, "because I happen to be Bat Jennison, myself."

"Mr. Jennison," Bull qualified, "it's not quite the truth to say I've never heard of you. Of course I have. Everybody in the West has and—"

"You'd never seen me," Jennison interrupted hurriedly. "Nor Mr. Pike neither, I expect. But we'll leave that doubled-barreled lie set. What I've gotta ask you both now is close askin' but she's damned important. Mr. Bull, what led you to tell Mrs. Dalzell that Mr. Pike here had left a squaw and other things up onto the Flathead Reservation? And Mr. Pike, how come you told that widder about how Mr. Bull mishandled himself onto the Yakima Reservation?"

"It's a damned lie!" This time the answer was ditto, synchronous and equally torrid.

"Jest so," Jennison nodded. "But you was both so et up with jealousy and hurt pride et celery that you never neither had the manhood to figger on it as mebby a put up job onto you two old friends. Nope, you didn't have right then the brains God give a goose. You dived into your mad spell and come up shootin'. Mr. Jones tell these two hammerheads who *did* tell the widder! You see she told Abe the morning she flew the coop."

"The widow told me," so Jones obliged loudly, "that Ples Beekman and Godfrey Stoddard both told her."

The two men simply stared, bereft of thought and the power of speech. But Jennison plodded on.

"Last night I camped at Rahab. Beekman was upset. He couldn't figger out jest why I was thar and he was a lot uneasy. Anyway him and Stoddard rode away that evening to prospect a pretend mine, but what they achully did, I figger, was to try to poison Mr. Pike's cows."

"We were laying for something," Pike cut in excitedly, "and we blasted a couple of men out of the scenery. We figgered it was the Bulls and—

"You shot Beekman through his left hand," Jennison told him for his comfort. "And when me and Abe here went through his saddle bags this morning, we found this bottle of arsenic." And he held it up for them to glare at.

"And," said Abe Jones pertly, "them two buzzards are laid out right now dead from Mr. Jennison's guns in the old stage stand and you men will have to go up and bury them, for I'm taking Stoddard's saddle horse for more than a hundred dollars he owes me, besides for a lot of kicks—"

"What he says is so," Jennison said soberly. "They tried to ambush me this morning and failed. Well, thar's only one thing more. You men was supposed to git a tenth rate offer fur your ranges and cows, said offer comin' through Beekman frum a rich hombre at Walla Walla named Roundtree. Now I happen to know Roundtree. He's a broke down tin horn gambler who couldn't buy the sweat off your brow. Roundtree was Ples Beekman and Godfrey Stoddard. And gents thar you are. A smart trick only she didn't function."

Jim Pike rose slowly to his great height.

"Mr. Jennison," he declared earnestly, "it would have functioned but for you." He thrust out his hand. "Personally I want you to know that I believe every word you've said and you've got my thanks."

"Mine too," Bull chimed in. "It was a game Jim and me ought to have seen. friends like we'd been for years, but it only takes a stranger a day to see it. By God, you're smart! And, Jim, give me a wag of your old paw. Then I'll turn and have you kick me."

"Right," Pike grinned, "if you'll return the compliment with interest."

Partisans of both men swarmed about them in a rout of happiness, but when they tried to thank Jennison, he grew confused.

"Miss Naomi," he smiled at the girl to serve as buffer in his need, "it's been a prime pleasure to meet you. Whoa onto your thanks fur I'm goin' to lay a burden onto you. At Rahab I found this pore half starved pup, who'd been kicked around by everybody, 'ceptin' Mr. Jones. If you really appreciate what you seem to think I done, you take him and give him a home, also grub. Fur Mr. Jones and me is pushin' out right now onto that trail fur Slumgullion. So long."

"Them Sims Be Right Stout Men, but Full of Hidden Fires. Sort of Volcano-Like . . . ."

By
FRANCIS GOTT
Author of "Which Sammy," etc.

THE SIMS AIN'T SLACKERS

WHILE Captain Barnabas Lee waited for the tide, he set up the radio.

"Don't ye dast twiddle them knobs now till I get the antenna up," he admonished his crew.

Most of the nine man crew looked upon this new example of their skipper's chronic exertion with lazy indifference. It was the first time that the trawling schooner *Sally L.* had ever had an antenna strung between her stump masts.

Homer Sims, however, watched with sleepy lidded wonder.

Antenna up, all in readiness, Captain Barnabas blew on his frost-nipped fingers

and tuned in. Most of the crew, sprawled out in their bunks, just yawned, for they had good radios in their homes; to them it meant more noise. A noon broadcast, listing American war losses, poured into the confines of the fo'c'sle.

Captain Barnabas beamed. "Ye wouldn't know it from a brand new set, would ye, now?" he asked. "Low radiation, special marine gadget, subs can't hear it."

Just then Homer Sims let forth a startled yelp. Captain Barnabas looked toward the big man. With mounting concern he saw that Sims' potato-like face was screwed up in alarm and anguish. His little blue eyes, sunk almost out of sight between thick lids, were staring in fixed horror at the radio.

"My land!" he moaned. "Ain't it awful?"

Captain Barnabas' cherubic jowls flushed an angry red. "Ye durn fool!" he snorted "What do ye know about radios? Ye've hibernated aboard the *Sally L.* for the last twenty-three years."

Sims' eyes had a stricken look when he moaned again. "The war's wuss'n I thought. I had no idea—"

Captain Barnabas sobered. "Ye're right, b'y."

"Cap'n," gasped Sims, nearly stricken by the mental effort. "I got to go ashore!"

Sims heaved himself to his feet. He gulped. Then he climbed the ladder to the open deck.

Recovering from his surprise, Captain Barnabas called, "The tide—ye durn fool!"

He felt the vessel, riding light, roll slightly when Sims' three hundred and ten pounds left her for the wharf. Puzzled by this unusual exertion of the phlegmatic Sims, Captain Barnabas climbed up on deck. He was followed by one of the hands, Oboe Vreeley. They watched Sims' elephantine breeches whisk around a corner of the fish house and disappear.

"First time Homer ever acted like that," Captain Barnabas muttered, torn between exasperation and worry. "Here we be ready to cast off with the tide and the big critter has to scoot ashore s'if he had ants in his pants. Don't 'spose he's took sudden with a mortal ailment, do ye, Oby?"

Vreeley, mouth agape, brown eyes watering with gratitude from this unexpected attention, just stood there. He trembled with pleasure. Captain Barnabas looked upon Vreeley as he would upon a friendly undersized cockroach.

The only badge of authority Captain Barnabas wore on his portly frame was an old vest, embellished by a herring scale or two. Remnant of a shore going suit of a younger day, it was his one point of prestige. From it he plucked a greasy black cigar, set it to glowing and puffed impatiently.

"Must've been the radio that shook Homer so," he reflected aloud.

"Yawp," squeaked Vreeley, hanging on the words of the master.

"And the war news. I don't cal'ate Homer knew they was a war on. Must've been quite a shock to him. He never goes ashore, can't read, and is half asleep most of the time; and when he is awake he can't hear much, bein' pretty deaf."

"Yawp," said Vreeley, his large thin-fleshed ears twitching in agreement.

Captain Barnabas began pacing. At the end of a half hour he had worked himself into a lather, had smoked his cigar down and had chewed the stub. He had about decided to cast aside his dignity and go after Sims when he heard a commotion ashore. His weather eye took in an alarming sight.

"Oby!" he barked. "Scuttle down into the fo'c'sle and fetch my shotgun. It's been so long since Homer's been to the village that they must've mistook him for a stranger. They's a pack o' the ugliest lookin' brutes at his taffrail that I ever did see."

Vreeley disappeared down the yawning opening into the forecastle like a lighted match snuffed out in a dark cellar. In twenty-five seconds flat he had returned

with the shotgun. Captain Barnabas grasped it, snugged the stock against his leathery cheek. He tried to aim just astern of Homer Sims who was pounding down the wharf with the deceiving velocity of an elephant. Almost at his heels tore three vicious looking dogs upon whom Captain Barnabas was trying to get a bead. Captain Barnabas' spine stiffened when the lead dog, an ancient hound with one ear, set up a determined yelping at sight of the shotgun.

"Don't ye dast shoot, Cap'n!" thundered Homer Sims, coming up to the edge of the wharf. "These be my houn's. We just got a hustle on so's we'd get out with the tide."

Captain Barnabas lowered the shotgun, but he held it warily. He studied Homer's face, trying to convince himself that he had heard aright. The big man's homely features were glowing with a new found light. A stiff wisp of white hair stuck out from under his knitted cap as if his own vapory breath had frosted it. A giant bulldog, the last to come up, stopped under Homer's outstretched hand. An immense Airedale somberly eyed Captain Barnabas from between Sims' legs.

"I got 'em ready trained," said Sims.

"Ye can't bring them critters aboard."

"They's war dogs."

"They's what?"

"I got 'em at a bargain—at the dog pound. Fifty cents for the three of 'em. The dog catcher's got about forty more of 'em. Says he has an awful job keepin' 'em hid when the taxpayers come around. He hates to shoot 'em."

"But what are ye going to do with 'em, Homer?" asked Captain Barnabas doubtfully.

"Confound the enemy."

"My Lord!"

Sims lowered his bulk aboard. The hound and the Airedale jumped after him, but the thick-bodied and short-legged bulldog plainly was not a jumper. He had to be lowered in Sims' arms.

Captain Barnabas, even though he had a sneaking liking for dogs, reflected that he had never in his speckled career seen such hair raising specimens of canine dissolution. If traits of character meant anything, these dogs were veterans of adventure. by their scars and attitude he knew them. The black hound had only one ear the size of which gave an odd cant to the long head. The bulldog's left eye drooped which gave his ugly face the added qualities of being both sinister and salacious. The hound and the bulldog gave an edge of deference to the Airedale, a female, because of a torn lip she had a permanent leer.

"The dog catcher spent a long time trainin 'em as dogs of war," Sims explained. "When he offered 'em to the U. S. Army they told him, considering their age, that the greatest service they could do their country was to be sent to dog heaven as mercifully as possible."

"I cal'ate they w'ant far wrong."

Sims snorted. "Them army fellers don't know dogs. Maybe they ain't got the pep of youth—but they got stayin' power. I'm banking fifty cents on 'em, and our lives, and the *Sally L.*"

Captain Barnabas withheld a sarcastic retort when he saw the concern on Sims' face.

"All right, Homer," he grunted. "Cast off! We can feed them on fish. And maybe they'll help keep the crew awake and on their toes for, fear of dreaming of them and having nightmares. Such ugly brutes."

BY THE time the trawling schooner had sailed fifty miles off shore, Captain Barnabas found even more cause for alarm in the gradual change that was coming over Homer Sims. He found that the big man was becoming a schemer, a plotter, a man of disconcerting moves.

When, that night, Captain Barnabas left the spray and windswept darkness for the fetid warmth of the forecastle, it was with an uneasy spirit. Old Vreeley, his trusted sir-echo, was at the wheel. Before he sought his bunk he looked with suspicion on the

faces of his sleeping mates; Sims, now bent over the radio, his vast shoulders casting a shadowy gloom over the narrow confines between the bunks, had been putting ideas in their heads. It was not healthy, Captain Barnabas feared, for Homer to think too much.

"Ye best get your sleep, Homer," Captain Barnabas prodded, gently, yet firmly. "We're wettin' twine tomorrow."

"Ha!" growled Sims, his face working with dark thoughts as if his mind were the repository of unguessed secrets. "If we're still afloat. War's a brewin'. The Sims ain't slackers."

"M' soul!" sighed Captain Barnabas uneasily. He sought his bunk.

He awoke from a restless sleep with fear upon him. Was the deck coming in on him? A sagging, treading weight was on his chest and paunch. Water dripped on his face. Fearing the worst, for the deck head lamp was out in its gimbels, he struggled to rise. Something wet slid over his face; kelp maybe.

Calmness came to him. His left hand sought matches, found one on the small shelf above his bunk. He struck it. Light flared. He looked up into the grinning mug of Sims' bulldog.

Came a voice. "Douse that glim!"

Captain Barnabas was becoming peeved. He tried to rise, but the friendly bulldog pawed him down again. All the weight of one big paw drove the wind out of him. With a gasp of pain he tried to roll over. He figured that the animal must weigh a hundred pounds, at least. Over the top of the dog's head he caught sight of Homer peering down into the forecastle from the hatch.

Came the voice again. "Ha! Enticin' my war hou'n' from his duty, eh."

In his wonder and exasperation at the trait of combativeness that had come over Sims, the captain let the match burn his fingers. He dropped it and swore into the sudden darkness.

"Who put out the fo'c'sle light?"

"I did," said Sims.

"You did! But I give strict orders that—"

"Light might show and give us away. These be grievous times."

Captain Barnabas heard Sims coming down the ladder. The whole forecastle creaked under the strain given to the bulkhead ladder.

"Take this critter off'n my chest, Homer."

Captain Barnabas felt Sims' fumbling hands.

"I can't," complained Sims. "Ye're holdin' him!"

"Holdin' him! My land! Who'd want to hold the ugly critter?"

The bulldog had taken a pronounced shine to the skipper of the *Sally L.* He was reluctant to leave.

"You been feedin' him," accused Sims.

"I've had about enough out'n that hatch o' yourn, Homer." He lit another match, saw Sims swaying to the slight roll of the vessel. The big man was wringing his hands; his homely face was lugubrious to the extreme. His eyes, bright beads sunk deep in the flesh, looked down at the bulldog and had the stare of a devoted chief gazing upon a faithless follower.

Dog on hip, Sims left the forecastle Captain Barnabas stared into the darkness. He drowsed. It was a pleasant feeling to be snug and dry between warm blankets, knowing that he wouldn't have to mount to the wet deck for several hours yet. Perhaps with good fishing luck they'd make a short trip—six, seven days maybe. Fish were high now because of the war. Not many old trawling schooners left; not many dory trawlers now, men who could find their way back to the vessel in a fog mull or driving blizzard with that sixth sense common to the days of his youth. Yet the old way was proving to be best after all. The big draggers, those that Uncle Sam hadn't taken over for coast guard and navy work, didn't dare to go too far off—too many had been shelled and sunk by the Nazis.

Sometime later he was shaken into wakefulness.

"Cap'n! Cap'n!" Vreeley's voice.

"That deck-head lamp—" Captain Barnabas muttered, sudden resentment tearing at him.

"Aye, that fool Homer—I lit it, but he blew it out again. That radio, Cap'n. Ye should never had brought it aboard." Old Vreeley's voice had risen to a wail. "He's had his ear glued to that radio every minute. He got news of a sea battle to the south'ard. It nigh drove him into feathers' out. He told me to get into my bunk, pull the covers up over my head and keep mum."

"Who's got the wheel?"

"Hiram Hillgate," old Vreeley faltered.

"Light that deck-head lamp."

"I don't dast. Homer'll——"

"Of all the infernal shenanigans," choked Captain Barnabas. "Who's skipperin' the *Sally L.?*"

Torn between fear of Homer Sims and loyalty to Captain Barnabas, old Vreeley lit the lamp. If old Vreeley wan't a sight, thought Captain Barnabas disdainfully; the old fellow's leathery face was glowing a rusty pink from shame; his weak eyes were wet. His weak chin dripped spray where he'd been pecking out on deck. He shoved the skipper's oilskins at him.

"I know I shouldn't have give up the wheel, Cap'n. I—I—"

Captain Barnabas got into his oilskins. As he shoved his head out into the night he heard a soft command club into the wind.

"You Dead-eye—you ain't no smeller—you stay here by the companionway and keep that stupid dolt of a skipper from comin' up on deck. And you, One-ear, leg it inter the bow and let the ol' howls out'n ye if'n ye gets a whiff o' the enemy. And you, Torn-lip, come inter the stern with me where ye can stand rear guard like a lady."

Captain Barnabas' hooded eyes narrowed. His brain, long stiffened into the accustomed language of the Banks, could only dredge into the memory of stories of his youth and visualize pirates. Then he spat in disgust as a hot tongue drooled across his face and he realized that Dead-eye, the one-eyed bulldog, was before him. He climbed into frigid night and thumped a hand down upon the head of his friendly enemy for letting him pass. He headed aft. Looking back, he saw that the bulldog was sticking to his post, refusing to let old Vreeley out on deck. He chuckled, felt a sudden surge of respect for the battle-scarred beast, good judge of human nature that he was.

Just abaft the mainmast he met Sims, but he disregarded him and stepped toward the wheel. He had a suspicion that Sims had changed the course, for the wind was from the starboard quarter. Ducking a sheet of snow-laced spray, he shoved his head down close to the binnacle. By its faint glow of light he read the compass—south by west a quarter west.

He straightened, turned on Sims. His voice cracked with anger. "You've changed the course! Well—answer."

Sims stood there, his vast bulk taking spray as if he had no feeling. The gray wool scarf about his thick neck flapped heavily, for it had ice upon it. Yet Sims hands were bare; cold did not bother him. Because of his size he had to make his oilskins out of canvas, then oil them. They kept the wind out and the water. A less rugged man could not have worn them, with ease; or without suffering from wrist boils from their harshness.

Captain Barnabas grasped him, shook him. He heard a growl, barely discerned the Airedale, her black and tan coat protective against the darkness, her square body braced against the surge of the vessel.

"Homer," Captain Barnabas said, "I have a lot of patience with the foibles of human nature, but when you turn the routine of my vessel upside down you're hitting me in a tender spot. I can stand your

dogs—but I can't stand to have another giving orders on my ship. Now get below and sleep off whatever grouch is hurting you."

Sims' answer was a sly grunt. "Hag-g!" From under the voluminous folds of his oilskins he produced a metallic something. "Maybe the Sims be fools, but they ain't slackers. I got this iron ashore when I got my houn's. Now you get below, Barnabas, before I pink ye."

Captain Barnabas gasped, appalled. He heard a startled cry come from the lank form of Hiram Hillgate. Hiram's bony face was shoved forward over the binnacle as he strove to see what was going on; his long drooping mustachios, pointed with glittering daggers of ice, appeared like twin question marks riding his upper lip to the obscurity of his hollow cheeks.

"Now, Homer," he begged, his nasal twang riding the wind, "ye're a big man and I cal'ate ye'd make an awful dent in the deck if'n Cappy gets his dander up."

Sims shoved the gun barrel into the glow of light coming from the binnacle; a swirl of snow pelted against his hairy hand. "War be serious business, b'y,' he said. "We're headin' toward a big sea battle to the south'ard. Stick to the course I give ye, b'y."

"Homer—" Captain Barnabas remonstrated.

"Cap'n—" rumbled Sims, deadly serious.

Captain Barnabas felt the gun barrel prodding him. Rather than suffer an arm or leg wound he decided to get down into the forecastle and think things over. The sobering fact that Sims was driving the vessel under full canvas toward a sea battle to the southward was somewhat obscured by Sims' unheard of attitude. From the dim past he recalled a warning given him by his uncle, Captain Zadoc Haskill, a great mackerel killer in his day. "Them Sims be right stout men, b'y, and good hands and bos'ns, but they be like volcanoes—they be sleeping fires in 'em. They might skip a generation, but some day they'll erupt. In my day I'd never ship one of 'em."

For the first time in his life Captain Barnabas was ineffectual on the decks of his ship. His high good humor had been ruffled at times, but never before had his authority been questioned.

Hot jowled from shame and a biting resentment, he swung down into the forecastle. He couldn't quite meet old Vreeley's questioning eye.

"I'd like to choke the overgrown porpoise back to his senses," he sputtered.

"Ye can't choke an elephant," cackled old Vreeley.

"Batten down!" snapped Captain Barnabas.

He looked toward the bunks. He'd awake the men. Then he choked, settled down upon a bench locker. No, by thunder! He'd worm himself out of this pickle before they woke up otherwise he'd never be able to live down his ignominy. Potato-face Sims in command of his vessel and he a prisoner in his own forecastle! The palms of his plump hands became moist. Would fables never cease?

Old Vreeley's head nodded. He squared his thin arms on the checkered red cloth of the mess table, dropped his head and slept. The responsibility was not his.

Never a man to sit quiet, Captain Barnabas studied the hatch in the deck, which led to a small storeroom. In its after-end was an escape hatch leading down to the hold. The hold was now empty except for three feet of cracked ice. In the after bulkhead of the hold was another hatch leading into the lazarette which, in turn, led up to a small hatch abaft the wheel on the quarter deck.

First he'd try the companionway slide again. Yep! Locked He heard a long drawn-in sniff and knew that Dead-eye smelled him. Good ol' dog. Well, he'd try the below decks route. He'd take Sims and Hillgate in the rear and surprise 'em. It was a poor skipper and owner who didn't

know his own ship. Once he got the upper hand again he'd sweat the living daylights out of Sims, work him so hard at baiting trawl, trimming sail, steering and cooking that he'd have no time except to eat and sleep. He shook his pudgy fist at the radio. Damn the thing!

He searched for his shotgun, in vain. The storeroom beneath the forecastle was only a half fathom high and stank of bilge. Marlinspike in hand he wormed himself over the top of rigging and canned provisions toward the escape hatch which hadn't been used in years. He attacked it with the fourteen inch steel spike, pried it open an eighth of an inch at a time. He grunted and swore. He became wet with beads of moisture and was exceedingly discomfited.

Finally, when the vessel pitched upward, the hatch slid away from him into the hold. He shook his head, sputtered, puffed out his cheeks at the bucketsful of ice that showered about him.

"Br-r!" he shivered.

Despite his discomfort he sought to squeeze through the opening, upward through the ice. Not until then did he realize to the full the girth that the fleeting years had put to his waist.

He became stuck, the fore part of his body wedged in ice. He feared he would stiffen and freeze to death. Frantic, he tried to yell—but no sound came. Ice pressed into his face. He picked upward with the spike, felt it break through. He could not back out either, for he was firmly wedged, somehow. His thickset legs flailed, to no advantage.

All at once the vessel shivered and vibrated as if in the neighborhood of a suboceanic disturbance. His heart thumped, then pounded. He was needed up on deck! His sea canny brain, aided by a too ready imagination, began to work. A depth charge nearby! Homer was plunging them all toward destruction.

Captain Barnabas moaned, "With a small vessel, nine men, three dogs, a horse pistol and a shotgun, the overgrown half baked porpoise is steering us into a sea battle!"

The icy reflection of a flashlight reached his smarting eyes by way of his left shoulder. Dimly he heard o'd Vreeley's scandalized voice, felt a tug at his rubber boots.

"Heaven a crackin', Cap'n!" We're bein' shot at—and you down here iced in like a logy tom cod."

Captain Barnabas yelled, "Pull, ye durn loon, pull!"

Old Vreeley pulled, to no good. So, despite his skipper's lamentations, he pushed and pried Captain Barnabas' backside through the hatch. Blowing like a sperm whale, Captain Barnabas broke through the ice. Old Vreeley, in fear of his hide, clawed up after him.

Suddenly, again, vibration after vibration shook the hull. Muted eerily, the sound of an explosion reached them. Knee deep in ice, startled, aghast, they stared at each other open mouthed, then at the sweating sides of the hull, then up at the close battened cargo hatch above their heads. The flashlight in old Vreeley's hand shook.

"Entombed—'twixt wind and water!" he chattered.

"Shuddup!" growled Captain Barnabas, turning his eyes away from the fearful shadows the flashlight was making under old Vreeley's deep sunken eyes. "Quit shakin' that bug light!"

"One shell from a battle wagon'll blow us into splinters," moaned old Vreeley. "All your fault, Barnabas, for bringin' that radio aboard and lettin' Homer hear it."

Captain Barnabas raised his hand, for silence. Creepy, it was. A chill crept down his spine. His vessel was talking to him. Through all his senses he felt her straining. The mainmast, its base in the hold, was groaning its whole length to the fearful wracking put upon it by the sails. The sea, faintly audible, slipped and pounded, gurgled, whispered and snarled her secrets against the sleek sides of the vessel's waist.

"Aye! Homer's drivin' her," said Captain Barnabas, shakily. "We got to get up

through the lazarette and down him. It's dark and spittin' snow an' we can get the vessel away in the night."

They waded toward the escape hatch in the after bulkhead. They scooped away ice, pried open the hatch and crawled through. Captain Barnabas stood precariously on some empty trawl tubs to get at the deckhead hatch—battened down from topside. He was counting on Hiram Hillgate. He thumped on the hatch with the marlin spike, then listened, while old Vreeley stood shaking and gulping, clutching the flashlight tenaciously.

Thin sounds crept about them—the inching movement of gear, the whining of the steering cable, the sucking swirl of the sea at the rudder; other sounds, intermittent, the rumble of guns, the underwater vibration of an explosion; and the over all murmuring of the night, all merging and flowing in a symphony of muted sounds.

The hatch lifted above Captain Barnabas' hand. He shoved with his foot against a pile of old canvas and lifted himself out, marlinspike in fist. Old Vreeley came after, flashlight snapped off he waved a rusty halibut hook threateningly.

Hillgate, one long arm stretched to the wheel, leaned above the hatch.

"Lo'd save me!" he gasped. "Whyn't ye scare a body to death and have done with?"

"What's that bellerin' I hear up for 'ard?" asked Captain Barnabas, shouting above the wind.

Hillgate straightened up from rebattening the hatch. He shoved his mustache under Captain Barnabas' ear.

"Homer. He's been trumpetin' up an down the deck like a bull walrus. Right difficult time I've had. Got some idea in mind, been tinkerin with the radio. Drunk with excitement, he is, like a kid at his first circus. Says they never was a war yet but what a Sims smelt gunpowder a burnin'."

Captain Barnabas caught the burst of a rocket to leeward. Not twenty fathoms distant on the port beam he thought he glimpsed the low, spray-swept deck of a submersible, but a burst of snow skirled down and blotted it out.

"Steer nor'west, Hiram," he bade. "We're gettin' out'n here s'fast as the ol' girl can larrup."

Worried for the safety of his vessel and crew, he turned a shoulder to the wind and went forward, heaving on a brace here and there. He even had a thought for the dogs, wondering how long a dog could swim in that icy sea.

He met Sims coming aft. Sims stopped, unmoving, when he saw them. Uncomprehending, for the moment. Then, a bellow.

"Ye ain't goin'ter cheat me out'n the only sea battle I'll live to take part in, Barnabas." A lurid blaze of fire shattered the darkness a mile off their port bow. An explosion. "Hag-g! Them's destroyers. We're on the tail end of a hundred-mile-long convoy bound for Rushy. Nazi subs is wolfin' at 'em."

Captain Barnabas wondered by what perversity of war the news of this harried convoy had ever been broadcast into the all too receptive ears of Homer Sims.

"Why'd ye change course?" asked Sims suspiciously. "We're drawin' away."

"Durn tootin', an' damn lucky for them sleepin' fishermen in the fo'c'sle that we be."

Sims raised his arm. Captain Barnabas struck him a smart rap on the wrist with the marlinspike. Sims revolver flipped deftly into Captain Barnabas' waiting hand. Sims cried like a hurt baby. The old Airedale growled; she was too wise to take sides where no real enmity existed. The hound yelped dolefully. The old bulldog sniffed of Captain Barnabas' boots, then rubbed against his leg. He felt sorry for the dogs, they were new to the harsh weather of the Banks, yet, veterans that they were, of hunger, storms, and hardship, they didn't whine.

"Quit moanin' and help close haul the

sheets," ordered Captain Barnabas, prodding Sims. "Ye huik o' deviltry, move! You, Oboe, take the pin out'n the companionway slide and get all hands on deck. Pound the ice off'n the dories, provision and water 'em; hell of a mess you got us into Homer."

Wind whimpered in the rigging as the tiny vessel dipped her jib boom close to the snow-laced scud. Close aboard came a salvo that ripped the night apart. Captain Barnabas shook in his boots when he sighted the two-stacked leanness of a destroyer knifing by in all her savagery. He breathed in relief when the thickening smother to windward swallowed her, only to have the breath freeze in his throat and his fist freeze to a stay when she came tearing back. She cut across their bow, close, and was gone again. The tiny vessel rolled in the wash while Hillgate swore and fought the wheel. Shortly after came the tearing vibration of depth charges.

"Iff'n I on'y had a battleship," cried Sims, in ecstasy. "Hag-g!""

Off there in the night, slowly, fitfully, beginning as a mere pin prick of light, came flame and chaos. Explosion followed explosion. The blackness was lifted. A destroyer, torpedoed, twisted, turned, slowed down, grievously hurt.

Captain Barnabas wrenched his fascinated gaze away; he had his own ship to consider. The schooner, dangerously close, white sails limned against the murk, was a ghostly windship caught in the maw of eternity.

Then came men, up out of the sea, clutching at her hull, vainly, despairingly. Their forlorn cries became a part of the night, weak sounds that were gone in a moment, making Captain Barnabas feel hollow inside. Near them he sighted a submarine, blasted to the surface, spilling men. An odd smell rode the wind—burnt gunpowder and the soot from blazing fuel oil; it bit his nostrils. Uneasiness gripped him.

"Lord God!" he prayed. "Those poor souls," he shouted at Hillgate. "Hard over! Spill the wind from her sheets. We'll pick up what we can."

No man could live long in the intense cold of that sea. The Airdale came racing aft, growling savagely. He followed her with his eyes. A hoarse cry burst from his throat when German seamen, taking him unawares, ten, fifteen, sixteen, came up over the side, abaft the port tier of dories, from a raft. Grim and silent, haggard, oil smeared, led by a fleshy nosed squat man in gold braid, they swiftly spread over the vessel. Hillgate was ruthlessly knocked down, the wheel wrenched from him.

CAPTAIN BARNABAS was fighting. One man he tripped neatly, using tricks learned in the waterfront brawls of his youth. That man never lived to rise again, for the old hound, a streak of deadly purpose, closed in. A piercing scream was torn from the man before he was still, his throat gashed open. One-ear melted away in the storm-wracked gloom. Two men, seeing the unorthodox manner by which their comrade had met death, closed in desperately upon Captain Barnabas. He shot one with the old horse pistol, wounded him. The other was neatly caught by the leg, tripped overboard by a black and tan streak of fury—Torn-lip.

Captain Barnabas, having a momentary breathing spell, looked forward. By the dimming flames from the destroyer, he saw that his men were fighting as only Banks trawlers, living a free, independent life, toughened by long years of pulling at wheel, brace and groundline, could fight. He saw Sims lift a thrashing man high, fling him against the base of the foremast, where he lay, moving slightly with the roll of the vessel.

The Germans, by shrill guttural cries, informed each other that all was not well upon the decks of this ship. She was peopled by giants and queerly garbed men and furred things that came at them swiftly, ruthlessly, without sound, with

bared fangs, killed and wounded, then were gone in shadows behind dories, masts, deck gear.

Captain Barnabas heaved, nostrils flaring from the effort, when he felt strong hands at his windpipe. He dropped, caught his assailant by one leg, lifted him. They crashed to the deck, Captain Barnabas on top. He looked up into the cold eyes of the Nazi officer in gold braid. The man was calmly leveling a revolver at him. Old Vreeley, then, wailing like a lost soul, snow swirling about his thin legs, thumped close, halibut hook flailing. The hook buried its ugly point in the officer's wrist. He shot his own man instead, between the eyes. He stooped for another shot at Captain Barnabas, then screamed in agony.

Old Dead-eye, obeying the generations of bull baiting by which men had bred him, rose from the deck like a dirty white puff of smoke. His powerful jaws closed on the Nazi commander's bulbous nose. The stricken man swayed, thrashing at the limply swinging horror frozen to his face. From one wrist hung the halibut hook.

The man swayed drunkenly up the deck, screaming, completely demoralizing his men. In five minutes Captain Barnabas and his crew had the *Sally L.* once more under control. Three Germans were dead, nine wounded, two missing, two unhurt. Of his own crew, Gramp Pillsbury, seventy-nine, was gone; he had taken a Hitlerite into the sea with him. Hillgate and two others were wounded. Dawn light was spraying in the east.

Shortly after, a British destroyer, fires now blanketed, ordered the *Sally L.* to stand by. A long-faced lieutenant, wrapped to the ears in a bridge coat, swung aboard the vessel from a small boat. Gravely he shook hands with Captain Barnabas.

"I saw the fight through binoculars," he said. "Magnificent. By your radio signals we located that submerged wolf pack of submarines. We got six, and their leader. What a bag! You fellows of the volunteer patrol are doing fine work."

"Signals!" Captain Barnabas' stare was blank.

"Ha! Crude—yet effective."

"We did nothing. We're just poor fishermen caught in a mess."

The Britisher's laugh was curt, half-angry. "You trawlers are so damn modest."

Captain Barnabas heard how the Nazi submarines were now hunting in packs. Each pack was led by one manned by veterans, who smell out the convoys.

"They have been nipping at us all night," the Britisher said. "It was a break when you ran into them submerging, signaled us. They couldn't hear you, being sail, and we got cross bearings on your signals and were on top of them with three destroyers in short order."

After the Britishers had left, taking the German submarine men with them, both dead and alive, Captain Barnabas bent a frigid eye upon Homer Sims.

"What signals?" he asked.

Sims wrung his big hands. "I—well, 'twas like this, Cap'n—I—er—I seen all them submarines submerging, sensed 'em sort of, like I would a fleet of our own dories in a fog mull, an' the subs didn't seem to sight us or hear us, bein' small and a wooden ship under sail and all that. So I fooled around with the wires and tubes of the radio, figurin' the sound would carry a mile or two, hopin' them convoy destroyers'd hear it. I tapped out SUBS."

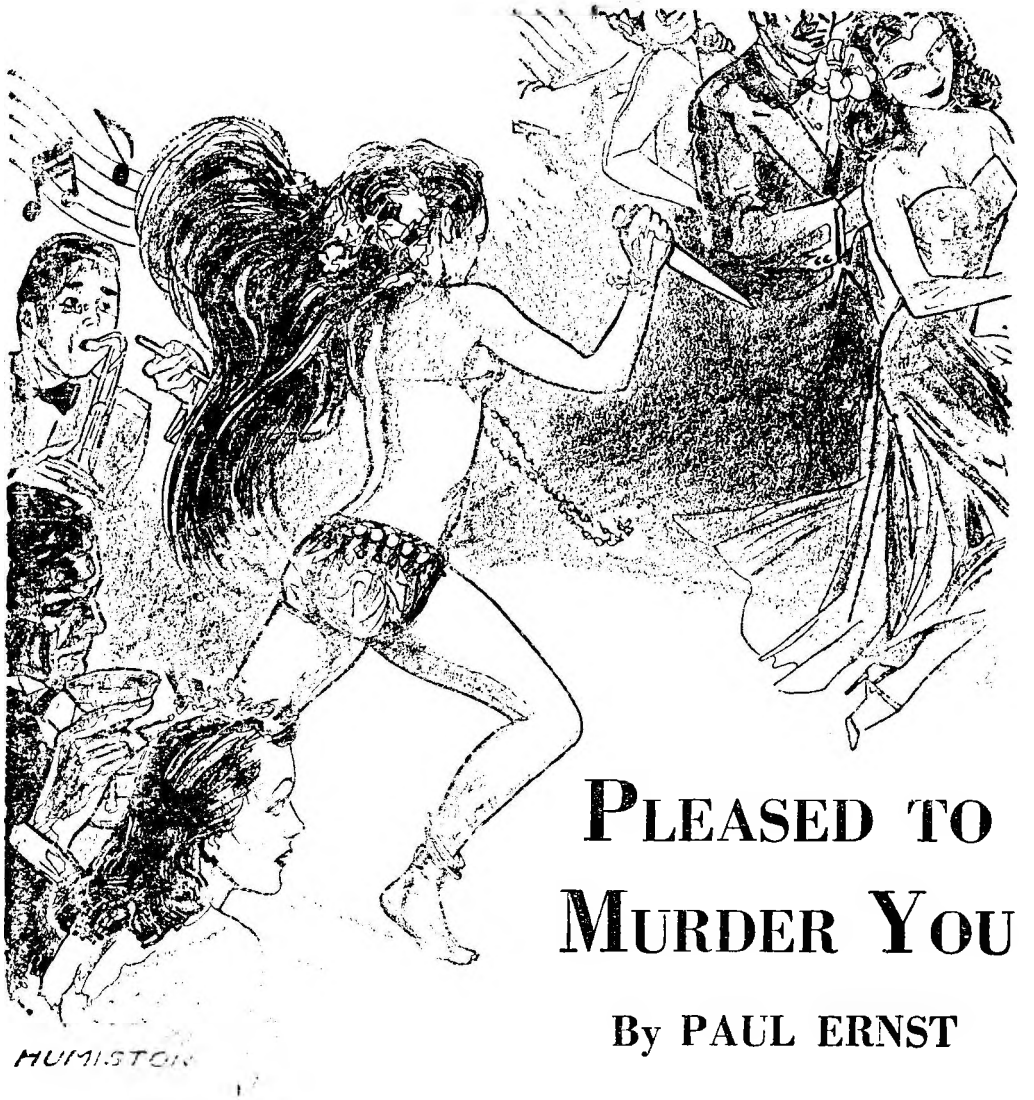
"Where'd ye learn code?"

"You know as well as I do I put in a hitch in the coast guard as a boy. All I could remember, though, was SUBS."

"I cal'ate 'twas enough," conceded Captain Barnabas. "Now I suppose I got to put up with them dogs till they give up the spirit. As for the radio—you can have the blame thing as a gift."

Sims' flabby jowls twitched and his beady eyes winked in fatigue. "I'd give anything to go home, Captain Barnabas," he begged.

"We're goin'," said Captain Barnabas dryly.



PLEASED TO MURDER YOU

By PAUL ERNST

I

HALF a thousand people witnessed what Hoodoo Quist later insisted must be considered the introduction to murder.

Five hundred pairs of eyes watched the girl.

She had on breastplates that could have been slightly larger to fit her personality, a narrow girdle plastered with glittering sequins, and was a honey blonde. The expanses between bits of costume were quite enough to rivet attention; but it was her dance that got the crowd, really

It was billed as the Dagger Dance. It was an Apache kind of thing, with the girl doing it alone, going through the motions of being thrown aside by a cruel lover, then drawing this dagger and waving it ferociously around. The dagger was one of those double-edged things that breathed of creeping forms in the night and notes left on corpses with strange signatures underneath their scrawls.

The girl was just fair as a dancer, the dance was not too original; but it got you just the same. She was a good actress and into her savage imaginary murder she put everything she had. It left a tingle up your spine, and when she plunged the knife

finally into an imaginary corpse at the end of the number, half a hundred people, civilians, service men, old, young, gasped a little bit.

The lights went up, the girl took her bow, and a burly man with pitch black eyebrows grinned at the crowd.

"There you are, folks. You get away with murder here. Is there any one in the place you don't like? Just follow the little lady's example and rub 'em out, liquidate 'em. Grrr!"

The orchestra began to play and most of the five hundred rose and began shuffling over the dance space. At a ringside table, however, one couple did not get up. The girl stared around with inquiring eyes. The man gazed with eyes filled with philosophical speculation.

"Introduction to murder," he said slowly. His voice was deep and a little furry. "'The little lady's example' was a shade too good. Enough to really put ideas in people's heads."

"Pooh," said the girl. "You're making a lot out of an ordinary dagger dance."

"Not so ordinary. The way that girl put it on, it really was an introduction to murder. And what a lot of 'em here would like to take it up! Pleased to murder you, friend."

"Cynic," said the girl. "You're as much fun to go out with as a case of ulcers."

The blonde entertainer was beautiful; but you looked at her and said to yourself, Yeah, she's beautiful, and let it go at that. Of this girl, whose hair was mahogany flame, whose eyes were purple-blue, and who had a redhead's milky skin, you would have said in a different tone, Gee, she's *beautiful!* If you'd inquired about her you'd have found that she was Joanna Thyne, niece of Kimberly Thyne who owned, among other things, Chicago's second biggest newspaper.

The man with her was William Quist, known in Chicago as a focal spot for trouble. He had a weird penchant for being where things happened. Some of this was because he went looking for trouble, and some was because he was just that kind of person.

Bill Quist was as tall as the burly bouncer with the black eyebrows, whose function was concealed under the title Assistant Manager. But Bill was about twenty pounds lighter because there was no fat on him. Bill's huskiness, his big bones, his slate-blue eyes, gave the story of his ancestry. They had come from stormy northern seas. Somewhere back among his thick-shouldered, independent forefathers were Holmquists or Lundquists or some such thing, with the Holm—or Lund—at some time dropped for plain Quist. He said:

"Going out with you, carrot-top, is like going out with a neat little vial of nitro. It's such a pretty neck — you shouldn't stick it out so far and so often."

"I'll stick it out," said Joanna, "till I get a news story that'll make Unk put me on his old paper as a reporter."

Quist shook his head.

"You're richer than a tub of cream. You have an uncle and guardian who yearn to pamper you and gild your life. And you want to work as a lousy reporter."

"Speaking of cream," said Joanna. "The check for this so called entertainment—"

"Is mine of course," growled Quist in his deep, fuzzy voice. "I have my self-respect, or something."

"No private detective has any self-respect, Bill. Which reminds me, when are you going to get some more detecting to be private about?"

"Any year now," said Quist.

"I'll bet you're broker than a dropped egg."

"All right. It's my egg."

"You haven't any business being here with me. You can't afford it."

"Routine expenses," said Quist lightly. "Things can happen at a joint like this as well as anywhere else, can't they?"

"Wouldn't you feel funny if something did happen, after that crack?"

"Look around you," said Quist, a trifle less lightly.

THE Forty Thieves was just a novelty spot, cashing in on the wartime rush for night club atmosphere. It's only novelty was that dagger dance. *Follow the little lady's example. Some one here you don't like? Just liquidate 'em.* But as Quist had said, the dancer was all too good an introducer of murder.

Here and there on slightly drunken or otherwise unguarded faces was a disquieting expression.

Murder, if you break it down into percentages, is not common. Only a comparatively few commit murder. But the murder *wish* as the little men who write the big books will tell you, is something else again.

The world is full of people who would like to murder someone; and quite a few seemed to be among the crowd that packed The Forty Thieves.

Here was a woman, past beauty but not desire, staring at a stodgy husband across the table. There was a girl with a fixed smile on her partner, who played footie-footie with a brunette next to him. Yonder a thin, tired man gazed at the white bosom of his wife where too many diamonds, representing countless hours of slavery at business, blazed jeeringly at him.

"Bill," said Joanna suddenly, "isn't that girl acting kind of funny? There. Table by the end pillar. Red dress, brown hair."

Quist stared at her—nice number about twenty-seven, on the plump side, with a low cut frock of wine red. Beauty of a girl still young—composure of a woman much older. It seemed almost a professional composure.

The fellow with her was just a big kid, probably about through college with induction ready for him on graduation day. He was blonde, wiry, nice looking. He was very drunk. A glance told this, and also told of money in his background.

"She's robbing the cradle," said Joanna indignantly.

"Yeah. Otherwise, what's funny about her?" said Quist.

"Nothing now. But—look! It's happening to her again!"

Quist could see the girl's expression quite plainly for himself.

A look of sheer horror.

She stared at something beyond the pillar out of Quist's sight. Her eyes were so wide that a ring of white showed around each glaring pupil. Her lips were slack with terror, and small specks of moisture glistened around her mouth.

Then the lights dimmed down.

"Snake dance, ladies and gentlemen," boomed the assistant manager. "Everybody in. Try to be gentlemen and ladies, but if you can't—remember, you get away with murder here."

Every one got up. Quist tried to see the girl in wine red, but dozens of bodies were in the way. He was still shocked at the supreme horror in her eyes as she stared past the pillar at something out of his sight. As if she looked into hell itself.

"As if she'd seen a ghost," whispered Joanna. And Bill nodded. The girl had seemed more frightened than anything on earth could account for. Hers had seemed a terror beyond mere physical fear — a supernatural horror.

Then he and Joanna were in the weaving dance with Bill's hands on Jo's waist just above the hips, and they were all bent over in a line. Snake dance in and out among the tables, laughing and yelling, hips rolling with the music's beat.

"Silly business," said Quist, in his deep, blurry voice.

"Oh, yeah?" Joanna stared at him over her lovely bare shoulder. "I could make you marry me for that life grip you've got on me. Maybe I will, too. I've toyed with the notion."

"Nuts," said Quist.

"Go on. You could be snared."

"One can look at you without too much pain," admitted Quist. "But—"

Somebody screamed.

It was a good businesslike job, filling the big café room with its shrillness; and the dancing line faltered and stopped, and the lights went on.

"Somebody must have clutched somebody too intimately," Jo laughed. She had a swell laugh. Then it broke in the middle and Quist followed her suddenly staring eyes. She was looking toward the pillar, from where the scream had sounded, and all the rest were looking too—except for a girl who had fainted, probably the one who'd screamed at what she'd seen in the dimout of the dance. An unnatural quietness of another girl. . . .

This was—the girl in wine red.

She was slumped back in her chair, staring vacantly at nothing. Across from her the drunken blonde kid had half risen

from his chair as it began to percolate in his dazed brain that something was wrong. His lips moved as he anxiously addressed the girl in red, but she didn't answer. She'd never answer.

The dagger dance had given someone ideas. This night the invitation to get away with murder had been accepted.

II

THE wine red dress matched the color of the blood from the dead girl's breast so that it looked like a strip of the fabric going up.

Up to the knife handle.

The handle was enough to identify the weapon. It was black, of plain hard wood, smoothed by use. There were several hundred like it around The Forty Thieves; knives dull and rounded of point but quite sharp of edge, to kid the customers into thinking that the steaks they were misguided enough to order were not as tough as they usually were. An ordinary steak knife, in a word.

There was a steak on a plate in front of the blonde kid's chair, more messed with than eaten, for he had been too drunk to eat much. The knife had come from that plate, it seemed. A trace of meat sauce had been seen up near the hilt. But nothing—no prints—on the handle. The cops had already seen that; it could be determined with the naked eye.

There were half a dozen cops in uniform in the place, and a couple in plainclothes. Concerning one of the latter there was Joanna's sudden whisper in Quist's ear.

"Camber! For Pete's sake pin down your tongue this time, Bill."

Quist just nodded to her, and kept on looking around. He and Joanna were seated at their table again. No sense in joining all the others milling around the death table and getting shoved back again by the cops.

He watched Camber work. And it was good, efficient work.

The crowd was sorted into a line, and this line came past Sergeant Camber, the other plainclothes man, a guy named Pastern, and one of the uniformed cops. Name, address, where were you when the light went on, a fast look, and out. With a stern admonition to be where the police department could reach them if it wanted them.

In an admirably short time the respectable ones, the ones who almost certainly could have had nothing to do with the affair, were weeded out. At the end of this, Quist went with Joanna to the two tables slid end to end where Camber, Pastern and the uniformed cop sat a little like three judges.

"You can check us out, too, I think," he said easily to the inquisitors. "We were off there—"

Camber's gaze, and Joanna's nudge, stopped Quist.

Sergeant Fred Camber was a fine detective. None better on Homicide. He was a coldly ambitious man, scrupulously fair as a rule, not indulging in personalities. Which made him all the more dangerous to the rare few who had his icy personal enmity.

Of which, Bill Quist was outstandingly at the head of the list!

It was unfortunate. There had been a snatch affair in which Quist had got the hunch that the kidnaper worked in the household. He had acted out a play designed to scare the snatcher into flight, subtly directing that flight so that the most convenient exit was a pantry window. To slow the escape and make capture doubly sure, Quist had put under the window the first things at hand in the pantry—an empty bucket and a mop, the latter leaning against the house wall so that a touch would bring it down in a confusing tangle. Then, as an afterthought, he had posted a newspaper photographer friend in the bushes to get a picture of the flight and of the guilty person.

It was slightly screwy, as many of

Quist's maneuvers were. But there was no malice in it. Certainly Bill hadn't had Fred Camber in mind. It was a freak of ill chance that Camber, about that time, had noticed the window open a little and had climbed out to see what he could see.

What he saw, next day, was a picture on the front page of Sergeant Camber sprawled on the ground with one foot in a bucket and with a mop over his hatless head in just the position to make the soppy strands look like a horrific wig.

It had indefinitely postponed an impending lieutenantcy, and directed toward Bill Quist a hatred so murderous that had he been anybody but Quist he'd have taken the next train out of town.

"So we can check you out," said Camber now, dark eyes like black stone on Quist's bony face and Joanna's much more charming pan. "Shall we drive you home in a squad car too? Or do you have your own car here?"

"Oh, all right," sighed Bill, sitting down at a near table.

Imperturbably, Camber went on with it. One of his worst points as an enemy was that he never raised his voice and never let his wrath cloud his abilities. He had a dark brown face, dark eyes and hair and habitually wore dapper, dark brown suits. The general impression was of a browned rifle barrel.

The sheep were gone, and the goats were left, now, to wriggle under Camber's cold eye. The goats were the blonde kid who had brought the dead girl here, the waiter on the death table, the people at tables nearest, and the bouncer. And Bill and Joanna, of course; they'd be goats whenever Camber could manage it.

"We may be here come sunrise," Quist murmured to Joanna. "And in a murder that has nothing to do with the Quist Detective Agency, too."

"Shut up," said Camber evenly, toward their table. He turned his attention back to the blonde kid, who was shocked half-sober by now.

"Name?"

"Thomas Allen Regan, Third," said the kid in a low tone.

QUIST whistled. Regan fabricated steel. One of the big names in the city. Here was something for the reporters who were clamoring at the door of the night club.

"You brought her here?" Camber's thumb pointed to the white mound formed by dead body and table under a draping tablecloth.

The blonde youngster shivered and nodded. His lips looked green under the bright lights.

"Her name?"

"Virgina Draper."

"Know her well?"

"No. I only met her last week. Went out with her once before tonight. The College Room. She seemed to be—" he moistened greenish lips—"a good egg."

"You went out with her only once before, yet you hated her enough to kill her."

"I didn't kill her," whispered the boy. Quist, off to one side, nodded a little. The youngster was making no effort to play up the Regan name. He was steaming on his own, not yelling about what his rich father would do to the whole police force if they didn't let him go instantly. Nice boy.

"Tell me what you did when the lights went out for the last dance."

"I got up with Virge," said Regan the Third. "I meant to get her ahead of me in the snake dance. There was a mixup so I got behind some girl I'd never seen before, and Virge was behind me. We went around the place that way. Then somebody yelled. I was near our table and the lights went on so I just sat down. Then I saw Virge already sitting there. She'd beat me to the table. I said something to her, and she didn't answer, and I got a little scared because she wasn't moving or anything. And pretty soon everybody was around us, staring at her and at me—"

"You're sure it was Virginia Draper be-

hind you in the dance?" Quist said softly from the sidelines.

"Why not?" said young Regan, turning a white face toward Bill for a moment. "I was tight enough, and it was dark enough, so I couldn't have sworn she was there. But Virge wasn't tight. She could tell who she had hold of."

Sergeant Frederick Camber turned all the way in his chair to stare at Quist, so Bill looked innocently straight ahead, and started a bit when a small toe hit viciously under the table at his ankle. After a minute Camber turned back again.

The homicide man looked thoughtfully around. The place had an eerie look—the few people in the big room which resounded emptily and lonesomely because it was designed for a crowd; the glints of light from instrument and music racks on the empty orchestra dais; the tables with half eaten food and half finished drinks. Inquest on death in the shell of life. And in Camber's eyes was a promise that The Forty Thieves and its introduction to murder was as good as closed right now.

"The Draper girl was slumped in her chair, dead, when you first saw her in the lights?" Camber said smoothly.

"She was in the chair," said young Regan. "But for the rest—I don't know. I don't know much of anything about it." A trace of color came into his white face. "I don't usually get this fried. But tonight—"

Camber jerked his head, and the youngster moved on, to stand with two cops very near him. Quist looked at Joanna. Regan the Third or no Regan the Third, the boy was in trouble up to his ears. In fact, it was not impossible that he was in the electric chair right this minute. His steak knife, from his plate, in the smooth white breast of his girl at his table. It was a mess.

The man and girl in front of Camber now started slight stirrings of memory in Quist. That is, the man did. The girl, a blondined trick with small hard features and a small selfish mouth and no doubt a small tight mind, he'd never seen. The man, big and flabby, with hair too sleek and dinner packet too form-fitting, he had. Then he placed him, as Camber had placed him earlier. He was Neddie Boyce, or Graham, or Gresham, a second-rate con man and blackmailer.

"What was wrong, Neddie?" said Camber evenly. "Wouldn't Draper come through for some letters or something?"

"You can't pin this on me," snarled the con man. "I was four tables away when the lights went on. I never saw her before."

"Yeah, you can't pin this on him," shrilled the girl with him. "Before the snake dance and during the snake dance and after the snake dance we were way over there, like this all the time." She held up her predatory little hand with first and second fingers crossed.

"You'll talk when you're spoken to," snapped Camber.

"I'll talk when I damn well want to!" shrilled the girl. "We ain't in on this, and you can't make us out that way."

"Hey, Belle—" mumbled Neddie uneasily.

"Well, he can't."

"Your name?" said Camber.

"Flobelle LaMar. Manicurist at the Belldon Arms Hotel, and if you think—"

"LaMar's no name. It's a brand of cigars. Name?"

"Well—Marie Klobber."

"So you were 'way over there' during all this," said Camber, nasty polite.

"Yeah, we were. We didn't get back to our table till after the light, and then we came from near the orchestra clear the other end of the joint. So we couldn't of been in on it unless we could of flew."

Camber glanced at a figure in black like a melancholy crow. The waiter for the tables near the pillar, one of which now propped up death. The waiter nodded his gloomy affirmation of the placing of Neddie and Flobelle.

Camber asked a few more questions and

each time the girl yapped shrilly before Neddie could open his embarrassed mouth, and the red climbed a little into Camber's neck, and he turned them over to the uniformed cops. They'd go to Headquarters with Regan the Third for more exhaustive questioning; but Quist's shrug and Joanna's answering glance gave it as their opinion that they'd not be held long.

There followed the burly bouncer, savage in the sure knowledge that after this night he was going to have to hunt another joint to bounce in; a young fellow with football shoulders who had been at the table behind Regan's, and who said his name was Wharton and that he was an ambulance driver; and the girl with Wharton who was a nice brunette and looked even more scared than he did. Then came a fairly wealthy business man whose name was Forrester, and a girl who finally said she was Forrester's secretary and please was it necessary for names to come out in the papers? And then it was Bill Quist and Joanna Thyne.

Camber's teeth showed in his smile.

"Hoodoo Quist," he said, with a little nod. "Where you go, there's trouble. And usually you have a hand in it."

"Not tonight," said Bill, lounging in front of the table with his hands in the pockets of his dinner jacket. "I'm an innocent bystander."

Camber looked at Pastern, who was taking notes and keeping his mouth shut.

"Pure as snow in a coal mine," said Camber. Pastern just shrugged. Quist was nothing to him, one way or another.

"Where were you and your girl friend during all this?" Camber asked him.

"Over there," said Bill, pointing out their rather distant table. "Right?" he added, to the bouncer.

"Yeah," said the man grudgingly.

"You know Quist?" Camber said to the bouncer.

"Sure, I know 'im. Bad luck Quist. When he came in, I had a hunch we'd get in some kind of a jam. He's a jinx."

"How people love you," Joanna murmured to Bill. Then she quailed before Camber's stare.

"What's the dope on this, Quist? What do you know?"

"Nothing," said Bill.

Camber's teeth were in his smile, as before.

"It would be fun to make sure of that in the back room."

"It wouldn't be fun when the papers came out next morning," said Joanna.

CAMBER'S stare swung back to her, coldly furious, baffled, but controlled. He knew quite well who she was, and who her uncle was, and what paper her uncle owned.

"It must be comfortable to go through life hiding behind a dame's skirts," he said evenly to Quist.

"Why, you—" began Quist, with sparks in his slate gray eyes. Then he stopped as Camber waited inquiringly for the rest. Camber would like a brawl, under the circumstances. It would have suited Bill, regardless. But there was Joanna to consider. He glared down at his lovely handicap, and she stared meekly back up at him.

Red was in Camber's neck again. He would have loved to put these two in with the little group that was going to Headquarters for more questioning, but he had no reason to do that and he knew it. He had already done all he could, which was to hold them till the last dog was hung, and, Bill suspected, see to it that their names got to the reporters ravening outside.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "Beat it. But stay where we can find you. And—" his feelings almost got the better of him for a moment—"if I find out you're in on this somehow, that this is part of some shady case of yours that you're holding out about—look out."

"Yes, sir," said Quist, with perhaps too much humility. Then he said, "Look, there is one thing that might be a kind

of tip. Miss Thyne and I happened to notice the Draper girl's actions just before that snake dance—"

"So you are holding out. You—"

"Now wait a minute. This is just a tip, I tell you. For what it may be worth. A minute before that dance, the girl saw something, or somebody, that scared her to death. I never saw such fear in a human's face.

"As Miss Thyne put it, she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. Then the lights went out, and when they came on, she was dead."

"All right, who did she see?"

"I don't know. Whatever she was looking at was cut off from where we sat by that pillar."

CAMBER snorted, "Saw her killer, probably. I don't see that that helps. She can't tell us about it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Bill politely. "You needn't thank me so fulsomely. I seen it was my duty to tell you, and I done it, that's all."

"Get out," said Camber, lips barely moving.

Outside, Bill stopped grinning.

"That suchandsuch of a soandso," he said. "I'll pick those ice-cold eyes of his out and make him eat 'em like grapes, one of these days."

"At the moment," murmured Joanna, "I could help you with pleasure. I do get a story—murder and Regan the Third—and he keeps me in till every reporter in Chicago has phoned the story in. But look, Bill, it would be just as well if you did forget this thing—not mix in it.

"He's after your scalp anyhow, and that would be offering it to him on a silver tray."

"I guess you're right," said Quist. But in his eyes was the body of the girl in wine red, with the steak knife buried in her bosom; and in his eyes was more abstracted thought than Joanna liked to see under the circumstances.

III

BILL QUIST, Hoodo Quist to many, had his number tens propped up on the window sill and was leaning back in his swivel chair with his back to the desk and his face to the twelfth story clouds. His hat was low over his brooding eyes. The anteroom door clicked and there were neat small steps and he said, without turning: "How'd you work it? With your name plastered in the news this morning, I expected Uncle Kimberly would never let you out of his house again."

Joanna sat on the edge of the desk and opened her fur coat and crossed her legs.

"That would have suited Kim grand," she admitted. "Never to let me out of the house again, I mean. But he's in a spot. What can he do? He can't lock me in like a child."

"He could give you a damn good spanking," said Bill, eyes moody as at last he turned and stared at her. "You'd better go on back home, now."

"You mean, because you're going to be busy?" said Joanna brightly.

"I didn't say I was going to be busy."

"But you are. I knew it last night, the way you looked. In spite of the trouble you may get into with Camber, and in spite of the fact that you ought to be busy looking up paying cases so you can meet your rent bills, you're going to smell around this Draper case a little."

"I'm not."

"You'll always be next door to the bread line," said Jo comfortably, "because you'll always be interesting yourself in cases that don't concern you, and in which there isn't any money."

"I tell you I'm not interested in the Draper thing," said Bill. "Anyway, dough is where you find it. You can never tell where you'll find an outcropping."

"Cigarette?" said Jo, grinning a little.

"No—" Quist took one and lit it, and obviously didn't know he had done so. "That's a nice kid, that young Regan," he

said. "They sure fixed him up in the papers."

"Well, he's the logical suspect, isn't he?"

"He didn't do it."

"Oh? You have proof of that, of course?"

"Look," said Quist. "The girl was killed with a steak knife. No point at all on such a knife, to speak of. Almost as rounded as a table knife. Think a minute of the beef required to drive such a dull thing to a human heart."

Jo looked narrowly at him over her cigarette.

"That blow took terrific force," Bill went on. "Now, who could have given it the necessary brawn? The bouncer could have. I might just possibly have done it. But young Regan? Never! He's wiry and fast moving, but he hasn't the weight. However, you couldn't break down the nice case they have against him with a little thing like that."

Jo wiggled her feet. The current ambition of her life was to get such a news scoop that her uncle would have to admit she'd make a good reporter; and she looked as if she sensed such a scoop in the offing.

"The look on that girl's face just before she was killed," Bill mused on. "Damnedest thing I ever saw. It wasn't what Camber said. She didn't look that way because she saw the man who was going to kill her and sensed it. It was a different kind of fear. Supernatural."

"So you *are* going to work on it."

"Build a case on a thing as thin as a facial expression? Don't be silly." Quist got up. "You might as well go on back home. I'm going out to see a guy, and you wouldn't like him."

"I'd love him," said Jo, matching strides with him. "I'll go along. Where?"

"Well, if you must know, to Headquarters."

"You wouldn't dream of building a case on a facial expression!"

"I'm just going to see if they've found out anything more," snapped Bill. "And maybe get some dope on the Draper girl. That doesn't mean I'm going to mix in, does it?"

"You chump."

"And anyhow, you can't go with me."

"The streets are public," said Joanna. "Try and shake me."

"If you mean that literally," said Bill, taking her shoulders in his big hands, "it would be a pleasure."

He shook her with restrained savagery, looked for a breathless minute as if he were going to kiss her in the same spirit, then released her.

"You're a problem child and I don't know what I've done to deserve you," he growled. And he took a waspish pleasure in walking so fast that she had almost to run to keep up.

PASTERN was at Headquarters, and Pastern, as has been said, neither liked nor disliked Bill Quist. He gave with what had been found out since last night. There was nothing concerning the actual murder; Thomas Allen Regan the Third was still the lad with his neck in a noose for that. But they'd checked on Virginia Draper.

"She was a tramp, in a way," said Pastern, chewing rhythmically on gum; he didn't smoke. Bill remembered that almost professional composure of the girl in red. A composure that had instantly suggested elegant tramphood. "But she was discreet. In five years, three guys have had a key to her place. Only three, and never more than one at a time. Quiet, sober citizens, too. One was R. J. Montgomery, the utilities man. The other two were guys in the dough: Cluett Morse and Theodore Adamson."

"Did you check them?" said Bill.

Joanna was taking mental notes and wiggling her toes excitedly.

"Sure. Montgomery's retired and in California now with his wife and married daughter. The other two are dead."

"Dead?"

"Yeah, but not in that tone of voice. Perfectly natural. Morse went broke and committed suicide. Adamson died in an accident. Fire."

"Doesn't look like there's much there," shrugged Quist. "Could I have a word with young Regan?"

Pastern stopped chewing gum for a minute.

"You cutting yourself in on this? After what Camber told you?"

"There isn't a dime in it for me," said Bill, by way of answer. "I'm just curious, that's all."

"That'd better be all, pal," said Pastern. "Yeah, you can talk to Regan."

Young Tom Regan looked as if he had waked in his cell with a bucket of mud in his mouth, after the many drinks the night before. In addition to the hangover, he had plenty to worry about. But he had talked to a brace of lawyers chased down in the dawn by his wealthy father, and he'd had time to compose himself so he was reasonably calm.

But he was still, according to him, in the dark about what had really happened last night.

"I can only remember chunks of it," he said. "Like looking at a movie through frosted glass, with little clear spots here and there. I *was* fried!"

"Let's have the clear spots."

A few words had removed the boy's first suspicions of Quist, but a few were left.

"Where do you come in on this? Why do you want to know?"

"I'm a private detective, and not a bad one. I might decide to take your case. If so, and I help, I'll send you a bill that'll mortgage your yacht. If I don't help—no bill."

"Seems fair enough. Well—I was sitting there at the table with Virginia just before the last dance. I guess I was eating—I seem to remember cutting at some steak. I put down knife and fork and got up and started toward the dance floor when the lights went out. I waited for Virge to walk ahead of me, and didn't feel her. Just a lot of people milling around. I said, 'Hey, where are you?' And then I felt her behind me, hands on my back, and we started off, Next thing I knew, I was back at the table, looking across at her and wondering how she could get seated before I did. And I talked to her and she didn't answer and a lot of cops came—"

"That's all you can remember?"

"That's all."

"And you didn't know her very well?"

"Went out with her only one night before. She was older, playing me for money. But that's all right. I've got plenty, and I'd get value received."

"Could some other girl have been behind you in the dance instead of Virginia?"

Regan shrugged. "Maybe. Would that make a difference?"

"It might, or it might not. Perhaps the girl never did get up from the table. Maybe she was sitting there dead all during the dance, instead of being killed later. If so, and if we could prove you were on the floor and around the other tables all that time, it would help."

"Luck to you," said Regan wistfully.

So Quist went back to the desk and then out to the street with Joanna.

"Good-by," he said. "Nice to have had you with me."

"Now, Bill—"

"Here we regretfully part. I mean it. There are still a few exclusively male spots in this femininely dominated world. I'll just go from one to another till you have to desist."

She stood with beautiful red banners of rage in her face and watched him stride away.

He went to The Forty Thieves.

He parked his buggy away from the door a hundred feet, walked back, and jiggled the door vigorously. At this time of day it was locked, of course; and he stood to one side as he heard steps, so that who-

ever was coming to open up could not quite recognize him through the barred glass.

The bouncer opened the door inquiringly, saw Quist, and started profanely to shut it again. Bill shoved in.

"All morning and up to half an hour ago, we've had cops in our soup," snapped the bouncer. "Now you come. What do you want?"

"My partner of last evening dropped her compact," said Quist gravely. "I'd like to see if I can find it."

"There's been nothing like that reported."

"I'll look anyhow."

"Beat it."

Not a muscle of Quist's bony face moved. But his eyes seemed to take on the hue of a sea in a fog.

"I'll look around."

Biting his lips, the man stood aside and Quist went in.

IF THE place had looked empty during Camber's inquisition last night, it looked positively cavernous now. Dimly lit, with a few cleaning women around and the tables moved every which way, it was as lonesome as an airplane hangar when the dawn patrol has gone.

Bill took a little flashlight from his pocket and went to the table where the girl had died. He stood a moment trying to repopulate the nearby tables as they had been last night.

He thought that at this one, to the dead girl's right, the business man and secretary had been. There, he thought, behind the girl, the wide-shouldered young ambulance driver and his friend had sat; and behind Regan the petty con man and the gilded Flobelle LaMar. But he couldn't be sure; he'd had no reason to observe things that closely.

He snapped on the flash and began looking around. The bouncer came morosely over.

"The cops have been around with microscopes," he observed sourly. "So what do you expect to find that they didn't?"

"Who can tell?" said Quist. "A four-leafed clover, maybe."

The small spot of light roamed restlessly over the floor, along a strip of carpet between rows of tables. Bill bent and flipped up an edge of the carpet. The light went on, jerked back. His hand darted down and came up with thumb and forefinger closed. He looked hard, with his back to the bouncer, then popped his hand in his coat pocket and drew it out empty.

"Hey! What'd you find there?"

"Four-leafed clover," said Bill, with a pleased smile. "I knew I'd be lucky today."

He waved genially to the scowling bouncer, went to the door, and emerged onto the street.

The avenue on which The Forty Thieves had been born was as untidy and unattractive looking by day as the joint itself. A scabby looking El structure shivered to roaring trains a block away, and small loft buildings and sooty warehouses lined the block. The only residence structures around were third-rate boarding houses, so it was mildly unusual that a taxi should be hanging around at the curb. It was certainly an unlikely place for fares.

But the cab was there, and the driver had the door open a couple of inches invitingly, and he called, "Cab, buddy?"

Behind the bony calm of Quist's face was pleased interest, but he couldn't be sure of anything yet. The cab *might* be there innocently. So he said, "No. Got my own car down here. I'll—"

There was a quiet voice from the doorway of the brick building next to The Forty Thieves.

"You'll take a cab, buddy," said the voice.

Bill turned and saw a gun, ten feet away, and a gloved hand steady on it, and a slit of a mouth and a pair of ice marbles for eyes over it, so he went to the cab.

"Swell!" he told himself, getting in, and meanwhile registering all the surprise and

anger and fear he should have felt in such a position.

But it was not so swell. For things happened too fast, when he'd entered the cab, for even a reasonably alert guy like Quist to have expected.

The driver slammed the door shut that remaining few inches. Bill sat down. And that was all Bill knew. Instead of sitting on a car seat, he seemed to have lowered himself rearward into a fathomless, black pool that closed over his head without sound and without remembrance.

IV

LOOKING around feebly an unguessable length of time later, bracing his body instinctively to the cab's rapid movement, Quist realized that he should have divined in time the nature of the trap into which he had so blithely stepped.

The glass panel between front and rear of the cab had been tightly closed; it was open a bit now. All the windows had been tight shut. The driver had been so careful to have held the door a few inches open. Tissue-thin shards of glass on the floor of that side of the cab were hardly necessary to tell Bill what had happened.

There'd been a little round pill bottle fastened to the door-catch, maybe with a blob of chewing gum, so that it was broken when the door slammed. One of the ordinary little pill cylinders druggists use by the thousand. But in this one, instead of pills, there'd been a gas or volatile liquid that struck at consciousness almost on contact with the membrane of the nostrils. There was expert medical knowledge in this.

Bill felt sick, and hoped that the stuff had no permanent after-effects. Then he realized wryly that possible permanence should worry him very little at the moment. He wouldn't be allowed to live to find out.

He tried to move his hands, and found that his wrists were tied, with his hands in his lap so that passersby could not see in and see the bonds. His ankles were tied, too. He raised his hands to his chest. The cab was on a back road, but there was some traffic, and a driver might see the ropes—

"Put your arms down," said the driver, expressionlessly. Quist caught his cold eye in the rear-view mirror, and put his arms down.

"Where are you taking me?" said Bill.

"New Mexico, maybe," said the driver. "They say that's a good place for guys with their lungs all shot."

"Well," said Bill, "you might at least turn off your meter."

"Ha, ha," said the man, spacing the two syllables evenly.

"What are you picking on me for?" persisted Bill. "I don't know anything about the Draper killing."

"Neither do I," said the man.

"All I know," said Bill, since he might as well pass time trying to get information, even if he'd never be able to use it, "is that she had a queer look on her face just before the payoff. She looked as if she'd seen a ghost."

The response to that was astonishing.

The driver, he could see in the mirror, actually smiled a little, for the first time, in a grisly sort of humor.

"She did, pal," he said.

"She did what?" said Bill, sure he hadn't heard right.

"See a ghost."

"You shouldn't kid a man in my position!"

The driver shrugged. "You called it. Not me."

The cab slowed. Bill had been expecting it to slow for some time. A taxi in the country excites more and more interest the farther out it gets on a purely rural road. So Quist had been expecting to be changed from it to a private car any time. And here was the time.

The cab rocked left, into a lane of winter-bared trees and bushes, and ahead

of it was a sedan, a non-descript machine that you'd almost have to take a picture of to remember later. There were two men in it who got out without haste as the cab stopped. Quist had never seen either of them before.

The cab driver hauled Bill out into the snow. Bill managed to stand on bound feet by leaning against the side of the cab. The two from the sedan watched him without much curiosity. The lack of curiosity, or of any other emotion, gave him the shakes; and he decided he'd better try playing his one trump card. Which was a deuce.

"Looks like I'm going on that last lovely ride," he said.

"Looks like it," said the smaller of the two men.

"You're too late," said Bill. "Believe it or not, I managed to ditch what I got off the floor of The Forty Thieves before I got in the cab. The police will have it by now."

"You found something in there?" said the smaller man, lighting a cigarette.

"Isn't that the reason you snatched me?" demanded Bill.

"No," said the smaller man.

Bill felt cold clear down to the soles of his feet. The man's disinterest was so complete that he was almost polite about it. And it left Quist without a straw to cling to.

HE HAD gone into the night spot with no idea whatever of really finding anything after the cops' exhaustive search. He had gone there to *pretend* to find something, with the idea that the pretense might alarm somebody into going after him with wild-eyed threats, and thus giving him some information. This, he had thought in the cab, was what had happened. Somebody in The Forty Thieves had given the signal to somebody outside. He had been picked up so that non-existent clue could be retrieved. Okay. He could use the snatchers' anxiety to get their hands on the clue he'd pretended to find, as a stall till he had pried out a few facts and had a chance to make a break.

And now he found that these men didn't even know he'd been supposed to find anything, and didn't care anyhow. Which seemed to clear the night club of complicity either in the murder or in any plot with these two gunmen; and which left him without even a thread to hang on.

"I'll run along, Ed," said the cab driver.

The larger of the two from the sedan nodded impassively.

"Sure."

The cab backed out, with the driver deftly following the thread of the lane. Quist dully watched it go.

"Why did you pick me up if you didn't get the tip that I'd found something?" he said, almost angrily.

"Oh, we've been following you all day," said the small man. "We got orders to tail you till we made sure you weren't going to stick your nose in this. You stuck your nose in. Get into the car."

"I can't walk with my ankles tied," said Quist, in the faint hope that the two would prefer to untie him rather than carry him.

"You can hop."

"As long as my hands are bound anyway—"

The small man drew a gun from his holster. Bill hopped toward the sedan. The larger man opened the rear door, and Quist got a glimpse of a couple of things on the floor. There was a length of thin chain and there were two foot-long chunks of old railroad rail. And not far out the road along which the cab had come was the drainage canal.

"Hoodoo Quist," said the big man. "But this time nobody's jinxed but yourself."

And it was then that the siren sounded.

The growing wail came from the road in the direction of the city. It seemed to be about a mile away, but the rapidity with which the sound increased told of extreme speed of approach. Then you heard motor

noise. It might have been a car, or a couple of motorcycles, or all three. There was ample racket for the latter.

For the first time the two gentlemen from the sedan took a genuine interest in things. An intense interest, in fact. The smaller man almost lost his cigarette from his dangling jaw, and the large one stared at him with popping eyes.

"What the hell!" was the large one's eloquent comment.

"Cop car?"

"Can't be."

"Is!"

"Coming here?"

The siren died a little as the turn into the lane was approached. It was enough for the two.

"Lam!"

The smaller man whirled with blood in his eye, and Quist had just prescience enough to drop in his tracks. To drop about two and a half inches under the bullet that blazed from the man's gun. The big fellow was already at the wheel and pulling away. The smaller one hit the running-board, sent one more shot at Quist, which missed by a yard, and then the sedan was whining out of there, around a bend and toward another parallel road in the distance. Killers, like foxes, have two holes; they had picked a lane that went from road to road instead of ending in a blind alley.

AND then the cause of all the siren-screaming commotion slid up to where Quist lay staring with a jaw as slack as the smaller thug's had been.

It was his own roadster, and at the wheel was Joanna, with a face as white as if she had just fallen head first into a barrel of flour.

"Bill! You all right?"

Quist's reaction went in all directions. He cursed in amazement, sheer nerve relief, and reasonless fury. The triple strain bore really notable results in the way of profanity, and Jo's face got back a little color, and she put her hands over her ears and said, "William! Puhleaze!"

"Knife in right hand pocket," muttered Quist.

She sawed at the bonds.

"You little dumbbell!"

"Bill—is that a way to thank a guy for saving your life? What makes the palms of your hands so wet?"

"What do you think? I'm no iron man. That's sweat. I was scared—er—witless. I thought you were going home when you left me at Headquarters?"

"Lucky for you I didn't," said Joanna, resentfully slicing at the rope, and not seeming to care much if she took a little hide along with it. "And lucky I saw you go away from The Forty Thieves in a cab, after driving there in your own car. And lucky for you that you left the keys in your car and lucky you had a siren on it in spite of the dire things Camber threatened you with if you didn't take it off. In fact, it's lucky for you that you know me at all, and I'm sorry I saved your old l-life for you, and——"

She dissolved in shivers and tears, and Bill held onto her shoulders with one arm and rubbed circulation with his free hand, and they got in the roadster.

"All right," said Quist, after a couple of miles. And a gentleness far down in his voice denied the gruffness of tone. "You're a pal and you saved my life and I'll cut you a medal out of the upper of one of my old golf shoes. But you might have been shot and if you have any sense you'll quit playing in murder cases from now on."

So Jo powdered her nose with a shaky hand and said, "Yes, Bill. What do we do next?"

Bill sighed, and brushed at his muddy clothes.

"Got any ideas, Bill?"

"Yes." He shrugged. "If you still want more. I'm going to get my suit and overcoat cleaned up a little and pressed when we get back to town. While I'm in the

tailor's back room in my shorts, you get on the phone. Get the police reporter on your uncle's paper and have him find out whatever the police know about this guy that gave his name as Wharton last night to Camber."

"Wharton— Oh, you mean that ambulance driver."

"Yes. See if he is an ambulance driver, or if that was a phony. If he really is, what hospital does he work for? Get his address, and the address of the girl he was with."

"Right. But—why?"

"I said a steak knife with a rounded point had to be used with a lot of force to reach to a human heart," Quist explained. "I said nobody in sight last night would seem to have enough beef for the job except maybe the bouncer. But it occurred to me a little while ago that there was another. That guy, Wharton. He had shoulders like an All-American fullback."

"That isn't much to investigate a man on."

"Better than not following any leads at all. You know what to ask for? Okay."

Over cocktails forty-five minutes later in a west side tavern, Jo gave the answers.

"He drives an ambulance, all right, according to Vehicle Registration. Or he did, anyhow. He was with the St. Augustine Emergency Hospital for a little while, but quit there months ago. Employment place now not known. Or else no one has bothered to check up on it. Here's his address, and the address of Edith May, the girl with him last night. But what would you see her for?"

"Well, if there should turn out to be any reason for putting the heat on Wharton, we'd automatically include the girl he was with. But there's another thing. Young Regan can't be sure the girl behind him in that snake dance was Virginia Draper. From the placing of the tables, the girl might have been this Edith May, and she might have taken her place behind Regan by the order of someone who knew the Draper girl was to be killed—before the dance ever began—or she might have been just led to the right place, innocently, in the dark. In either case, she could tell who the orderer or the urger was, couldn't she?"

"Maybe," said Joanna, sipping her martini. "She looked pretty nice to me last night, though, Bill."

"Even nice girls can get caught between the cars. And can possibly give information. And I want some information, hang it! All I got out of those guys that took me for a ride was a probable cold in the head. Oh, yes. And the statement that Virginia Draper really *had* seen a ghost just before she died."

"What?" said Jo, staring.

"You remarked yourself that she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. Well, it seems she did."

"What are you talking about?"

"You heard me."

"Did one of 'em hit you on the head, Bill?" said Joanna solicitously. Then she wriggled her toes in anticipation and said, "Do we visit this Wharton now?"

"We don't," said Quist. "I do. In the meantime, you get whatever you can, from whatever source you think of, on the two gentlemen in Virginia Draper's career who now lie peaceful in death. You remember —there were three in her last five years?"

Jo nodded. "The three honey papas were Montgomery, retired now and in California, and Morse and Adamson, dead."

"Nice going. You might chisel a place on your uncle's paper yet. As office girl."

"Why do you want to know about a couple of dead men?" asked Jo suspiciously. "Are you just getting me out of the way?"

"By no means," said Quist. "Learn what you can. I'll have a talk with friend Wharton. See you for dinner at eight at the Mirabar—and don't remind me that I'm broke and we ought to eat in a cafeteria. I'm as aware of that fact as you."

She started off, and he started off; but en route, since it was right on the way to Wharton's address anyhow, he stopped at his office to get a gun. The cab driver, or somebody, had taken his automatic from him at the same time they had tied him up, during his unconsciousness.

He opened his office door and the first thing he saw, sitting in his chair with feet on his desk and smoking one of his cigars, was Sergeant Fred Camber.

V

"HELLO!" said Quist. "Can I come in, please?"

Camber took his feet off the desk, but only to give Quist a straighter, colder stare.

"Nice to see you," Quist said. "But you might have brewed a cup of tea while you were waiting for me."

The words kind of spoke themselves. No one knew better than Bill what a dangerous enemy this man could be. No one knew better than Bill that Camber would go to his grave still convinced that the mop and bucket trick had been deliberately contrived to rob him of a lieutenant's berth, and that hence it behooved Bill to keep a discreet tongue in his head. And he meant to; he really did. He was always as surprised as anyone else when his mouth opened in Camber's presence and crazy things came out.

Camber took the cigar from his teeth, puffed smoke thinly through his nostrils, and said, "You told me last night you weren't in on this Draper business."

"That was true," Quist nodded.

"*Was* true?" Camber caught him up.

Quist said nothing. Camber went on.

"You were at Headquarters today, asking Pastern what had been found out so far. Then you talked to young Regan. Then you went to The Forty Thieves, and the bouncer says you found something on the floor."

Quist sighed as he saw what was coming.

"What did you find, Quist?"

"Nothing," said Bill truthfully.

Camber was stone still, staring at him.

"You know what it gets you—holding out on us," he said at last. "The bouncer saw you pick something up."

"The guy saw me pretend to pick something up. There's a difference. I put on an act, to see if I could scare some guilty party into tipping his hand."

"Do I have to tell you how thin that sounds?"

"No," said Quist despondently. "I'll have to admit, myself, that it sounds thin. But it's a fact. And it did smoke out a herring. I was jammed into a cab and taken for a ride the minute I stepped out of the joint. The cab stopped out near the drainage canal, and they rolled me out into the snow and mud to put me in another car."

Camber's cold eyes were on Quist's immaculate overcoat and suit.

"I stopped at a tailor's awhile ago and got a sponge and a press," Bill said. "Anyway, they heaved me out, and I made a break and got away."

"From a couple of guys with guns? Just like that?" Camber said softly.

Bill couldn't explain further without bringing in Joanna and the siren. So he said nothing.

"You said you were not in this," said Camber, slowly getting to his feet. "Now you are in it. I'm telling you—keep out from under my feet. If you don't, the loss of your license will be the least you can expect."

He went out, not hurrying; and Bill got a .38 revolver from his vault, and then sat down at his desk for a moment with the gun sagging in his pocket.

Camber was not kidding. And Camber was nobody to laugh off. And Camber had seemed very, very sure of himself. As if he held Quist infallibly in the palm of his hand, and had only to shut that hand to smash him. Bill faintly smelled something extremely wrong somewhere.

He clicked his teeth shut, got up, and went out. Hanged if he was going to draw out of this now, no matter how many like Camber said Boo.

HE DROVE in fast figure eights to shake any possible police tail, to the address of Wharten. And there he was excited, not by what he found, but by what he did not find.

Because what he did not find was Wharton at home. The man had gone, checked out completely, disappeared.

Wharton's address was that of a modest establishment half rooming house and half one-room apartment house. There was a middle-aged man in charge whose collar was buttoned but tieless, and whose whitish stubble of beard could have been razored without hurting anything.

"Can I look around his room a minute?" Bill asked.

"Nothin' there to see," said the man in charge.

Quist persisted. Wharton, along with the others at The Forty Thieves last night, had been strictly ordered to stay where the police could get in touch with them. And Wharton had scrammed. That looked promising to Bill.

"I'll only take a minute."

"You got a search warrant?" snapped the man defiantly.

"No. You don't have to let me up there. You can throw me out any time you please. I'm just asking."

The man lost some of his belligerence. "Okay," he said with a shrug, after a moment. "Here's the key. 31A."

Wharton's room had once been the living room in a large, old-fashioned apartment. It now had an inadoor bed, a decrepit small refrigerator in an alcove, and some unlovely furniture. And that was all. Two minutes told Quist that this room had been methodically stripped by a person anticipating a search and admirably trained in rendering it barren.

There was nothing personal in the bare room. No names or numbers scribbled near the phone; wastebasket cleanly empty; no magazines or newspapers around; cushions of easy-chair and davenport half lifted to be sure nothing had slid down there from an unwary pocket. Nothing at all.

Quist went back down to the concierge.

"He sure left a nice clean room."

"Yeah," nodded the man. "Took all the junk we usually have to clean up after a tenant, down to the furnace room and tossed it in. A nice guy."

"Oh?" said Bill. "Down those stairs?"

He walked back along the hall as he said it, not making the mistake of asking if he could go to the furnace room, and giving the man a chance to say no. He just went down there, with the man taking a few steps toward him as if to stop him, and then shrugging again and staying by the door.

Bill looked along the stairs with his flashlight, and then over the cellar floor. And finally, for all his effort, near the furnace itself, he found one scrap of paper that had dribbled from an overfull wastebasket. A meaningless scrap, it seemed.

It was part of a letterhead. It had no writing on it at all, just a few printed letters. "Foun—"

BILL went back up, gave the man a couple of bucks from his skinny wallet, and got into his roadster. It was half-past six, and the girl, Edith May, ought to be home from wherever she worked — unless she had decamped with her ambulance driving sweetie.

Edith May lived nearer the lake than Wharton, in a new building rearing up twelve stories. Quist got her number from the letterboxes just off the street. 108; on the tenth floor. There was a lobby, with an ever-present clerk. Bill didn't want to be announced to the girl; he wanted to walk in on her without warning. So he went out again, around to the rear of the building, and in through the trade entrance. There, it was easy to slide past the

building engineer and into the stairwell, without being seen.

In whatever business or activity you engage, you presently develop sensibilities that cannot be explained by logic. The stone mason does not like the *feel* of an old wall, though it looks sound even to his trained eye; so when it comes crashing down he is out of the way, saved by dim, intuitive warning. That kind of thing. "There's something a little off color here." These words form in your brain with no reasonable explanation, to be called a hunch, later, for want of a better word.

Quist had this occupational prickle of warning quite strongly as he got to the ninth floor of the stairway, and it was apparent enough to make his scalp crinkle at the doorway to the tenth floor corridor.

He opened the door a slow inch, listened a long time, and heard no sound to confirm the hunch. Nothing whatever.

"Nuts," he muttered, as better men have done before. "I'm just jittery." And he went soft-footed down a silent hall to the door marked 108. There he listened some more, and as there was still no sound, his finger went out to press the buzzer.

And didn't.

The door of 108 was open a fraction of an inch; just enough to tell that it had been hastily closed and the lock had not quite caught. That did toll intuition's bell of warning. Quist got out his revolver and slid back the safety. He pushed the door open and then flattened against the wall outside.

There was no hail of bullets through the doorway, still no smallest noise from within. He eased around the jamb and into the room.

His gun hand lost its rigid point, and his eyes widened. It was not impending violence that had sent those prickles of warning along his spine, but the condition of the tenant in 108.

Edith May lay near a small table, on the floor, with one white arm half under her and the other trailing out on the carpet. On the table was the phone. It looked as if she had been reaching for that when death caught her.

Death in the form of a bullet, which had pierced her left breast and the heart beneath. There was nothing Quist could do here; and his course was plain: get out at once. But he didn't. Gun still lax in his hand, he went over to her.

That was because of the look of the small amount of blood on the dead girl's negligee. It looked very dry. He examined it from close range, and found it as dried as it looked. And the shapely flesh was quite cold. Edith May had been dead for several hours at least.

"Drop the gun, Quist."

Bill's breath whistled through his teeth as he whirled. Camber had opened the door again, soundlessly, and stood on the threshold with his own gun out and leveled.

Bill crouched and took a reckless step toward a door at the side of the room. This opened, and Pastern stood there. His gun was leveled too, and the look in his eyes told that he would use it if he had to, without animosity and without emotion.

Quist opened his hand, and the revolver thudded softly on the carpet. With the safety catch off, there was a chance that it would go off and that Bill could try a break in the resultant confusion. But it didn't go off; it just lit peacefully and lay there.

Slowly, with grim joy on his face, Camber walked toward him. So did Pastern, from the other side.

And Quist got the whole picture in one thunderous instant.

Edith May's flesh was cold and her blood dried: she had been dead several hours at least. That meant that she had been lying here in a sprawl at the very moment Camber had been in his office icily warning him to keep out of the case.

Camber had known she was murdered, and he had been pretty sure Bill would keep on snooping, and that soon Bill would wind up here. So Camber had come here

to trap him. And had succeeded! Now, in one stroke, the man could take revenge on Hoodoo Quist for all he had ever suffered, or thought he had suffered, from him.

"We're arresting you, Quist, for the murder of Edith May," Camber said quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Bill, sweating.

"Ridiculous?" Camber's smile was full of teeth. "We hid around here on the hunch that whoever shot her would come back. And in you come, after sneaking up the back way, and with your gun in your hand. Thought you'd left something behind that might burn you, so you came back for it."

"You're nuts," said Bill, sweating.

"Oh? We'll see how it turns out."

But Quist knew all too well how it would turn out.

That a murder charge could be made to stick to him was silly. Anyhow, he hoped he was right in believing that such a thing was silly. But it wasn't necessary to make the charge stick in order to cook his goose.

Weeks in a cell labeled as a killer. A trial. Huge expenses for legal defense. Disastrous publicity.

And the deuce of it was that Camber, in his warped way, had been fair enough about it. He had warned Bill to keep his nose out. If Bill had, this wouldn't have happened. But he hadn't, so Camber would feel justified in breaking him into a million pieces.

"Look," he said, a bit thickly, "you've got me. Kamerad. But it will pay you not to smash me. I've got a little way on this thing, and I think I can get farther. I think I can clear it up. If I do, I'll give you all the credit—if you let me have another couple of days to myself."

Camber jerked his head toward the hall door in a wordless command for Bill to get going. And as he did so, Camber reached for his hip, for handcuffs. Pastern got to the door first, and opened it wider for their exit.

"Virginia Draper didn't take part in that snake dance," said Quist rapidly. "She was killed a second after the lights went out. The girl behind young Regan during the dance was this Edith May. She was swung into that position by Wharton. And it was Wharton, pretty certainly, who killed Draper. Because Wharton has beat it, no forwarding address."

"Guesses," said Camber, producing the handcuffs. "Anyhow, we know Wharton lammed. The description's out now to pick him up."

"Probably Wharton killed this girl too," said Quist. "Right after he checked out of his room, maybe. Edith May was okay, I think. But she might have let something slip to pin the murder on Wharton, so he shut her up."

"In that case," said Camber silkily, reaching with the cuffs, "you are innocent, and innocent men have nothing to fear from a jury—"

Bill's hands, in front of him and close together for the cuffs, spread widely. The arms behind them stiffened, and he shoved. With all the strength of his hundred and ninety pounds, and with one hand on Pastern's chest and the other heeled under Camber's solid jaw.

The two jammed backward through the doorway into the corridor. Quist banged the door shut on their yells and slid the bolt. He leaped toward the window, keeping low and to one side in anticipation of bullets through the panel.

He threw the window up noisily.

"Downstairs!" Camber's shout sounded in the hall. "There's a ledge to the fire escape. Watch there, in the alley. I'll take the street door—"

Their running feet cut off the rest. That, and the clang of the door of an elevator parked on the floor for their exclusive use.

Quist wiped drops of moisture off his forehead, went back to the door, opened it, and walked out of the room. And

Camber, flattened against the wall out there, leveled his gun and said:

"Resisting arrest won't make things look a bit better for you, Quist—"

His gun did go off when it hit the floor ten feet down the hall at the flashing smack of Bill's left hand. The sound was deafening in the confined space; and in it, Camber's fall from a right to the jaw that would have broken the neck of an ordinary person, was without noise.

It wasn't cricket, Quist thought as he loped toward the stairs. Had he been a crook, he'd never have got away with that. He'd be lying now with Camber's bullet in his guts. But under the circumstances Camber hadn't put a slug there; he had elected to try clubbing Quist down; and in the half-second while his gun had been snapping up, Bill had had his chance.

But what a chance, he reflected gloomily, sliding out the front door while Pastern warily watched an alley fire escape. The bloodhounds would be on his trail now! It was a hundred to one he'd have no more than a few hours to try to dig up the real murderer of Edith May and clear himself.

It would have been nice if he'd had just one little idea of what to do next.

VI

"BUT, Bill!" gasped Joanna forty-five minutes later while oblivion cooled her soup. "You're a—a fugitive from justice. You shouldn't be just eating dinner with me here at the Mirabar."

Quist shrugged and said in his deep, furry voice, "I'd be picked up even quicker in a dive like Mike's Hole-In-The-Wall, than in a glittering place like the Mirabar. And a guy has to eat."

"Camber certainly has you where he wants you!"

"You're telling me."

"And all you got was that little scrap of paper."

They looked at the bit of paper from the furnace room of Wharton's building.

"It might not even have been dropped by Wharton," said Quist pessimistically. "It might have come from someone else's wastebasket."

" 'Foun—' " Jo spelled out. The only letters on the paper. "Part of the name of some company or enterprise, I guess. It could be Foundry, or Foundlings' Home, or Fountain—"

Bill finished his consomme.

"Find out anything on your end?" he asked.

Joanna looked a small dagger at him with each dark blue eye, and sniffed.

"You did set me to that job to get me out of your way," she said. "But I forgive you, because you had a truer hunch than you knew. I went to the Insurance Exchange for the information, Bill. And I turned up some odd coincidences."

"Insurance Exchange," said Quist, pursing his lips. "Not a bad source, redcap. What are the coincidences?"

"In the last four years," said Joanna slowly, "three other wealthy men besides Morse and Adamson, the two boy friends of Virginia Draper, have died in the same circumstances. That is, their manner of death was such that in each case nothing was left to identify the remains but dental work, metal possessions in pockets, that sort of thing. Never a one identifiable by face or body in the usual way. Drowned and weeks in water, burned in fire, suicide with shotgun to face—that kind of stuff."

"That is interesting," admitted Bill. "Did those three have anything to do with Virginia, too?"

"Not as far as I could find out. But there's more. Four of the five were no longer wealthy when they died. They had either gone broke or given their money away. The fifth had a lot of money, but willed it away from his family. Which brings up still another coincidence."

Bill's slate gray eyes were all attention, now.

"He willed it," said Joanna, "to the Harley Medical Foundation. And his in-

surance, save for one small policy, was made out to the Harley Medical Foundation. And the insurance of each of the others was made out to the same. And in every case the beneficiary named in the policy had been switched to that name within a year of death."

"Harley Medical Foundation," repeated Quist. "Never heard of it. Did you?"

"No."

"You *did* get some odd fish in your net, rusty. So odd that I can't see why the Insurance Exchange hasn't poked around in corners a bit."

"They have," said Joanna. "They got nowhere, so they gave it up. They say the Foundation is respectable enough, and the five deaths were kosher as far as could be told, so okay."

Quist snatched up the scrap of paper. "Foundation! Harley *Foun*dation. And here we have, 'Foun—'" He balled his napkin and threw it on the table, with a five-dollar bill beside it.

"Bill!"

"Good-by. Work to do."

But she was beside him as he waved to a cab. He didn't dare use his own roadster, of course, with the whole force dragnetting for him.

"You're going to the Harley place?" she asked, toes wiggling excitedly.

"What do *you* think?" snapped Bill. "Under no circumstances, however, will you go with me. Got that? But first I'll go to a second-hand shop."

"Stores aren't open at this hour."

"Second-hand clothing stores are. Anyhow, this one will be. I've gone in there at eleven and twelve at night and got things. The proprietor's a friend of mine."

Quist dismissed the cab and walked the last four blocks because police quiz cab drivers for wanted men and he didn't want to get his friend into hot water by being driven openly to the store.

The place was near Halsted Street, and the proprietor was sitting behind a counter reading a paper over the tops of his glasses. He looked at Bill and Joanna the same way and said:

"What trouble are you in now, William?"

"What makes you think I'm in trouble?" said Bill.

"Always you're in trouble when you come here," said the man, with a slow smile that warmed you like a pot-bellied stove. "Who is this beautiful young lady? Your intended?"

Joanna dimpled. Quist snapped, "By no means. She's just a brat who tags along now and then."

"Well, even fools I help when their name is Quist," sighed the store owner. "Even blind men. What do you want?"

"Suit and overcoat, size forty-two. Shirt, sixteen. Shoes, size ten. Necktie. I want stuff that's ragged and dirty, that you haven't cleaned up yet."

Quist stood in the clothes later and regarded himself in a dingy panel mirror.

"Too bad I shaved this morning," he said.

"That was this morning," said Joanna. "Don't worry, you're blue-black enough around the jowls to suit any occasion."

"See what I'd be up against if what you thought was right?" Quist said to the store owner. "What do I owe you?"

The man spread his hands. "Nothing, Quist. Come back when you're through, and trade them for your own clothes."

Three blocks away, Bill got a cab and shoved Joanna into it. "Bill!" she wailed.

"Go home," he said. "Stick near the phone. I'll give you a news story when and if I get it."

And he stood there without moving, till the cab rounded a corner, before he started for the address he had looked up in the clothing store phone book.

The address of the Harley Medical Foundation.

It looked a little like a store, save that the show window was painted over so that it let in light but not vision. It was a two-story box about as big as a four-flat build-

ing, so dirty that it had long ago reached the point where additional soot just added depth and not discoloration. But that was all right; clinics in slum districts all look about like that; and a welfare clinic in a slum district was what the Hanley Medical Foundation purported to be.

Quist began to walk laboriously as he neared the place, and he pressed his hand to his side and kept it there. A man was lounging against the wall of it. His overcoat was a thing you wouldn't have shipped potatoes in and his feet were wrapped in burlap instead of leather, but his breath, as Bill neared him, told that he'd been wealthy enough at least to get some bum rye somewhere in the recent past.

Quist breathed heavily, as though in pain, and pressed the buzzer set beside the door, after ascertaining that the door was locked.

Nobody answered so he leaned on it again. There was light upstairs.

"New around here, ain't you, buddy?" said the man in the ragged coat.

"Yeah, why?" said Bill.

"If you weren't, you'd know you'd never get no place in there." The man jabbed a contemptuous thumb toward the gilt letters, Harley Medical Foundation.

"It's a free clinic, I was told," said Quist.

"They don't charge nothin'," admitted the man, with a hiccough. "But they don't take nobody for treatment, either. Better go some place else."

Quist leaned on the bell.

"I'm around here a lot," said the man, blinking bleary eyes. "Only once in awhile I see some guy taken in, out of a lot that try like you."

Quist kept jabbing the bell determinedly.

"Once in awhile," the man enlarged on the statement, "the doc in there looks a guy over like he was looking over a horse, and then takes him in. But not often."

Quist kept playing tunes on the bell."

"I've tipped you," said the man. A bleat came into his voice. "I've tried to get in myself. I'm a sick man. I need a dime for a cuppa rye—I mean coffee. If you—"

"If I had a dime, I wouldn't be here," began Quist.

The door opened.

"What do you mean by ringing and ringing like that?" a high, thin voice lanced into Quist's ear. "Go away."

The man in the doorway was about five feet six, pudgy, with soft pink cheeks and thin red lips. His eyes were timid and light colored behind prim spectacles. He wore a white coat, like a doctor about to operate.

"I had to get in," said Quist heavily. "I got to have treatment—"

"Every bed is taken," shrilled the little pudgy man, "I am sorry."

However, he didn't shut the door. That was because Quist had leaned against it as if unable to stand without support, and his weight was too much for the pudgy fellow in white.

"There is a good doctor two blocks down," the man shrilled. "Doctor Jarvis. If you will please—"

"Refusin' a sick man," mumbled Quist. "The newspapers ought to be interested in this. What you here for if not to help guys with no money?"

The man's eyes blinked behind the prim spectacles, and his manner changed. There was no less peevish hostility in it, but something in what Bill had said, maybe the mumble about newspapers, had drawn a veil over it.

Quist walked in, heavily, and the man in white glared at him and said, "Well? Well? What is wrong with you?"

"My back and side hurt," said Quist. "There's something in there that ain't right. I think I oughtta have an X-ray."

There was something in there, all right. Bill could ask for an X-ray confident that it wouldn't show him up as a malingerer. It would reveal a bullet lodged against his spine. It would not reveal that the bullet had been there for six years, and was in

there because it bothered him not at all and would have been a tricky thing to excavate.

"We have no X-ray machine," said the man.

"Are you one of the doctors?"

"I am Doctor Calanthis," said the man.

"If I could see Doctor Harley—"

"There is no Doctor Harley. He died a little while after the Foundation was formed, and I took over. I am in charge, and I am telling you—regretfully and sympathetically, my good fellow—that we have no X-ray machine, and that we are unable to hold you here for observation because all our beds are filled. Also it is nearly eleven o'clock, and the clinic closes at six. Come back tomorrow."

Quist sighed audibly.

"It'll be tough to wait that long. But if I have to——"

At once he was being deftly urged out.

"Any particular time—" he began. The decisive closing of the door cut off his words. It banged crisply shut, and there were steps inside, climbing some stairs, and Bill grinned.

The man who had bleated for a dime was walking unsteadily off down the street, and Bill was alone, so he didn't disguise the stealthiness with which he turned the knob and then crept into the building again.

He had found the little round lock-release with his thumb while the doctor was urging him out, and had pressed it to throw out the automatic catch. All he had to do now to get back in was shove.

The hall down here was unlighted save for dim rays coming from the second floor. Quist started prowling, pocket flash slicing the blackness occasionally.

There were four rooms downstairs; two on each side of the central corridor. In each were beds, but no bed had an occupant. There was pretty fair equipment in the place—surgical instruments complete even to dental forceps, in glass-fronted cases; cardiograph, chrome-plated, adjustable racks, shelves of drugs and bandages.

But no patients.

The more Quist looked around in this place the more careful he was to make no noise. Because he had hit something hot and he knew it. Maybe this joint had looked okay to investigators from the Insurance Exchange, during their more formal searches, but it smelled very odd to him. He couldn't catalogue that smell yet, but it was there.

He went up the stairs, slowly and easily, ready to duck down fast. Because it was lighted upstairs; there wasn't any friendly darkness to cover him.

Upstairs there seemed to be eight small rooms instead of four large ones as there were downstairs. At least there were eight closed doors off the second floor hall. Light was showing under two of the doors, in addition to the illumination of the central hall chandelier. One of the two doors was in front, one was in the rear.

Quist tiptoed to the front one first, and applied an eye to the old-fashioned keyhole. Dr. Calanthis was in line with the keyhole, seated in a padded chair, looking steadily and querulously at something. Bill couldn't tell whether he was just staring off into space or looking at somebody else in the room.

Then the pink-cheeked little man said, "You're to blame—anything happens—all right before—"

Quist backed up hastily. Someone else was in there with Calanthis; one or the other might come out fast enough to catch him. He listened to the next door back, a darkened one, heard nothing, and went in. He left the hall door open a crack, so light from the hall would dimly illuminate the room. He saw a bed in a corner, noted that for the first time he was seeing an occupied one instead of an empty one, then whirled back toward the door.

Had he heard a soft sound from the hall? Furtive steps as someone drifted past the three-inch crack between door and jamb? He tiptoed to the door, and looked

out. The hall was empty, so he must have imagined it. He turned back.

His eyes were accustomed to the lack of light, so he saw the occupied bed more clearly. And he got a shock.

There was a figure in the bed, all right, but its head was swathed in white, and it was much too motionless. It looked very much as if the tenant of this room was a corpse—

Quist bit back an exclamation as the corpse suddenly stirred, reached out a wan arm to a table beside the bed, and then snapped on a light,

"Is that you, Doctor?" came a muffled voice from behind the white wrappings of the head.

VII

BILL'S fist was just drawing back for a slam at a jaw when he saw that the swathings around this man's head were complete. Even to the eyes. He couldn't see any more than if he'd had his head in a sack. He'd lit the light from habit.

"You're not angry, are you, Doctor?" came the muffled voice. It was a cultured voice, though one that you instinctively disliked. "I know I shouldn't have done it, but——"

"You caused a lot of trouble," whispered Quist, at a venture.

"I know," was the reply. "But it's the holiday season, and I've been living like a monk for months. I thought one night in a gay spot wouldn't hurt. The way you've fixed my face, only two people on earth could have recognized me—my wife, and the Draper girl. It was fantastically bad luck that Virginia Draper should choose that night to go to that place."

"Well, she did," whispered Bill.

"Why are you whispering?"

"There's a very sick man in the next room. I don't want to disturb him."

"I don't think Virginia could have told any one of seeing me," said the bandaged man petulantly. "It wasn't necessary to operate all over again on my face."

"We thought it best," whispered Bill. "Go to sleep, now."

He switched off the table lamp, turned, and went out of the room after ascertaining that the hall was empty.

It was almost disastrous. He had scarcely got the door closed when shadows at the lighted crack at the bottom of the door of the front room told that either Calanthis or the person he'd been talking with was about to come out.

Quist spun to the next room, opened the door willy nilly, and slid in. No time to see if the room was empty or occupied. He had to take a chance on that. And the moment he got the door soundlessly shut again, he realized that the breaks had gone against him.

There was a sound of breathing and a rustle of clothing from near the window of this darkened room. He looked there, saw the shapeless blob of a crouching person—and saw a gun.

The latter was quite plain. Dim light from outside missed the figure, but glinted all too plainly on gun metal. Bill slowly raised his hands, calculating the distance to an inch.

Nothing happened.

The gun continued to glint in line with his body. But no voice challenged him. He let his hands sag a little. The person's breathing was shallow, fluttery—the breathing of someone obviously even more scared than he was. And the rustle of clothing was a rustle—of skirts. A woman's garments.

He heard Calanthis' voice but not his words, from the opened doorway of the front room in the hall outside. He could not get out of here now, for a while.

He dropped his hands and took a step forward.

"D-don't or I'll sh-shoot," came a weak whisper.

"Joanna!" Bill got to her in three savage strides. "What in *hell* are you doing here?" he breathed, lips near her ear.

"I trailed you to the door, and later it wasn't locked, so I just sneaked in. I thought you might need. I s-saved your life once, so I thought——"

"You've never thought in your life. If you're caught here—— Any way out that window?"

"No. It's n-nailed shut."

"It's marvelous what a red-headed little dope will do for a news item. We've got to get out of here—"

There were steps on the stairs outside. Bill listened for the slam of the street door, to tell that the person on the stairs had gone out of the building. But there was no such slam. Whoever it was had merely gone to the first floor. While he was there, Bill and Joanna couldn't risk those stairs. They'd have to hide in here till he came back up again.

"Did you get anything, Bill?" said Joanna, face close to Quist's. Her hair tickled his nose. He put his lips closer to her small ear than was strictly necessary to reply.

"A tubfull. You'll get a story to knock your uncle's head off—if we can just get out of here with it."

"Oh! Bill! What did you find out?"

"Ssh! Not so loud, for cripes' sake. I found out that Virginia Draper really did see a ghost."

"Oh, all right—"

"I'm not kidding." Bill listened for steps coming up the stairs again, and didn't hear them. Someone was still downstairs, and their way out was still blocked. "She saw one of her old sweeties at The Forty Thieves, last night. Either Cluett Morse, or Adamson. Don't know which."

"But they're *dead.*"

"That's what she thought," Bill breathed into her ear, with her red, silk hair tickling his face in a cool burning. "That's why she looked like that. But Morse and Adamson aren't dead."

There were sounds from downstairs, but not the right sounds.

"It's a neat little insurance racket, Jo. Rich man goes broke, wants to cash in on his insurance. He makes the Harley Foundation his beneficiary. Here, they supply a corpse—easy, because paupers apply in droves for medical help, and they just wait till they get a sick man of about the insured's build, and nab him. The sick man dies, with a little help, maybe. The body is taken to a place where the insured is supposed to be, and partially destroyed. It is found unidentifiable save for the insured's bridgework, watch and pocketknife. So then the rich man is 'dead,' and his insurance is paid to the Foundation. There's a split, fifty-fifty probably, and that's that. Similarly, a man who hasn't gone broke but who wants to shake his family and obligations and other tiresome routine details, can will his money to the Foundation and split that as well as the insurance."

"But someone would be sure to recognize them, Bill."

"Nope. Doctor Calanthis here changes their faces with plastic surgery. They lie low till they're healed, and then probably go to a strange town. Maybe to South America. But a recent customer, either Morse or Adamson, got tired of hiding and went to a night spot for some fun. The Forty Thieves, to be specific. He had the bad luck to run into a person with whom he had been so intimate that she could recognize him in spite of everything. Virginia Draper. So, you see, she did 'see a ghost.' "

Joanna shivered. "And was killed for it."

"Yes." Would the steps never thump back up the stairs so they could get out of here?" "Wharton was at the night club. Maybe by accident, maybe deliberately to watch over their rebellious customer—probably the latter. He saw Virginia spot the man. Even one slip like that could not be allowed. It would wreck the whole industry. So he killed her, with young Regan to take the rap. Then he decided he'd better put Edith May out of the way,

too, for fear of what she might innocently let slip."

"Why—if that's true—the man's a monster! Have you got proof?"

"Not yet. But it ought to be easy to get it, with what we now know—"

Light flashed on like a cascading flood, and the door to the hall banged inward against the wall.

"Hold it—both of you. Don't move. You, beautiful, let the gun drop."

Joanna's .32 slipped from her limp fingers. She and Bill stared at the man in the doorway.

His shoulders filled the frame, for as Quist had said, the man who wielded that blunt-pointed steak knife would have to have beef. And Wharton had that, all right. Bill was no shrimp; but Wharton could have given him two inches and forty pounds.

The gun in his big right hand was held almost negligently and his voice was almost soft as he said, "Thought I heard Morse talking in the next room. He doesn't usually talk to himself, so it looked like a good time to investigate. Calanthis downstairs to watch the street door, me up here listening at doors till I heard whispers in here. You're Hoodoo Quist, aren't you?"

Bill nodded, smoldering gray eyes alone indicating the seething fury within him—at himself, Joanna, Fate. He'd had this all wrapped in a neat bundle to lay at Camber's feet and then laugh at attempts to arrest him for the May girl's murder. And now—

"Thought I got the name right last night," said Wharton. "I don't know why you're in this, all dressed up in your dirty clothes, but I don't think you and the girl will like the outcome. Turn around."

Bill stood still.

"Turn!" The gun was held less carelessly. Bill turned.

Joanna screamed, and a building beam or something fell on his head, and that was all Quist knew for awhile.

Bill was waltzing. Around and around, in circles, so fast it made him dizzy. That was funny. It had been a long time since he'd waltzed. He was with Joanna, and she was looking up into his face with a dreamy expression, and urging him on, ever faster, till he was so dizzy he could hardly stand up. He was about to ask her where the hell she got that stuff, and leave her in the middle of the dance floor, when he began getting corrected impressions.

He wasn't waltzing, with Joanna or anyone else. He was lying down. Only his brain was going around in circles, inside his skull. His body was very still, and the head attached to his body was one big ache, and the whole business was just the aftermath of that whopping sock on the head delivered by Wharton a few minutes ago. Or maybe a few hours ago.

He opened his eyes a very little, and looked around through nearly closed lashes. He wasn't thinking very straight yet, but he had a vague idea that it might be to his benefit if he pretended to be still unconscious.

Off a way from him, next to a wall, was a pudgy little man in a white coat. He was looking earnestly into a gleaming wall cabinet of glass and chrome, where a litter of glittering things with sharp points and edges lay in deadly quiescence.

It was Dr. Calanthis. He spoke, without turning, the words coming over his plump shoulder.

"Murder is bad, Wharton. Murder is always bad. I don't like murder."

"D'you think I go in for it as a hobby, or something?" growled a voice. Wharton's voice. "I don't like murder, either. But what are you supposed to do when a couple of nosey fatheads blunder in and learn the works? Play patty-cake with them?"

BILL'S eyes slid sideways and he saw Wharton in the doorway of this room, shoulders filling the frame, looking much as his previous glimpse of the man had shown him. Only this was another doorway and another room.

Quist had placed himself a little, now. He lay on a hard operating table. A length of something pressed against his chest, and another length bit into his thighs. Like two snakes cozily constricting their greedy coils.

By sliding his eyes in the other direction from Wharton, he saw Joanna, and he saw what the two snakes were that held him to the table, because the girl was similarly held. They were broad straps, commonly used in operating. One was around chest and arms just above the elbows. The other was around legs half-way from waist to knees.

Bill, inwardly, invented some profanity that was new and unique as he looked at Joanna. There was a slight matted place on her head. The devil in the doorway had slugged her, too, back in the other room, in order to have a minimum of trouble with her. But——

Why were the two of them alive at all? Why hadn't Wharton put just the extra bit of force necessary to kill them into the two hammer blows?

The answer to that dribbled out in the next few minutes.

"I suppose we really must do this?" said Calanthis, still at the cabinet.

"You know the answer as well as I do," snapped Wharton. "If either of these two stayed alive, we couldn't go fast enough or far enough to get away from the cops."

"Then why take chances? Why simply render them unconscious instead of killing them right now?"

"You wouldn't ask that," said Wharton sourly, "if you were the one that was going to drive the ambulance out to Gray's Lake. I'm stopped, maybe. Two bodies are found inside. If the two are simply unconscious, I might stall out of it. But if I'm stopped with a couple of dead bodies -- good-night. You just slip 'em something to make 'em look good and sick, and we'll finish the job at Gray's Lake. Link and Pete and Ned are out there."

Calanthis turned from the cabinet, then. And Bill felt a chill crawl down his spine as he looked through veiled lashes at the man's eyes, over the foot of his bed.

The doctor was a frightened man. Stark fear in his timid eyes looked out like a slinking animal. And Bill had long ago learned that a scared man will act twice as deadly as a man with courage. Calanthis, right now, was twice as dangerous as the cold-blooded Wharton himself.

"You've killed before," Wharton said, looking curiously at the little man.

"Only bums. Floaters," said Calanthis, moistening red lips with a pink tongue. "There was nothing like this till you came with me."

"There weren't any real profits, either," said Wharton. "But there will be from now on. The idea—splitting with these insurance gyppers! Why let a man play dead and have half the money? When you can put something in his coffee after you've operated and made him unidentifiable, and keep the whole thing? You needed me, I'll say."

There was a more regular sound to Joanna's breathing, and her eyelids fluttered.

"She's coming around," said Wharton dispassionately. "And Quist has been with us for several minutes. Stretching his long ears to take in what we're saying. Interested, Bright Eyes?" he added to Bill.

Bill dropped the useless pretense of unconsciousness, and replied with a glare. Also he stretched hard against the two straps, and felt no give to them at all. They were designed to hold patients in delirium.

"Is Gray's Lake as deep as it's made out to be, Doc?" Wharton said idly to Calanthis.

Calanthis nodded, eyes desperate and stark with fear.

"It's over a hundred feet deep, a quarter of a mile out from the cabin," he said. "I don't know how much over. I let out a hundred feet of cord with a heavy weight on it, one day, and didn't touch."

Wharton nodded comfortably. "The trick, then, will be to fix it so they don't come up after a few weeks. A heavy wire mesh around 'em, maybe copper wire, with weights on it, ought to do it."

"Oh, Bill," quavered Joanna. She had come to in time to hear the last words.

"Don't worry, Jo," said Quist, a bit hoarsely. "Headquarters knows where we went. There'll be a visitation any minute now that these two won't like."

Wharton laughed. "Stop kidding us—and yourself. I saw last night how you and the cops get along. You aren't working with them any more than a cat works with a pack of hounds. Doc, what are you fussing in that cabinet for?"

Calanthis turned. "I thought I had some morphine in here, but I guess I haven't."

"There's some in the safe, downstairs," said Wharton. "Bring it up. And in the meantime I'll go and bring the ambulance around from the garage. We'll wheel these two out to it, beds and all."

"One of us ought to stay—"

Wharton laughed as he looked at the two trussed figures.

"They won't run away. Not from those straps. Come on, snap into it. You're going up to the lake with me, with your little black bag. You're going to have to change *my* face a little. The cops are out for me by now; I'm hot. Hit these two if they start yelling."

"It won't matter if they yell," said Calanthis. "Patients in here, in delirium, frequently do."

"Okay, then," nodded Wharton. The two heard his heavy steps on the stairs. And then, Calanthis, with a careful look at the straps binding the prisoners, went downstairs, too.

"Bill," said Joanna unsteadily, "I'm sorry. This is my fault. If I'd only chased to the nearest phone booth and called the cops, instead of following you in here. But if you hadn't really uncovered anything, I'd only have been turning you over to Camber's tender mercies—"

Quist said, "Shut up and make yourself small."

"Make my— Bill! What's the matter? Are you having convulsions?"

"Will you stop wasting time," Bill ground out, "and suck in your—breath? I can just touch the buckle of your strap. If you'll kindly loosen up on it—"

The instant Calanthis had gone out the door Bill had tried an experiment he'd been pondering since coming to.

Joanna's wheeled bed was a couple of feet to his right. Little less, maybe. And his arms were free from the elbows down. Why not? He couldn't possibly reach the buckle to his strap in that position. But if he could, perhaps, reach Joanna's bonds.

He had found that by violent twisting, and by throwing his arm out of joint till the elbow shrieked protest, he could just reach Joanna's strap with his fingertips. What was more, the buckle was fastened just under the edge of her bed, so he could reach that, too.

He groaned with effort. The distance was such that he couldn't bring his thumb into play. Just his first and second fingers. The cords stuck out on the backs of them as he strove, with just the tips on either side of the loop of leather in the buckle, to bring that loop up—get the trailing strap-end free.

"Bill, you'll never do it!"

"You red-headed little nitwit—keep your breath in."

He had the loop up enough to stick a finger in and yank it the rest of the way, as a practical joker hooks a finger under a victim's tie and yanks it from his vest. So then all he had to do was lift up the belt tongue with one fingernail, and get the strap over that. Which was practically impossible.

"Don't breathe!" he said. "Suck it in. Give me just a second—"

There were steps on the stairs again. Calanthis had finished with the safe and was coming up.

"Give me some slack—"

He had the tongue out of the straphole. "Fast! Reach! My strap!"

Joanna twisted sideways till she was in danger of tipping over, bed and all, and loosened the strap around his torso and arms. And then the door opened.

Joanna was back in place, breathing hard, face white as ice with the shattering new hope that was theirs. Bill lay equally quiet, and tried to look innocent, meanwhile perspiringly conscious of the fact that his strap-end was trailing on the floor instead of being drawn up tightly. If Calanthis saw that—

Well, there was a loaded gun on top of that wall cabinet. And Bill's legs were still bound, as were Joanna's. They could now move their arms; otherwise they were as helpless as before.

Calanthis walked from the door to the cabinet again. He stared at the two with his desperately frightened, deadly eyes, and Bill felt sweat run down his sides as he anticipated the man's discovery of the loosened strap. But the discovery wasn't made. Quist was breathless, shaking a little, with feverish red flooding his face.

Calanthis had brought a little vial in from downstairs. He got a hypodermic needle from the cabinet, loaded the thing, and turned toward the two beds.

"Joanna," said Bill. "Just in case—I kind of like you. I thought you wouldn't mind knowing that."

"Bill," said Joanna. "I—"

But she didn't get a chance to finish it. Calanthis was beside her, now. Between the two beds. He was bending down, with that glittering, lethal thing in his hand. And then he snapped erect again with a scream that might have come from a woman's lips.

He had seen the loosened strap dangling from her bed.

Bill sat up like a jack-in-the-box. His long arms shot out and one hand caught the collar of the doctor's white coat. He grasped this, hauled back on it.

Calanthis screamed again, and fought to get free, fought to get to the cabinet where that gun lay.

And his coat ripped in Bills' straining fingers.

That did it. That was curtains. Joanna's cry rang out as Calanthis reached the cabinet, got the gun, turned with it. But Bill was not quite through.

The doctor and the cabinet were against the wall at the foot of his bed. With the doctor's success in ripping free, Bill's arm had shot up and back. Now he had his hands against the wall at the head of his bed—and he shoved.

HE SHOT the wheeled bed, rolling easily on its rubber casters, forward, with his own body on it, like something out of a cannon's mouth. And the iron end caught Calanthis squarely in the middle as he was lining the gun in frenzied haste on Bill's body.

The man was knocked backward into the cabinet, which fell from its wall hangings and knocked him forward again with its steel and glass bulk. The gun fell from his clawing hand, and, still screaming like a hysterical woman, he tried to straighten up again before two big, vengeful hands got hold of him.

He stopped screaming, then, because he didn't succeed in eluding the hands, and you can't scream with ten fingers vise-like around your windpipe.

So after a long time, regretfully, Bill's hands released their contented grip, and Calanthis slumped to the floor like an inner tube with a blowout hole in it.

"Bill," sighed Joanna, when he had unfastened her other strap, after loosing his own, and they stood together over Calanthis' dangerously moveless form. "Oh—Bill!"

Then she fainted, and didn't see the reception accorded Wharton. Which was too bad. She'd have liked it.

First Bill put her back on her bed, which was the one first exposed to view when the door was opened. Then he stood

next to the door for Wharton to come in from getting the ambulance. He hefted the gun Calanthis had dropped. A nice, solid .44. "Oh, boy!" he breathed as Wharton's steps sounded.

And then, with a pleased grunt, he swung.

Wharton went down without sound or move. He was out while Joanna got her uncle's paper on the phone and turned in her story—which no desk man would have dreamed of believing had not Bill Quist added his sworn statements that it was all true and would be released officially by the police in a short time. Wharton was still out when Quist called Headquarters.

And he was still out next afternoon. Still unconscious in a hospital bed.

Camber was in the hallway like an agitated mother hen. "If you've killed him—" he kept repeating, through set teeth.

"Conked but not killed," replied Quist, who had been plenty worried himself, but who had just heard the latest from the doctor. "He'll come around, to add to Calanthis' statements. It's a juicy case, Camber. It won't hurt you a bit with the commissioner to have the credit of cracking it."

It wouldn't. Through this, Camber would almost certainly be transformed from sergeant to lieutenant. But human nature is a funny thing; rock wears away before ideas change. There was still cold venom in the police sergeant's eyes as he rubbed gently at the lump on his jaw where Quist's knuckles has landed earlier.

"He'll hate you till he dies," said Joanna, as they walked toward the hospital elevator. "No matter what you do, he'll hate you. And he'll get you yet."

Bill sighed, then grinned, as they emerged on the street. He walked Joanna toward his roadster, shrugging off Camber as he went.

"You're a rather nice looking number, Miss Thyne," he said. "It would have been too bad if you'd been rubbed out."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Joanna. "But it is no longer Miss Thyne. To you, it's Special Reporter Thyne."

"No!"

"Yes. Uncle Kimberly yelled murder, but he'd promised to put me on if I got an exclusive. And I did. No pay, and the regulars look down their noses at me, for which I don't blame them—but I made it."

"And once you were a normal human being," Quist groaned. "Accept my deepest sympathy."

"Damn you sincerely, sir," said Joanna. "I'd probably never speak to you again, only you might stumble onto more news some day. Meanwhile, will you have a drink with a veteran reporter?"

"Oh, all right," growled Bill. "We'll have a zombie apiece, and then we'll no longer feel the shame of our professions."

And he kissed her, while her toes wriggled in surprise and approval, and they went to the Mirabar.

"You've Seen Western Pictures with Indians Circling a Wagon Train. . . . Well, That's What Happened to Us."

FALCONS OVER AFRICA

By HAROLD ROGERS

Author of "Lone Wolf Ace," etc.

ZR-RUNG! The deep-throated snarl of twin Allisons, revved wide open, split the flat hot stillness of the late African afternoon. One minute we were sitting there batting the breeze in our tiny, hidden outpost, the next we were scattering for cover, even digging right down into the sand, anywhere to get out of the way of that P-38 that seemed to have gone crazy.

We didn't know it then, but there was a dead man at the controls. Yes, I repeat, a dead man, and yet a man who wouldn't let even death stop him until he had completed his mission. That was the kind of a flyer Tim Albaugh was, playing the game even after his fighting heart was stilled forever. That was why he was in command in our tightly knit little group of Desert Falcons.

When we heard his plane coming we didn't know that he was dead. We only knew there was something terribly wrong, and while I was diving for cover I felt the back of my neck crawl. Tim Albaugh could fly circles around any pilot in the outfit, but even in his wildest moments he never blasted the sky like that Lightning was doing.

One instant his plane was only a pin prick on the horizon, the next it was right there on us, just skimming the ground, and the wheels weren't down. We knew he was going to crash and there was nothing we could do about it. Absolutely nothing.

The plane struck a hundred yards beyond our rendezvous. There was a geyser of dirt and the rip of tortured metal, then out of that cloud, crumpled wings and twisted tail booms caromed off in a dozen different directions.

Then we were all running toward the wreckage, knowing only too well what we would find; yet hoping we wouldn't. It was Clint Jackman, our second in command, who found it, the center nacelle with the cockpit. I saw him smash at the canopy release with his fist. He had it open when we got there, but one look at his face and we knew what he had found.

Sure we were used to death. We'd lived with it for weeks, but this was different, this was Tim Albaugh, the man who had organized the Desert Falcons, the man who had fought with Goering's best and lived to fight again.

The cockpit was completely riddled with bullets.

Then we saw something else. On the note pad strapped to Tim's right knee there was a scrawled message:

"German planes coming in from north.

Transports with men and gasoline. I stayed with them until—"

The message ended there, but it wasn't hard to guess the rest. Tim, out on a solo sortie had stumbled on to an aerial convoy and he'd stayed with them until his ammunition was gone, then he'd opened the throttles and headed for our base, hoping to get there with his message before it was too late.

We didn't wait for orders. We all started for our planes on the double. I'd just shoved my foot into the stirrup and was swinging up on the wing when I heard Clint Jackman start to give orders in a voice that broke off at the edges.

"At fifteen thousand fan out and head north. The first man who spots them will give the signal. Climb at once to twenty thousand. We'll go into a tight formation and attack from there. And don't forget, this is for Tim Albaugh."

It was while Clint was giving those orders that I noticed Danny Jackman standing there, white-faced and shaking, while he kicked at the sand with the toe of his polished boot. Sure he was Clint's kid brother, the very spit and image of him. Just fresh across the pond he still had his first taste of combat flying ahead of him. Only that afternoon he'd boarded one of our supply transports and come up for a couple days' leave. It was the first time he and Clint had seen each other in almost two years.

Yes, it was tough on him. What he had just seen wasn't pretty, but it was war, and this was his chance to prove his mettle. There was an extra P-38 all warmed up, waiting to go, and he had trained on them back in the States.

If, when he came up for his visit, he'd been hoping to become one of us this was his time to make his bid. Men weren't assigned to our outfit. They came on invitation and it had to be unanimous. Still I couldn't help but think if Danny swung aboard that Lightning on his own and did any kind of a job, that invitation might not be too far away. Only he didn't. He just stood there kicking at the sand and let us wing away into the blue.

Eleven P-38's rolled down that hurriedly constructed runway. Clint Jackman was the first man to lift his wheels from the sand and the rest of us took off at fifteen second intervals. Tim Albaugh would be avenged. It wouldn't bring him back, but at least there would be a few less Nazis to inflict their brutal tactics on the world.

We put a half hour of hard flying behind us, then Clint's voice came in over the air. "Close formation."

I was on his right and Hal McCardle was on his left. We moved in until we were almost touching and I saw Clint point down.

Jerry and his planes were scattered all over the desert and were still coming in, but apparently they hadn't seen us and the sound of their own engines drowned ours out.

We peeled off and went down. The hit and run signal was on. We were outnumbered twenty to one, but what of it.

I saw a plane on the ground explode beneath the hammering of Clint's guns, and one word leaped to my mind. Gasoline!

THEN something got in my own sights that didn't belong there. I pressed the gun button. It was like an electric spark in a case of dynamite. One second the Hun transport was there, the next it wasn't. It came apart with a dull orange flash.

Once more we went down to take care of the planes on the ground. There wasn't much time though, because those Nazi devils still in the air were right down on our backs hammering us with lead. About all we had time for was to blast across their base, spraying them with our guns and releasing a few fragmentation bombs, then move out.

And believe me that is where those Lightnings are sweet. Pour the go grease to those twin Allisons and it's like being hitched to a rocket. I glanced down at

my instrument panel to see that everything was all right and went straight upstairs.

I saw a big transport winging in from the coast and started after it. Get it in my sights and I'd saw its tail off. But before I knew what it was all about three 109's were on me trying to spear me with their slugs. With throttles wide I nosed up and over.

Did someone say that those Lightnings weren't maneuverable? Well that twin-engined sky wagon was under a Hun's belly before he could yell, "Heil Hitler!" Another second and he couldn't yell anything. That's what fifty-caliber slugs do to a man, they stop him cold, right in mid-air.

By that time the sky was filled with dog-fights. It was roll and twist, dive and shoot. It was kill or be killed and we had Tim Albaugh to avenge.

Then all at once my guns went empty. One Hun tried to get on my tail while two more tried to hem me in, but they forgot I was riding lightning. I was out in the clear with a straight run before they had a chance to spray me.

I WAS the fifth plane back. Then started the grim business of scanning the sky and waiting—waiting. Hal McCardle came in next followed by Clint Jackman. Still four to come. The minutes ticked away. Two more pin pricks appeared in the sky and grew into Lightnings, then one more. Ten were down out of eleven.

It was Tiny Burk. Tiny, the kid from West Virginia, who sang and fought and loved with all the reckless abandon of a hot-blooded twenty-one year old.

"He was doing all right when I saw him last," Hal said. "I watched him drill the middle out of one Jerry and tie into another, then I had an appointment myself—"

After that it got so still that it hurt. We knew he wasn't coming back and yet we waited, hoping against hope. There was no use to go out and look until morning. If he had managed to bail out he would look out for himself, but there was an awfully big "if."

I saw Clint and Danny squatting on their heels, drawing hard on their cigarettes and I wondered what they were saying. I couldn't help but think that maybe if Danny had been along Tiny Burk would have come back. Sometimes an extra plane is a mighty big ace to have in the hole.

It must have been nine o'clock that evening when Clint Jackman called us into his tent. There were just ten of us. Danny wasn't there. There was about two minutes when all you could hear was the tick of wrist watches before Clint spoke.

"We need more pilots and need them bad."

"Yeah," Jim Vance, one of the old-timers in the outfit, agreed. "Plenty more. For every one we down Jerry brings back ten more."

It was very evident that Clint was hoping one of us would propose Danny as a candidate. I started to speak, but couldn't help but remember how he had acted when we took off in response to Tim Albaugh's last message. If he were half the flyer Clint was, wild horses couldn't have kept him on the ground.

Finally it was Clint himself who broached the question. "I was just wondering about Danny?" You could tell by the way he spoke that it was hard for him and yet he wanted the kid where he could watch out for him.

Again there was that long silence while about half of the boys lighted cigarettes.

"I'll cast my vote in that direction." It was Hal McCardle who started the ball rolling, then one by one the rest of the gang came through with their assent. Just the same there was considerable low talk when we broke up and headed back for our tents. It was a ticklish situation, inviting our commanding officer's kid brother to join us; yet already branding him as a coward before we had even seen him in the air.

Oh, we all knew that actually it wasn't his duty to go with us that afternoon; and yet the same question kept bobbing up. He was a fighter pilot, wasn't he? And lord how we had needed him.

WE HAD two jobs to do the next morning. First we had to hunt for Tiny and see if he were stranded out on the desert and second the Jerries still held a railroad track. We'd worked it over a few times, but they were still patching it up and using it to move supplies and ground troops

Maybe it was a good thing. It would give Danny Jackman a chance to cut his combat teeth without running into too much trouble. The raid was to be made in the regular Falcon manner. We'd be in the air before it was light and come up on the target with the sun at our tails. Before Jerry knew what it was all about we'd be back home eating breakfast and he'd have a week's work patching up his railroad again.

We rolled our crates across the sand and lifted them into the air with a roar of sound. The field dropped away and disappeared beneath us. At ten thousand it was cold and I switched on the cockpit heater. The plane was almost flying itself and I started scanning the desert for a telltale speck that might be Tiny Burk. Somehow I couldn't picture him as dead.

We flew for an hour that way, then one by one the reports came in, "No sign of Tiny."

We didn't exactly give up and still I think we all knew that his chances were pretty slim as we headed for the railroad.

The sun was a blazing ball of brass when we picked up the first glint of the steel ribbons that we were out to destroy. Then we saw something else in the distance. A puff of black smoke went balling upwards.

"A train!"

The words came in from a half dozen throats all at once. I wanted to laugh. It was like going out duck hunting and bagging a goose. It had been a month or more since we'd worked a train over.

Things happened fast after that. In a few seconds we were on the train and peeling off, one by one to go down. A hundred feet above the track we flattened out and piece by piece that train started to come apart. We never knew whose slugs they were that found the vital spot in the engine, but suddenly there was a puff of steam and the monster leaped from the track like a wounded stag with the first seven or eight cars piling right up on top of it.

It was a combination troop and supply train. When we made the second trip across, the Jerries with their coal scuttle helmets were already out, that is those who could get out, and they were ready for us with rifle and machine-gun fire.

We were coming fast, but we were low. Sure we were spraying the men on the ground, but they weren't exactly throwing confetti up at us. There were a couple of high pitched spings like mammoth violin strings breaking and my plane jerked as slugs tore through the wings.

If we'd been playing it safe we would have let well enough alone after that second trip over our target and headed for home, but it was too good to leave. There were tanks and armored cars on that wrecked train. Everyone we could put out of commission now would shorten the war just that much.

Maybe that is why we forgot about watching the sky. And that moment of carelessness—well you guess. We were about half through with our third trip across the train when the Jerries threw an aerial umbrella over us that like to blotted out the sun. They were ganged up on us about ten to one. Top that off with their altitude advantage and I still don't know why they didn't pin us all to the ground.

I started to nose up and about that time I spotted Danny. I'd almost forgotten him. Now two Huns were diving on him

from opposite directions. I saw his elevators go down and the nose come up. It looked as if he were coming over in a tight loop and try to get on top of them, but instead he picked up his altitude, then flattened out and headed straight for home.

It made something red dance in front of my eyes, but because I couldn't take it out on him I nailed one of the Jerries while Hal was winging it into the other.

By that time they had formed a ring around us and were gradually drawing it tighter. You've seen Western pictures with Indians circling a wagon train. Well, that's what they were doing to us. Anywhere we looked there were Jerries blocking the exit.

Then all at once Clint's voice came in as calm as if he were strolling down main street of the old home town. "Let's all take a different path and go home. Now!" That last word fairly cracked. It was a starter's gun sending us off on a dash for our very lives.

And what I mean we dashed. We were like sparks coming off an emery wheel. We simply fanned out, with engines wide open and guns blazing. That was one time when it didn't take the square heads long to make up their minds. They opened the gates for us so fast that it wasn't funny, and those they didn't open we shot open. There were at least eight of them who wouldn't demonstrate the goose step again.

I don't know how the trip home was for the rest of the boys, but for me it was bad. I kept thinking about Danny Jackman. It was the first time I had ever seen a Falcon turn tail and run while the rest were fighting. Sure he was new—

His plane was there on the ground when we came in. Almost before my props had quit turning I was out and over to him. He was back by the right tail boom tinkering with the radiator shutter.

"The blamed thing stuck shut on me and my right engine started to heat. The coolant indicator was on the red when I pulled out of the mess," he stammered.

I looked straight at his drawn face. "It should have been open long before you ever got there."

He whirled and for a minute I thought he was going to bust me. "So you think I'm lying. You think I took a run out. Well, I tell you it stuck shut. I got it open and was coming back to help, but I saw you all coming and landed."

I was just going to make another retort when Clint came and took the kid by the shoulder. "I want to see you alone, Danny."

So Clint had seen and guessed. I felt sorry for the kid, but I felt more sorry for Clint. He'd proposed Danny himself and now to have the kid turn out yellow made it tough.

The next few hours we were all too busy to think much about anyone's troubles but our own. We were so short on mechanics that we had to do most of our own work and there was plenty of it. By the time we were patched and fueled up the sun was starting to sink toward the horizon. We were tired and hot and just a little discouraged.

Clint must have sensed the feeling and known that it was at times like that when well oiled organizations split over nothing. He knew the cure, too. Work!

When I was just beginning to think of knocking off and wishing there were some place where I could go for a tall, cool one, the order came for us to report to Headquarters. We found Clint waiting, as tired and dirty as the rest of us.

"About now," he said without formalities, "Jerry is going to be salvaging that train we decorated this morning. With the light as it is we can hedge hop in and blast him before he's picked up too many pieces. Is there anyone who can't be in the air in ten minutes?" He paused, and when no one answered to the contrary he said, "That will be all then. We'll roll as usual."

We flew low and fast. There weren't too many minutes of daylight left.

Beneath our speeding wings the ground was a dull mottled brown.

Miles before we got there we could see smoke still spiraling up from the train, then as we drew closer we could see the ground was fairly crawling with men and machines. They were pulling tanks, guns and armored cars out into the clear, but they hadn't exactly neglected to prepare for us either. They'd set up a few anti-aircraft batteries and there must have been at least fifty planes waiting up there in the sun.

But we'd picked our approach well and they didn't see us until it was almost too late. We roared across the first time before their planes could get down on us. It was a new dish to the Huns, getting some of the medicine they had dished out to the refugees along the choked roads in France and Poland, and they didn't like it. Even their gun crew started digging in like a bunch of gophers, but they didn't have long to dig. In less than half a minute our last plane had roared over them, throwing a lead mowing machine from its guns and dropping fragmentation bombs.

The second trip was a little rougher. The German planes were right down on top of us, but when they shot at us more of their bullets were plowing into their own men down on the ground than were hitting us.

The next few minutes were wild while we clawed for altitude. At five thousand we went into a tight ball, flying prop to tail. You may have seen a porcupine roll himself up so that his quills are sticking out in all directions. That was our formation. Only our quills were fifty caliber guns. We'd used that trick before and it always brought results.

Our main plan was to keep together so that we were protected from all directions and while we flew in circles we kept spiraling further and further away until we were in the clear. It was a dizzy, whirling maelstrom.

Twice a formation of 190's peeled off and tried to break us up, but they found that to be pretty costly. For six of them it was their last peel. That was enough for them and while they were trying to reassemble themselves and call the next dance we started for home just barely skimming the sands. That way it would be hard for them to follow us and we weren't anxious about leaving any signposts to our hideout.

Then all at once I saw one of our planes break formation and start to set down. There was just a flash while I caught its number. It was Danny Jackman. He didn't seem to be hurt and yet if he weren't what was the big idea?

I just started to yell into my mike when I saw something else—a crumpled P-38 with its nose buried in the sand and about a hundred yards away a figure flopped around on the ground trying to wave something white at us. It was Tiny Burk! Sure he was hurt, you could tell that because the best he could do was get to one knee, but he was alive.

About six of us started down to help but Clint's voice coming in over the air stopped that. Stay in the air and protect them. I glanced around and swallowed twice to get my heart down out of my mouth. The Jerries who had been tailing us, and spotting our play, were coming down on us like hawks on a crippled chick.

Part of them came down on us and that was all right, but part of them were diving straight at Danny who already had his wheels down and was helpless. That's where Lady Luck and courage entered the picture. Apparently Danny had his plan all mapped out and regardless of Jerry bullets he was going to carry it out. With lead singing all around him he set down.

A cloud of dust spewed into the air and his plane took a couple of wicked hops on the rough ground, but he was riding it with a tight rein and made it behave. Twisting and turning through the rocks he taxied toward Tiny. Then with both

engines still idling he began methodically to jerk the radio equipment out of the space just in back of the pilot's seat and heave it to the ground. It had taken mechanics hours to install it, but he was only seconds removing it.

Sure we only caught glimpses of what he was doing as we flashed over trying to keep the Jerries off him, but it was enough to get the general idea. He was going to stow Tiny back there and try to carry him to safety. It was a long chance with all or nothing at stake for the both of them, but it was a Falcon's chance, only we didn't have time to think about that then. He was doing his job and it was up to us to do ours.

For a few minutes it was touch and go. While the Huns tried to draw us away two or three of them would dive down at Danny and Tiny with their guns going full blast. Still Danny finished the job of clearing out the radio equipment and then jumped to the ground.

I WAS just circling back trying to get a burst in at one of the planes that was diving on him when I saw him fling himself prone and I thought he had been hit, but no, he was up on his feet racing toward Tiny who was crawling toward him crab fashion.

Time, the world, everything seemed to stand still, but those bullets that were slashing down at the two men on the ground. Up in the air cutting the breeze at better than two hundred miles an hour there was a lot that we missed, but there was a lot that we didn't miss, too.

I saw him stoop down and swing Tiny up on his shoulder, then head for the plane with a running stagger. Somehow, I'll never know how, but he managed to get Tiny up on the center wing section, then he clambered up himself and stowed Tiny back in the space where the radio had been.

Then he must have shut his eyes, opened the throttles and horsed back on the wheel. There wasn't room enough for a light plane to take off; yet Danny flung that Lightning into the air.

Luck, you say. Hell and Maria no! It was some of the sweetest flying I've ever seen, that and just plain cool nerve.

After that a Hun didn't get within miles of him. We saw to that. Yes, and we saw to a few other things. We saw to it that five of their tribe would never fly again.

It was like getting a new lease on life. With Tiny Burk still alive and Danny Jackman, a full-fledged member of the gang, we were an even dozen once more.

There was only one more thing to do, roar up alongside the plane with its double burden and dip our wings, and one by one we did. I dipped mine twice to make up for the things I'd thought and said.

It was our way of saluting a Falcon who makes good.

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Concluded from page* 7)

sports coach at a seminary for juvenile delinquents, and odd press commissions in between, just about account for the past ten years.

I have traveled on foot throughout the length and breadth of Australia, through the Western areas, but always I came back to the cities, for it is there, I feel, that life, in its many strange patterns, is concentrated for the author's study. About two-thirds of Australia's population are factory workers despite the foreign impression that we are a nation of farmers.

I have published two hundred and forty stories in Australia and more recently stories have been placed in the States. Thus encouraged, I hope to settle down to some serious writing, somewhat along the lines of my earlier rejected efforts. But I have come to learn that the love of a good story is deeply rooted in humanity and that fine writing, as such, can never hope to supersede the story with a plot.

It may be my good fortune to be able to visit your country when the war is over. If, in the meantime, I am able to win some kind of a reading public in advance, I believe that I could eventually justify the faith that editors have, at this distance and at this stage of my career, imposed on me.

William Lynch.

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Tales of the Strato-Shooters

When Stratolines Said, "the Sky's the Limit," It Was Meant Literally

THE ONE-HANDED SIBERIAN

TOM HANLON, in blissful idleness, was sucking an empty pipe and looking out across the Jersey meadows, when Potts came along and stopped by his desk. The other desks in the room were empty. Out of the whole corps of trouble-shooters, the two of them were alone here at headquarters.

"Well, I'm off for Edmonton," said Potts, happily. He loved trouble. "Another of those provincial government tax squabbles. Reilly's due in from Mexico this noon, and McCoy has cleaned up the Australian mess, so he'll be back today. Luck to you!"

Hanlon was about to respond, when the interphone at his elbow twanged. Swinging his feet off the desk, he switched in. The explosive voice of Upshott, president of Stratolines, Limited, barked at him.

"Tom! I want you. Bring the communications dope on Hengyang, China, and whatever's in the files on Wing Yim Sen, the Chinese minister of air."

"Okay," said Hanlon.

Stratolines was the biggest freight transport line on earth. The stratoshooters, as the gang called themselves, were picked and highly trained men, able to do anything from flying a multi-engined Planetoid transport to sitting down and arguing with kings and rulers. Tom Hanlon had done both. Whatever hampered the operations of Stratolines, Limited, whether gremlins in the upper lanes or political skullduggery on earth, went to the stratoshooters for settlement—and got it.

You will recall how, immediately after the war, Stratolines zoomed into position as a huge, economic factor, with almost a monopoly on distance freighting. Its policy of nonstop runs, its deadly efficiency, and its control of the Brem auxiliary helicopter gear, insured success. It now had a world-wide hookup. It carried no passengers, and this was another factor in its rise, eliminating competition. Some said it had heavy Washington backing, though this claim has never been substantiated.

Hanlon, lanky and laconic, sent a clerk for the information on the Chinese air minister, and passed into the map room of the general offices. He went to the huge Telaport world-chart that covered one whole wall. This ingenious device, which even before the war's end had altered the entire science of air navigation, has been remarkably improved by Stratolines engineers.

Pressing the starter button, then those bearing the names of New York and Hengyang, Hanlon stood back. The distance ribbon slid across the face of the chart, slid back, and the exact figures stood revealed within twenty seconds.

The Great Circle course to Chungking was 7,538 miles; Hengyang lay two hundred miles away. The next Stratolines ship scheduled was Flight B11 that same night; flying time, twenty-eight hours to Chungking and local transportation to Hengyang another two hours. The sole stop would be at Edmonton, whose strategic position on the world air lanes had made it Canada's greatest metropolis; refueling farther on would be done by helicopter tank.

The clerk brought Hanlon the required information on Wing Yim Sen, and he ran his eye over it as he went on toward the president's office. It threw no light on his present errand and he tucked it away with cheerful inconsequence. He never borrowed trouble. In fact, the lanky Texan conveyed an impression of amiable laziness, which was far from the truth.

He had been one of the pilot group that blasted Tokio out of existence, before those terrific earthquakes that split and ruined Japan and made its far-flung armies homeless outlaws. After the war he spent a year in the operations department of the International Air Control, then came to Stratolines. He had been married during the war and divorced later.

HANLON walked into the huge and airy office of Upshott unannounced; stratoshooters were a favored group and free of formalities. The president, who looked not unlike a young and lusty bulldog, barked a greeting at him, picked up the teleradio and put in a call for the Chungking office. Within thirty seconds the screen on his desk showed the features of the Shungking agent, and his voice came in.

"It's as we expected, Mr. Upshott. We've located Mr. Sen at Hengyang. He'll be there two weeks. That's his family home. He's on vacation and devoting himself to prayer before the tablets of his ancestors. He refuses pointblank to see any of our representatives."

"Yeah? Well, he'd better! Is he on the level?"

"That I can't say. However, a Mr. Beloff, from Omsk, is en route to Hengyang. We've done our best to detain him, without much success."

Upshott, with a savage growl, rang off. He turned to face Hanlon.

"Gimme that Hengyang data." He jotted down notes as Hanlon complied, then called operations and talked with the manager. Any divergence from the scheduled runs must be plotted well in advance and okayed by the Air Control. At length Upshott leaned back and bit at one of his Pittsburg Havanas.

"Well, Tom, that's settled. Catch Flight B 11 tonight. They'll drop you at Hengyang early Wednesday morning. You'll be met there by someone. Now gimme the stuff on this Wing Yim Sen, blast his yellow hide! He's been reached, that's what; bribed, by the lord!"

Scowling, he studied the data on the Chinese air minister and, to Hanlon's later regret, tossed it impatiently aside.

"Not a ghost of any clue. You heard about that Beloff; a common Russian name, means 'White.' He's a Siberian agent. Trying to euchre us, blast it!"

"Have you any objections to telling me what it's all about?" asked Hanlon with gentle sarcasm. Upshott held a match to his stogie, and puffed.

"Our agreement with the Chinese government expires in three months. This Mr. Sen is one of their men who came into power when they moved the capital to Nanking, after the war. He's a smooth article. He's stalling on renewing the agreement. Your job is to sign him up and do it quick, and I don't give a damn how you do it! This Siberian outfit is trying to cut in, get the freight concession for China, and have our bases turned over to them. You know what that'd mean to us."

"Who's this Beloff?"

"How the hell would I know? But we'll have the dope on him before you reach Hengyang. Go nail this Mr. Sen, lash him to the mast! You'll get a copy of the renewal agreement with your passport and expense money. The sky's the limit, and Stratolines backs you up all the way; go to it!"

Any stratoshooter had extraordinary powers. Behind him were worldwide resources. He was a sworn and bonded Air Control officer. In other words, he could do what he liked, anywhere. When Upshott said, "The sky's the limit," it was meant literally.

Hanlon sent his ready-packed bag to the operations hangar to be stowed aboard B 11, and caught a local helicopter into New York for the evening. He made the Televis Theatre in time for the spectacle of the New Delhi inauguration of the new Indian Federation president, enjoyed a leisurely dinner, and got back early to headquarters.

During an hour and more he watched the ships come and go. He never tired of seeing the Planetoids land and depart with the marvel of their Brem gear, on which Stratolines had a world monopoly. Silent and swift, the giant transports lifted straight into the air with a police helicopter escort, flitting up and out of sight before their six mighty engines sent them hurtling away on their stratosphere course.

Merely as a night spectacle, the headquarters airport was fascinating. Across the sky winked the electronic traffic markers designating the various lanes for private and passenger and local freight ships. Police helicopters streaked scarlet light hither and yon; an occasional Air Control official ship with its brilliant identification star flashed along the upper levels; and everywhere, high and low, the lights of

planes starred the night sky in an apparent confusion that was actually a perfect pattern of ordered control.

WITH a sigh, Hanlon at length made his way to the loading hangars, located Flight B Eleven, received his papers, passed the customs and passport formalities, and found the berth assigned him in the crew's quarters. In ten minutes he was sound asleep.

He wakened once; when, before sunrise, they came down at Edmonton. Then he slept again and breakfasted late; the earth-indicator on the cabin ceiling showed they were over the Aleutians and roaring for the earthquake-shrunken Japanese islands and the China coast.

The stratosphere was not lonely that day. A Frisco-Delhi passenger express went by on a lower level; news bulletins and pictures were frequent, and two patrol ships of the Air Control kept them company for a time, the pilots gossiping. With afternoon an off-course Russian freighter wandered into sight, was given its bearings, and hurriedly plunged down to find its own lane again. Then the mountains of China glittered in the sunset.

The lights of Hengyang airport rose to meet them in the pre-dawn darkness, and Tom Hanlon was landed in a hurry, the transport taking off again on the instant.

"Mr. Hanlon?" A figure shoved forward to greet him. Dimly seen features, brisk American voice. "I'm Curtis Sung; flew over from Chungking to meet you. My car's waiting and I've engaged a hotel room for you in town. Here's a radiogram for you from New York."

Hanlon pocketed the envelope and followed his guide, a Chinese American born in San Francisco who had come out to China as a flier during the war and was now employed by Stratolines. Sung led him to a tiny Shawcraft from which the tail and wings had been removed at the airfield, and ran him into Hengyang, leaving him at the spanking new hotel.

In his hotel room, Hanlon opened the message, which was in code from Upshott. About Beloff, nothing could be learned; Hanlon was to use his own judgment. Pilot Sung was wholly reliable and was conversant with the situation; and, further, knew Mr. Sen.

A bath and a nap, and Hanlon went down to breakfast and to work. The dining room was communal, and since the hotel existed for the benefit of tourists and commercial travelers, the staff all spoke English. Hanlon paused at the desk, and nodded to the clerk.

"I think you have a Mr. Beloff stopping here? Where'll I find him?"

"He's in the dining room now, sir. Shall I call him?"

"By no means. I'll go in and speak to him."

He turned into the dining room. A few tables were occupied; the tremendous flood of tourist travel that had hit China in the post-war years was reflected in the faces about. A single man sat alone, and Hanlon headed for him. He was young, red-cheeked, hard-jawed, and of the distinctive Russian type that had emerged from the war. He glanced up as Hanlon stopped.

"Mr. Beloff?"

"Yes," said the other in surprise.

"My name's Hanlon. I'm with Stratolines, Limited. Mind if I breakfast with you?"

Beloff rose, laughter in his eyes, and extended his hand.

"Delighted! Sit down, do. I didn't know Stratolines had anyone here."

The Texan grinned and slid into a chair. "Just got in. I was looking for somebody who wore hoofs and horns and decided you were it. Close up, you don't look like a devil."

The other fairly bubbled with amusement. He had bright eyes, wide cheekbones, and an air of efficiency. Hanlon liked his looks.

"Nor do you, Mr. Hanlon. So you were looking for me, eh?"

"Yeah. You speak splendid English, if I may say so."

"I ought to. I worked in Seattle shipyards the last year of the war, and another year with your army of occupation in Japan."

"Glad we understand one another," Hanlon said cheerfully. "Have you seen our friend Mr. Sen?"

"I got here only yesterday; I was unfortunately delayed. I think some of your people had something to do with it."

"Very likely," Hanlon admitted. "They're an enterprising lot. I'd not put anything past them. However, short of pulling a gun and shooting you under the table, I don't quite see how I'm to knock out your game. Is this outfit of yours a Russian one?"

"No, Siberian," Beloff replied. "We're going in for the freight end in a big way."

"The wrong way, you mean. Instead of trying to cut the ground from under our feet, you should have tried other tactics first. You'd have made money by it."

Beloff's eyes twinkled. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Lord, no! Just looking for your weak points."

They laughed together. Each man was, or had been, a flier; they recognized a kindred spirit in each other. Enemies they might be, but honest enemies. Hanlon ordered breakfast and gave Beloff a cigarette.

Then, for the first time, he noted that Beloff's left hand was gloved. Either the arm or the hand was artificial. He made no comment on it, of course.

"I'm seeing Mr. Sen at eleven this morning," he said. "Care to go with me?"

"With you?" Beloff looked his astonishment.

"Sure; why not? All my cards are on the table. If Wing Yim Sen refuses to sign our renewal, we're in the soup. Are your people, by any chance, trying to hold us up?"

Beloff dissented. "No; we are honest. We're forming a Siberian air freight line to take over the business in Asia. The backbone of it will be this Chinese concession."

"If you get it. I suppose this crook Mr. Sen is getting a fat bribe, being the key man here. Has it occurred to you that if he doublecrosses us, he'd be just as quick to doublecross you, if Stratolines outbid you?"

Beloff's smile died. "Now you are bluffing, I think."

Hanlon studied his man. He was tempted; but after all, a bluff would do him no good. He decided to go on playing a hunch and stick to his present approach.

"Yes, perhaps," he said with a laugh. "I'll be honest, Beloff. I'm here to beat hell out of you and I'm going to do it. But not by overbidding you with this Chinese crook. I'd bribe you in a minute, if I thought it could be done; I don't."

"Thank you," said Beloff soberly. "No, I made money after the war; there is much money in Siberia. I own shares in some mines that are rich."

TOM HANLON attacked his breakfast. He saw that he had his man worried; his cheery assurance, his vigorous honesty, to Beloff's mind must have something definite behind it. And Beloff was trying hard to spot the Abyssinian in the woodpile. As a matter of fact, Hanlon perceived that he had a mighty tough antagonist in this Siberian. But if he could keep him worried—

Coffee finished, Hanlon lit his pipe and relaxed. They had the corner of the dining room to themselves and Beloff evidenced no haste to be gone.

"How can you fellows hope to compete with our Planetoid transports?" he asked.

"We are building our own at Omsk," said Beloff. "I myself have adapted the Oursky engine, which we devolped during the war, for stratosphere operation. It is good to forty thousand, but not too good over that."

Tougher and tougher. Not a hired man, but an official of the new line, evidently.

"So you were in Seattle when the war ended, eh?"

Beloff nodded. A shadow came into his eyes. "Yes. San Francisco first; I had a hard time there. I was learning to speak English; it was difficult. But your country was kind to me, and at Seattle I found a place where I fitted in. Will you permit me to say one thing? You are wrong to call Mr. Sen a crook, or to speak of my having bribed him."

Tom Hanlon was convinced that every man had a flaw in his armor, if it could be found. And that shadow in the eyes, this quick change of the subject, gave him an idea of where to look for Beloff's weak spot: in his San Francisco experiences. However, he yielded gracefully to the change of topic.

"That so? Why was it wrong?"

"Mr. Sen is a wise, shrewd man," said Beloff thoughtfully. "He thinks he is acting for China's good in this matter; I have convinced him of it. I did not need to bribe him with money. Personally he is quite honest."

Hanlon instantly accepted the statement. "I believe you; I merely jumped at conclusions," he said. "How would you suggest that I go about it, to prevent him giving you this concession?"

Beloff looked at him for a moment, caught his twinkling eye, and broke into laughter.

"Well, by proving to him that Stratolines would better serve China's interest—if you can!" he replied, chortling. "I think it's safely sewed up, Mr. Hanlon."

"Dream on," said Hanlon cheerfully. "I haven't started to work yet. What about going out with me to see Mr. Sen this morning?"

"Thanks. But I'm lunching with him at one o'clock. I'd better wait."

When a man is laughing, he usually blurts out the truth. Hanlon chewed on his pipe-stem, thinking of these words. Suppose Mr. Sen really were an honest man? Suppose he could be argued into seeing Stratolines as China's best friend? It was like a Chinese to hear a specious argument, decide upon it, and close his mind to all else.

He looked at Beloff intently, penetratingly, and nodded slowly.

"I like you, Mr. Beloff," he said. "I wish we were working together, not against each other. I am sorry, very sorry, for what I must do; but I have no choice, as you must realize." He paused. In that broad, powerful face was no emotion, but he caught the quick widening of the eyes, and knew his words had scored. With a sigh, he rose and put out his hand. "Well, it's good to have met you."

Beloff rose and gripped his hand, smiling. "Anyone would think you were about to preside at my funeral! But I've a long time to live, I assure you."

"I hope you're right," said Hanlon. "So long. I'll be seeing you."

He went to his room, chuckling; he had left Beloff worried and uncertain, always a prime objective in war. Beyond this, he was perfectly blank as to operations.

He had scarcely been in his room five minutes when there came a tap at his door. It opened at his word, and a slim figure in baggy flying costume appeared.

"Curtis Sung, Mr. Hanlon."

"Of course, of course!" Hanlon shook hands, eyeing the features, which were only lightly oriental, with interest. "I didn't recognize you. Have a chair."

"I saw you were at breakfast with Beloff and didn't want him to see me, so—"

"You mean you know Beloff?"

The other hesitated. "I used to know him. What do you think of him?"

"An extremely fine fellow. And I understand you know Wing Yim Sen too!"

"Oh, I've been around," said Sung, smiling. Something in the smile caught Hanlon's eye and startled him.

"Hm! Is it true that Mr. Sen is a conscientious and upright man?"

"Quite true." Sung smiled again. "His integrity is proverbial. He's old-fashioned and what we would call a bit dumb, but entirely honest. He issued my pilot license renewals and gave me a fatherly talk when he did it. He's that kind."

INWARDLY, Hanlon cursed the impetuous Upshott, remembering how Upshott had dismissed that information about Mr. Sen as being immaterial. It might have saved him much trouble.

"Fatherly talk, eh? Take off that leather cap, will you?"

Sung obeyed, met Hanlon's eyes, and colored faintly as she read their meaning.

"I thought you knew," she said. "It's no secret."

"I think your name fooled me. Curtis Sung. I didn't suspect you were a woman."

"Mary Curtis Sung. I dropped the Mary when I took up flying."

He chuckled. "You're a damned pretty girl, Miss Sung. Well, Mr. Upshott says you know all the circumstances. We're up against it, hard. I don't know if it'd be any use to see Mr. Sen, even if we could reach him. Beloff seems to have everything sewed up, and he's lunching with Sen. Have you any suggestions?"

"Only that with my Shawcraft we could drop in on Mr. Sen whether he likes it or not. He lives about eight miles north of the city, on his ancestral estate. It was destroyed when the Japs were here but he has rebuilt it. I can act as interpreter, if you do this."

"Hm! You say you knew Beloff. Where?"

"Oh, long ago in San Francisco." Again she colored slightly, and her eyes dropped. "His name was Sergei Ouminski then. He nearly killed his wife in a drunken orgy and was put in jail. When he drank, he was terrible! Afterward, he must have taken the name of Beloff; it is a common one. I recognized him at once when I saw him with you."

Hanlon studied her as she spoke. This young woman was decidedly attractive. Across one side of her forehead was a long, faint scar; she fingered it as she sat.

"And you don't want him to see you, eh?"

She grimaced. "What does it matter? He might recognize me and know that I knew of his past; it would be unpleasant, and were better avoided if possible."

"Right." Hanlon's eyes were alight; he began to see his way at last, thanks to her. "Do you write Chinese?"

"Of course."

"Get busy and write something for me, to go to Mr. Sen."

She went to the writing desk, which was furnished with both pens and brushes. Taking up a brush, she held it poised, and waited. Hanlon dictated carefully.

"An old dog is made young by a brushed coat, and a hard word is softened by a low voice. The superior man has no fear of hearing the truth spoken. That's all. Sign my name to it in Chinese, if you can."

She laughed softly. "Where did you learn that old proverb, Mr. Hanlon?"

"Oh, I heard it somewhere and remembered it. Got your car here? Then let's go pick up your wings and visit Mr. Sen. You can drop me in on him."

"Don't be too hasty." She gave him a quick look. "He's air minister, you know. His estate has guards. With this proverb, you've really hit the one possible way of getting an interview with Wing Yim Sen; but he's old and loves formality and would be outraged—"

"Listen, sister," Hanlon broke in, "what about me and Stratolines being outraged?"

"Okay," she said. "But we have laws in China against planes desecrating the privacy of dwellings. What if I lose my license?"

"Stratolines will give you a Planetoid to fly and a license good anywhere else in the world."

Her eyes shone eagerly. "You mean it? Oh, that's the dream of my life—to fly for Stratolines! But there's a waiting list of hundreds ahead of me—"

"If we bust this Siberian outfit, I'll have you on the pilots' payroll in a week. Word of honor. Does that suit you?"

She caught up her leather helmet and jammed it on her head; her face was radiant.

"I'll do my part! Come on!"

Hanlon grinned and accompanied her from the room. She had already done her part, but he was careful not to say so. He suspected there was more to her story about Beloff than she had let slip, and Tom Hanlon always played his hunches.

Her Shawcraft convertible was outside the hotel. They got in and started away.

"If you merely want to leave that note for Mr. Sen," she said, "we could drive to his estate and leave it at the gates."

"And be whitewashed. No thanks," he said. "I want you to drop me smack in his front yard. I want to get to him ahead of Beloff, too."

"He doesn't speak English."

"He'll have someone there who will. You can skip out after dropping me."

"Okay, but I doubt if it'll work out that way," she responded.

They headed for the airport. There the wings and double tail were locked in place on the Shawcraft, the helicopter blades were installed, and upon receiving clearance the little convertible lifted like a bird. Miss Sung headed westward, saw Hanlon look at the compass, and laughed.

"You're supposed to be a tourist, Mr. Hanlon. I'm operating under a tourist-rental license, you see; your Chungking manager knows me and frequently employs me. That's why I'm on this job. I'm reaching our objective by a roundabout way. If Wing Yim Sen has any Air Police around his place, it'll be just too bad for us."

Hanlon nodded, admiring her efficiency. She was a different person now; his promise of a pilot's job with Stratolines had transformed her into a vivid, wide-awake personality bubbling over with eagerness.

They had been assigned a two-thousand foot lane before taking off. At this height they drifted westward, while she pointed out various battlefields and scenes of note in the war days. Hanlon had been with the Americans armies operating in China toward the close of the Japanese war, but this far southern sector was new to him and of absorbing interest. He had the happy faculty of doing one thing at a time, and refused to worry about what would happen at their destination until they reached it.

Gradually Miss Sung worked northward. Without warning, she nodded to the right.

"There's our place, beyond that bend of road. You can see that group of flame-trees around the house, past the hill and temple. The place has extensive gardens; I'll land there, as close to the house as possible."

No police ships were in sight; indeed, the skies were empty. Hanlon located the patch of flame-trees. It was late morning, but he would get there long ahead of Beloff. He was playing a hunch in all this, and a big one; if it failed, there would still be other ways to fight. Clutching the note Miss Sung had written, he watched. They came over the flame-trees; the helicopter gears clashed; now they were dropping, drifting straight down. Objects below grew more distinct. The house, the gardens took shape. Bright spots of color appeared; these were people walking in the gardens.

"Get ready," said Miss Sung. "I'll stop a foot from the ground."

Hanlon was already at the door, waiting. At fifty feet he was aware of excited movements and shrill voices below. Thirty feet —twenty—

The car halted bare inches from the ground. He threw open the door and jumped. At once, the car lifted and was gone. Figures came rushing at him; men in uniform. A rifle exploded, then another. Hanlon held up his hands as an officer leaped at him, and extended the note. Startled, the officer seized it. With throaty yells, two other men leaped in—and halted not.

NEXT instant he was rolling on the ground in the fight of his life, while more rifles banged away. Half a dozen more wiry Chinese piled on Hanlon; his informal call on the air minister was not appreciated. Worse—as he fought off the savage striking shapes, he saw the helicopter coming down, disabled by a bullet. The bright plastic shape struck, and next moment a rifle-butt banged Hanlon behind the ear and dropped him like a log.

When he woke up he was lying on a pile of straw, evidently in a stable. A young Chinese, a stranger, was holding a cup of water to his lips, and two soldiers looked on. Hanlon drank, felt the bump behind his ear, and grunted. The young man grimmed at him.

"I am His Excellency's secretary," he said, in fluent English. "Apparently you were not trying to assassinate my master, as we first thought."

"Hell, no," said Hanlon. "Miss Sung—was she hurt?"

"Not appreciably, but the experience did her no good," replied the other. "We gather that you are an emissary from Stratolines, Limited. His Excellency has no fear of the truth, as your message insinuated; the message interested him. What is your purpose in desiring to see him?"

Hanlon suppressed a groan. "To obtain his signature to the renewal of the concession to my company. I had the paper somewhere—"

"I have it," broke in the other blandly. "Your pockets are empty. Here are your pipe and pouch, since you may wish them, and your money. Have you any grounds on which to base your argument with His Excellency?"

"Certainly, but for his ear alone," said Hanlon, pocketing his belongings.

"Very well. Let me help you straighten your clothes a bit, and he will receive you at once."

With this astonishing speech, the young man helped Hanlon to his feet, brushed off his clothes and led him out into the gardens; the two soldiers followed closely.

As became his dignity, Wing Yim Sen occupied the center of a semi-circular stone bench flanked by secretaries and attendants, with banks of gorgeous roses rising behind. He was a stoutish old man, with drooping gray mustache and a deceptive air of benevolence. He was attired in garments of black brocaded silk. He addressed Hanlon harshly.

"Did you act in ignorance of our laws?" translated the young secretary.

"No. In spite of them," replied Hanlon, unabashed by his hurts and bruises. "Did not Lao Tze say there are motives more powerful than the laws?"

That got a grunt out of Mr. Sen. But, at this moment, Beloff arrived. He was led by an attendant, and after one glance of astonishment at Hanlon, so obviously under guard, and a nod of recognition, he attended to the formalities of greeting his host; these were lengthy, for Mr. Sen followed the ancient conventions. Beloff seemed to speak Chinese with ease. At length he stood aside and Mr. Sen again addressed Hanlon.

"Our master desires to hear whatever argument you may have to offer," the young man translated. Then he reported Hanlon's reply sentence by sentence.

"Stratolines, Limited, has kept all its engagements with your country to the letter," Hanlon said slowly. "Our relations have been pleasant and honorable. Now you are about to cause us great injury and harm by listening to less honorable people and refusing to renew our agreement, because these other people make it to the interest of China. But since they are dishonorable, how can you believe in them or in their promises?"

Hanlon was picking his way carefully. Beloff, with a lightning glance, said a few words. Old Mr. Sen made reply, and the translation was to the point.

"The Russians are honorable people who do not break the law or force themselves where they are not wanted."

"A man is known by the company he keeps," replied Hanlon. "You are dealing with this Siberian agent who comes to you using a false name. His real name is Sergei Ouminski and in America he is what we call a jailbird. He was in prison there."

The words created instant impression. Beloff went white as death; his mouth fell open, and his eyes bulged. So evident was his consternation that Hanlon took quick advantage of it.

"You see his face; he cannot deny this."

Beloff took two swift, impulsive steps forward as though to hurl himself at Hanlon; he was in a blaze of fury. Then he froze, as though stricken by an invisible hand. A low cry was wrenched from him. His gaze went past Hanlon, to the three persons approaching.

Miss Sung was being aided by two soldiers. She was bareheaded; one arm was in a sling, and she walked with difficulty. Beloff seemed to forget everything else; he took a step toward her, his face changed and became first incredulous, then indescribably and gloriously happy.

"Mary! It is you—Mary!" he cried, his voice shaken by emotion. "They told me—you had died in the hospital—my life has been a living hell since that day. Mary, my dear!"

The girl drew herself up. Her hand lifted; she touched the scar on her forehead.

"I never expected to see you again, Sergei," she said. "I never wanted to see you again, a drunken husband whose hand struck down his wife. This is the scar you left as a memento. Why would I ever want to see you again?"

Time had come to a stop, queerly enough. These two had no word or look for anyone else; they were utterly absorbed in each other. An officer moved as though to intervene. Old Mr. Sen, who was listening to a whispered translation of the spoken words, motioned him to step back, and he obeyed.

Hanlon, only vaguely comprehending that they were husband and wife, stood staring. Then Beloff broke out in a passionate rush of words.

"It is true, it is all true; I have repented daily and hourly. I was young, hopeless,

a fool; dear Mary, what man does not make mistakes? When they told me you had died, my heart broke and I went away and hid myself. I've never had a drop of liquor since that day, Mary. I've tried to make myself as you would have had me, as you thought me. Sergei Ouminski was a name of horror to me; I wiped him out and all his past, and as Sergei Beloff began afresh. My heart was all yours, my love was all yours. The hand that struck you was accursed. I shoved it into a machine in the shop and got rid of it—here, look, it is gone!"

Furiously, he pulled up his left sleeve and detached the gloved artificial hand. It fell to the ground.

Miss Sung uttered a sharp cry, checked it, and stood looking at the man. A tide of lovely color had suffused her face. The tense silence was surcharged with emotion; it quivered in the air like a sentient force. Hanlon saw in her features what is seldom given a man to find in a woman's face; her heart, revealed and laid bare.

The man's action, his words, conveyed a terrific sense of shock, to those who heard. His sincerity was undoubted; one could see instantly that such a man might well destroy his own hand because of what it had done. Across Hanlon's mind rushed the memory of some old Scriptural quotation —if thine hand offend thee, cut it from thee. It was the deed of an impulsive fanatic, of a penitent—of a lover.

"I never had a chance to ask your forgiveness," Beloff plunged on in a mixture of heart-hurried English and Russian, but his meaning was quite clear. "Never until now. They said you were dead; that I was a drunken animal, that I struck you—it was all true. Men sometimes do those terrible things in liquor, and regret them all their lives. I have been sorry. I loved you always, all the time! During these years you have held my heart. Now say what you want, and I will do it. Divorce you, leave you free, go my own way; anything, that may earn your forgiveness!"

He faced her, white and desperate and blazing-eyed, and she looked at him.

WING YIM SEN, who had been watching her face intently, spoke to those around him and rose. The young secretary touched Hanlon's arm and uttered a low word.

"His Excellency desires you to come with him, please."

They were moving away, all of them; Hanlon followed. Beloff, his back to everyone else, his whole being absorbed in the woman, was unconscious of it; but she saw, and her eyes went to them for a moment, then back to the man facing her. And this was the last Hanlon saw, as he accompanied the young secretary down a branching path, of those two people.

Wing Yim Sen halted beside a weeping willow that made an appropriately dignified background, and addressed Hanlon. The young secretary was right on the job.

"You are at the hotel in town? The concession renewal, signed and sealed, will be sent you within an hour. His Excellency says your argument was very sound. When you are next in Nanking, he trusts it will please you to visit him."

"Tell him I shall be charmed," said Hanlon. "I trust Miss Sung will not be penalized for having brought me here?"

The young man put the question, and his slant eyes twinkled.

"Apparently she is a Russian subject and not subject to this jurisdiction," he replied.

Hanlon bowed to Mr. Sen and was taken to a car that carried him back to town.

He never saw Beloff again, and Miss Sung never applied for a pilot's job with Stratolines; but Hanlon had never expected her to do so, after seeing that expression on her face as she looked at Beloff. Lucky Beloff!

Curioddities

BY Weill

IN EUROPEAN CASTLES THE COURT ASTROLOGER'S ROOM WAS ALWAYS LOCATED NEXT TO THAT OF THE ROYAL MASTER AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE ASTROLOGER ON STATE AFFAIRS *USUALLY* **EXCEEDED** *THAT OF THE KING'S* **WIFE!**

THE ROMANS BELIEVED MUSTARD TO BE AN **ANTIDOTE** FOR *SCORPION BITES!*

NOTED FOR ITS SPEED AND TIRELESS ENERGY, THE CHIMNEY SWIFT CAN TRAVEL AT THE RATE OF **68 MILES PER HOUR** WHEN MIGRATING! IT PROBABLY NEVER TOUCHES THE GROUND BECAUSE IT *CANNOT WALK AND EVEN* **EATS** *AND* **MATES** *ON THE WING!* ITS LEGS, HOWEVER, ARE STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD IT TO THE WALL OF A CHIMNEY AS IT ROOSTS AT NIGHT.

Who was the first man to read a newspaper? See Curioddities next time.

"Come On Back In the League," They Said, "You Were Good . . . Once"

YOU DIG ON LAST DOWN

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Author of "Dark Horse on the River," etc.

THE Steelers had nine points on them going into the second quarter. The Steelers had a little too much power in the line; the Steeler tailbacks were slicing through the Condor forward wall, picking up yardage on every play.

Brick Malloy, Condor fullback, sat on the bench and rubbed his big hands. It was a different game now; they passed on the second down; sometimes they passed on the first down! The air was full of footballs. It was a faster game then it had been six years ago when he finished the season with the Buffalos—his seventh in the pro loop.

Charlie Good, Condor owner and coach, had got him back into the league. Uncle Charlie had visited him at the Anton Prep School where he was teaching kids the rudiments of the game.

He was a married man with two children now—fifteen pounds over the two hundred and fifteen pound limit he'd set for himself when he was pounding enemy lines for the Buffalos.

"I need a bucking back," Charlie had said. They called him Uncle Charlie Good

in the loop. He was the founder of the league—father of pro football.

"You're up the wrong alley," Brick grinned. "I'm an old man, Charlie." He sat on the Condor bench, the second game of the season. He was thirty-three, and it was old for a ball carrier. Occasionally, the slower-footed linemen kept going that long. He'd signed up with Good because he needed the money, because they didn't pay a decent salary at the school.

"You look at it this way," the Condor owner told him. "You were top man one time, Brick. Now you're stuck in a hole and everybody forgot about you. Get back in the limelight and you might land something good."

The two teams were changing goals and Charlie Good began to shoot in replacements to start the second quarter. He pointed a finger at Brick Malloy. The big man swallowed. They didn't remember him in the league. A few guys were around—guys like Hop Dorgan, Condor quarterback, formerly of the Buffalos.

Brick threw off the jacket and scooped up a black Condor helmet. He lumbered across the green with three Condor linemen.

His hair was thin and rust-colored; face wide and scarred, with a dent in the nose and a pair of quiet gray eyes.

The Condors watched him as he came into the huddle. Hop Dorgan's thin face tightened with hatred. Brick Malloy looked at the smaller man and then adjusted his helmet. Dorgan remembered the days with the Buffalos; he remembered the slap in the face Brick had handed out to him after a championship tilt with these same Steelers. A man didn't forget a slap in the face.

They were working the "T" with Ford and Jamison on the angles, Malloy in the center, and Dorgan calling the plays. The Condors had the ball, first and ten on their own twenty-five.

"Maybe we'll score some points now," Dorgan sneered. "Everybody move." The linemen went up to scrimmage and the four backs squatted in position.

Brick Malloy crouched, elbows on padded knees. He listened to Dorgan's high-pitched voice as the quarterback barked the signals. Dorgan hadn't changed. He was a kid out of a hick college when he came to the big time Buffalos eight years ago. Brick Malloy was the power house of the league—leading ground gainer.

"Seventeen," Dorgan snapped. "Four—seven—three—"

Left half, Jack Ford, moved off—man-in-motion, the Condor right end picking him up. The play called for an off-tackle slash by Turk Jamison.

Dorgan took the ball from center, whirled and handed it to Jamison as the right half shot by. Tall, dark-haired Jamison aimed for a gap between tackle and guard. The Steelers piled him up.

Brick Malloy rubbed his hands. He glanced up into the stands. Pro football had wakened up since he quit the game. They had thirty-five thousand watching the Steelers and the Condors. It was big time football. A man with a reputation in the proloop could go places. He'd be grabbed up to coach a college squad; he could make a living.

Jamison had made half a yard on the play. It was second and nine and a half.

"How about it?" Dorgan asked in the huddle. "You feel like runnin', Malloy?" There was the same sneering challenge in the voice—the thing that had got the Buffalos down on him. Dorgan was a smart little quarterback; he was a driver, and a tricky passer, but he knew it.

The old Buffalo coach, Huck Murdock, had tried to calm him down. Huck had seen the fresh kids with the big reputations on their own campus.

"Look," Huck had said, "these guys ain't college, Dorgan. A lot of 'em are married men with families. You treat 'em like that."

Somebody had told Dorgan he was a

spark plug and he'd never got over it. His nasty remarks had followed the Buffalos into the locker room. Brick had taken it for ten games. He'd slapped Dorgan in the mouth after the eleventh.

"Number eight," Dorgan snapped. "Don't fall over your feet."

Brick reddened. The others looked at him curiously. He'd been with the team for a week. They'd heard about his reputation with the old Buffalos. Most of them had been kids in high school when he was at the top of the league.

They lined up and Brick Malloy felt that queer sensation running through him. He'd had his fill of football but this thing never left. A man tingled when his number was called. He sweat inwardly.

DORGAN reached down for the ball and rammed it into his stomach as he swept past. Number eight was a straight buck over the middle. There was no deception and no science to it. They'd referred to him as the "battering ram."

Rudledge, ponderous Condor center, gave him an opening. He got the feel of the thing as he crossed the line of scrimmage. For a man of thirty-three he was in good shape. He'd worked hard to get into condition. The legs never would be the same, but he had his wind.

Slattery, Steeler fullback, backing the line, dove for his knees as he came out into the open. Brick rolled away from the tackle.

It was an old stunt—something that he hadn't seen in the pro game thus far. Slattery hit him above the knees, but Brick Malloy spun completely around and plunged forward. His left knee caught Slattery in the face and he heard the big man gasp from the shock. Brick sprawled on the thirty-one. He'd gone over five yards on the play.

Slattery was picking himself up when Brick went back into the huddle. The Steelers backfield man rubbed his jaw ruefully.

"You got steel in your pads, Malloy?" he asked.

"Sorry," Brick grinned. "Better luck next time, kid."

Hop Dorgan's rasping voice tore at him The Condor quarter waited in the huddle, head thrust forward, chin out. He had pale blue eyes and colorless eyebrows.

"Go ahead brag about it," Dorgan said. "We got all day."

Brick came back to the huddle, jaw tight. He didn't want to start anything with the first string Condor quarterback. Murdock had traded Dorgan after that affair in the locker room. Dorgan had been with practically every team in the league since then. He was still good.

"We need points," Dorgan was saying. "We don't get them by gabbing."

"Call the play," Rudledge suggested. The big man in the center of the line was the Condor captain. He was dark-haired, heavy-jawed, with mild blue eyes.

Brick looked at Rudledge quickly. These men didn't like Dorgan either. It was the same old pattern. Good had picked up Dorgan because he couldn't afford to pay for the men he wanted, and Dorgan came cheap. It was for the same reason Charlie Good had gone into the grab bag to come up with Brick Malloy, one-time headliner

"Three-B," Hop Dorgan scowled.

Jamison cut for the right side of the line, moved out wide, with Brick and Ford in front of him. Brick dived for Murray McCann, Steeler left end, and took him out of the play. Jamison was knocked out of bounds on the thirty-three. They were two yards short of a first down.

Brick walked back across the field with the others. This was a strange Condor team—a team of paradoxes. Charlie Good had told him the same thing. The Condors looked good in spots. The "T" worked to perfection on occasions, and at other times it was gruesome.

"When we start to click," the old man had grinned, "we'll go places, Brick."

Big Ben Rudledge had told Brick the

real story. The wolves were after Uncle Charlie Good, and they had him against the wall.

"On the road," Rudledge explained, "we do pretty well, Malloy. When we get back home we don't draw flies. A team has to win to bring out the cash customers. The Condors have been in the cellar for three years."

Brick Malloy nodded. In the old days he'd seen clubs fold up. It would be a sad thing for Charlie Good who had football for breakfast every morning. It was Charlie Good who had brought the "T" down from the attic and made it the offensive formation of three-quarters of the league.

"There's an outlaw club back home," Rudledge had said, "and they're trying to squeeze Good out. They got the money behind them and they're buying up headliners. Last fall they outdrew us at the gate. If they do it again this fall, the old man will be ruined. They'll take over his franchise and push him out into the cold."

"They're not in the league?" Brick asked.

"They want to get in," the center said. "That's where the big money is."

HOP DORGAN called for a kick and Brick moved back to kick formation. He'd been punting during the past week and he got distance. A man didn't forget the things he'd been doing since he was ten years old.

Red jerseyed Steelers slipped the line and plunged toward him, but he got the ball away. It went high, end over end, past the middle of the field. Black and blue clad Condors stormed after it. The ball was taken by the Steeler safety man on the fifteen. He was downed after he'd taken two steps. It was a beautiful kick.

"Nice going," Rudledge smiled.

Hop Dorgan walked on ahead of them. He half turned his head and Brick heard him laugh coldly.

"That guy," Rudledge whispered, "doesn't like himself."

The Steelers took over. They were running out of a single wing, one of the few teams in the league that hadn't shifted to the "T".

Brick Malloy waited behind the line of scrimmage. Rudledge was near him, playing a roving center. Hop Dorgan was off to the right. The fleet-footed Jamison back at safety, and Ford off to Brick's right.

A POWER play steamed over the middle and Brick moved in for it. He heard the roar of the thirty-five thousand home-town fans. The Steelers were second place in the league, just getting underway with the tough Buffalos again on top.

Slattery, Steeler fullback, came up high, ball clutched under his right arm. Brick Malloy saw the man's face as he leaped over the backs of the linemen. He got in under Slattery's straight arm and held him around the middle. The play was stopped at the line of scrimmage. Rudlege had come up to get in on the tackle.

"Knock 'em down," the center mumbled. He had a split lip and his left hand was taped.

The Steelers tried a pass and Brick knew it was foolish even before the play materialized. They were throwing too much in this modern game. The old Buffalos had depended on the ground attack. Too many games were lost through the air!

Hop Dorgan had followed a Steeler back as he sifted through the scrimmage line. Brick retreated also as the Steeler quarterback faded with the ball. Passing on the second down from their own fifteen would one time have been considered the height of foolishness.

The ball flew through the air and Dorgan whirled. Brick watched the quarterback leap and come down with the pigskin. He started off for the right coffin corner. Brick knocked down a red clad man and watched Dorgan get thrown out of bounds on the ten-yard stripe. They were in scoring position for the first time since the start of the game.

DORGAN came into the huddle, eyes wild with excitement, breathing heavily.

"Let's make it good," he snarled. He looked at Brick Malloy. It wasn't Dorgan's way to let personalities interfere with his proper handling of the plays. He'd send the devil through the middle if it meant a gain.

"Number Six-M," Dorgan scowled "We want a score."

They had over two hundred plays evolving out of Charlie Good's "T". Brick had worked overtime learning the most common plays. Six-M was his own—a fake spinner to Ford, and then a plunge by himself over left guard. It was a delayed buck.

The line wheeled into position. Jamison, man-in-motion, turned off to the right. They had to watch Jamison now for a quick side line pass. Dorgan bent down and took the ball. He spun and faked to Ford reeling by. Brick followed from the other side.

Again Dorgan rammed the ball at him. He lowered his head and let go. The Condors needed points; he had to make good to stay in the lineup. Sooner or later, he might land something that would pay. A man couldn't remain the rest of his life as a prep school coach, supporting a wife and two kids. Anton Prep couldn't pay him.

Two red-clad men hit him as he went through the hole in the line. The hole was there and then it wasn't. Brick dug in and gritted his teeth. He made one yard out of the final ten.

Dorgan didn't like it. "How about a little fight?" the quarterback blared. "Do I do it alone?"

Brick Malloy straightened up in the huddle. He looked at Rudledge.

"Try him again," the center suggested.

"I handle this team," Dorgan said. Rudledge shut up. He'd made a suggestion. Any man in the huddle might have something on his mind. He didn't usually say it, but the team captain could have a voice.

Dorgan tried Ford on a wide sweep toward the right side of the line. The Condor left half picked up two yards. It was third and seven. The Steeler fans were pleading for the home club to hold the line. They had a nine point lead, but it could be wiped out easily enough.

"Twenty-Two-A," Dorgan said in the huddle. Brick Malloy licked his chapped lips. Charlie Good had just taken out Johnny Pollock, regular fullback. They wanted to see what he had. If he didn't show up, Good would have to go to the grab bag again.

The play moved toward the left side of the line. Brick Malloy took the ball from Dorgan and hit in between tackle and guard. The Condor left guard had let his man drive through the line. Jack Ford hit him, closing the jaws of the mousetrap. Brick hammered through the opening. He went over one stripe, rolling away from Slattery. He saw the last broad one and he churned the dirt. They buried him one yard short of the mark.

He stood up and his legs were a trifle shaky. The Steelers meant business on those tackles, and they'd ganged up on him that play.

"Nice going," Rudledge grinned.

Hop Dorgan called his next play. It was fourth and one for the touchdown. Brick bent low and moved forward. The Condor front line gave him the yard. He lay on his face in the end zone, the ball beneath him. It was 9 to 6 for the Steelers. Dorgan kicked the extra point.

The Steeler crowd gave Brick a hand as he moved back up the field. There were men in the stands who remembered him with the Buffalos; they knew his age. Pro football wasn't an old man's game.

There was no more scoring the remainder of the half. It was still 9 to 7 when the teams went to the dressing room. Charlie Good slapped Brick's broad back.

"You still hit 'em," he acknowledged.

"Thanks," Brick said. Good would probably have young Pollack back in at the

start of the third quarter, but the first string man wouldn't play the entire thirty minutes.

In the locker room, Hop Dorgan opened up again. Early in the first period, the Condors had thrown away a scoring chance on a fumble by Jamison. Dorgan never forgot fumbles; they were inexcusable.

Brick Malloy listened to the quarterback. A man never changed. It was the same ranting voice.

"We got to hang onto that ball," Dorgan growled, "if we want to score."

Jamison, a tall, dark-haired man with a long jaw, reddened. He opened his mouth to say something, and then shut it again. Brick sat in a corner and took it all in. These Condors had possibilities. They could move to the top of the league if they were handled right. They were a young team and Good's game was sound.

After a while Good himself came in and stopped Dorgan with a look.

"We'd like to win this one," the old man said quietly. "Everybody pitch in." The Condors had lost the opener. If they were taken again this afternoon, it would set them way back. In a ten game schedule, two defeats at the start can mean an awful lot.

Pollock was in at fullback the start of the second half. Brick Malloy, wrapped in his sheepskin, sat on the bench near Charlie Good. The Steelers kicked off and Ford ran the ball up to the twenty-eight.

Pollock picked up three yards over center and Jamison added another two around left end. Dorgan's sneak pass was short of the mark and then Pollock booted down the field.

Uncle Charlie Good shifted uneasily on the bench. It was evident the old man wasn't satisfied with the progress of the game. Good knew a football squad when he saw one, and the Condors had something even though they seldom displayed it.

The ball moved back and forth up and down the field for the third quarter with neither team getting inside the other's twenty-yard marker. Brick watched gloomily. The Condors opened up at home next Sunday afternoon. It wouldn't be nice to go back with two defeats against them and last place in the league standings.

Jamison nearly broke loose from his own thirty-five near the end of the period. The fleet-footed right half found a gap between tackle and end. Slattery, of the Steelers, missed his tackle and Jamison went to midfield. He was trying to get blockers in front of him, when he stumbled over the foot of a Condor player. Brick saw Hop Dorgan give it to both of them.

Charlie Good walked out to the side line and watched. Even above the dull roar from the stands, they could hear the quarterback's high-pitched voice. Jamison kicked up a clod of dirt in disgust and walked away.

The Condors lost the ball a moment later when Pollock fumbled going through the middle. At the whistle, Good nodded to Brick Malloy. The big man threw away the sheepskin and picked up his helmet.

Young Pollock shook a friendly fist at him as he went by. Brick grinned. It was still 9 to 7 for the Steelers and they needed a score to win—field goal or touchdown.

It was the Steelers ball—first and ten on their own forty-five. Dorgan greeted the new fullback with a curling of the lip. The little quarterback was still sore over the fumble.

"Let's hang onto that ball," he snapped.

Brick waited behind the line of scrimmage. He saw the Steeler quarterback glance over the backs of his men in the huddle. They were in an ideal spot for a quick pass.

The red-clad men came out of the huddle and lined up. The shift was off to the right. Brick held his ground. He watched the Steeler left half, the man who had done most of the pass receiving.

When the ball was snapped, the Steeler

backs cut toward the left, but the pass receiver didn't go with them. Brick watched the man cutting through the line of scrimmage. Dorgan had been sucked in on that wide end sweep. He was driving behind the line of scrimmage, keeping his eyes on the left half. Far over on the other side of the field, the Steeler quarterback suddenly faded. As his arm went back, Brick headed for the receiver in the open. The ball came toward them low and hard.

Brick Malloy got one hand on it and juggled it for a second. He clutched the ball to his chest just as a Steeler hit him from the side. He went down but he held the ball.

The interception gave the Condors new life. The "T" worked to perfection as they moved down the field toward the Steeler goal line. Jamison cut through tackle and around the ends. Jack Ford and Brick Molloy hit the line and picked up yardage.

THEY were on the twenty-one first and ten. Hop Dorgan's eyes were gleaming as he called his plays. Brick noted that the quarterback made few mistakes. He found the weak spots in the enemy line and he pounded them. Wisely, he refrained from passing at this stage. The Condor ground attack was working, and a pass would have been foolish.

"Seven-Q," Dorgan snapped. Jamison slid inside right end. He was smacked down hard. Brick Malloy, running in front of the right half, heard him gasp from the shock. The ball squirted out of Jamison's hands and an alert Steeler line man fell on it.

Dorgan stared at the runner as he climbed to his feet. They were well into the fourth quarter now and every scoring chance might be the last.

"Whose side you on?" the quarterback glared.

"Shut up," Jamison grated.

Rudledge came in between them. He pushed Jamison away. Brick glanced toward the side lines. He saw Charlie Good's shoulders sag.

The Steeler drive stalled on the thirty-five. They tried a long placement which missed the bars by a matter of feet. The Condors took over, first and ten on their own twenty.

Brick Malloy looked toward the other end of the field. The goal line was eighty yards away and they had seven minutes to get down there. If this final drive failed, they were through for the afternoon.

Dorgan worked it carefully. He called his plays and the backs responded. Time and again, Brick Malloy cut through left guard. The Steeler lineman at that position was on his last legs and Dorgan knew it.

They picked up three, four and five yards on each play. Jack Ford sprinted around end for seventeen yards. Dorgan himself, slipped through on a quarterback's sneak and made another first down.

Big Rudledge clapped his hands. "Keep it moving," he called. The center had been in since the start of the game.

The Steelers tightened on their own forty; they held again on the twenty-eight. Brick wondered what Dorgan's strategy was.

They needed three points and the quarterback was good on short placements. Possibly, Dorgan was trying to get them close enough for a kick.

The Steelers called time and Brick looked up at the clock. They had less than two minutes left. Charlie Good sent in fresh linemen to open holes for the running backs. Brick half-expected to see Pollock come out to take his place. He was beginning to feel it in the calves of the legs. He'd taken a beating around the middle.

"Let's go," Dorgan snapped as the whistle blew again.

Jamison slanted off tackle for six yards. They pulled a sneaky reverse and Ford took it around right end for another first

down. It was possible they could run the ball over the line.

"Twelve-A," Dorgan called in the huddle. Brick Malloy hit the center. They piled him up but he churned hard for an extra yard or two. They were on the fifteen-yard stripe, fourth and a yard.

"This is it," Rudledge whispered to Brick.

Dorgan was on the spot. He had to call this one correctly because the game depended on it. They were close enough for a placement, but if it missed, they were through. They had been making yardage all along and one yard didn't look like anything, but the Steelers would gang up on the runner this play. Already they were crowding in close, waiting for the line play.

"We'll kick it," Dorgan said deliberately. Brick admired the man's nerve. The quarterback could have passed the buck on to someone else. By trying the kick, he was putting himself on the spot.

They lined up with Ford holding the ball. Jamison and Brick squatted on either side, ready to knock down any stray Steeler linemen coming through.

Brick listened to the noise. The Steeler crowd was up, pleading for a blocked kick. Fifteen yards from the line of scrimmage, the red and white striped goal posts stuck up out of the ground.

"Signals," Dorgan snarled. "Sixteen—four—seven—"

The ball spun back. Brick watched that red line surge forward. He saw Slattery, the fullback, coming over the top in a wild charge. Other men were getting through.

The Steeler left guard was plunging forward toward the ball holder.

Brick leaped for the man as Hop Dorgan trotted forward to kick. He heard the plunk of Dorgan's foot on the ball and then something struck him on the left shoulder. He heard the roar as the ball bounced up into the air. The Steeler left guard had stumbled as he came through the line. He could not have blocked the kick.

Brick Malloy fell forward on the ground. He saw the ball go into the end zone after caroming off his shoulder. He had broken up the play.

Hop Dorgan glared at him, hands on hips. Then he walked away. Brick climbed to his feet. It was all over. The Steelers took the ball on the twenty, and stalled the remainder of the game. It was still 9 to 7 for the Steelers.

A glum Condor squad walked toward the dressing room.

"I didn't see it," Rudledge said, "but it can happen, Brick. Don't let it worry you."

The veteran fullback nodded. He saw Dorgan striding on ahead by himself. The Condor signal caller wouldn't forget this in a hurry. He had a habit of remembering when all others had forgotten.

"It's not Dorgan I'm sorry for," Rudledge said, "it's Uncle Charlie. He couldn't afford to lose this one today, Brick."

"No," Brick said miserably. Good had given him his chance to get back into the big time. He was digging out of the empty coffers to pay him a salary. In three months with the Condors he would make more than he'd made a whole year at Anton Prep.

IN THE dressing room, Brick saw Hop Dorgan striding toward the showers. The quarterback's face was still white with rage. Dorgan probably hadn't seen that Steeler guard coming through at the ball. Dorgan was attending to his own job. It would look to him as if Brick Malloy had deliberately, or clumsily, fallen in front of the kick.

"He'll have something to say," Rudledge whispered. "Don't bother with him, Brick. The guy goes nuts when we lose one."

Brick nodded grimly. Dorgan had always been like that, even with the Buffalos. A loss got him down. It affected the

quarterback more than it affected the others. It was a thing Brick had never been able to understand. He was a family man and winning meant much to him, too, but he could stand an occasional loss.

The Condor quarterback came out of the shower room five minutes later. He had a towel around his waist. His hair was flattened down against his skull. Water dripped from his chin.

Brick Malloy dropped his cleats and picked up his towel. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dorgan glaring at him. Dorgan hadn't forgotten that kick. It would be a long time before he forgot it.

Brick tried to walk past to the shower room. He saw the others stop dressing and look up. They knew what was coming. Dorgan was a small man, no more than a hundred and sixty pounds. Brick weighed two-fifteen. He was a full head taller than the quarterback.

"We had that game in the bag," Dorgan snarled. "What the hell happened out there?"

Brick looked at him. "It was an accident," he said stiffly. He wanted to drive his fist into the smaller man's face but he knew he couldn't do it.

"Accident?" Dorgan laughed coldly. "I'd say it was a good block."

Uncle Charlie Good came into the room and stood by the door. Dorgan laughed again and strode away.

"A nice guy," Rudledge said in the shower room. "I could break his back with pleasure."

Brick had seen the expression on Charlie Good's face. The old man was helpless. He'd done his best to build a winning team, but the Condors didn't win.

"We got the Buffalos next week at home," Rudledge said slowly, "and we got to win to get the crowd. If we take a shellacking then, that outlaw club will take away all the trade. Charlie will fold up."

"It will have to be the Buffalos," Brick said. He knew the league leaders would draw a good crowd for the opener. It was doubtful whether that crowd would come back if the Buffalos stampeded over them.

Back at the hotel he wrote a letter home. He tried to make it cheerful. The Condors were great fellows and the team would get going in another week or so. He didn't want the wife to feel badly about it too. She knew what this chance meant to him. He had one year of football left in those legs. If he could hold up—if the Condors could hold up—he might be able to land something.

"At any rate," he wrote, "we're taking a chance." At Anton Prep they had been standing still. The salary was not sufficient for a man with two children now going to school. "Everybody watches the pro game," he explained, "scouts from colleges, athletic directors, all kinds of alumni. Last year they picked up half a dozen pros for college coaching jobs."

CHARLIE GOOD worked on the formations during the week. The old man said little. Hop Dorgan did most of the driving from the field. Brick Malloy listened to him and then shook his head. Privately, he spoke to Rudledge.

"If Uncle Charlie thinks Dorgan is hurting the team," he said, "why doesn't he get rid of him?"

Rudledge smiled. "Dorgan is a good football player, Brick, and the best field general in the business. Good knows that. He thinks that some day everything will work out all right. If the Condors ever start to click, they'll be hard to beat."

Brick Malloy nodded. It was possible, also, that Good couldn't afford to buy another quarterback of big league calibre. He probably got Hop Dorgan for a song.

It rained the Saturday night before the game, and the field was soggy to begin with. Heavy black clouds still hung in the sky above the grandstand, as the two squads came out for practice.

Brick watched the stands filling up. Skeptical Condor fans had come out to see the home club. They knew about the

two defeats and they wanted to see for themselves.

"That outlaw club," Rudledge said, "is playing on the west side today, but the Buffalos have drawn most of the fans. It might not be this way next Sunday."

The Buffalos looked bigger than ever. Brick didn't know any of them, Murdock, still coaching, came over to shake his hand.

"Thought they had you buried, Brick," the Buffalo mentor grinned. Murdock was a squat man with a barrel chest, flattened nose and a bald head.

Brick poked him playfully in the ribs. "I got about three touchdowns in the old legs," he said. "Tell your guys to stay out of the way."

Murdock looked down at the field at the big men in brown and white. "I got a ball club this year, Brick," he said thoughtfully. "They got as much as the old outfits." He paused. "How's Dorgan?"

Brick's lips tightened. "Same guy," he said slowly.

Murdock shook his head. "A man shouldn't play football the way he plays it, Brick. It ain't a game like that."

BRICK watched Dorgan tossing passes to a line of men. The quarterback's face was tense. He seemed to be under a terrific strain all the time. Brick had noticed the same thing in the practice sessions. Dorgan couldn't relax.

Murdock went back to his club and Brick Malloy booted a few long ones down the field. He watched the blackclouds driving overhead. The turf was soggy underfoot—exactly the conditions the Buffalos wanted. They were the heavier club, with a terrific line. The Condors depended upon Dorgan's passing, and the running of the speed boys, Ford and Jamison. With a wet ball and an uncertain turf, the Buffalos had a distinct advantage.

Charlie Good called Brick over and spoke to him quietly. "If it rains," the old man said, "we'll have to depend on you and Pollock to do most of the ball carrying. The other boys won't be able to run in this weather."

Brick nodded. Pollock, the first string fullback, would start the game, but he couldn't be expected to go sixty minutes against a club like the Buffalos. The league-leaders hit a man when he came through; they gave him a terrific beating in the line-backing position on the defensive.

It was raining as the Buffalos prepared to kick off. Brick Malloy sat on the bench with the sheepskin around his neck. He saw Charlie Good out on the sidelines; he listened to the noise from the stands. The fans were withholding judgment until they saw the home club in action.

The kickoff zoomed into the air and Pollock caught it on the goal line. Rain slanted down at the blue-jerseyed Condors as they came upfield. Ford and Jamison drifted in front of Pollock. Hop Dorgan tore up the midde and threw himself at the knees of a big Buffalo lineman. Brick saw the player tumble.

Pollock went up the middle and then veered off to the right. The huge brown and white men hemmed him in. Pollock got around one of them. He lowered his head and plunged into a mob of players.

From the bench, Brick Malloy heard the impact. Pollock was knocked backward. Somehow, the ball got away and bobbled on the muddy ground. The Buffalos dived from all angles and one of them came up with the ball.

The crowd howled and Brick shook his head. The Condors had fumbled on the first play of the game and the Buffalos had the ball on the twenty-yard stripe, in striking distance.

Pollock wasn't getting up. He lay on his back with his arms outstretched, and the rain pattering on his face. Brick stood up. The club physician was running across the wet grass, bag in hand. Charlie Good stood with his hands in his coat pockets. He turned around and looked at the relief back.

They carried Johnny Pollock toward the

bench. Brick saw the blood coming from the fullback's smashed nose.

"Broken," Rudledge groaned. "The guy's through."

Brick picked up a black helmet. Good gave him the sign and he trotted across the field toward the official. Pollock was out for good, and Uncle Charlie had depended upon him to do most of the ball carrying this afternoon!

Hop Dorgan was standing in the mud, waiting. The Condors played at the ball park of the home-town Indians. The goal posts had been set up in the first base coaching box. The infield was already a quagmire.

Brick took his place behind the line of scrimmage. The brown and white men grinned at him. Rudledge went past and slapped his back. The game was not a minute old and the Buffalos had them against the wall.

The first play boiled over dead center. The four Buffalo backs were all over two hundred pounds. They worked out of the "T" also. Brick saw the hole in the middle as George Sexton, Buffalo fullback, drove through. He plunged forward to get the man. Sexton's knees caught him in the shoulder but he hung on. Rudledge helped on the tackle. Sexton picked up three yards on the play.

"We'll give 'em hell," Rudledge said. His face was covered with mud and his teeth gleamed through the muck.

THE Buffalos pulled a fake plunge and then one of those ponderous backs hit off right tackle. Brick tried to get over. He missed his tackle. It was Dorgan who brought the big runner down with an ankle grip. The Buffalos had a first down on the play—to the Condor ten.

They were silent in the stands—awed by the power of this tremendous Buffalo outfit. The weather seemed to be no handicap. The big men carrying the ball were all "mudders."

Another smash at the middle and Brick Malloy picked himself up. He felt the pain in the face. He had the taste of blood in his mouth. They were back on their own five-yard stripe. The goal posts were directly behind him.

"How's it?" Rudledge asked.

"I'm okay," Brick said gruffly. Somebody else had been in on that tackle. He saw the man pick himself up slowly. It was Dorgan—eyes gleaming with intense hatred. Dorgan couldn't lose.

They held twice in the shadow of the goal posts and the fans gave them an ovation. The next play shot off left tackle, after a fake spinner. It was far and away from Brick Malloy. He watched the runner splinter the line and tumble into the end zone. The Buffalos kicked the extra point. It was 7 to 0.

Hop Dorgan was talking as they walked slowly to their positions for the next kick-off.

"Hold that damn line," Dorgan snarled. "Dig in." His voice was getting hysterical. Brick looked back. Dorgan was standing with his hands on his hips, head thrust forward, jaw out.

The kick came toward them. Brick took two steps backward and pulled the ball against his chest. He remembered Pollock's broken nose. The fullback was probably out for the season.

Brick went up the middle, picking up speed as he ran. Jamison was off to his left and he fell in step behind the right half.

The Buffalos converged on him as he went over the fifteen. Jamison went down. Rudledge was still up in front, bucking the brown and white men.

Brick Malloy let himself go. He saw a small gap between two tacklers and he plowed through. Stumbling out into the clear, he veered off to the left, slashing at a brown helmet with his open hand. He was up to the twenty-five and then the thirty, fighting. Three Buffalos threw him out of bounds on the thirty-three.

Hop Dorgan called them into the hud-

dle. Brick saw the hope in the little man's eyes.

"Eleven-A," the quarterback snapped.

Jack Ford took it on a straight slash off left tackle. The Buffalos piled him up at the line of scrimmage. Ford lost his footing as he went through. Hop Dorgan cursed aloud. He sent Jamison toward the end, and the Buffalo wingman chased the runner toward the sidelines. Jamison tried to cut, reverse his field. He went down in the soft mud of the infield.

"He won't make a yard like that," Rudledge said softly. It was still raining steadily and the cold bit into them. Brick Malloy felt it through the damp jersey. "We'll have to hit the line," Rudledge said.

Brick Malloy blinked. They had no line plungers except himself, and he had no relief man to spell him. Sixty minutes was a lot of football against a club like the Buffalos.

It was third and ten. Dorgan took no chances.

"We'll kick," he snarled. "Get it away, Malloy."

Brick booted into the rain. He got it above the outstretched hands of the Buffalo tackle. It was taken by the safety on the Buffalo twenty-five. He got away to the thirty-five by the blocking of the brown and white team.

The Buffalos wasted no time. They struck at the line, and they slashed off tackle. They picked up the yardage in good-sized chunks. Brick Malloy and Rudledge tried to hold them off. Hop Dorgan played up closer to the line of scrimmage. Ford came in also to help. The Buffalos went over the center and down the other side.

Every play was on the ground. It was impossible now to pass that soggy ball, and the Buffalos were one of the few teams in the league that still relied on the ground attack.

On the Condor twenty-eight, Rudledge called time. They stood in a huddle with the rain slanting down at them. Brick saw the battered, puffed faces. The Condor line, outweighed about fifteen pounds to the man, were taking a terrific beating. He was conscious of the fact that his own face was in the same condition.

"Let's stop this," Rudledge said. "We can't let these guys walk all over us." The center was playing up on the line of scrimmage now. His right cheek was red with blood. He was mud from head to foot.

"Dig in," Dorgan growled. "Make a fight."

Brick felt the pain in the legs. He'd been taking it behind the line; he'd dug in on those tackles. He didn't have the legs of a kid of twenty-one.

The Buffalos picked up where they had left. They dashed out of the "T" and hit the line, from spinners, from delayed bucks. They whirled and came through, big men with brown helmets and black mud on their faces. They made yards.

On the fifteen the Condors held till the fourth down. The Buffalo quarterback faked a plunge at the line and then sent one of his backs around the end. The maneuver caught the Condor wingman flatfooted. The Buffalos made the first down on the eight-yard stripe. It was goal to go.

Brick Malloy watched them line up again. He moved up closer. Stumpy Dillon, two hundred and ten pounds of beef, plowed over right guard for the Buffalos. Brick hit the visiting left half, lifted him up, and threw him back into the line.

Dillon grinned as he tossed the ball to the referee. "I heard you were once a Buffalo," the man chuckled. "That makes it all right."

They came through twice more and the ball was on the two-yard stripe. Brick stared at it lying so close to the Condor goal line. He saw Hop Dorgan staring also. Another Buffalo touchdown in this first quarter might put the game on ice.

Dillon slammed through and Rudledge caught him. The other Buffalo backs piled through behind Dillon, driving them for-

ward. The whistle blew and Dillon was on the one-yard marker.

Sexton, the fullback, hit over right guard. The entire Buffalo line moved forward and splashed into the end zone. They were over. Brick Malloy picked himself up dazedly. He'd had a hand on Sexton's leg and he'd clung to it, but the Buffalos had stepped on him. He felt the pain in his ribs. The Buffalos made the extra point. It was 14 to 0. They changed positions at the quarter.

Rudledge asked for the kickoff. "Maybe we can make them fumble," the center said hopefully. "We'll try to keep the ball in their territory."

Brick Malloy grimaced under the mud. It was a forlorn hope and Rudledge knew it. The Condors had been unable to do anything against that Buffalo forward wall, and the Buffalos had pounded holes into the Condor line. They had had possession of the ball almost the entire first quarter.

Brick got the kick up into the air and raced after it. The Buffalos took the ball to the thirty-five before Dillon was knocked down by Jamison and Dorgan.

"Hold that line," Dorgan called from behind. Again, Brick Malloy sensed the terror in the quarterback's voice. The crowd was very silent after the second touchdown. Later on they would begin to boo as the Buffalos rolled over them. They wouldn't come back the following Sundays. The outlaw club would draw the cash.

The Buffalos fumbled on the third down with a yard to go. Red Oliver, Condor end, fell on the ball for the recovery. Brick heard the yell from the stands. It was the first break the Condors had had.

Dorgan bounded into the huddle. "Let's go," he snapped. He called Brick's number on the first play. It was a straight buck over the middle.

Brick went in low, driving his cleats into the mud. He made three yards before the Buffalos hammered him into the water. Jamison fumbled on the next play.

Hop Dorgan yelled frantically as the ball bounced from the halfback's hands. Jamison tried to scoop it up again and missed. It was a loose ball in that mass of diving players. Dorgan screamed again. A Buffalo lineman clutched the ball under his chest.

Jamison waited on his hands and knees, a hopeless expression on his face. The ball was slippery and he had his excuse. Dorgan walked past him, face tight with rage.

"Hand it to 'em on a platter," he snarled. "Give 'em the game."

Jamison bounced to his feet and Rudledge caught him around the waist. The right half was already aiming a blow at Dorgan's face. Brick heard the horn. Charlie Good sent in a relief man for Jamison.

Brick looked at the faces of the Condors. They had seen the interchange between Dorgan and Jamison. It wasn't a nice thing in the middle of a grueling game.

The Buffalos picked up where they had left off. It was an irresistible force moving down the field. Brick Malloy crouched in the rain and saw the backs hurtling through at him. He knocked them down, but they never stopped coming.

The Condors held on the twenty-five, but a wide end run behind massed interference carried the Buffalos down to the twelve. They kicked a field goal from the eight after their attack stalled again. It was 17 to 0 for the Buffalos.

Brick heard the boos from the stands. The Condor fans had half-expected this, but they were disappointed nevertheless. Charlie Good sent in substitutions in the line. He gave Ford a rest. Brick stayed in the game. Good stared at him from the sidelines and shook his head. There was no one else and he was doing a good job on the defensive.

The Buffalos kicked off and Dorgan took the ball. The little quarterback headed into a mass of players. Brick saw him lifted up into the air and slammed to the

ground. Dorgan got up, stunned. He staggered into the huddle.

Rudledge held out a hand to steady him and Dorgan cursed, pushing it away. He called Brick Malloy's play off left tackle. Brick was the only back making any ground.

The play swung toward the left, beginning as an end run. Brick cut in sharply as the blockers left him. He hit the tackle spot with all he had. Somebody gave on the other side and he went through into the Buffalo backfield. They smashed him from the left and right. Sexton got him up high around the head. Dillon hit his knees. They nearly tore him in half.

"Stay on your own side, brother," Dillon grinned. "You ain't got no business back here."

BRICK made four yards on the play. Hop Dorgan stared at him when he came into the huddle and then called for a pass. Dorgan would have sent him into the line a dozen times in succession if it meant gains. He was not sentimental in that respect, but Brick Malloy needed a rest.

"Get clear, Oliver," Dorgan snapped, "and hang onto the ball."

The quarterback got it away beautifully and Brick was amazed. The Buffalos had been afraid to pass with that wet ball. It was suicide. Dorgan laid the ball in Oliver's hands and it was a first down.

He threw again and again and they went over the middle of the field. Twice Ford and Jamison dropped passes and Dorgan swore at them. Jamison had come in to finish out the half. He was as nervous as a cat.

On the Buffalo forty-two, Brick whirled through the center for five yards. Dorgan threw again and Oliver snatched at the slippery ball. It got away and a Buffalo player caught it before it touched the ground. The Condor drive was stalled. Dorgan threw his helmet on the ground and kicked it away.

There was no more scoring in the half. They walked to the dressing room, wearied men with muddy, sodden outfits, faces cut and bruised, splattered with the mud. The rain had let up. It was only a drizzle now, but it was colder.

Brick Malloy picked up his sheepskin. He paused to tie his shoelace. The other Condors were straggling ahead of him. Hop Dorgan walked in the rear, a small man with the fatigue evident in the slope of his shoulders.

Dorgan passed a box off the field. A woman sat in the box with an unbrella over her head. Two small children sat with her. Brick Malloy saw her face—the hopelessness. Dorgan was looking at her steadily as he walked past. He didn't stop. He just looked and then his right hand went up in a half wave.

Brick stopped in his tracks. The boy with the woman was the dead image of Dorgan. He was about six. The girl was younger, possibly four. Brick thought of his own kids—almost the same age. Hop Dorgan was a married man with a family!

THE woman's eyes followed Dorgan as he trudged toward the locker room. She was pretty but her face was now strained with emotion. Brick Malloy saw the love in her eyes as she looked at the Condor quarterback. The boy called, but the words could not be distinguished above the sound around them. Hop Dorgan didn't hear it. He kept walking.

Brick followed more slowly. Dorgan had a wife and two kids! He couldn't get over it. He hadn't thought of Dorgan as being a married man. Even with the Buffalos. Dorgan had been married, and a father!

That was the reason for Dorgan's fanatical will to win on the gridiron. He had responsibilities at home. He was a professional football player and it was probably the only trade he knew. Like Brick himself, Dorgan was aware of this. When the Condors went on the rocks, Dorgan

would go with them. He couldn't afford to lose.

Brick Malloy plodded across the soggy turf. It put Hop Dorgan in an entirely different light. You could excuse a man for killing himself, and others, for his family. No matter how much the Condor quarterback demanded of others, it was no more than he was willing to give himself.

Charlie Good spoke to them in the dressing room. They stripped off the sodden jerseys and were given dry ones for the second half. Brick lay on the rubbing table and listened to the old man. He felt his body stiffening. It would be tough going this next period.

"They have seventeen points on us," Good said, "and it's a lot. I've seen teams make three touchdowns in as many minutes. We won't give up till the final minute." He went around speaking to the men individually. Uncle Charlie Good wasn't the man for the locker-room speeches. He was no orator.

Brick Malloy watched Hop Dorgan across the room. Dorgan had wiped the mud from his face and he looked presentable again. His cold blue eyes flickered around the room. Brick read the hatred in the faces of the Condors. They had taken too much from Dorgan and they were ready to crack.

Jamison's jaws were tight. Ford and Oliver sat in a corner glaring at the quarterback. Brick saw it and it made him sick. The Condors had to win this afternoon, but they couldn't do it this way. There was a possibility if they pulled together. Brick had seen those flashes of brilliance.

He got up and walked toward the door. Charlie Good didn't see him go out. He walked hurriedly down the corridor, up the ramp, and out on the field. A local band was performing out on the muddy gridiron and no one noticed him pause at the box where Dorgan's family were sitting.

"You sure Harry won't mind?" Mrs. Dorgan asked anxiously.

"He'll be tickled pink," Brick said. He went back to the dressing room. Outside the door, he heard Jamison's voice. It was high pitched with anger. Brick Malloy grimaced. He opened the door and pushed Dorgan's six-year-old boy into the room.

The little fellow's eyes bulged. There were about twenty-five big men in the room. Jamison was standing in front of Hop Dorgan, fists clenched. Charlie Good was holding Jamison's arms. Rudledge was standing behind Dorgan ready to grab him.

The boy stared from one man to another. He was dressed in a blue ski suit. His face was red and a trifle moist from the rain. His eyes were blue, with the long lashes of a girl.

"Daddy!" the boy yelled. He ran over and Hop Dorgan scooped him up from the floor. Jamison gulped and stepped back. There wasn't a sound in the room.

Brick Malloy stepped through the door. He grinned abashedly. "The little feller was looking for his dad," he said. Young Dorgan was sitting happily in his father's arms. He was smiling at the men around him, much delighted with the company.

Brick felt the tension leave the room. Red Oliver was grinning from the corner. Rudledge was making faces over Dorgan's shoulder at the child.

DORGAN didn't say anything. He looked around awkwardly and then walked out the door with the child in his arms.

"He has another one," Brick said. "Little girl. Take a look at them in the box to the left of our bench."

Charlie Good blinked. "Dorgan never told me he was married," the old man said slowly. "I've never met his wife."

Brick shrugged. "Maybe they just came east for the game," he explained. He knew that Dorgan was from the middlewest. Good watched him closely. It was a rather far-fetched story that he had found the child wandering around.

"A nice kid," Rudledge chuckled. "Who

would think a guy like Dorgan—?" He trailed off into silence.

Brick Malloy cleared his throat. "Sometimes," he said, "when you have a couple of kids, you forget yourself. You got to take care of them and you'll do almost anything. I know, I got two of 'em myself." He looked steadily at Jamison. "Sometimes you say things you don't mean." Jamison reddened.

There was a small smile on Charlie Good's face. He hid it when he scratched his jaw.

"Let's play some football," Brick grinned. "Everybody wants to win this game." He started for the door and the others trooped after him. Good gripped his arm as he walked down the corridor.

The Condors kicked off and Dillon brought the ball to the twenty-five for the Buffalos. Brick Malloy fell back behind the line of scrimmage. Rudledge was with him. Jamison drifted back to the safety position.

Sexton, of the Buffalos, broke over the middle. Rudledge stopped him with a jarring tackle. There was no gain. Brick Malloy grinned. The Condor line had held on that play. They'd boxed Sexton in.

Dillon slanted off right tackle, and Happy Faye, Condor tackle, threw him for a one-yard loss. The Buffalos were a little surprised. The rain had stopped completely now, but the mud was an inch thick in the infield. The grass was soggy.

Another smash at the Condor line was stopped with no gain. Brick Malloy sensed the difference in the play. He saw some of the Condors grinning.

Sexton booted up the field and Jamison took the ball on the Condor forty-yard stripe. Brick knocked down a Buffalo lineman driving through. He tried to rise to his feet. Jamison was bringing the ball back, moving down the side. He'd got around two Buffalo wingmen. He was over the fifty and down into Buffalo territory.

Desperately, Brick got to his feet and headed across the field to help out. Dorgan threw a flying block at Dillon, and Jamison had a clear field to the thirty-five. He was knocked out of bounds on the thirty.

Brick watched the fleet-footed Jamison pick himself from the mud and walk back on the field. Dorgan limped as he went into the huddle. He'd hit the granite-like Dillon with reckless abandon.

"We have a chance to score," Dorgan said. "Let's put it over." He was very quiet. Brick hadn't heard his voice railing at them from behind while they were on the defensive. Dorgan called Brick's number. Spinner over left guard.

Brick took the ball as Dorgan spun with it. He went in low. They gave him a hole in the line. He heard the Condor linemen grunt as they battled to give him room. He made seven yards on the play.

Dorgan called Jamison's number. It was a fake buck and a wide sweep around left end. Jamison looked at the ground. He wiped the mud from his face.

BRICK MALLOY ran in front of him on the play. He smashed down the Buffalo right half and then watched Jamison sprint ahead of him. The Condor speed boy went down to the fifteen before they spilled him. Brick listened to the noise from the stands. For the first time, the Condors were in scoring position. It was incredible.

"Take it, Malloy," Dorgan snapped. "Number 15-A."

Brick smiled. He had the pain bad now, but they needed him on these bucks. He was the only man capable of driving through the line. Jamison and Ford didn't have the weight or the power.

They tore at his face as he went over right tackle. He sprawled forward into the mud and he made five yards. When he got up, his legs wobbled. Rudledge looked at him queerly. They knew his age. He hadn't been in active competition for six years.

Dorgan faked an end run and then calmly flipped the ball into the end zone. Red Oliver caught it with no one near him.

"Nice goin'," Brick said to Dorgan. It took courage throwing that wet ball. If he'd dropped it into the hands of a Buffalo player, the Condor fans would never forget it.

Dorgan didn't say anything. He kicked the extra point, making it 17 to 7 for the Buffalos. The Condor crowd gave them a hand as they walked up the field. Even scoring a touchdown against the brown and white team was an achievement.

The second touchdown came with lightning swiftness. Brick's kickoff fell into the hands of George Sexton. The Buffalo fullback fumbled the ball and picked it up. Again, he dropped it. Big Rudledge was in like a flash, hands grasping for the ball. There was a pile-up and the whistle blew fitfully. When they dragged the Buffalos off, Rudledge had the ball on the twelve-yard stripe.

Brick Malloy looked at Dorgan. The quarterback couldn't risk a pass now. The Buffalos would be watching for something like that. They'd have to take it over on the ground.

"How do you feel?" Dorgan asked. The words came out grudgingly. It wasn't Dorgan's custom to inquire first.

"Let me run," Brick told him. He hit the middle twice and picked up five yards. The Condors were giving him the holes now. It was third and five on the seven.

Dorgan faked again at the line and sent Jack Ford offtackle. Ford hit to the two. In the stands the Condor fans were going wild.

It was still the third quarter and the Condors were moving for another touchdown. This was a new team out on the field. They acted with precision. They opened holes and the backs went through. They were taking advantage of the breaks.

Dorgan turned to Brick Malloy. They needed two yards for the touchdown.

"Let me try it," Jamison spoke up quietly.

Dorgan nodded. Brick Malloy smashed through the middle on a fake. Jamison cut for tackle and went over the line of scrimmage in a flying dive. He landed in the end zone. Dorgan kicked the point. It was 17 to 14.

They walked back up the field, eleven muddied men. Charlie Good stood on the sidelines and shook his fist at them. Brick Malloy glanced down the field at the Buffalos before kicking. Something had happened to the brown and white team. They lacked that confidence they'd displayed the first half. They were more quiet as they waited for the ball.

Brick trotted forward and kicked high, giving his men plenty of time to get down the field. The Buffalo quarterback took the ball on the goal line. Red Oliver spilled him on the fifteen, knifing through for a beautiful ankle tackle.

The Buffalos sent runners into the Condor line but couldn't gain. They kicked, and Jamison flew away through the mud again. The Condor safety man took the punt on his forty-five and skipped back to the Buffalo forty-two.

DORGAN worked it carefully. He used Brick sparingly. Ford went around the ends and this time the Condor line gave them support. Jamison hit at the tackle spots. Dorgan passed successfully on two occasions. They were down on the fifteen yard line when the quarter ended.

The Buffalos stiffened on the ten. They took the ball on downs. Murdock sent in substitutions—a new set of running backs. Brick Malloy watched the fresh men come into the game. Charlie Good was woefully weak on reserves.

They were in the fourth quarter with the crowd getting hysterical by the magnificent drive of the home club. The Buffalos bulled their way up the field.

Foolishly, the Buffalo quarterback attempted a short pass over the center of the

line. Hop Dorgan cut in on it and started through the mass of men. Brick Malloy saw him get hit from three sides. They nearly tore the small man to pieces. He hit the turf with the ball still clutched tightly under his arm.

They didn't have too much time now and Dorgan knew it. "You gotta run, Malloy," he said quietly. Dorgan had saved him for this final drive. It was first and ten on their own thirty-five.

Brick hit the middle and picked himself from the mud. He made two yards and three yards. Sometimes, he got through for half a dozen yards. The goal posts moved closer and closer. His body was stiff and sore from the punishment. Once or twice, his legs nearly caved in when the Buffalos hit him.

Dorgan got through a beautiful fifteen yard pass to Jamison to the Buffalo ten-yard line. Dorgan stepped back calmly with the game in the balance, and threw into Jamison's hands.

Ford went into the line for a yard. Brick Malloy hit left guard for three, to the six. They had to make it now. They'd already redeemed themselves in the eyes of the Condor rooters. They were a ball club—win or lose, but they wanted to win this one.

Jamison cut around end on a wide sweep and two Buffalos hit him on the three. He went up into the air and came down hard, the ball spurting away.

Brick Malloy gazed at it hopelessly. He was on the ground with Sexton on top of him. The Buffalo end fell on the ball.

Jamison climbed to his feet, face white. They had the game in the bag and he'd thrown it away. He looked at Hop Dorgan. They had four minutes on the clock.

"We'll get 'em," Dorgan said.

Jamison nodded. He went back to the safety position. The Buffalos stalled through three plays and then kicked from the end zone. It was a beautiful boot into the breeze and carried back to midfield.

Inwardly, Brick Malloy groaned. They could never bring the ball all the way down again. There was not sufficient time.

But Jamison was running. Brick saw him cut for the side lines and spin around the Buffalo end. Jamison moved in toward the center of the field, keeping his footing on the slippery turf, moving closer and closer toward the goal line.

He was down on the thirty and then the twenty with the crowd going mad. Brick Malloy knocked down a muddied man in brown and white. He was climbing to his feet again when Jamison hurtled past him to the ten-yard line, and into a mob of Buffaloes.

Jamison held the ball this time. He got up and staggered into the huddle. Hop Dorgan slapped his back, Jamison had redeemed himself. But he was through as a ball carrier. The back had run himself out on that great drive down the field.

Hop Dorgan looked at Brick Malloy.

"I'll take it," Brick said simply. They needed ten yards and they had four plays to make it. He hit right guard on the first one and got two yards. He could feel the Buffalo line give as the Condor forwards drove into them, displaying a power they'd never shown before.

Another buck into the middle netted him three yards, to the five.

"Give the guy a rest," Jack Ford said. "Let me run."

Dorgan nodded. He sent Ford off tackle, and the left half made three yards to the two. Brick Malloy plodded back into the huddle. They had time for another play and nothing more.

"You got it?" Dorgan asked.

"I got it," Brick said. He took the ball from Dorgan and let himself go. His head was down low. Rudledge yelled up front. Brick churned the mud. He didn't look for a hole this time. He ran blindly, wildly.

He was still digging when Rudledge grabbed him. A half dozen Buffalos were clinging to him, but he was still on his feet.

"You're over!" Rudledge screamed. "It's a score!"

Brick Malloy let himself sink to the ground. He saw the goal posts behind him. Hop Dorgan helped him to his feet.

"Nice game, kid," Dorgan said.

Brick grinned at him. He could hardly stagger back to the dressing room. Charlie Good walked beside him. They listened to the noise.

"We got a club here," Good said. "We'll be in at the finish now."

Brick sat down on a bench in the locker room. He was too tired to talk. A lot of people were in the room, yelling excitedly. A man sat next to him. Brick was too tired to listen. He caught one or two words.

"Contract—next fall."

Brick Malloy gulped. "What about it?" he asked weakly.

"We could use you down at Midfield College," the man was saying. "We need a coach next fall. Of course we're not big, but—" He named the salary.

Brick closed his eyes.

"We'd like to get your name on a contract before anyone else gets around," the man beside him grinned. "It was a great game, Malloy."

"You'll never know," Brick Malloy said. "Got a pen, friend?"

ARCTIC PASSAGE

By WILLIAM LYNCH

OFF Hammerfest, the Arctic air crackles when a sailor spits his contempt on the U-boats that skulk beneath the gray sea.

And, by this token, the frigid atmosphere of the Barents Sea fairly sizzled with such offensive noises on that hitherto quiet weekend in late spring.

There had been the usual troubles, to be sure. Heinkels had harried them twice, off the Lofotens; but reconnaissance had been splendid, and surprise, the chief weapon of a torpedo-carrier, had been lost to the enemy.

Then there had been a U-boat scare off Tromso. But this was routine for the men who took the convoys to Murmansk.

Now, on a peaceful Sunday morning, the convoy sailed serenely on the last lap of the perilous north route. At Hammerfest, they would turn due east and make the home run.

Thirty ships, traveling at 12 knots in three columns: Liberty ships, Victory ships, long, wallowing tankers, merchantmen, a motley crowd of ships. And the ubiquitous destroyers, corvettes, and armed trawlers, worrying their way round the convoy, herding and protecting, and sometimes admonishing.

Captain Jack Moody stood uneasily on the *Rushworth's* navigating bridge, binoculars dangling at his chest. He had spotted the first ragged pattern of floe-ice, and momentarily he expected to see a destroyer loom up through the mist. He was right. He heard, through the public-address system:

"Number Ten, you are falling behind. Keep up with the convoy or you may have to find your own way—"

Captain Moody grinned. When 12 knots was the best you had—

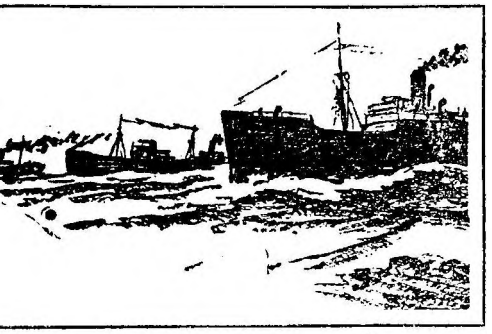
"Tell the engine-room the speed is 12 knots, Mr. Davis, and come to course two eight O."

From the *Rushworth's* position, well to the rear of the convoy, he could barely discern, through the rising mist, the fog-buoy of the ship ahead, a tongue of white spray rising from a brass fin at the end of the trailer rope. Lose sight of the fog-buoy and you sailed alone; for there was no predetermined route through the Arctic ice.

Standing on the forward salient of the bridge, he peered ahead, calculating the speed and direction of the largest of the floes. Occasionally, there came the hoarse bleat of an identification siren, and by these he was able roughly to determine his position in the line.

At 12 knots he was still falling back. The foamy jet of the fog-buoy was no

" . . . Follow Plan Two on Northeasterly Course, and Good Luck!"



longer visible, and the sirens were fainter. The mist was heavier now, and bearing down rapidly.

"The speed is 8 knots, Mr. Davis."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Captain Moody watched him go, his face puckered over. It was unnecessary to tell Davis that they were now virtually out of the convoy and alone on the Barents Sea, unprotected, and forced to cruise at reduced speed in order to negotiate the floe-ice that bore down on them from the north.

Unprotected? It was the destroyer again, swirling out of the gloom. The blare of the loudspeaker came through throatily.

"Number Ten, did you hear the general alarm?"

"Send him a negative, Mr. Davis." Captain Moody spoke in a bored tone. The destroyer replied quickly as she slipped back into the mist: "Enemy reconnaissance has located the convoy. Ships have received orders to disperse. Plan Two on northeasterly courses. Good luck!"

OVERHEAD, the faint drone of a plane could be heard off the port beam. That would be one of the convoy's planes taking off.

It might be Heinkels or U-boats. It could be either on this, the world's most perilous stretch of water. When the mist cleared—God keep the hindmost, the sea-devil's portion!"

Captain Moody consulted Plan Two mechanically. He knew it only too well. Simply, it meant breaking formation with a minimum of confusion, and keeping your allotted place in the scattered jigsaw of ships, to avoid being run down in the impenetrable fog. It meant complete radio silence, the severance of your last link with the convoy. Complete, unrelieved isolation for maybe two or three entire days and nights. Dispersal was the killer ghost of all the spectres that sailed the Arctic passage.

He suddenly remembered that it was Sunday morning.

"Mr. Davis, there will be prayers on deck as usual."

"Prayers, it is, sir." Davis was obviously both surprised and pleased.

So they foregathered on the after-deck, according to schedule, upwards of three score of the ship's company, down on one knee, faces cupped in gnarled hands, as Captain Moody solemnly intoned an improvised prayer.

"—and we humbly ask that You will protect this ship, and the men who sail in her—"

A swift, sleek corvette mysteriously slid out of the semi-gloom. Her loudspeaker assailed the ears of the worshipers. "Number Ten, are you okay?"

Captain Moody did not raise his eyes.

"—Give him an affirmative, Mr. Davis—and grant safe passage to the other ships of this convoy—"

"Number Ten, you will continue to preserve radio silence. Seven enemy submarines have been sighted, bearing one four five, distance 200 miles, following an intercepting course."

"—Acknowledge the message, Mr. Davis—and for the many thousands of brave souls who, at this minute, are in peril on the sea—the speed is 10 knots, Mr. Davis—we respectfully request Your Divine intervention. Amen."

CAPTAIN MOODY stood silent awhile, watching the corvette slide back into the mist. "I think we might—ah—splice the main brace, Mr. Davis." The first officer smiled warmly.

"Dat's the way of it," exclaimed Zahara, the Rumanian mess-boy. "One minnit it's Gor save us, an' den it's a issue of grog. Strike me, between the two you'll find the whole bloody Marchant Navy. Me, I don't touch dat stuff, but good luck to 'em as do." And he expectorated fiercely over the deck rail.

Ice, assorted ice, in a myriad bizarre patterns, representing every geometrical shape in Euclid and outside of it, yellow-green

slabs of it, rising to 60 feet in thin, fluted columns weird and wonderful, and again flat and rolling, like great sheets of galvanized iron.

The men swore at the ice that hourly crowded them in, reducing speed to danger level; cursed, too, the mist that did not disperse with the rising wind.

For a night and another day, the *Rushworth* gamely wallowed along, her crew increasingly silent and apprehensive. Somewhere in the mist, 59 other ghost ships ploughed along their isolated courses, each fearful for the other's safety. A heavy, engulfing, black loneliness descended upon the tiny freighter as she bore forever northeast, at the rear of the column.

It was being at the end of the line that mattered to her crew; it was being the straggler ship of the convoy, the obvious target, that constantly seared the minds of the crew. It was, too, the long, unrelieved, ominous silence, the not-knowing and the may-never-know of this phantom voyage that made them goggle-eyed and impatient for the light. The mess-boy, Zahara, voiced the general sentiment.

"Wot's wrong with dis blasted ship is dat it has got astigmatism in its damn eyes, and it is rollin' drunk. I'll betcha that we'll cop one before six bells. It was jus' like this las' trip, and den—whoong! We are in the damn drink an' I am playin' tag wid a chunk of ice."

It was Turner, the Navy Reserve man, who first saw the long, black shape through the mist off the starboard beam! "Enemy submarine 800 yards off the starboard beam, sir." Captain Moody raised his binoculars.

"Reduce the speed to 2 knots, Mr. Davis, and let her pull ahead." And then savagely, "God, Davis, what would I give for a gun!"

The U-boat appeared to have by-passed them. In reality, it had not suspected prey so far behind the estimated position of the convoy. It was the oil-tankers they wanted.

"If she has spotted us, Mr. Davis, why the hell doesn't she open fire?"

"I think perhaps we're not big enough for her, sir."

"Very well, then, we will break radio silence. There is no point in preserving it now." He scribbled something on a pad. "Release this to all ships." He paused. "Wait! Maybe she thinks that we haven't spotted her. What then?"

"Then," said the first officer, "it will degenerate into a vulgar game of tag, sir."

"I think we'll hold the message a little while, Mr. Davis, nevertheless. The speed is 5 knots."

There was not much of the daylight left as the *Rushworth* altered course to come round to the rear of the U-boat.

Keep her there, Mr. Davis. The speed is 10 knos. We have roughly one hour of daylight. And, for God's sake, Mr. Davis, SMILE!"

Captain Moody fought gamely with his conscience. He pondered the fortunes of his crew of 60, mentally tried and tested, over and over.

"They are manning their guns, Mr. Davis. Increase speed to 12 knots." He swung the wheel over hard and went into a zig-zagging course, not away from, but toward, the U-boat.

The first salvo, at 800 yards, went through the *Rushworth's* rigging. He felt the ship quiver, then surge savagely ahead.

"Let that message go out now, Mr. Davis. Tell the crew we are preparing to ram. Target is the U-boat on the starboard beam."

With the next salvo the *Rushworth* shuddered convulsively. Captain Moody felt the shock of an explosion somewhere aft. The after-deck was already aflame, and the *Rushworth* had a dangerous list to starboard. But she ploughed on, straight ahead, her nose deep in the water. The phantom form of the U-boat was assuming clearer outlines. Four hundred—three hundred—two—

The *Rushworth* caught her broadside on, aft of the conning tower. The freighter lurched sickingly and settled further.

"Hard astern, Mr. Davis!"

He saw panicked figures struggling in the water round the U-boat; others struggling out of the conning tower.

"Full speed ahead!"

The *Rushworth,* scarcely under way, and listing ominously, moved painfully forward and crunched against the submarine's plates. There followed a tearing, rasping crescendo, as steel bit into steel.

"Hard astern!"

Captain Moody repeated the process twice more, although the *Rushworth* could scarcely make speed. It was not until the tilted bow of the U-boat slid beneath the water that he wiped his brow and rang down to lower the boats.

The last shreds of mist were impatiently scattered away as the destroyer swung through the half-light, a collar of foam round her bows.

"Number Ten," blared the loudspeaker. "Your message received. What is the position of the U-boat observed by you?"

Captain Moody winked at his first officer, and made a swift calculation. "Tell them. Mr. Davis, that the enemy's position at this moment is about 70 fathoms directly beneath the *Rushworth.* And, for God's sake, Mr. Davis, when you say it, SMILE!"

At four bells on a clear morning, 59 ships of the convoy swung neatly into line. Ship Number Nine on the port column, the *Arctic Star,* tended to lose distance as the convoy made full speed. Her skipper, Captain Isaac Cutton, raised his binoculars and scanned the southern horizon.

Somewhere, beneath the Barents Sea, a pack of U-boats lay hidden, watching every maneuver of his ship. They would follow, maybe, for a whole week, before showing their fangs.

Then the convoy would disperse, and now the *Arctic Star* was the straggler ship of the line.

Overseas Mail

UNDER this heading in each issue of SHORT STORIES we plan to publish letters from men in our armed forces overseas. For each one we use its sender will receive a $25.00 war bond. Won't you send us one? We cannot guarantee to return unused ones, but we want representative letters showing what is happening to our young men in their greatest adventure.

Address the Editor, SHORT STORIES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Do not send original letters; have them copied.

This one is from a sergeant with a bomber squadron and is dated "Somewhere in China."

Dear ——:

Your letter reached me a few days ago, so I'll try an answer this idle Sunday afternoon. Time on my hands is a new experience since getting to China, so I'm catching up on a few letters.

So, you would like an education about India? Wouldn't China do just as well? I'm sure it appeals more to me. Both are perhaps 100 years behind the States,

but the people here seem to be honest and hardworking, with a definite hatred toward the Japs. But, of course, the latter is understood. There's quite a lot of farming, all done by hand and water buffalo. They are slow, but like the people, keep plodding on.

I could tell you so much about where I've been and what I've seen, if it were possible. It would probably be cut out, so, I'm afraid there's very little to tell.

One good subject is Chinese money. My haircut last night cost $6. A $100 dry-cleaning bill is nothing. We have some high-priced, $50-limit poker games, too. Still remember how I gazed in amazement my first night here when I saw one of them. The market on this money is $60 for one American dollar. That explains the big stakes, so my bill at the barber shop was actually only about 15 cents.

I'll be closing this now.

RAG

This was sent us from Lawson General Hospital, Atlanta, Ga., by a friend of the writer.

Somewhere in North Africa, July, 1943.

Dear Carl:

Now that I have finished a campaign, I will write you about it, omitting, of course, those parts that would cause the censor to tear his hair.

My platoon had its first taste of battle in Tunisia. We marched up a draw running east, preparatory to advancing north. We knew we were near the enemy, but did not know his exact location. We were quiet and tense but our movement helped us to maintain good control of ourselves. Suddenly, the crackling sound of machine-gun fire filled the still morning air. The whole platoon hit the ground in nothing flat. After a brief pause our second lieutenant began to shout orders. I don't know what he said. I felt the kind of fear that seems to wrap you up and smother you. Our platoon sergeant moved up to the second lieutenant.

Then the word was passed on that my squad would advance north toward the enemy position from the left of where we were, while another squad would advance north from the right of where we were. A third squad would remain in the shallow draw and attempt to hold the enemy down by rifle fire. As we started forward the Germans spotted us. A few bursts of machine-gun fire pinned us down momentarily. Our corporal was killed. Another man was shot in the leg. We pushed forward again by rushes. A few would run forward while the others fired. Then those ahead would fire while those behind came up. The fear was leaving me. As we went forward I became more determined. Our mortars were soon laying shells on the enemy position. When we got within a few yards of the enemy the two squads made an assault. We charged with the yell of victory. A few of the enemy ran away. A few of them met us with the bayonet. It was all over in a short time. We had taken the position. We reorganized and sent eight members of the famed Afrika Korps to the rear as prisoners and counted five dead and three wounded on the ground.

Though this was a very small action as events later proved, I will remember it when other engagements are forgotten. In it I became a veteran. In it I won my own individual battle with fear. It is a battle that all soldiers at the front have to win. The winning of it makes them brothers in the fraternity of fighting men. Tunisia convinced me that the American soldier is man for man better than the German. He has more to fight for. We will win the war. To every soldier fighting overseas, the U. S. comes to symbolize something close to heaven. The folks back home must keep it that way. They can do much. A letter from home is a great boost to morale. If every person back home would write some soldier every day it would be very

helpful. If they could understand this, I am sure they would.

I came through Tunisia without a scratch. I am a better soldier now. I look to the future with confidence.

Your friend,

PVT. JOHN ——.

Mrs. B. L. Kingsbury, of Cavendish, Vermont, sent us this one from her son in the Air Forces and stationed in Alaska.

Dear Mother and All:

Your letter of the twelfth came yesterday, and I was very glad to hear from you and to get the snapshots. Everyone I hear from in Boston says it is about impossible to get film now.

Glad to see my bank account increase. Almost all I get is saved. I do buy a box of candy once in a while, and soap now and then. That is about all I can spend it for, so saving is practically compulsory!

For once, I can't say there is no news here. Went to church Sunday morning in the "Day Room" in a little Pacific hut, and heard a good sermon and a few familiar hymns to the tune of a piano. Afterward, as many as could, piled into a jeep to return to our duties for the day, and got to talking. I mentioned Tremont Temple Baptist Church. There happened to be another fellow in the jeep who had been there often in the past, and was the brother of a very good friend of mine back in Boston. His grandmother who sings in the choir, I knew well, having been to her house several times for dinner with this particular friend. And he knew quite a few people I also know. He is the first one I have met in the army that I have come even close to knowing in civilian life. Strange that we should meet where we did. I might add that there were no less than seven of us crammed in the little jeep.

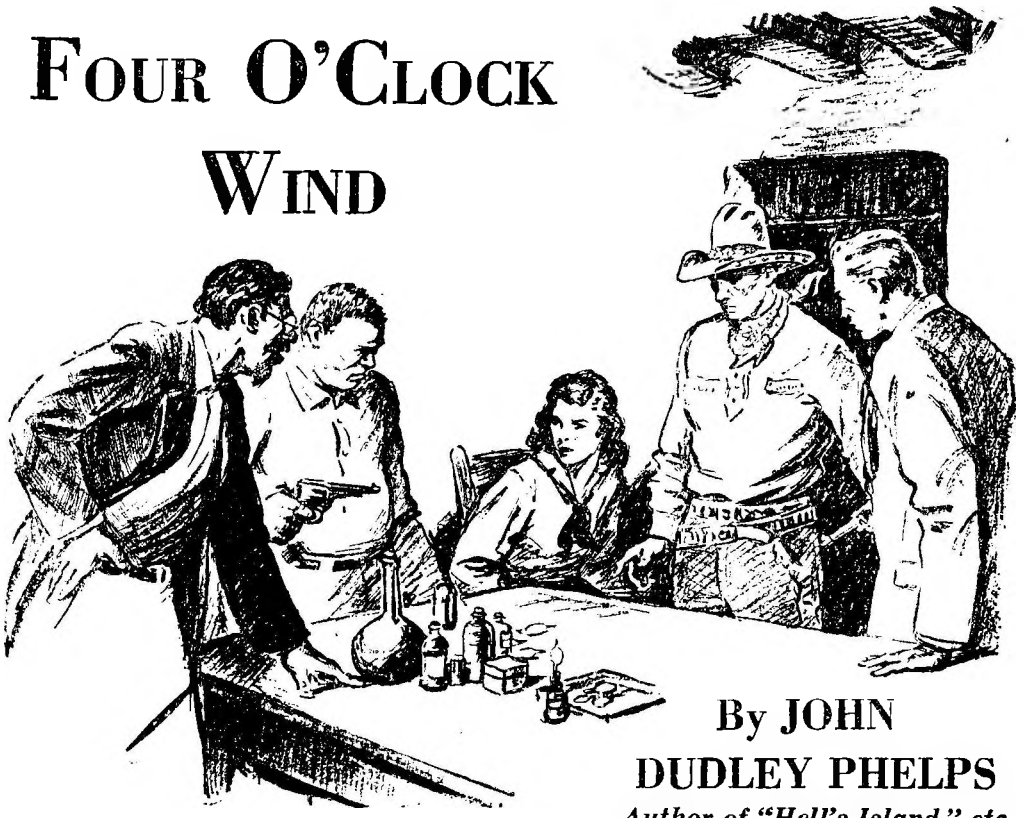
The other thing I wish to tell about is this: For a solid hour, I sat on the bomber hangar's floor within twenty feet of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker as he told of his experiences and findings in his travels to the fighting fronts of the world, as he was on the last leg of that long journey. His remarks were very deep and straight from the shoulder without a noticeable taint of political axe grinding or military ambition. He seemed like a very sincere person, who was sent out to get facts and accountable to no-one but the highest military authorities. He told about his experiences on that life raft out in the Pacific just about as we read it in the papers, and he had guts enough to break tradition and say to the men: "If you don't have a religion, GET ONE!" I think I have quoted him verbatim. He told how one of the boys had a New Testament in his pocket—guess he said Bible—and that they read it and prayed. Right after that a seagull lit on his head, and he said we could call it what we like, but intimated that he thought it was an act of God. As I said before, he knew how to express himself, and spoke with authority. He is an old comrade of Major General Johnson, and I guess it was a real treat for the general to see him again. They commanded their respective airplane squadrons in the first world war. Wish I could tell more of what he said, but you may already have read some of it in the newspapers and if not, it might be cut out anyway. It was good to get straight facts.

Am feeling fine, and will see you when it is over. No person knows exactly when that will be, nor can they make a very intelligent guess. Could in my opinion be any time. Will write again when there is any special news I can tell, or even if there is none, which is more likely. Must sign off for now.

Love, JAMES.

Tumbleweeds Can Blow Up Trouble

FOUR O'CLOCK WIND



By JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS

Author of "Hell's Island," etc.

THE wind sprang up just as Bill Beran brought his pinto to a stop on the crest of a juniper-covered ridge. No need for a watch or for a glance at the sun, for at that time of year the breeze always started to blow at four o'clock. The view was wide and long and deep; the view was of Bill's homeland.

Bill sat there thrilled to his very soul. Of course, here at home the earth had a better flavor, the air was purer, the sun more kind than any place at all, but what thrilled Bill was thought of Elsie Graham. This country was her home, too. Thoughts of her thrilled away his common sense, his balance. Had he not been so full of her, he would have changed the clothes he wore before seeing her. Those clothes and the reason of them simply could not be explained to her.

If by some strange alchemy of time old Solomon of the Glory could have happened along, he would have paled and faded before the glory of this cowhand. Crowning Bill was a cream-colored Stetson banded by conchas skillfully hammered from 'dobe dollars by some patient Navajo buck. The alternate ones were set with plates of turquoise. The shirt was silk and of a tremendous pinkness. The pants were blue wool with bell bottoms and embroidered inserts. The boots were patent leather with three-inch heels. Mexican spurs with four-inch rowels finished him off. With the outfit had come a yard-square neckerchief of black silk adorned with red swastikas, but for obvious reasons Bill had ditched that. He loved those clothes.

The ridge whereon Bill sat saddle and thrilled away his better judgment extended for many miles east and to west. From the crest the land sloped down, steeply at first, then leveled to a plain which reached to

mountains thirty miles away. The slope was juniper green and the sweep of the plain brown and dun and terra cotta, sunburnt colors put there by hot summer suns. Across the valley floor, east to west, ran a river, from this distance a beaded, irregular line. For nine months of the year the streambed was dry, for three months it rippled with snow-cold water. This side of the river lay the Santa Fe tracks.

The four o'clock wind became brisk and would remain so until sundown.

"Git along, horse!"

The pinto started stiff-legged to quarter down the slope and what little good sense remained in Bill up and fluttered away, for he would see Elsie soon.

They dropped below the junipers and there the land began to level, but gradually. Chaparral grew sparsely and many weeds luxuriantly, especially the tumbleweeds which were large and lusty. A big fellow cast tether and the four o'clock wind gave it impetus that took it ten feet in air and forty feet down the slope, then it settled down to rolling. Bill laughed and watched until the weed blended with the dun earth.

At the foot of the slope was a road and the pinto turned to the left, west, and it was some time before Bill took his head from the clouds to note the direction. He spun the pinto around in his tracks and headed him east, that was the way to Elsie.

West, the road led to the ranch of Judson Alpin, a bachelor, inept in all things.

Hard luck lived with him and was responsible for his mortgage, his impending bankruptcy, the sickness of his cows and why his dog got up in the middle of the night and bit him. Bill always felt sorry for Jud, but he wanted none of him now. Too much rapture lay ahead.

And in rapture Bill continued aided somewhat by the plodding hoofs of the pinto, and in due time arrived at the ranch of Elsie's father, Vic Graham, a livestock dealer. The long, adobe ranchhouse lay a little distance from the road and was flanked on all sides by ancient cottonwoods.

ALL along the front of the house was a wide, covered porch and there sat Elsie busily knitting. Bill pulled up at the hitchrail and tossed the reins over the pinto's head. He dismounted and began a mincing, tottering walk over a lawn to the porch. It was impossible to preserve both dignity and balance on these high heels. Bill was not concerned with anything at all except Elsie. His heart was going pinwheel fashion and rose-colored thoughts ballooned his head. He did not possess the right thoughts to defend himself.

Elsie glanced up from her knitting and continued. For a fact she did not recognize Bill. The pinto whinnied; she looked at the horse. The ball of yarn fled her lap. The needles clashed and were silent. She looked at Bill and stood up. As she smoothed the dress about her hips, she continued to stare at him.

Bill came tottering along. There was a light in his eyes, his tanned face glowed and he seemed to vibrate with an inner force. Mentally, he was all unorganized. Overhead the four o'clock wind rattled the leaves of the cottonwoods.

"Bill Beran!"

The shock from her tone of voice brought Bill to a stop with his heels dug in and arms outflung for balance. He leaned forward, eyes wide, mouth open.

"What possessed you to spend all that money for such a rig?" she asked as she appraised his finery piece by piece.

The expression on Bill's face was blank and hopeless. If he had had any understanding of women, he would have known that her concern and anxiety was for the money she thought he had spent foolishly. Every dollar wasted delayed their marriage. She was out of patience because she loved him so. He snatched off his hat.

Bill was sunk. He couldn't tell her—or his state of mind, he dared not tell her—

that he had won the clothes in a poker game. He had promised her that he would never, never, play poker.

"I sort of traded a feller for 'em," he claimed, but not convincingly. "I gave him my clothes." He grinned foolishly.

"Who?" she shot at him.

"A fellow named—Le's see? Oh, yes, Charlie Tontana," Bill replied, giving the first name that popped into his head. "He was going into the army."

Bill couldn't have thought for a week and made a worse selection. Charlie Tontana was a dissolute character who infested those parts and spent much time in jail, all the time that the sheriff did not require his cell for a more respectable malefactor.

"And what army," Elsie inquired, "would take a one-eyed drunken bum?"

Bill should have been warned. She just wasn't making talk. Elsie was born and raised in cow country. She talked the language. She thought straight.

"I guess it wasn't Charlie," Bill admitted. "Name something like his, though. He was a stranger."

"Stranger?" Elsie repeated and nodded knowingly. "Traded clothes? Sounds to me like a poker game." She looked searchingly at Bill whose face was red.

"Oh, no, no, no!" he cried, gesturing with his free hand.

What Bill should have said was something like this: "You see, Elsie, I had to hang around Phoenix for three weeks. Though the boss had priority to buy that barb' wire on account he's raising beef for the government, it took a lot of time. The boss told me to stick until I had that wire for sure.

"I got so dog-gone lonesome! Couldn't stand to go to movies when every feller had his girl. Tried reading at the library, but there was two heads over every book. I just moped around the hotel and thought of you.

"Couple of days before I started home I couldn't stand it no more. I went for a walk. I walked and walked. Finally, I heard music, swell music, that song you like, Moonlight and Roses. I went in there. After the music finished, I found I was in a good saloon.

"Some fellers were playing cards and asked me to sit in. Next I knew I had won all that ranny's clothes. You see, Elsie, I didn't know what I was doing 'cause I thought of you so much. Anyhow, I traded my old clothes with him and gave him ten bucks to get to the army."

If Bill had used his head and made such a palaver, all would have been well, especially if he had admitted he had won an additional hundred dollars which was in his pants pocket. No woman could chide her man for winning. Elsie would have forgiven him on the spot because that hundred smackers brought their marriage nearer. But Bill was too spooky to tell the truth and all he could achieve was, "Oh, no, no, no!" And wave one paw.

"Bill Beran," she declared with the stamp of a foot, "you are one great, big liar!"

IF BILL had had the wit to haul out that hundred bucks and yell, Here come the cavalry," he would have been a hero. As it was, he was a cowhand caught in a lie and not a good one. He hung to the brim of the sombrero and looked pleadingly at Elsie, when he should have been shouting her down. If he could have got her to weep, he could have patted her on the back and murmured, "There, there, sweetheart! Don't cry, darling!" But poor Bill didn't know beans about women.

She turned disdainfully and looked over a raised shoulder at him. She made for a door and never a word spoke she. Bill was trying to get his lips to work and he did just as the door closed.

"Elsie, come back!"

The door opened a little and her voice came out. "*You* may come back," she said, "when you can tell the truth." The door started to close, halted and Elsie's

voice came out. She said, "You can find out who is burning the bridges." The door closed.

To Bill, befuddled as he was, that statement did not make sense. Just then he had a rush of brains to head and knew what he should have done. He slammed his hat to the ground. He picked it up, went to the horse and mounted. He nudged the horse in the ribs.

Bill started for home, the Flying C Ranch, but he must pass through the small town of Rio Verde. He was getting his senses back and he had a glimmering that Elsie's mandate, "You can find out who is burning the bridges" was a concession, but he couldn't figure it out. What bridges?

Rio Verde consisted of a large general store, a blacksmith shop, a garage, a couple of saloons and a saddle shop. There were a few homes. As Bill passed the general store, he noticed a new buckboard at the hitch rail. Hitched to the rig was a team of matched bays, small horses, but well formed.

"Hi, Bill!"

Seated in the buckboard was Judson Alpin who waved a hand. Jud was a short, heavy-set man with a long face whereon care and worry had put their marks.

Bill pulled over there. "How are you, Jud?" he asked, noticing that the rig was piled high with groceries. "Nice bunch of grub, you got," he remarked.

"Sort of catchin' up with my eatin'," Jud said with a wry smile. "I've had quite a spell of tough breaks."

Bill nodded and said, "This is a swell rig and a fine team. Cost somebody a good piece of change."

"I bought 'em," Jud said casually. "Don't like autos. Had some luck lately. Hope to pay off my mortgage."

"Mighty glad to hear it, Jud. It's time luck came your way." Bill was genuinely pleased that good fortune had come to this cowman. He gathered up the reins. "I'll have to blow," he said, then pulled up. "Say, Jud, have you heard of any bridges being burned around here?"

"Bridges!" Jud repeated in honest surprise and he shook his head. His face lighted. "There's been a railroad trestle or two on fire. Caught by sparks from the locomotive, I'd say. Or—" his glance strayed over Bill's pink shirt "—you haven't been foolin' around the railroad with that shirt?"

"You lay off my shirt," Bill retorted, grinning at the first joke he had ever heard Jud crack. "Well, I'll have to blow. So long."

Away from town and in open country, the four o'clock wind blew upon Bill's back and felt like the urge of a friendly hand. He came to the crossing of the Santa Fe tracks, pulled up between them and looked east, then west. The rails and ties formed a ladder that climbed to nowhere. To the east there was a trestle, but not visible.

Bill glanced at the sun which was low in the west and calculated he could make the home ranch just about grub time. The pinto had the same idea and, disregarding the long miles he had come, started on a good clip.

JUST at sunset, just as the four o'clock wind died, Bill was making a wide circle around the Flying C ranchhouse headed for the corral by the feed barn. He watered the horse, rubbed him down, gave him a good feed of oats and left him munching. Bill peered around the bunkhouse. Three cowboys were roosting about the wood pile which was close to the bunkhouse door.

Bill hitched up his pants, took a deep breath and stepped proudly out in full sight of the trio. Elmer McCord fell off the chopping block, giving forth a wailing scream. Harry Taylor and Al Wickman clung together while their knees wobbled as open mouthed they gazed upon Bill and his glory.

"I do believe it's ole Bill Beran!" Harry

gasped, giving Al a shove and howling. "Quit prancin' on my boots!"

Al tripped over a stick of wood and sat down upon his south end. Upon his round face was wonder, his blue eyes were lighted with astonishment. He sprang to his feet.

"You're right for once, Harry," he said. "But the only thing what can save poor, ole Bill is to rush him to the dippin' trough."

Bill stepped back. He had no desire to be sheep dipped.

But Harry came to his rescue. "No, no," he decided. "Too late. Cholera morbus has set in. His legs has turned blue!"

Elmer uprose from behind the chopping block and peered between spread fingers. "Is it safe to look at him?" he inquired tremulously.

"Just around the edges at first," Al advised.

Harry raised a boot to the sawbuck and observed, "Bill, he's been in Phoenix three weeks. Bet he knows every barkeep in town by his first name."

"Pay no heed to him, Bill," Al advised. "We know you are pure or Elsie would wham the pie outta you." It was a good thing he was staring at his partner, Harry, or he would have noted the betraying look upon Bill's face. "You take Old Taylor, here," Al continued, "the trouble is he's got old crow wrinkles around his eyes lookin' over a green river for a white horse. His old granddad never knew what water was until some splashed on him when Harry was christened."

Harry upraised his lank form and his nose which had a bit of a hook to it quivered and his eyes, serious always, became more so. He sighed and scorn was in his voice as he glared upon his chubby friend.

"I dunno why I suffer so on account of you," he declared. "All these years I've kept your secret from the world. Here goes: Gents, this here blue-eyed, porky-pine haired varmint is a fisherman! Under his bunk, he has a box full of hooks and eyes and sinkers and lines. And in this part of Arizona there ain't hardly water to fill a' eye cup! Does that stop him? Hell, no! He fishes in dry holes, behind rocks and up trees."

"When I get a chance, I bet I catch some fish," Al defended himself. "I dog-gone near got one the other day over at Blue Rock Waterhole."

BILL pricked up his ears. Blue Rock Waterhole was guarded by Pablo Garcia who had charge of a flock of sheep with which the old man was experimenting.

"You mean that pet catfish that belongs to Pablo?" Bill asked. He was puzzled for Pablo would defend that catfish against all comers.

Al and Harry regarded the foreman quizzically. Inherent in them was the cowboy's hate of woolies, though in these days, many cowmen went in for sheep. These two cowpokes recognized neither sheep nor sheepherders.

"Pablo ain't there any more," Elmer put in. He had a long, sad face with heavy downward lines at the corners of his mouth. It was as if sorrow had tugged at his mouth and forgotten to let go. "He went away."

That puzzled Bill more than ever. That shack by the waterhole was the only home Pablo knew. He often expressed delight with it. Years ago, he had brought to the waterhole a small catfish which grew into a monster. Al and Harry were jabbering away so Bill withheld his questions.

"We rode up to the waterhole," Harry was saying. "Al spots that fish so he hauls out a hook and ladder and baits with bread."

"Did not. It was bacon. Got it from my lunch."

"He put a piece of pie on the hook and the fish nabbed it."

"Not at first. I had to troll for him."

"Quit buttin' in!" Harry yelled. "The fish pulled Al into the water."

"He did not. I fell in," Al claimed,

hopping up and down. "Dammit, I used bacon!"

"I know why Pablo left," Elmer put in, but no one paid him any attention.

"Al tried to bulldog that fish," Harry went on, raising his voice. "The fish gored him and made him leggo."

Elmer joined in the general shouting. "Pablo told me," he yelled, "that a ball of fire rolled in through the doorway and burned up his bed. The devil was sitting on the ball—"

The banging of a triangle stilled the turmoil. Old Chin Wah beat on the steel and shouted, "You come ketchee, me thlow him out!" The Chinaman's yellow face, prominent with teeth, was in a wide grin.

A stampede started for the kitchen door. The four men sat at an oilcloth covered table before heaped plates. For five minutes there were no sounds except the clash of knives and forks upon enameled plates. Coffee was put down by the quart, biscuits by the dozen. After each man had surrounded a great slab of Chin Wah's apple pie, they sat stuffed. Slowly and carefully, each man rolled a smoke.

Al loosed his belt and sat back in the chair. "What was I talkin' about?" he murmured.

"Well, I dunno, bub," Harry replied. "When you get up in the morning, you start your jaw waggin' and it wags all day long. I just can't keep track of your yappin'."

Bill knew these two would jaw at each other until time to bed down so he asked, "What's happened since I been away?"

"Everything has gone all right," Harry replied, scowling in thought.

"The army has moved out," Al said, watching a smoke ring expand and fade.

"Army! What army?"

"The only army we got, bub," Harry said. "The army of the good, old U. S. A."

"Why was the—"

"You listen to me," Al pleaded. "Two days after you pulled your freight, Bill, a trestle on the Santa Fe burned down. Two days later, another one. Then the army moved in to guard the rest of 'em. Nothing happened and yesterday the army went away."

"Figured no more trestles would burn?" Bill surmised. "Or maybe they just let on they were moving out."

"Cigarettes, bub, cigarettes," Harry declared. "They've been hauling' an awful snag of soldiers, sailors and marines over our railroad. Cigarette butts are ankle deep along the tracks." He nodded wisely.

"Nuts!" Elmer snapped. "I been along them tracks and there's mighty few butts. And no engine sparks either 'cause them engines burn oil."

Al regarded the speaker owlishly. He snapped a finger at Harry. "Come on," he said, "we'll examine his head. You round up a' auger and we'll start on his off side."

"Nope, no use," Harry declared. "He's off on both sides. We'll start on his north section line and work south. Hey! Leggo! Dammit! Help—ouch!" Harry sprawled upon the floor.

Because Elmer had reached and snatched his chair from under him, then took off into the night.

The protest faded from Bill's lips as Elmer skipped. Bill was beginning to wonder if there could be more than appeared on the surface to this trestle burning. Pablo Garcia's abandoning of his home and pet catfish was a cause for wonder. And Elmer had said something about a ball of fire. He would question Elmer. And Elsie had told him to find out who was burning the bridges. Why hadn't she told him what she knew?

Al with great solicitude was helping Harry to his feet. After the third bump back on the floor, Harry grabbed his tormentor and a knot of cowboys rolled about the floor. Bill went out into the quiet night. Before the bunkhouse was a mellow patch of light put there by a lantern shining through the open door. Bill started for the bunkhouse with the idea of talking

with Elmer. He held still in his tracks. Faint in the distance were hoofbeats and coming stronger with each passing second.

Al and Harry, puffing from recent exertion, came out and joined Bill.

"Here comes Paul Revere," Al remarked, hand to ear.

"All right, bub, hang a couple more bats in your belfry."

THE rider was Ned Crawford, a deputy sheriff, young, broadshouldered and very handsome about the ears. Horse and man showed sign of hard riding. Ned took his boots from the stirrups and sat sideways in the saddle. He took out his handkerchief and dust clouded the air.

"Hello, fellers!" was his greeting.

"Who dunnit?" Al wanted to know.

"Where's the body?" Harry demanded.

"There an't no body," Ned answered. "Another trestle caught fire. One end burned down. Three troop trains are held up and a lot of equipment. The railroad wrecking crew is on the way. Now, Bill, was any of your men out east of here, fifteen miles, pretty close to the east fence of the Flyin' Crowbar?"

"I just got home," Bill explained. "I don't know where the boys are working."

"Oscar Lundberg and Harry Smith rode the east line last week," Harry said. "Nobody has been out that way since."

Ned nodded. "Seems like nobody was out there except four soldiers in one of them jumpin' peeps."

"I thought the army pulled out," Bill interrupted.

"No, they moved. They're doing patrol work," Ned explained and continued. "They came to the trestle. They were going slow and a big ground squirrel ran across their path. Two of the boys got out and threw rocks at the squirrel which ran into some brush and dry weeds at one end of the trestle, then they went on, two, three miles.

"One of 'em happened to look back and saw smoke. They turned around and, about the third jump the peep made, a front tire hit a sharp rock and blew. That held 'em up. When they got to the fire, the trestle was burning. They had a shovel, an axe and a pick. Three of 'em fought the fire while the fourth set out for help. When help came, the damage was done." He gestured with a hand.

Land and sky were star quiet. Then an owl hooted in the distance, a horse whinnied from the corral and the world began to turn again.

"One of them soldiers dropped a cigarete butt," Al surmised.

"They claimed they hadn't smoked," Ned said.

"I've never seen a squirrel smoke," Harry remarked.

"Brush and weeds," Bill murmured as if thinking aloud. "Those tumbleweeds sure do stack up at this time of year."

"Any place they can rest against," Ned concurred. "Yet, summp'n had to set 'em afire."

Again came a silence broken by Ned's horse impatiently tonguing the roller of his bit.

"Et, Ned?" Harry inquired.

"Not lately."

"You come on," Al invited. "Chin Wah will scare up some grub."

"I'll take care of your horse," Bill volunteered.

He had led the horse but a little way when he noticed a figure standing in the shadows.

"That you, Elmer?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear what Ned said?"

"Yes."

"What do you make of it?"

"I don't, no more'n that ball -" He stopped mid-sentence.

Bill remembered what Elmer had said about Pablo Garcia. "What did you say about a ball of fire burning up Pablo's bed?"

"Just that," Elmer said, but uneasily. "Well, I was riding near the Blue Rock

Waterhole when I see Pablo take off like all hell was after him. He looked like a Christmas tree, he was so loaded. A fry pan went flyin', but he didn't give a hoot. The next jump of his horse cost him his coffee pot and all he did was spur on. I managed to cut him off and stop him by grabbin' his bridle rein.

"Pablo was as white as a sheet—well, a dirty sheet. And he sure was sweatin'. He goggled at me and wagged his jaws. When he could talk, it took a long time to find out what was chewin' on him. Boiled down it was this: Pablo was choppin' wood when he looked up to see a ball of fire sailin' over the ground. That was enough to make Pablo's knees knock together and jar off his hat, but what took the resin outta his backbone was that the devil was ridin' that ball of fire." Elmer grunted and said, "I'm only tellin' you what Pablo said."

Bill made no comment.

"That ball of fire sailed into Pablo's shack," Elmer went on. "When Pablo could make his feet work, he wobbled to the shack which was full of smoke. Pablo said it smelled like sulphur. After a while, he got courage to go in. All the damage which was enough was that Pablo's bed was all burned up. There wasn't any sign of the ball of fire. He gathered up his belongings and beat it. Couldn't talk him outta it. That's all I know, Bill. Let's forget it."

"Sure sounds screwy," Bill observed. "Maybe we had. I'll put up this horse." He took a few steps. "What time was it when Pablo saw that ball of fire?"

Elmer thought a moment. "I guess it was half past five when I run him down. Half past four, I'd say."

"The four o'clock wind!" Bill mused.

"What's that wind got to do with it?" Elmer wanted to know.

The next morning, Bill, dressed in his ordinary clothes, took up his duties. By noon, he had gathered all the ends loosed during his absence and by mid-afternoon he was headed east toward the damaged trestle. His thoughts were of Elsie and Elsie he found near where the railroad construction gang were at work. She was in the back seat of an army peep together with a second lieutenant. A corporal drove.

She greeted Bill with a nod and a friendly smile. The smile bothered Bill. He considered it a smile only for a friend. She introduced him to the soldiers. She talked, the lieutenant talked and Bill wondered how the hell he could get her alone. He invited her to take a walk. She told him that if ever he had a wife he wouldn't want her to walk in weeds and ruin her stockings. Stockings were hard to get and were expensive. He didn't see her alone.

Finally, in desperation he blurted out, "Elsie, do you know anything about these fires?"

"Just what my womanly intuition tells me, somebody is setting them."

"But that is impossible," declared the officer. "We know there was nobody near, that is after the army came."

"How does it happen, then?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," said the lieutenant, frowning, "but we'll find out."

"Somebody will," Elsie said, looking at Bill.

That was a challenge, Bill knew. Then Elsie tossed her head, the lieutenant gave an order and the peep went on. Bill bit his lip. The railroad construction gang were working with might and main. Far into the east extended troop trains, the passengers, the soldiers, were held in check by sentries. Thoughtfully, Bill went to his horse.

Bill laid siege to Elsie. He lay in wait for her; he lurked. He haunted the neighborhood of her home, but with no luck. He wasted all of one week, then Elsie threw a party for the military and invited Bill. He curried and rubbed the pinto until he was as sleek as a stuffed squirrel. He saw that all his finery was in order and set forth in a glory of pink and blue and cream.

The party was in its beginning, formal stage when Bill arrived. Gravely, he saluted the assemblage from saddle. Gorgeous rider upon a gleaming pinto were a sight to see. All eyes were upon him. Sedately, he dismounted and began that teetering walk towards the porch where stood Elsie surrounded by officers and the belles of the region. Bill's look was upon Elsie. She made a gesture as of caution.

Bill was approaching the wide lawn. He did not see the dripping hydrant nor the vast puddle of clear water amid the grass. All he saw was Elsie. A spur caught in the high grass at the lawn edge. Bill plunged to earth. His Stetson became a turreted monitor upon the waters. Bill fell flat. He took his nose from the grass roots. He stood up and a goodly portion of the puddle rippled back upon the lawn. He put his hat on sideways and began a mincing, unbalanced walk toward his horse. His blue pants were saturated. Water dripped from the points of his outspread, pink elbows.

The next day, Bill, his mind dripping with memory, rolled a couple of blankets, got some grub from Chin Wah and set out for the wide open spaces. He told nobody of his idea. He rambled the range. He sneaked back to the home ranch now and again for grub. His whiskers flourished; the wind blew through them.

The brush over by Blue Black Waterhole became fired and the blaze extinguished after much effort. Fire sprang up in the deferred grazing of the Flying C Bar and all men on the home ranch went forth to battle and won after fifty acres had been blackened. Grass and accumulated tumbleweeds on the Santa Fe right-of-way burned, but not near a trestle and no damage was done.

One late afternoon, with the urge of the four o'clock wind upon him, Bill was engaged upon his research. He was galloping over the glebe, a willow pole in hand, pursuing a large, lusty tumbleweed. Suddenly appeared two riders. Bill made a wild stab, impaled the weed and pulled up short. He glared through his whiskers at the horseman.

"Bub," said the taller of the two to his short and chubby companion, "what do you reckon it is?"

He of the innocent face gazed wonderingly upon Bill. "Well, now," he surmised, "could it be that old buzzard what used to hunt windmills in Spain?"

"Don Quixote? Yes! How was he on whiskers?"

"Very fertile. But mostly he was noted for being nuts."

"Bub, you have something there."

Both of them stared hard upon Bill.

Bill glared back at them. Harry winked at Al and the tension eased. Bill glanced down at the tumbleweed which he had impaled. What he saw caused him to lean from saddle and peer into the heart of the skeleton framework of the weed.

Al looked down. "What is that thing?" he asked. "Move that pole so I can get a squint at it."

Bill moved the pole, there was a wisp of whittish vapor and small flames sprang up on the ground below the weed. The weed began to smoke. With a wild cry, Bill flung himself from saddle and landed both feet upon the small flames. He stamped and scrubbed with his boot soles. Remained no vapor, no flames, nothing but the tortured earth.

"Now you done it!" Harry growled as he swung from saddle. "Now we can't know what that thing was."

Al got out of saddle. The three cowboys squatted on their toes about the site of the tiny fire. Whatever the object was it had been ground to powder.

"Guess I got too previous," Bill said sorrowfully, "but that flame scared the wits out of me."

"It looked like a bubble," Harry said.

"A shiny, soap bubble," Al supplemented.

"About as big as a pullet's egg," Bill added.

"And when Bill moved that stick the what-ever-it-was dropped to the ground," Al said.

"And busted," Harry continued, "and started a fire." He looked to Bill for confirmation.

Bill was poking a finger about the scrubbed place on the ground. He found a tiny fragment of the bubble and examined it.

"Glass," he announced, "and thin, thin as paper."

"Sounds reasonable," Harry said.

Al licked the paper of a cigarette. "Um," he began. "Say, Bill did you know there was sumpp'n on them tumbleweeds was why you was chasing them?"

"No, I didn't," Bill said. "It was a hunch. Nobody was ever seen near where a fire started or afterward. That fire had to come from some place. If it wasn't started on the spot by some human, it had to come through the air or over the ground."

"Sure, bub," Harry put in, "tumbleweeds, thousands of 'em."

"We've proved the tumbleweeds carry those bubbles," Bill said, plucking at his whiskers. "I've kept track where each fire happened, trestles, right-of-way and on the range. I think I got the time each started pretty close. Most of 'em started after four o'clock."

"After that wind started blowing," Al said, looking at Harry.

WITH the same impulse, the three gazed south over the dun range to the juniper green of that far stretching ridge.

"Who could have turned those bubbles loose?" Bill asked, thus voicing the thought of the other two men.

A silence came and the three sat motionless.

"Well, bub," Harry said slowly, "Jud Alpin is the only rancher up that way."

"And Jud," Al claimed, "is plumb harmless. He wouldn't hurt a flea. Besides he has troubles of his own."

"And he's a good American," Harry said.

"Uh, what was that?" Bill asked, blinking his eyes.

"We were just saying Jud is all right."

"Sure he is," Bill agreed. "Just the same we have to go up there. Jud might give us a clue. How about tomorrow?" He glanced toward the setting sun.

"We was all set to clean up around Blue Rock," Al reminded Bill. "How about the day after?"

"Okay," Bill agreed.

They mounted and rode to the home ranch.

IN THE morning, Al and Harry went upon their appointed task. Bill spent some time working on the accounts of the ranch, then went to the bunkhouse. He got out his finery, admired and fondled it. A large moth flew from a fold of the pants and Bill, thinking it was a wool moth, nearly tore down the bunkhouse trying to kill it. The moth eluded him. He became fretful. He plucked at his beard.

He decided to shave. When he had lost his beard, a strange mood came upon him. He was restless without cause; he felt helpless and weak. Perhaps Samson, the temple wrecker, felt much the same way after his encounter with the first lady barber of recorded history. Of course, Bill had shaved himself, but his thoughts were of Elsie.

After lunch the mood was still upon him. Mindful of that moth, he decided that the best protection for his glory was to wear it. He dressed carefully and hung his six-gun about him. He saddled the pinto and headed for the range. The horse went his own way while Bill sat saddle and looked blindly upon a pleasant world. He examined a few tumbleweeds and wondered if those with the fiery bubbles were sown broadcast. He decided against that or the whole range would have been in flames. There must be some governing factor beside luck. There might be cur-

rents of wind as there were of water, running in certain channels.

Bill aroused with the first blow of the four o'clock wind upon him. He had traveled far and was close to the juniper ridge, close to the road that ran west to Jud Alpin and east to town and to Elsie. He rode along the fence and noticed where ten feet of wire had been cut from the upper strand and the middle strand cut. There were marks of wagon tires by the roadside. Bill concluded someone had needed the wire for wagon repairs. He looked about for a landmark by which to locate the place again.

From the east was approaching a light rig drawn by a team of small horses. They came on lickity-split, a banner of dust

funneling behind them. Bill watched the horses, their action, the rippling muscles, all their points and nodded with approval. Then he noted that Elsie held the reins. He swung from saddle, his legs crossed and he sat down with an ungraceful motion.

At the apparition in pink and blue, the horses gave a jump, the reins were snatched from Elsie's hands and the team plunged on in headlong flight. Bill, on a shambling run, led his horse to the gap in the fence and crow-hopped him over the lower strand. The cut middle strand reached out a bark and hooked a blue pennant from Bill's south end. Bill leaped into saddle and started in pursuit of the runaway.

Elsie was battling, not only to hang on, but also she tried to step along the wagon tongue and pick up the reins. She had no luck. She had all she could do to hang on for dear life. The light rig bounced from side to side of the rough road. The horses, necks outstretched and ears back, raced onward.

"Hang on! Hang on!" Bill yelled, though he was a hundred feet away.

Bill spurred the pinto. The little horse did his best. Inch by inch the distance lessened between him and the rig. The dust swept upon Bill, almost blinding him at times. Bill heard the pounding of the pinto's hoofs and the rattle of the wagon. He tasted bitter dust. He saw dimly the swaying, jouncing figure of Elsie who was putting up a game fight. Bill felt nothing, but the urge for more speed. Time did not exist.

Would-be rescuer and runaway swept along. Bill was aware he passed through an open gateway. Pound of hoofs ceased to give place to a clattering. The wagon wheels made a grinding sound. Bill recalled that Jud had recently graveled the road to his ranch-house. Bill was quite close to the rig. The hoofs of the runaways spurned the gravel. The road took a curve and there lay the ranchhouse.

Jud Alpin's home was a long adobe with several doors in the front of it. The runaways swung toward the house, then lurched away, cramping the front wheels of the rig. Rather than be thrown out, Elsie jumped. And just in time, for the rig overturned and the horses broke away and took off for home. Bill made a wild leap from the saddle, sat down and his wide spurs ploughed the gravel and, as he got to his feet, three rocks fell down his pants leg

Elsie was sitting down, a pained expression on her face.

"Every time I wear these damn' clothes," "something happens." He reached for Elsie's hands.

"It's my foot—my ankle. I—I don't think I can stand."

Bill did not hesitate, but knelt down and gathered her in his arms and got to his feet. He stood a moment, considering which door to approach and wondering why all the noise and rumpus hadn't brought Jud outdoors. He must be away from home, Bill figured. One door opened a few inches, no more. Bill carried Elsie to it, pushed it open with a foot and prepared to cross the threshold.

Bill froze in his tracks. Elsie tightened her hold about his neck.

Facing Bill and leaning upon the far edge of a heavy table was a gaunt man well over six feet in height. His hair was long and in disorder. His face was triangular, accented by a pointed beard with a question mark curve to it. Spectacles with thick lenses hung to a beak of a nose. His eyes behind the lenses were wide, staring and pale.

"*Ach!*" he croaked. "Flies come to our parlor!" His voice was harsh.

Bill started to back out.

"Look out!" Elsie warned.

A thick hand grabbed Bill's left arm and whirled him into the room. The door slammed shut. As Bill caught his balance, Elsie slipped from his arms and stood upon her uninjured foot, one hand upon the table. Bill felt for his gun. It was gone.

The man who had hauled Bill into the room was heavy and squat with a bullet head. He had small eyes set over heavy jowls. His mouth was wide and there was a bristle of reddish hair upon a tight skull. In his hand, he held Bill's gun. The fellow who had slammed the door was young with a pleasant face and about Bill's size. He stood, back to the door, and coolly appraised Elsie.

The silence was oppressive, ominous.

"Somebody could bring me a chair," Elsie said.

The young man slipped away from the door and brought a chair to Elsie. He bowed from the waist. She thanked him and sat down. She looked curiously at the table. The three foreigners watched her.

Bill looked at the table which carried a strange array of glassware, bottles and queerly shaped flasks. There was a round flask with a long neck nearly filled with a liquid clear as water. Then Bill's attention centered upon a row of bubbles, empty, he judged, and each transparent with a small, hollow stem at either end. He had glimpsed such a bubble before it dropped from the heart of a tumbleweed.

He moved to the table and placed a finger upon one of the bubbles. To his surprise the thing did not shatter, but gave under the pressure of his finger. When his finger was removed, the bubble assumed its original shape.

"I thought it was glass," Bill murmured, knowing by this time just about what the score was.

He knew that he and Elsie were doomed, every man must hold to hope. There might be a way of escape and Bill wanted all the information he could get.

"Ya?" uttered the gaunt man. The question mark curl to his beard seemed to straighten a trifle. "You see him?"

"On a tumbleweed," Bill replied.

Elsie gave a gasp and settled down in her chair.

The gaunt man nodded. "Not glass," he said, "a plastic. I invent him." There was a purring quality to his voice. "I vunder?"

"I'm doing a little wondering myself," Bill said.

"I show you." The gaunt man picked up a bubble and, fingering a small amount of a dark, putty-like substance from a beaker, sealed one end. He took the long-necked flask and from it carefully poured some of the liquid into a test tube which was

marked by a line. The liquid he put into the bulb by means of a small funnel. That end was sealed with the dark substance.

"Now!" The doctor placed a finger upon the bubble which was elastic. "Soon and now we know how long it will be like glass, then a jar or maybe it might hit someding, the bulb break and poof—there is fire. Look!"

He seized the long-necked flask and, plucking up a sheet of filter paper, poured a few drops of the clear liquid upon the paper. Quickly he put down the flask. The liquid made a wet track down the paper and at once flame appeared. The doctor dropped the paper to the adobe floor and stamped out the fire. He stoppered the flask.

"You see it!" cried the doctor. "You will not understand, but in this liquid there is a solid dissolved. No, no, not dissolve, but he is held in suspension in—in little pieces—der molecule. Do you know the molecule? No! Vell, der molecule being so liddle, he unite with der oxygen of der air ven der liquid evaporate and leave him and poof—there is fire. You understand?"

"Sure," said Bill. "I took chemistry in high school." He yawned. "Sometimes your bubbles aren't so hot. They busted before they got to the trestles or beyond."

"Ya, ya, but I tell you ve make dem better now. Ve learn much. Ve learn how the vind blow." The doctor licked his lips. "Ve go avay. Ve have much to do in odder places."

"Oh, Bill!" Elsie cried. "Don't you—"

"Help! Help!" The cry interrupted Elsie. It was muffled, seemed to come from a distance.

The doctor, the young man and the dog-faced one looked toward the door connecting with the next room.

Bill measured the distance between him and dog-face.

"Heil Hitler!" shouted the doctor.

"Heil Hitler!" echoed the young man. "Sigmund—!"

The dog-faced man licked his lips and considered Bill. The six-gun was ready in his hand.

Bill knew that he would be shot, Elsie, too.

"Hold on, you pooch-faced dope," Bill began, stalling for time.

But Elsie grabbed that long-necked flask and hurled it with all her strength. And all history to the contrary, this woman's aim was true. The flask burst upon the dog-faced man's chest. There was a flash of flame, a puff of smoke. The victim gave one fear-filled screech as it burst into flames. He flailed his arms and writhed. Very little of the deadly liquid reached the adobe floor.

Bill dived for the gun he had dropped and fired it from the floor at the young man in whose hand was a flat automatic. The young man threw up his hands and fell flat. Bill leaped for the doctor who pawed at him and slashed the barrel of his gun above the doctor's ear. The doctor slumped and Bill leaped upon him.

"Rope!" Bill yelled. "We gotta keep one alive."

Elsie hopped on one foot about the room, found a piece of stout twine and with this Bill bound the unconscious doctor's hands behind his back.

Bill examined the young fellow who, to Bill's surprise was not dead. The bullet had creased him and he lived, though he wasn't aware of it. The dog-faced Sigmund was deader than a fried snake.

"Help! Help!"

Bill looked at Elsie. "Come on," he said.

Bill, Elsie hopping at his heels, went to the door and opened it. Jud Alpin sat tied securely to a chair. Many twists of rope made him resemble a mummy. He had chewed through the gag over his mouth.

"Thank God!" he mumbled. "Get me loose, Bill," he pleaded.

Bill reached for his knife, but his hand slid into that hole in his pants. He found

his pocket and got out the knife, then cut Jud's bonds.

"I have to take care of those so-and-so's in the other room," Bill said. He rushed away, taking the rope with him.

He secured his prisoners firmly. The doctor had lost his thick-lensed spectacles and there was a bewildered, helpless expression on his face. The question mark was quite gone from his beard. The young man whined and bemoaned his lot.

"Aw, shut up!" Bill growled. "You'd shoot people in cold blood, then squawk over a bump on the head."

"Five thousand dollars?" offered the young man.

"To hell with you!" snapped Bill.

"Ten thousand?"

"Another yap and I'll kick your teeth out." Bill hurried to rejoin his companions.

Jud was rubbing the cramp from his limbs. Elsie sat in an easy chair. Bill aided Jud and brought him water.

Jud lay upon a couch, thoroughly relaxed. "Guess I'll hold together," he remarked. He scowled in thought a moment, then asked, "S'pose you want the story?"

Elsie nodded.

"Shoot!" said Bill and moved to another chair nearer Elsie.

Jud snickered feebly and said, "Bill, your pink shirt-tail is stickin' out of that hole in your pants."

"Let her stick," Bill muttered and hastily sat down.

Jud gathered his thoughts, then began, "A day or so after you lit out for Phoenix, Bill, these fellers showed up with a car and a trailer, swell rig. They wanted to camp and they was welcome. I showed 'em how to get water account of the pump bein' busted.

"They said they was from the University of Arizona, makin' a survey of the flora and fauna hereabouts. That had me stumped 'cause the only Flora I know shoots biscuits in that hash house in town. And this ain't no deer country so there ain't no fawns. Anyhow, I found out they meant plants and animals. As far as I know they didn't fuss with the animals, but went after weeds, brush and trees, stuff like that. Say, Bill, you know them two sections of land I own out west of here?"

Bill nodded. "Not enough feed or browse there to care for over twenty cows. That land is covered by that prickly leaved brush, sort of whitish. Come to think about it, your land is the only place in the valley where the stuff grows."

"You hit it exactly," Jud declared, sitting up. "The doctor said they could make rubber of that brush and that was why they offered me five dollars a' acre for that land." He blinked at Bill.

"Rubber!" Elsie said and nodded. "I've heard they could get rubber from some desert plant."

"Five bucks a' acre?" Bill murmured, mentally multiplying twelve hundred and eighty acres by five dollars. "That's sixty-four hundred bucks!"

"I got a' thousand of it," Jud said, "as earnest money. I paid the bank five hundred and bought that team with most of the rest. 'Member, Bill, you met me in town and I said I expected to pay off all my mortgage?"

"I remember," Bill confirmed. He looked hard at Jud. "Did you know these Germans were setting fire to the trestles?"

"Why, no!" Jud exclaimed. "On account of buying my land and the rubber, they asked me not to tell anybody about them or what they were doing. In fact, I didn't pay no attention to 'em. I let 'em use the room next here for a workshop, but I didn't watch 'em or talk with 'em. I was so dad-gummed happy, thinking to clear my ranch of the mortgage.

"Just before you come, I heard 'em say they was movin' out. I asked 'em about the rest of the money. They didn't talk satisfactory and, maybe, I got too rambunctious. That young feller made a crack I didn't like so I slapped his face, then the

lump of a Sigmund jumped me and next I knew I was tied up like you found me." Jud wagged his head dolefully. "That money would have been the first real luck I'd had in years."

"What were they going to do with you?" Elsie asked.

"Kill me," Jud replied. "They talked that over after they had me hawg-tied. They didn't want me foolin' around the University of Arizona askin' questions."

GRADUALLY day had faded and dusk was there. Jud hobbled to a table and lighted a lantern. Bill watched Elsie's face appear in the dim light. Her lips were parted, her eyes open wide and she was looking intently at something which was a secret to all the world save she.

"What do you see?" Bill inquired softly.

"A dream coming real."

And Bill thought upon that.

There was a wild scrambling of hoofs and pebbles showered upon the house walls and the windows as horses were reined in upon the gravel.

Bill, hand upon gun, rushed to the door. "Who's there?" he shouted.

"That you, Jud?"

Bill recognized the voice of Victor Graham, Elsie's father.

"No. Bill Beran. Better come in."

Vic needed no second bidding, but came a running, a big man with russet hair, a wide freckled face and iron gray eyes. He stood in the doorway and looked at Elsie. Peering over his shoulders were Al Wickman and Harry Taylor.

Vic's lips relaxed. "The horses got home," he said, "battered up a little, but that doesn't matter so long's you're all right. Cast a shoe?" He was looking at her stockinged foot.

"Sprained my ankle when I jumped," she explained. "Bill scared my horses."

Vic considered Bill who stood sideways to him.

"Probably wagged that pink tail," Vic said, grinning.

"Now, look here!" Bill howled, feeling his face grow red. "I hate these damn' clothes! I swear I'll never wear a pink shirt or blue pants again, so help me."

"Why, Bill!" Al gasped.

"You'll feel different when you get them clothes cleaned," Harry claimed. "You look swell, Bill."

Bill gave his friends dirty looks. "How'd you bums get here?" he demanded.

"Al an' me got through quicker'n we figgered up at Blue Rock." Harry said. "We was on our way home when we spotted fresh horse tracks. Al said they belonged to your pinto and I thought so, too, so we trailed you, taking our time. We thought, maybe, you'd forgotten about our date for tomorrow. When we got to the road, we see Vic come a tearin' along hell bent for election. He waved and yelled to us to come along so we did."

"And, Bill," Al said happily. "I found that piece torn outta your pants. You can have it fixed as good as new. I got that piece right here in my shirt pocket." He scratched around in the pocket and fished out a blue rag.

Bill made a growling sound.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bill," Elsie claimed. "If you hadn't worn those clothes, there wouldn't have been a runaway. And if there hadn't been a runaway, you would never have found out who was burning the bridges. You'd better like those clothes."

Al fingered the blue rag lovingly and tenderly put it away.

"Just some cleanin' and you'll look beautiful again," Harry murmured.

"Here, hold still!" Vic commanded his daughter. "I think it's just a sprain, but we'll have the vet look at it when we get home. Jud, can I borrow your rig to get Elsie home?"

"You bet your boots, but them skunks have a good car."

Then Vic Graham heard a story told in part by Bill, the remainder by Jud. He listened intently, often his face changed ex-

pression, but glowed with pride when he heard how Elsie had thwarted the would-be butcher.

The prisoners were put in their own car which was driven by Al. Vic and Jud went along as guards. Harry rode close to the automobile, not because he wanted to, but because Bill threatened to shoot him if he came near the rig in which Bill was to drive Elsie. Bill got a blanket from the house and wrapped it about Elsie as there was a chill in the air.

The stars were Arizona stars, big and bright in the crystal air and their wan light made all things thinly visible. Bill drove slowly. Ahead he could see the tail light of the auto. Elsie nestled against him, her head on his shoulder. He hoped Elsie was not asleep. He wanted to talk to her about something very particular, but he didn't know how to begin. He thought about this problem for several minutes. There was no solution.

"Asleep?" he asked quietly.

"No," came the soft answer, "just resting."

"Ankle hurt?"

"Hardly any."

"That's great!"

There was a silence during which Bill counted twenty fenceposts as they marched past.

"Keep on talking, Bill."

"Uh—well—aw." He swallowed hard. He just let fly with the first thought that came along. "When I was in Phoenix," he said, "I won a hundred dollars playing poker. I forgot to tell you." Bill's teeth began to chatter when he realized what he had said.

Elsie popped up straight in the seat. "Why, Bill, a whole hundred dollars! That will buy so many things for our home!" She reached and brought his face close to hers and kissed him.

He kissed her back.

"W-when c-c-can we be m-married?" he asked, trying to control his teeth.

"As soon as my ankle is well."

"Oh, gee! Oh, gosh! Oh, yipee! When will that be?"

"Soon, my dear."

Elsie passed Bill half of the blanket. Bil kept the reins under a foot because he didn't have three hands. They reached the Graham ranch and the team stopped just within the barn to be unhitched. Th horses were very patient. Some time later, Viv Graham came along to disturb the occupants of the rig.

"The night is getting cool," he said. "We'd better get that ankle in the house. I've phoned the doctor."

Vic carried Elsie into the house and Bill unharnessed the horses and put them up. When Bill arrived in the big living room of the ranchhouse, the Graham family was assembled there.

Dr. Johnnie Cordova, a slight man with a fierce face, came to Bill and held out his hand. "Congratulations," he said. "Elsie has told me the news."

"Awk," Bill uttered, his face flaming. He looked at Vic Graham. "Awk—I forgot to t-t-tell—"

"Don't mind me," Vic said and grinned. "Us fathers don't count any more."

There was a soft pressure upon Bill's left hand. He turned to find Mrs. Graham standing there. She smiled and the light in her eyes reminded Bill of the light in Elsie's eyes. She reached up and drew down his head and kissed him just as Elsie had done.

"I've known for some time," she murmured.

They had a swell visit. Elsie, against her protest, was taken to bed. Mrs. Graham showed Bill to a guest room and left him.

He stood in the middle of it upon a soft, blue rug and looked at the snowy pillow shams with their crinkled edges and the fancy bed-spread. The lace curtains were given proper consideration. The lamp had a blue shade with drippy edges. There was a fancy jigger on a chair. There was a picture of a feller with wings and a harp

and one of bouncing lambs and fleecy clouds.

Bill opened a window; he put out the light. He tiptoed to the window, climbed outside and pulled down the sash. Head up, he marched to the barn, got to the hay loft and bedded down.

THE F. B. I. moved in by plane the next day and kept on moving about. Bill was very busy for the next few days. By evidence found in the trailer and the laboratory in Jud's house, the G-men had a case.

"Not only that," one of them told Bill, "but we now have all of a sabotage ring that was operating or intended to operate in the border states from Texas to California. You bet"—he grinned widely—"we'll make 'em say, 'Uncle'!"

Of course, they gave poor old Jud the works, but his innate dumbness was his best defense. Besides, the entire valley came to his rescue. Finally, sweating great drops of fear, he was released and admonished, if he ever contacted another bunch of saboteurs that he was to act just as he had in this instance, only he was to get in touch with Bill as soon as possible.

When Bill was through with aiding the government, he went out to the ranch. Thinking of days to come, he walked quietly to the bunkhouse. He heard voices strident and strained as if in desperate need. He went into the bunkhouse and cautiously peered out through a window.

Harry and Al stood before a tin washtub which held a precarious perch upon an up-ended apple box. Harry held in his hands a shapeless bunch of cloth, the color of which was a feeble, dirty blue streaked with a peculiar, mildewed pink. The object in Al's hands was the reverse, being a bilious pink overshot with streaks of greenish-blue.

"What kind of soap did you use?" Al demanded.

"Saddle soap."

"That's good soap," Al conceded.

"What was that white stuff you put in?"

"Dunno," Harry responded. "I asked Chin Wah for sump'm to lighten things, make 'em cleaner, you know. He got it outta that square can above the sink."

"That's what he uses to lighten his biscuits," Al said, scowling. "Can't figure, though, how that would make these colors swap around and sort of chase each other. Maybe we should have washed 'em separate?"

"Too late now, bub. How Bill loved these duds," Harry went on tearfully, "these here pants and them there shirts!"

"He was goin' to get married in 'em," Al moaned.

"And all this had to happen," Harry mourned, "just because we wanted to clean 'em for good, old Bill." He held the dripping pants at arm's length and regarded them. "Still, he—"

"Say, would you get married in them things?" Al demanded.

"Course not."

"What are you talkin' about? Think you're better'n Bill?"

"I didn't say so, you dam' catfish."

"We gotta do sump'n."

"Don't I know it?" Harry growled, holding up the pants.

They said nothing for a space, but there were muted growlings and grunts as if two brains were churning.

Suddenly Al straightened, his hair stood on end. "Say," he demanded, "did you call me a catfish?"

"I did."

Swish! The saturated shirt exploded in Harry's face. Harry twirled the pants, lassoed Al, drew him close and grappled him. They fell to earth. The wash tub with its hellish brew overturned upon them. They sat up, blowing pink and blue bubbles.

Bill, hands over his mouth, fled squeaking. He couldn't tell them what a favor they had done for him, how they had removed a jinx from his life. He was helpless then and soon he forgot.

TEMPUS fudged along and Elsie's ankle got well. Also, the wedding day approached and Bill became plumb loco. Presents for the prospective bride and groom poured in upon Elsie.

On the day before the wedding, Bill arrived at the Graham home. Elsie and he were alone in the living room which resembled Ben Rubin's department store. Upon a center table lay a large package wrapped with vivid pink and blue ribbons.

"Pink and blue!" Bill snorted. "I know blame well we can't use that present. Chuck it out."

"It's yours; it's addressed to you, Bill," Elsie said. "We must be polite."

"All right," Bill muttered. He tore off the ribbons and paper. He opened the box. He looked pop-eyed. He let out a terrible screech. "Oh, hell!" he howled. "Excuse me, I mean, dammit! Lookit, Elsie, pink pants—I mean, pink shirt, blue pants, patent leather boots and a damn' cream-colored sombrero! Where's my gun?"

"Now, now," soothed Elsie. "Look at the card."

Bill plucked a card from the box and read in a trembling voice, " 'Dear Bill, here are your wedding togs, the best we could find cause we spoiled the ones you were to get married in. We know you will wear them. After the wedding, we will get drunker than seven hundred dollars. With love, Al and Harry'." Bill staggered to the nearest chair and slumped upon it. "Al Wickman and Harry Taylor!" he moaned. "My friends! The best pals I got!" He gulped fiercely.

"They forgot and left the price tag on the sombrero," Elsie said. "Fifty dollars." She fingered the garments. "Finest quality," she commented. "I'll bet those boys spent two hundred dollars for this outfit."

"Two hundred dollars!" Bill gasped.

"Bill, what were you intending to be married in?" Elsie inquired.

"Why—" There Bill stopped. That was something he hadn't considered.

"You have to wear clothes, you know," Elsie reminded him.

"Why, yes," Bill admitted.

"So," Elsie went on, "you'll be married in that pink shirt and blue pants and all the rest of it. You'll be married in them because you can't let your friends down. You—"

"Of course, I wouldn't let my friends down."

"So," Elsie continued, "we'll have a cowboy wedding. We'll be on horseback and so will the minister and the best men and my—"

"Best men!" growled Bill, getting to his feet. "Now, hold on!"

"Hold on, nothing. I'll bet you haven't thought of a best man. You'll have to have Al and Harry. You simply couldn't have one without the other."

"That's right," Bill acknowledged after a moment's thought. "But," he added under his breath, "they better not get too funny about it."

Elsie refolded the pink shirt and the blue pants and carefully put them in the box. She glanced at the clock.

"Half past three," she announced. "Bill, let's go for a ride, my last ride as a free woman. You go get the horses, while I change into my riding things."

"Sure," Bill agreed and went on the errand.

They rode west, out along the juniper ridge. They rode slowly and mostly in silence. Elsie pulled up on a little spur that jutted from the ridge. They sat, overlooking the valley.

"Is it so beautiful!" Elsie breathed.

Bill nodded.

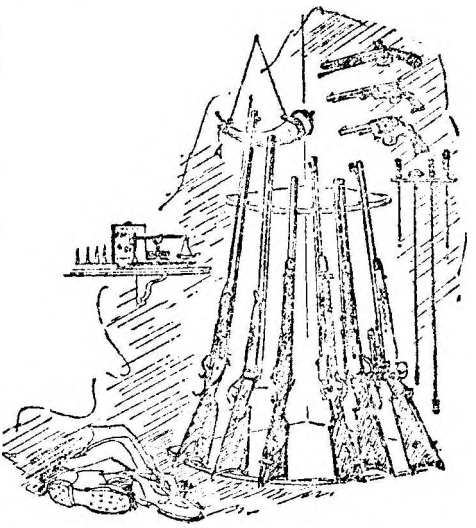
"Oh, Bill, we will be happy?"

"I promise you we shall."

"So quiet!" she whispered.

Bill put his head on one side. "Listen!" he said.

There was a stir among the foliage of the junipers, then a gentle murmuring as the four o'clock wind blew a benediction upon them.



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

One of Our Best Rifles

DURING the last year I have had more mail about one caliber rifle than all others. It seemed strange to me because this particular caliber is one that is limited in its variety of cartridges. Unlike the .30-06, for which we have cartridges available of almost any weight bullet from 110 to 225 grains, it is only "put up" with three different weight bullets. Yet it is almost what you might call an all-around rifle. I am speaking of the .270 Winchester.

It was placed on the market back in 1923 or '24 and was wildly acclaimed—but the average shooter just didn't seem to take to it. At that time it was loaded only with the 130-grain bullet which whooped

it up at 3,120 feet a second, and was considered great to use on running game because very little lead was required and the trajectory was flat. At 100 yards this bullet has more remaining velocity than the 110-grain .30-06 bullet which starts out at almost 3,500 feet a second.

Many hunters who used it on deer claimed it spoiled too much meat and other chaps who went out after heavier game claimed it didn't penetrate enough to take care of the really big ones, and also at that time I heard a varmint hunter claim the bullet ruined too many pelts. So most shooters stuck to the .30-30 or .30-06. I don't mean to say that the .270 was manufactured to supplant these guns for hunting but rather to augment them. But, to get 'way ahead of my story, I believe it will do *almost* anything the .30-06 will and in most cases do it better.

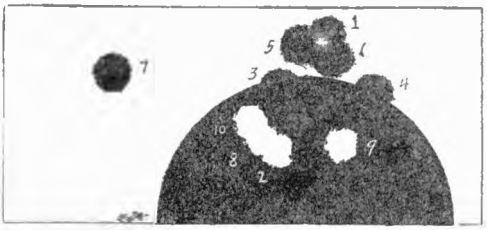
The .270 was designed by the Winchester people expressly for hunting purposes and, regardless of early criticism, has "come through" and is at the present time our number two rifle for big game hunting being over-shadowed only by the .30-06 in popularity.

The .270 case is the .30-06 case necked down. In fact, the .30-06 head space gauges can be used in the .270 caliber rifles. And some of the handloaders make their .270 cases by simply necking down the .30-06 case. But at this time handloading is out of the picture due to the fact that primers and bullets are just about extinct.

The .270 cartridge with a 150-grain bullet was developed to get rid of some of the destructive effect of the regular (130-grain) bullet. It moves along at 2,800 feet a second and has been used successfully on all our very heaviest North American game.

The Winchester people brought out the .270 cartridge with the 100-grain bullet to satisfy a demand for a very high velocity flat trajectory cartridge to be used particularly for varmint work. This bullet

starts out at the speed of 3,540 feet a second and at 100 yards is mobiling at 3,210 feet a second which is just a little under that of the .220 Swift 46-grain bullet which starts out at the terrific speed of 4,140 feet a second.



A group from rest with a .270 Winchester and 100-Gr. Bullet at 100 yards, using 15X Lyman scopesight.

Just for fun let's compare the .270 and the .220 Swift velocities and energies remaining at 200 yards. Incidentally the .220 Swift is our highest speed commercial cartridge and is strictly a varmint gun regardless of the fact that it has in some cases been used successfully on deer.

Bullet	*Ft. Secs.*	*Ft. Lbs.*
.270 – 100-gr.	2965	1957
.220 48-gr.	2760	815
.220 56-gr.	2455	745
.220 46-gr.	2360	570

Remember these figures are for 200 yards. So, since the .220 Swift depends solely on the remaining or striking velocity of its bullet for killing effect, the .270-100-grain bullet must be a better varmint or deer cartridge at ranges exceeding 100 yards and a better big game cartridge at any range. (I have always maintained that the .220 Swift was definitely not a big game cartridge and have emphatically condemned its use even on small deer.

But for lack of space I could go on and give figures showing (at least to my satisfaction) that the .270 is better at longer ranges than any other of our rifles. Of course for short range woods hunting the .30-30 is still mighty handy (but, not to start an argument or anything, for this

work I'll take my old Winchester Model 86 in .33 caliber.)

Did I hear someone inquire about the recoil or kick of the .270? Well, as near as I can make out by feel, I'd say it's about the same or a little less than the .30-06, which is a mite heavy for a very small light-weight shooter.

As far as ballistics are concerned the .270 is one of our most successful bullets. The sectional density (weight of bullet compared with its diameter) is especially good and the design is such that it is good at lessening air resistance.

Due to its flat trajectory the .270 is especially good for the hunter who isn't in the game fields more than a couple times a year and consequently (in most cases) is not so good at judging distances.

The midrange trajectory height for the original 130-grain bullet was given as ½ inch for 100 yards, 2 inches for 200 yards, and 5 inches for 300 yards and 16 inches for 500 yards.

For the 150-grain bullet it is a little over ½ inch or .6" for 100 yards, 3 inches for 200 yards and 7 inches for 300 yards.

While the figures for the 100-grain bullet are .4 inch at 100 yards, 1½" for 200 and 4½ inches for 300 yards.

Yep, the .270 Winchester is quite a gun!

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