WILBUR S. PEACOCK—"The Two Worlds of Ling Pao"
CADDO CAMERON—A story of the anonymous Gunman

Short Stories

ANC

November 10th

25¢

Possession of any famous jewel makes one a natural target

"TRAIL OF THE BURMA STAR"
STEUART EMERY

"Not Him!... we're better off three-handed!"

"WHAT do you mean 'We're better off'?" demanded Bill. "Dick's a charming guy and plays like an expert."

"I guess you haven't had him for a partner recently," Millie said knowingly.

"I guess I haven't. So what?"

"Well, I have! Over at the Club a week ago I sat in for a hand or two and, honestly, Bill, he was pretty grim. And both Myrtle and Charlie Hall noticed the same thing when they had him for dinner and bridge Monday night. His breath . . . his breath . . ."

"Oh, oh!" said Bill, "Now I catch on. Too bad somebody can't slip him a hint . . . and a bottle of Listerine Antiseptic."

"It really is," said Millie, "because he is such a peach and I hate to see him riding himself right out of the picture."

How about You?

The insidious thing about halitosis (bad breath) is that you, yourself, may not realize that you're guilty. So, it is very easy to offend the very people whose friendship you value most.

Isn't it foolish to take such chances when Listerine Antiseptic is such an easy, *extra careful* precaution? You simply rinse the mouth with it and, presto! . . . your breath becomes fresher, sweeter, less likely to offend.

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Short Stories

TWICE A MONTH

THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

November 10th, 1948

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History of Patience

"I KINDA liked writing 'The Two World's of Ling Pao,'" says author W. S. Peacock. "I have a great admiration for the Chinese, from reading, and from knowing several personally. Their history is one of patience, knowledge and achievement, and because of that I tried to mingle in Ling Pao, the various traits of character which I think are universal among the Chinese people.

"The problem posed in the story is a tricky one, and is based on actuality. Family and family honor are all important to the Chinese, and bloodlines can be traced back for centuries. I posed the problem for Ling Pao, and he, being a blend of the new and the old worlds, solved it in his own way. The right way, I believe.

"In a world of ox carts and Diesel engines there are many paradoxes. And not the least of these are the customs. One of these lies in the yarn, and curiously enough, during the war, the denouement of this story was the basis of many heated arguments. I cannot explain further here, for to do so would give away the ending of the story. But, once the yarn is read, I think you will be able to understand just what I mean.

"Anyway, I liked writing the yarn and the editors took it for the magazine. Now it is up to you, and I hope the judgment is favorable.

"More yarns, I hope, will be forthcoming in the future. Maybe you'll meet Ling Pao again. I'd like to—but that, as Ling Pao might say, lies in the fingers of Kwan Yin's hand."

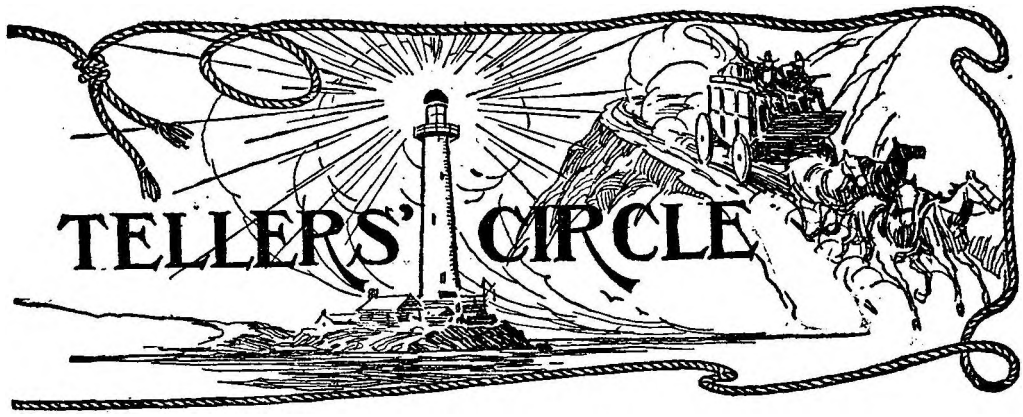
W. Scott Peacock

Copra Battlefields

HUGH B. CAVE, one-time war correspondent and author of several books about the fighting in the Pacific theater, has this to say about "The Surangani Affair" to be found elsewhere in this issue of SHORT STORIES:

"Any serviceman who saw action in the Pacific knows what a copra plantation is, even though he saw them under wartime conditions and probably used some of them as battlefields. While there myself I was curious about these 'coconut farms'—especially the remote, lonely ones on out-of-the-way islands—and wondered what it would be like to be plunked down on one and told to run it awhile. So I made a point of investigating, and was so fascinated by the history of the copra business and its multiple problems that I got in deeper and deeper.

"One way to tell the story, it seemed to me, was in a fiction piece encompassing some of the tales I'd heard, with, of course, as much factual background material and color as could be woven in. The resulting picture is not supposed to be complete—the history of copra growing is inextricably interwoven with the history of the Pacific itself and would need just as much telling. 'The Surangani Affair,' however, does give a reasonable picture, I believe, of the plantations outside the control of the big combines, or, for that matter, of certain smaller ones within the orbit. Even the combines have their troubles. What can you expect, then, when you have working for you a gang of only slightly inhibited natives whose fathers collected heads or who—in parts of New Guinea, for in-



stance—may very likely have collected a few themselves just before they signed up? Running a remote plantation in Melanesia is no holiday, no matter how you look at it."

Hugh B. Cave

Indian Country

WE FIND we learn things every day—well, anyway, every story!—about Caddo Cameron's Gunman. We picture the Gunman as quite a guy, a fellow of many parts, of divers sides. The places his adventures take him interest us, too, and not the least part of that interest is fanned by Cameron's accompanying remarks.

As we say, we have a nice mental image of Mister Gunman and Caddo Cameron's asides, help out like the man who does the explaining for lantern slides.

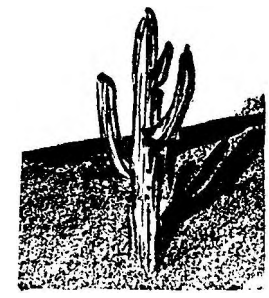
Caddo Cameron, incidentally, gets a fat star from this department for the energetic way he digs up fuel for the Story Tellers' Circle fires. With which few remarks we'll let you have a few more . . . by Mr. Cameron.

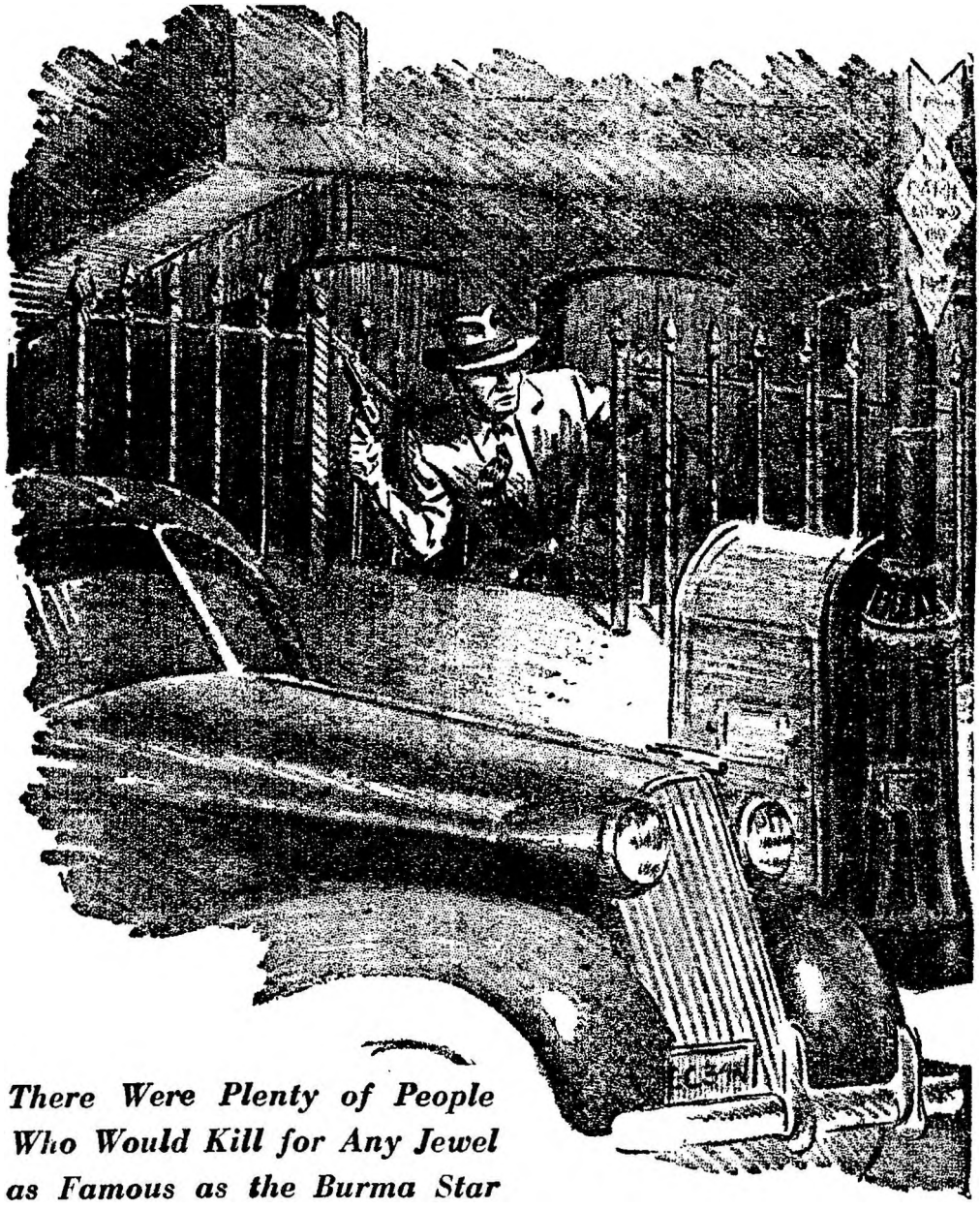
"Although Mister Gunman isn't much of a hand to drink whenever an open saloon doesn't appear in his yarns it's usually because the story is laid on an Indian Reservation or in one of The Nations—dry country, or supposedly dry. And right here is a word of explanation that I should have given you long since.

"Back in the years 1828 to 1846 the Federal Government tricked and slugged five tribes of Indians into abandoning their ancestral homes in the Southeastern part of the United States, and moving to what is now Oklahoma. These were the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw and Seminole Indians, and were called The Five Civilized Tribes. They were versed in civil government, having governed themselves since long before the U. S. A. was born, and accordingly each tribe established its governmental agencies when settled on its new lands in the West. They maintained themselves as separate nations, protectorates of the United States. And that's where the term, The Nations, comes from. Many other tribes were located in Oklahoma, but they had their Reservations rather than Nations.

"If you think Marshal Heck Henderson was dumb when he offered to let Johnny Antelope out of jail on his promise to return, don't. There are several well-authenticated instances where an Indian was condemned to death by his tribal court, then given an extended leave of absence to go away off and visit relatives before his execution, and they always returned to pay the penalty. Keeping his word was a vile habit of the early Indian, but the white man's example soon broke him of it."

Caddo Cameron





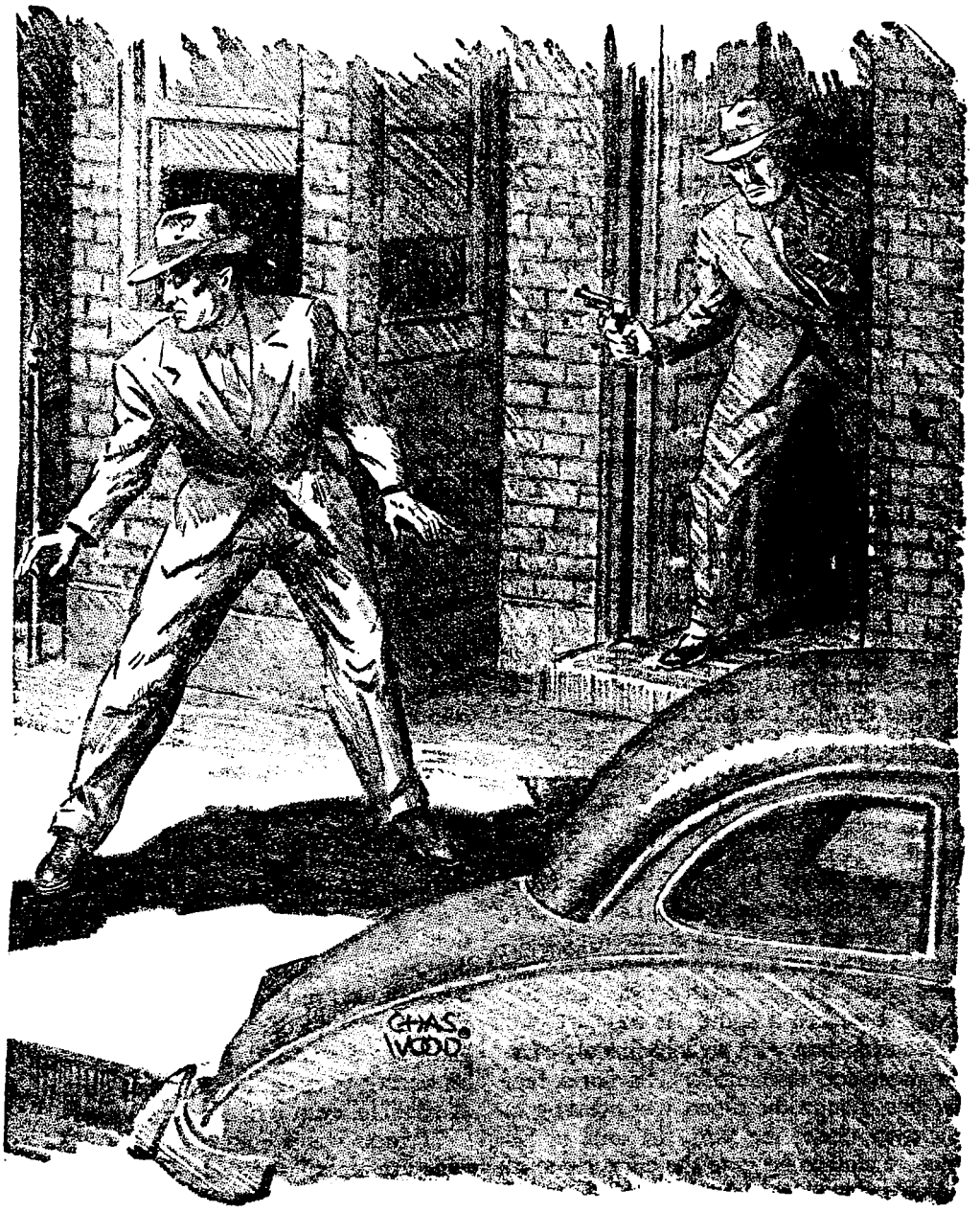
There Were Plenty of People Who Would Kill for Any Jewel as Famous as the Burma Star

TRAIL OF THE BURMA STAR

I

"SORRY, sir," said the snub-nosed house page in the neat uniform, "but House Detective Birnie isn't here yet. He just phoned the desk he'd be half an hour late. Will you wait, sir? I'll see him as soon as he comes in and tell him you want him."

"Don't bother," returned David Wayne. "I've got some late shopping to do, about an hour's worth. I can come back then. It was only a Legion post entertainment I want to talk to him about. I'll be running along. Check please, bartender."



By STEUART EMERY

As the bartender stepped to the cash register, Wayne glanced at himself in the mirror and pulled his hat down a little further. He saw the face of an average young man still well on the sunny side of thirty, matured by combat, but resilient. So was the well-built frame in the well-cut business suit. Just another guy sweating it out on his way up in the business world of New York after dealing with a war that had been supposed to settle the destiny of the entire world but somehow hadn't. There was good space between the gray eyes, a good rake to the jaw. Wayne veered his glance from his image in the mirror.

After all, he saw that face in the glass every day and it was no treat to him, particularly when he shaved it at 7:30 a.m.

"No, I'm not running along," he said sullenly. "I'm staying here."

In the mirror he had caught sight of the slim figure sweeping through the street door of the crowded cocktail lounge. All about gaiety and good nature overflowed, the working day was over and New York was delving into its Martinis and highballs. This was a well-dressed, sophisticated-looking crowd in the crimson and chromium room of the upper Madison Avenue Hotel Sefton, and everyone seemed in a relaxed mood. But this girl who pressed hurriedly through the door was not. She had a queer, taut look on her face instead of one of freedom.

A crimson scarf turban was wound around her head, secured by a gold ornament, her tailored suit was flawless, her grooming superbly metropolitan. Wayne studied the long honey-hued bob, the intelligent, clear brow, the fine set of the small chin.

This girl had beauty and poise—but the poise had been momentarily shattered. Here was a lady in trouble. She was in flight; he had seen that quick, desperate look before in the faces of men in combat seeking cover, anywhere they could and prepared to keep on fighting. No doubt he had worn it himself. There was no way out of the cocktail lounge, except by the front door and the side entrance into the hotel lobby, blocked for the moment by incoming guests. He directed his own glance to the front door as the girl's glance went to it. Casually through it walked a figure. It was that of a big, squarish man with an inordinately muscular chest and thick neck. His florid face looked as though the blood was pressing to the surface under the skin. In spite of his expensive clothes he gave the appearance of a butcher just stepped out of his apron. "And a black-market butcher"—the thought came to Wayne.

Desperately the girl's eyes roved the assemblage. Wayne had swivelled on his stool, he was facing her. Her gaze reached him, stopped and a strange expression dawned on her face. She was coming for him, straight as an arrow, her entire air alerted. Some quick and strange decision had entered her. She reached him, her hand was out, freed from its glove, a smile lightened her features.

"Jim!" she said, clearly and loudly. "Why Jim Thompson! I thought you were in San Francisco. This is wonderful!"

Wayne felt a slender, warm hand in his. Its touch thrilled him. "It is," he said. "It certainly is. But—"

The girl stripped off her other glove and laid it on the bar. Something inside Wayne sank. Only too clearly he saw the platinum band with the diamonds on the wedding finger. Married, this girl was married. And he wasn't Jim Thompson, or ever would be.

"Ah—er——" he managed and that was about all.

"Drink?" she asked brightly. "Let's have it over there." She gestured toward an empty stall in the near corner. "Five years it's been since you went to the Pacific with Henry as captains together. And you never came back East after the war. You've changed a bit, you're older and you're more responsible since you married, but I'd know you anywhere." They had reached the booth and seated themselves. The girl's hands were hidden under the wide bag in her lap but somehow Wayne knew that they were clenched. "Your wife is a lucky girl, Jim. Any more children after the first boy?"

"N-no," gagged Wayne.

"I'm Mrs. Charles Mason now, instead of Diana Fentress. I hope my wedding announcement reached you."

"Yes," said Wayne. The sinking sensation of disappointment had returned, even deeper. He knew he ought to come right out with his real identity, breaking up this chance meeting of two strangers thrown together by a mistake. But he didn't want to, he wanted to sit and talk to this girl as long as possible, even if she were married.

"I guess we've both changed a good deal with the years," she said. "It's like looking back on another life, another world, those days before the war when you and Henry were roommates at Dartmouth. The snow carnival; remember, the prom?"

"Yes," said Wayne.

HE, TOO, had his memories; the tree-shaded campus in the Midwest, the bunting-hung gymnasium with the band playing, a bundle of beauty in his arms, laughter, senior year gaiety when he had thought he was in love but wasn't. "Only I went to——" Just in time he checked himself.

"You live in New York, Diana?"

"Yes, an apartment not more than six blocks from here. My husband is in Chicago on a business trip. He travels a lot."

"Fine." The words came out in spite of themselves. "I'm in New York a while myself on business. And how about—"

"A date?" The line of thought creased the girl's smooth forehead. "There's nothing I'd like better but I'm all tied up right now. I'll tell you what I'd like you to do, though. Drive around to the apartment with me in a taxi and I'll give you another highball before I keep tonight's date. Then I'll phone you tomorrow and let you know when I'll be clear."

"Taxi's not necessary," said Wayne. "I have a car I use for my calls. It's outside at the curb. You want to leave right away?"

He rose and the girl did the same. "No," she said quickly. "Let's have another drink here first."

She sat down again and clenched her handbag in her lap. Wayne saw what had happened. The butcher-built man sitting at the single table not four yards away had reached for his wallet as Wayne and the girl had risen. He slapped a bill from it on the drink check. He was ready to go the instant they were, he was prepared to follow. And the girl, Diana, had seen his action, she knew he was coming after them. Wayne wondered if she had seen what he had when the man had pulled his wallet from his inner right-hand coat pocket. It was of brown leather, the holster disclosed for that fleeting second under the right armpit was black leather. This was a left-handed trigger man.

"Yes," said Wayne. "We'll have another drink." He lifted his finger for the waiter. "Refill, Waiter. We'll stay here as long as you wish." His mouth hardened. "Till hell freezes, if necessary."

He had made his decision, made it on no knowledge whatever of this girl except that menace dogged her. This was New York, this was the cocktail lounge of the swanky Hotel Sefton on upper Madison Avenue, but deadly danger hung in its background as surely as though it had been some waterfront dive in Port Said. Some superior staff work was called for. "Diana," he said swiftly, "you're in trouble."

"Yes—that is, no." The words had been jolted from her under the spur of tension. Her first instinct to tell him had been stopped by some other instinct.

"Would you—"

"No."

Wayne sat back, baffled.

A hand came down on his shoulder, a friendly voice sounded. "Sorry I kept you waiting. I could have a slight dipperful of that spring water with the Scotch coloration in it myself."

VAN BIRNIE, smiling cheerfully, stood over the table. He had the shoulders and the arm-reach of a prize-fighter. He was coordinated muscle all over under his double-breasted gray suit. His eyes were a clear blue and his hair was a sultry red. He looked and was as tough and fast-thinking a man as a friend could ever want beside him in trouble. Here was the staff worker to go along with.

For four years of war Wayne had known Birnie who had joined the Army fresh from a patrolman's job on the New York police force where he had already proved his guts by shooting it out at odds of one to three in a tough spot. First Lieutenant Van Birnie had been the best platoon officer Captain David Wayne, Infantry, had had from England to the Elbe. After GI Joe met Ivan at the dividing line and the shooting war was over Intelligence had snatched Birnie. Now, demobilized, he had gone for house detective at the Sefton with his eye on an assistant managership.

"This is Mr. Birnie, Mrs. Mason," said Wayne. "He's assistant manager of the hotel and an old friend of mine. He was out in the Pacific, too, where he was Major Dennis Birnie and I was Captain Jim Thompson."

"That's right," said Birnie. His clear blue gaze fixed Wayne's and took in plenty. He sat down at the table. "Pleasure to have you in our cocktail lounge, Mrs. Mason. Let's call this one on the house. What's on your mind these days, Captain, beside your hat?"

Wayne had his glass swizzle stick in his fingers. Again he was thinking fast. He began to tap it idly on the table top. "Nothing in particular you'd want to listen to, Birnie." Tap, tap, tap, the swizzle stick in Wayne's hand was beginning the Morse code. SOS, SOS, SOS. Birnie never batted an eye.

"Oh, I listen to everything," he said.

GIRL IN JAM. ARMED WATCHER NEXT TABLE. CAN YOU CLEAN HIM OUT FOR OUR GETAWAY? Swiftly the swizzle stick ran the code.

Birnie nodded imperceptibly. "The page you left your message with said you wanted me for something about our Legion entertainment. We always did work together, didn't we? Whatever you want from me consider it done. Michael!"

A gray-haired waiter who had been hovering close by instantly came forward. "For Mrs. Mason and my friend here I want the special Scotch. Perhaps I'd better come with you and write a note to the house steward. Back in two minutes, Jim; we keep our sixteen-year-old special under lock and key. Alert yourself for something you've never seen before."

Birnie hoisted himself up and, followed by the waiter, went to the bar. Birnie was onto everything, there was fast action coming and Wayne had his cue to be ready to move fast himself.

"Get set, Diana," he said. "The car's outside."

"What's that?" asked the girl swiftly.

"On your toes. Here it comes."

The gray-haired waiter was coming back from the bar. This time he was almost staggering under the load of a tray of bottles, glasses, and a big silver ice bucket that he held arm-high. It was the most tremendous load of liquor, glassware and ice that Wayne had ever seen carried in a New York cocktail lounge. The waiter's foot slipped, he began to skid, he emitted a yell of fright and the assorted burden poised on the tray came down on top of the head of the butcherlike patron from the side. The waiter flung himself forward after it, he plunged into the lap of the man who went over backward on the floor, chair and all with the waiter sprawled on him.

"Out, out, I said!" snapped Wayne and had the girl up on her feet by the arm.

AMID a pandemonium of startled cries they swept through the revolving door out onto the pavement, across it and into the small closed car parked at the curb. Wayne slammed on the power and they were off. He took the car around the corner and leveled away for a fast run. "Okay," he said briefly. "Birnie swamped your trailer. It was a beautiful act. Now where? We can do our talking when we get there."

The girl sat beside him as the block unreeled, fingers tensed on her handbag. She was a fighter, she was a blonde taking the situation as it came and that was the kind of blonde that Wayne preferred. "Number 150A East Fifty-third Street," she said. "It's a remodeled brownstone. Walk-up."

Wayne sent the car on, swerved it down Park Avenue, took it into the side-street and, within a block, pulled up in front of the address. He switched off the power and they got out. The girl sent her glance back up the street. It was full dark now and there was no traffic on it except for a taxicab that went past empty. No one was behind them, no one had followed them. Her look of tension eased.

"I could do with that drink," said Wayne.

A fleeting smile curved the girl's lips. "So could I."

She led the way to the apartment-house door, opened it with the key from her bag and they went up a flight of stairs to the door of a second-floor front apartment. It opened and they stepped in. The girl clicked the light switch and a small, beautifully decorated living room was disclosed. Water-colors and oil paintings hung on the walls, the carpet was thick pile; everything spoke of taste and affluence. Whoever Mrs. Diana Mason might be she had an income of at least $10,000 a year and it came to Wayne, ruefully, that his own $5,000 a year would never keep up a place like this.

"Make yourself at home, Jim," said Diana. "Scotch in the tabouret. Soda and ice in the kitchen. While you're mixing, I'll repair my complexion and there's a phone call or so I have to make. I'll only be five minutes, which, of course, means half an hour. When I come out we'll talk." A gay expression suddenly lit her face. Then she disappeared into the bedroom at the back, closing the door. Wayne strolled to the tabouret and took out the Scotch and a pair of glasses. He poured a small drink into the one-ounce mixing glass and prepared to down it.

"I'll get a fast one in first," he thought a bit grimly. "I'm just where I began."

He brought his head up, startled. His hearing had always been excellent. The tabouret stood against the wall next to the

bedroom door and this bedroom door, like those in so many remodeled apartments, must be paper thin. He could hear the girl's voice coming through it which meant that the phone was close by. There was urgency in her voice—there was a quick direct purpose that wasted no words. The fragments came—she had her dial connection.

"You know what I've got . . . you can get me an instant and absolutely secret sale? . . . You can take it off my hands immediately, if I'll do what? . . . Yes, I'll take a $25,000 cut to get it off my hands . . . here in my apartment . . . you'll bring the $200,000? . . . Announce yourself by the speaking tube, I'll let no one else in."

The connection ended. Wayne could hear the phone being hung up. His brows knitted. What was this, anyhow, that he had got into? He listened—every nerve strained. Bam! The thud against the apartment door brought him a jolt. Bam! The second knock slapped. A high-pitched voice began to yell.

"Noospaper! Evenin' noospaper! Here y'are, Missus Mason!" There was the sound of feet running down the stairs.

"What's that?" called the girl sharply.

"Newspaper boy," Wayne called back.

"Oh, take it in. The corner stand delivers twice a day. That's young Tony Gianelli. He delivers for his father."

Wayne opened the door and picked up the paper that lay by its sill. It was the *Evening Record,* and it specialized in sensation. This evening it had one after its own heart. The headlines screamed at him:

$250,000 STAR OF BURMA STOLEN
Angus Belding—Wealthy Recluse—Shot in Theft of Famous Gem—Woman Sought as Robber

HE SWEPT the column of type with his glance and its sentences struck hard: "Angus Belding, 72-year-old millionaire art collector, found sprawled over desk in Park Avenue apartment library by butler, Herbert Wilks, on return from movies . . . afternoon off . . . wall safe open . . . Star of Burma, one of world's most famous emeralds, missing from safe . . . bullet from small-caliber revolver in head . . . woman's gold lipstick case on desk, initial D . . . unknown woman caller believed robber . . . Angus Belding removed to Mercy Hospital . . . condition critical . . . long a widower . . . shunned society . . . no relatives in New York, according to butler. . . ."

Wayne came to the end of the brief story. He caught another item to the side of it—captioned BULLETIN. It headline read:

THREE DIE IN MIDWEST AIR CRASH —FOUR INJURED

Wayne put down the paper for an instant. Across the room, in the evening breeze that was coming stronger now through the open windows, the bedroom door was slowly moving backward. Its catch had never been fully closed, noiselessly it swung until it was against the wall and Wayne was looking through it. Squarely in his vision was the big mirror on the bureau and in that mirror the girl, out of sight from the living room, was reflected. She was standing with her bag in her hand, reaching into it. The mirror showed her taking an object from the bag—something that glinted and a small black case. She slipped the glittering object under the pillow of the bed she stood beside. It was a small automatic.

From the black case she drew something and held it to the light by its tiny chain. Sheer green beauty glowed there—fashioned in the shape of a star—and seeming to draw in a glory of living color. And Wayne knew what she had. Thrown back to him in the mirror he was looking at the Star of Burma. Angus Belding, shot through the head by a small-caliber gun in the hand of his robber—the lipstick case initialed D, that showed the robber was a woman . . . this girl Diana with the Star of Burma in her handbag—pursued into the Sefton cocktail lounge. Wayne's mind groped desperately with the thoughts that flooded it.

And then the girl was gone, she had moved out of the range of the mirror. He swept forward, not making a sound, reached the open door and pulled it to. From now on it was going to be a battle of wits. He had before his eyes every damning evidence and yet, he was fighting desperately against believing it. He wasn't going to let the girl know he had seen her with a stolen jewel in her hand.

"Drinks ready yet?" came her voice, clear and thrilling, from inside the bedroom. "I'm almost renovated."

"Drinks coming up," he called back; grabbed the Scotch and glasses and made for the kitchen. He had them a few moments later in the living room as she tripped through the door, freshly made up.

"Quite the new woman, Jim."

She looked it. The air of strain had gone, she seemed like a girl who had solved her problem and had her way clear before her. Wayne folded the paper and put it on the low stand before the sofa, making way for her.

"Anything in the paper?" she asked conversationally.

"Don't ask me," he returned. "I only looked for a horse I bet on. The race hadn't been reported at the time this edition came out."

"So here's how, Jim," Diana said in a light tone, raising her glass at her end of the sofa. "You were a lot of help to me, as usual. You always were dependable either on the ski run or the dance floor or in the war, according to my brother. That Madison Avenue wolf that your friend got rid of; I'm afraid I made too much out of an ordinary incident. He came up behind me on the street near the Sefton and there was no one in sight, so I ducked into the cocktail lounge to avoid him. How did Birnie know he was annoying me?"

"He has second sight," said Wayne briefly. "At the bar he told the waiter what to do." That was no sidewalk masher back in the Sefton—and Diana knew it. Sidewalk mashers didn't pack hidden rods.

"We girls get that all the time," smiled Diana. "Just one of the pitfalls of the big city, like the drugged demi-tasse with the two-dollar dinner. Of course, one way to stop a sidewalk wolf cold is to hit him in the face with a loaded handbag, and if that doesn't work, yell bloody murder, police, police. But I don't like to yell and there wasn't anything in my handbag except a compact and a couple of letters."

"Yes?" inquired Wayne.

"Nothing at all."

Diana's face was cool and composed. She took a short sip of her highball and reached out for the silver cigarette box on the stand. Every muscle in her slender body tautened, her eyes widened. The poised look vanished from her face, she was striving desperately to hide her emotion. Wayne had folded the paper but he hadn't folded it enough. The headline showed—STAR OF BURMA STOLEN. Diana put down her highball and swept up the paper, spreading it wide. She disappeared behind the outflung page. But Wayne saw the whole page tremble under the shaking of her hands.

"Nothing wrong, I hope."

"The—the airplane accident," she answered in a queer voice. "I—I knew the pilot."

"Sorry, Diana." Wayne's voice sounded oddly also, he knew. It wasn't the bulletin on the air crash Diana was reading. Ten seconds would suffice for that. She was reading the story on the Star of Burma theft.

"Critical condition. Not expected to live—" Her voice trailed off.

"What's that?" asked Wayne.

"Poor Bill Craven, the pilot. You've never met him. I knew him when I was in canteen service in the war and he was a Navy flier."

Wayne lifted his highball and took a deep pull. It wasn't Craven, the pilot, whose critical condition had jolted this exclamation from the girl. It was Angus Belding, possibly dying at this moment in the hospital. And if he died, it meant a first-degree murder charge against the person who had killed him in getting away with the Star of Burma, which at present was somewhere only yards away in Diana's bedroom and which had been traveling about since its theft in her handbag.

There were plenty of people who would kill for a $250,000 treasure like that and the man in the Sefton apparently was ready to do exactly that thing. Was this business the double-cross among thieves? The hijacking of the holder of the stolen loot by a member of his or her own gang, or by a rival gang? Whichever it was, this girl—Diana—was in the middle, a hunted fugitive with the police looking for her, on one side, and an unknown person, or persons, closing in on the other.

Diana got up. The paper was in her hands, crumpled by the force with which she gripped it. She had looked distraught when she had dodged into the Sefton to shake her pursuer, but now she looked stricken, as though her foundation had been swept out from under her feet.

"I'm going to phone," she said, "the—the main office of the airline. It's in New

York. They'll have the latest report on Bill Craven's condition."

"Sorry," said Wayne. He watched her go into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. This time its latch clicked solidly shut. But he was on his feet, treading noiselessly, and he had his ear to the thin door. He could hear the sound of the dial; Diana's voice. Once more she had mastered her shock and she was speaking in a normal tone.

"Mercy Hospital? . . . This is the secretary of the city editor of the *Record,* inquiring about the condition of Angus. . . . We have a reporter on his way to the hospital, but the city editor would like a word in the meantime. . . . What is that? . . . Yes. . . . Mr. Angus Belding has just gone on the operating table? . . . Yes, I see . . . no word for about an hour? Yes, yes—our reporter will be there long before that. . . . Thank you."

Wayne caught motion from inside the bedroom, and just made it to the sofa. He was sitting there, glass in hand, when Diana came in. "Any news?"

"Nothing as yet. But the airline office is in steady communication with the hospital in Iowa. They'll have immediate word. Poor Bill Craven!"

This was consummate acting that Wayne was looking at. The crisp words of Diana masquerading as a city editor's secretary had been true to life. Apparently she could play any role and make it stick. He knocked off the rest of his drink and set the glass on the stand. He was in a strange business and he meant to stay in it to the finish. Diana was looking straight at him.

"I'm sorry, Jim; but I'll have to ask you to go."

"Huh?" The inelegant ejaculation broke from him.

"I'm a bit upset. I don't want company. I'm sure you'll understand. In an hour or so someone is calling for me here for a date I can't break. He's a motion picture Eastern story editor, and I have an idea for an original scenario he's interested in. I write fiction, you see."

Write fiction! She was writing it now, she was talking it, she was putting over the most remarkable line of sheer but plausible untruth that Wayne had ever heard. No motion picture story editor was coming in, but somebody with $200,000 cash for the Star of Burma. And she was putting him definitely out of the picture.

"I'll phone you tomorrow, as I said, Jim. What's your address and phone number?"

"I'll write it down for you."

Wayne stepped to the secretary in the corner where the memo tablet and the bronze desk set showed. He took the pen out and wrote.

"I'm at the Collegiate Club," he tossed over his shoulder. "Ask for the suite of David Wayne. I have his diggings while he's out of town." His mind was working fast; he wanted to get into the bedroom. He dipped the pen deep and finished. "Blast it!" He held up his blackened finger. "I got ink all over myself. I'll have to use your soap and water."

"Certainly. There's pumice stone in the bathroom, if necessary. I know how hard ink is to get off."

"Mind if I use your phone? I want to call Birnie and tell him I'll be right back at the hotel. We still have that Legion entertainment to talk over."

"Go ahead."

WAYNE went for the bedroom. He would have to leave the door wide, but he could double-talk to Birnie perfectly openly. He wanted Birnie in on this business and he wanted him fast. He didn't intend to go back to the hotel for him, leaving the girl free from any scrutiny. He meant to get Birnie over to the scene. There was a tavern he had noticed, directly across the way, where he could pick him up. He was dialing the Sefton—the connection was completed.

"Main desk, please. Main desk? This is the main desk? Is Mr. Birnie there?"

"Mr. Birnie has gone out," came the answer.

"Gone out?" exclaimed Wayne. "Gone where?"

"He reported to the desk he had a sudden call, sir. He said he didn't expect to be back before midnight."

"I see," said Wayne dully. After all, Birnie had a perfect right to leave the hotel any time he saw fit. His was more or less a roving commission and there was usually another house detective around to take over.

"Missed him?" called Diana.

"Yes, but it wasn't important."

Wayne left the phone. Now he was on his own on this job, there would be no Birnie with his thoroughgoing police brain and his dependability in danger to side him. He went around the wall angle, out of sight of Diana, and looked into the mirror. Its reflection showed her with the newspaper up again, veiled from sight of him as he was from sight of her. In two steps he was at the bed pillow and slipped the automatic out. It was a beautifully balanced .25. And Angus Belding had been shot with a small-caliber gun.

Wayne stepped into the bathroom, closed the door and stood staring at the gun under the light. He drew the magazine from it and snicked out its shells. Five, and it should have had six. From his pocket he took an envelope and tore off a piece of it, shoving it into the open breech. He held the gun to the light and looked down its barrel. Against the white paper in the breech the dirty rifling showed clearly, the gun had been fired.

Slowly he put the shells back in the clip, shoved it into the gun butt and pocketed the gun. He got the hot water on and began to scrub his ink-stained finger. The ink seemed indelible, it wouldn't come off. He saw the pumice-stone on the tray in the gleaming bathtub under the sponge bag that hung above it. They would clean him up. The pumice stone went into the washbasin, he reached for the bag, pulled its drawstring and picked out the sponge. There was something in the bag under the sponge that weighted it. He drew it out. It was the black leather case he had seen before and he undid its catch and sent back the lid, lifting out the contents. Glowing—iridescent, and sheening in uncanny lucence—the Star of Burma lay in his palm.

II

WAYNE came out of the brownstone front and its door clicked shut behind him. There seemed to be a definite finality about the sound. He stood on the sidewalk and looked in both directions. The street was bare of figures within the block; in the distance he could make out a few stray pedestrians. This was the dinner hour and he was on a residential block enlivened only by the tavern with the curtained windows across the way, beside which ran a shadowy alley. He put his left hand into his coat pocket and got out the cigarettes, thrusting one between his lips. He put his right hand into his other pocket, looking for the packet of matches, and felt the chill of steel. The bullet the surgeons even now were probing for in Angus Belding's skull at Mercy Hospital, might or might not have passed through the rifling of Diana's .25, but at least for the present Ballistics down at Police Headquarters wasn't going to have the chance to find out. He had the gun. Maybe he was an accessory after the fact—maybe he wasn't. His thoughts were clouded; he was taut all over; he didn't know where he was. His car stood at the curb in front of him, and certainly—sooner or later—Diana would look out the window. He would have to drive it away. He took the first step toward it, still fumbling for the matches.

"Up! Up, damn you!"

The snarl came from the shadow that swept around from the other side of the car and took material form. It was that of an undersized man in dark clothes, a hat-brim low over glinting eyes, gun leveled at Wayne's head. He faced a killer who was ready to loose on him. He shot so fast, he didn't even realize he was shooting. His grip had closed on the butt of the automatic in his pocket; his hand jerked up, finger pressing trigger, and he blasted through the cloth in the fastest snapshot he had ever made. It was the old instinct of combat, the reaction that preceded conscious thought.

A scream of pain burst from the undersized man. The gun fell from his hand as his other hand clutched at a broken shoulder; he turned and ran like a rabbit along the sidewalk, leaping into cover behind a parked car and keeping on behind the row of other parked cars in front of the residences. Wayne relaxed for the instant and in that instant destruction leaped again; this time closing in from both sides. From a basement areaway, not five yards off, the big man burst with steel in his hand. The butcherlike trailer of the Sefton. From the vestibule of an apartment house ten yards in the other direction swept the second man, his weapon out.

Three men had laid in wait for Wayne

to gun him, one hidden in front by his own car, the other two concealed on either flank. The .25 he had fired through his coat was done for. Pressed forward with his shot it had tangled in the cloth. These killers had him.

Crashing, the roar of the police positive split the quiet of the street. The hat spun from the head of the big-bodied attacker on the right flank. The police positive slammed again. Cloth blew from the shoulder of the attacker on the left.

"Come on, you buzzards!" roared a voice. "Come and get it!" Framed in the rolled-down window of the front seat of Wayne's car, Van Birnie's face showed. "Duck, Dave!"

Wayne jumped forward and around the rear of his car. He crouched against the running board with his gun out, but too late. He heard the sound of racing footsteps that faded and Birnie's voice came to him again.

"Okay, Dave! They scrammed."

"Birnie!" Wayne got up. Birnie swung open the door from inside.

"Climb aboard. We're hauling out. If we scram ourselves pronto, this racket could pass as backfires."

Wayne stumbled in and Birnie shot on the power. Easily the car rolled along the street. Here and there figures of tenants showed in windows but the street was bare now of any fleeing figures. They went around the corner, headed north.

"Close, that was," commented Birnie. "Is it home, James? Or where to, my lord?"

"Pull into the curb," bit out Wayne. "We're not leaving this vicinity." Birnie steered into the curbing between a pair of parked cars and braked to a halt. "How in hell did you get into this car? I phoned you at the hotel and you were out. There's a jam on."

"So I gathered," grinned Birnie. "Therefore Van Birnie, house dick, false whiskers and all, trailed you to the house back there. I certainly know the license number of your bus, you park it in front of our caravansary every time you come to see me. I was right out after you onto the street and saw you turn east at the corner. I grabbed one of our regular taxi men off his rank, gave him your number and told him to get after you, and report back to me where you went."

"I'm beginning to get it," said Wayne, recalling the empty taxicab that had gone on past him after he had reached the girl's home.

"Then I checked out and came around to the address the driver gave me. There's more that jingles in a house dick's pants than loose change—there's a bunch of keys that will open anything from a can of beans to a Rolls-Royce door. The place to wait for you was in your car, so I opened it up and did. Then your trailers came along and I spotted two of them, in the area and the doorway, and got down on the floor of your car out of sight. The little shrimp, who almost got you, I missed. He must have crossed the street while I was squatting on the floor."

"That trailer the waiter crowned was one of the three," said Wayne.

"I know it. He got up back at the hotel half nuts and walked out. But he wasn't in any hurry. He must have known where the girl lived, and that the two of you could be picked up here. Now, Dave, give—what's the puzzle?"

"Listen." Wayne spoke at full length; Birnie following every word. He made it as brief as possible. "There's the picture," he finished.

"And it's a lousy picture. Everything points to your having gotten yourself tangled up with a damned smart jewel thief that other jewel thieves are after. New York, London, Paris—every big city has them. Some of them are hijackers, they wait till some other gang pulls a big haul and then jump on top of them, and take away their candy. This Star of Burma, like every other famous jewel, is a natural target—no one is ever really safe in possession of such a fortune; but then these collectors like Angus Belding are always cracked. This new girl-friend of yours, Diana Mason, is another Lady Lightfingers."

"No," said Wayne, but he said it almost hopelessly. "No, I still can't believe it. There's something different about her."

"I'm disillusioned," said Birnie. "After all, life on the force and as a house dick doesn't make you believe in Santa Claus, or the bees and the flowers. I admit that I look on the seamy side. I don't look for the beauty of the female limb, I look professionally for the run in the stocking. Right now, I'm looking at the evidence against

Diana Fentress Mason. Can you picture what a judge and jury would give her on it?"

"Twenty years in prison," said Wayne.

Birnie was leaning forward, flipping on the car radio, after glancing at his wristwatch. "City radio station, hourly news report on now—maybe—"

Into the car came the voice of the newscaster. "—Believe that this housing bill will pass at the next session of the Legislature. Flash! Flash!" There was a second of silence. "Our newsroom has just received a bulletin from Mercy Hospital. Angus Belding, owner of the Star of Burma, has died on the operating table, following the removal of a .25-caliber bullet from his brain."

"Twenty years in prison?" said Birnie grimly. "The chair now."

"And if—" Wayne broke off short. If the chair didn't get her, someone else would; the crowd who had tried to knock him off on the sidewalk. "Birnie, we've got to put a watch on her. We've got to keep her cased. They're still after her. There she is alone in her apartment."

"With the Star of Burma in the sponge bag. Wayne, I figure you're right. They tried for you, thinking she might have passed it along to you, now they'll go after her."

"Staff work." Wayne's forehead knotted. He was summoning up a picture out of memory of the layout of the street they had just left. "Listen, Birnie, from that tavern across the way, we can keep a watch on her apartment. Get in the corner, slide the curtain a little. There's an alley running clear through the block beside the tavern. We drive into the next street and into the alley, park the car and go into the tavern by the side door. We'll sit there undercover and wait to see what turns up. Someone is coming in sooner or later with $200,000 for the Star of Burma. And then—"

"I make the pinch, principal and fence together," snapped, Birnie. "I've got a private detective's license and I've also got a Police Positive on me, which is twice as good as a license. Dave, your staff work is flawless as ever, you know your reconnaissance." He put on the power and the car began to move.

"Pinch? You're going to arrest her?"

"Why not? I'll give her all the chance in the world to talk but if she can talk herself out of this one, she's good. The lipstick case with the initial 'D', the .25-caliber gun and a .25 bullet coming out of Belding's head, the Star of Burma in her handbag—what more do you want, Dave? Are you going to let a murderess go because of your quaint chivalry? Can a girl rob and murder all she wants to and get away with it, because she has a blond bob like Lana Turner and legs like Betty Grable? Hell, Dave, I've been on the force; I've seen murder for profit. I look at things differently from you."

"Yes," said Wayne, miserably. "But for the moment . . ."

"We go along together. I think, too, that this Diana dame is on a hell of a spot without the police and that she's in deadly danger. It's up to us to ward that off from her first and deal with the matter of the law later. Here we are in the alley. There's the side door."

BIRNIE stopped the car and they got out and went through the door that gave onto the cutting between the building. They stepped into the rear of a cheerful, noisy neighborhood tavern and passed through it for the front. Somebody was robbed, the judge's decision was lousy, why he batted for an average of .345 last year— Fragments of sporting conversation flew about the packed bar while quieter parties were pushing in steak dinners at the central tables.

"In luck." Birnie pointed to the table in the window angle where a pair of men were just getting up, their waiter bowing at the tip. "We've reserved," said Birnie.

"Yes, sir; I'll change the cloth, sir." The waiter snapped away the spotted cover while Birnie and Wayne stood by. "There, sir."

"And there we are, across the street." Birnie's voice was low as the waiter left. Over the low curtain, hung on rings, Wayne looked at the brownstone across the way. In one of its lighted front windows appeared a slender shape. Diana Fentress had come to the window as though for a touch of fresh air, she sent a breath of cigarette smoke outward, glanced up and down the street and disappeared.

"Recipe for shadowing same as that for cooking rabbit," observed Birnie. "First catch your rabbit. She's there, she hasn't gotten away. She won't." They slid into the seats; Wayne next to the window, Birnie

opposite him across the small table. "Slide the curtain," suggested Birnie. "You be the eye."

Wayne moved the cloth on its rings and got himself a full six inches of clear vision while from the street the pair of them could not be seen. The minutes dragged by while they stretched the highballs the waiter had brought. They were not talking, there didn't appear to be a great deal to say, and they were used to being together without the need of conversation. No one came out of the brownstone or went into it, and despite himself, Wayne began to feel more and more nervous. He almost jumped in his seat at a sudden noise of a gong.

"Not the copper's buggy," smiled Birnie. "That's an ambulance."

The long black car slid into sight and slowed down. Wayne could see the lettering on it. "Robinson Ambulance Service," he announced, holding the curtain apart.

"Know it well," remarked Birnie. "It takes care of this entire district. I've called for it any number of times for sudden illnesses in the hotel. Expensive, but perfectly reliable. What's the matter?"

"It's stopping," said Wayne. "It's stopping in front of the brownstone. They're taking out the stretcher."

A man sitting beside the driver had swung off and to the rear of the ambulance. Its back opened and another man in a white jacket and one in dark clothes, carrying a doctor's bag, got out. A stretcher slid out and the little group moved into the brownstone's vestibule. In another moment they had vanished in the building.

"Appendix? Maternity? Certainly not a common cold," said Birnie. He was standing looking through the plate glass window. "I can make out the driver from here. The regular six to two a.m. jockey, Mike Moriarty. Well, these calls go on night and day for Robinson's covered wagon. We've been here a hell of a long time and that's the first time anyone has gone into the joint. Let me know when they come out and I'll see if I recognize the doc."

A second round of drinks came while Wayne kept his lookout. Again the brownstone's entrance door opened and expertly the stretcher men came through, the man with the doctor's bag walking swiftly behind them. On the stretcher lay a form, completely cloaked by a blanket. The bearers swung the stretcher into the rear of the car, the doctor and the man in the white jacket got in and the door closed. Wayne caught a passing glimpse of the medico between house door and ambulance. A Van Dyke beard and glasses registered and that was about all but the professional air was distinctive. The car went into immediate motion.

"I never saw that doc before," Birnie, who had risen at Wayne's gesture, sat down again. "But that doesn't mean anything. Robinson's buggy is probably headed for St. Stephens', it's the big hospital not more than twenty blocks from here. Nothing to do but wait it out, Dave. That fence may get here inside the next five minutes, he may be five hours. Keep on with the peeking."

"I'm peeking," cast out Wayne.

He was looking at the second floor front windows of Diana's apartment and once more a figure showed in one of them. Its hand was drawing the curtains together, it was reaching up and pulling down the blind. But the figure was not that of a woman—it was that of a man. The first shade came down, the blind of the next window followed it.

"Birnie! Birnie! There's a man in Diana's apartment! The doctor and two men went in with the stretcher, the doctor and two men came out with the stretcher. Who was on it?"

Birnie swung erect, staring across the street. In the third and last window the figure showed as its blind rolled down. "Good God, Dave, you're right! Bang, under our noses, the girl has been snatched! That's a searcher up there, pulling the blinds down to cover him. There are apartments over this tavern from which you can see into Diana's place. Dave, whoever they are, they've got her! She went out, drugged or unconscious, on that stretcher and into the ambulance. Cripes, is that gang smart! Robinson's, the best-known ambulance service in the neighborhood, Mike Moriarty at the wheel, there'd be no better passport. And Mike will be ditched somewhere, maybe with a bullet in his head from the guy riding beside him. The ambulance goes on—and where? A beautiful, beautiful job!"

"Up!" bit out Wayne. "Up! You've got keys, you say will open anything from a can

of beans to a Rolls-Royce. You're opening the front door of that brownstone, Birnie, and the girl's apartment door after that. That searcher is still in there. Get him and squeeze him dry!"

"And how!" flashed Birnie.

HE TOSSED a bill on the table and they went for the door. Wayne was traveling fast. He dodged in front of a taxicab whose driver cursed him heartly as he slung on his brakes and reached the brownstone vestibule with Birnie right behind him. Birnie already had his keys out and the third one opened the lock. They moved up the stairs and reached the door of the girl's apartment.

"The perfect house dick makes the perfect housebreaker," said Birnie grimly. "I can guess how the extra man got in. By the fire-escape from the backyard. He must have put the girl out cold on a pre-arranged plan and then the ambulance party did the rest. This looks like gunwork, Dave. I'll go in by this door, but I don't think I can throw the lock without our customer hearing it. If I'm not mistaken—" He tiptoed down the short hall and looked out its rear window. "All up to building code specifications. Fire-escape clear across the back. You take it to the bedroom window and cut off our party that way. He will certainly have a rod and he will certainly pull it if we can't surprise him. For God's sake, shoot first! He won't be playing."

"Okay," returned Wayne. "Give me one minute."

He swung out of the hall window onto the fire-escape and moved along it. He had his gun out. Then he was crouching at Diana's bedroom window, its curtains partly drawn. The bedroom was a mess. Clothes and feminine belongings were scattered all over, the searcher had gone through it like a cyclone. From the living room he could hear slight sounds where the man inside still went on with his job. He drew a quick breath and hoisted himself into the bedroom

"Who's there?" came a sudden question. Birnie must have tried his key in the front door lock and it had clicked. He caught Birnie's voice, gruff and disguised.

"Electric light meter inspector. I want in."

"Nothing tonight," called back the stranger.

"Okay, pal, okay," answered Birnie.

"Damn you, stay out!"

Wayne plunged through the bedroom door. Birnie must be coming in, anyhow, and he had the intruder from the rear. A thinnish, bony-faced man with down-pulled hatbrim was crouching opposite the apartment door which was swinging open under Birnie's manipulation and he had a long-barreled pistol with a silencer on it leveled at the door.

"You ain't paid your bill!" shouted Birnie. "I got the landlord's key and a right to enter."

The bony-faced man swerved as he caught Wayne's footsteps, his gun swerved also at sight of the .25 in Wayne's hand, his lips drew back from the teeth like those of a cornered rat and he let go. Wayne was on top of him, the slug clipping his coat sleeve. He smashed the barrel of his automatic against the jaw of the man with his right hand and in the same split second uppercut him with his left. Birnie was through the door, his heavy Police Positive raised. He slammed it down on top of the man's head even as he reeled half-out from Wayne's blows. All strength washed out of the man, his lax hand dropped his weapon and he pitched forward onto his face.

"Teamwork does it," grunted Birnie. "Tough customer not so tough any more. House-to-house fighting transferred from Aachen to East Fifty-third Street, but the old technique still holds. Hell, Dave, this was the way we took that German m.g. nest in that damned sidestreet that time. I've slowed a bit but you're as good as ever."

Wayne stood over the body of the senseless intruder, breathing a little quickly. There was an overpowering sweetish and sickish odor in the living room and he knew what it was.

"Chloroform, Birnie. He must have jumped her from the bedroom via the fire-escape, the same way I jumped him and overpowered her in seconds. But she fought like a tigress." He pointed to the senseless man's lip. It was swollen and split.

"Chloroform it was," returned Birnie. He walked to the sofa and picked up the pad of cloth. Then he threw it into a corner. The living room like the bedroom was utter-

ly disrupted by a swift and trained search. "He did this business but he never found the Star of Burma. The sponge bag you said, in the bathroom. Keep an eye on your customer."

Birnie shouldered back into the bedroom and disappeared. His voice carried. "The sponge bag, you said, wasn't it, Dave?"

"It was."

"It's empty."

III

WAYNE reached the bathroom at a run. Alone of the apartment's rooms it had not felt the devastating hand of the searcher. It was untouched and Birnie stood under the light with the spongebag turned inside out, the sponge itself tossed into the wash-basin.

"Gone!" he said. "Gone with the wind. Now what?"

"Come on outside. Bigger and better staff work, Birnie." Wayne frowned. "She's got it on her person or else she changed her mind and hid it somewhere else in this apartment."

"You could be right, Dave," acceded Birnie. "Women are forever changing their minds and hiding things in another place. I'd hate to tell you the number of times I've been called in at the hotel to hunt for missing stuff. But if the Star of Burma is on this Diana dame's person, they've got it by now. If it's still here—"

"This customer we have here on the floor must have knocked her out immediately," reasoned Wayne. "They didn't dare bring her back to consciousness here because one yell out of her would rouse this apartment house. They took her out to their hideaway, unconscious, and they can't quiz her until she comes to any more than we can quiz our friend on the floor. They'll have to question her in the hideaway and come back here later, if she talks and hid it again here."

"She'll have to talk," said Birnie, mouth a hard slit. "A gang that kills isn't pretty when it wants information. A lighted cigar butt makes anybody converse at top speed."

Wayne felt a shudder run through him. Birnie made hard-boiled sense, as usual. He sent a glance at the bony-faced man sprawled uglily on the carpet. He was their sole link with the kidnappers, but he was a link.

"Let's make our friend talk and quick."

"I'm thinking of that, too. He ought to know where they took the girl. I can rustle up the ingredients to bring him out of slumber." They were back in the living room and Birnie stalked into the small kitchen. He returned with a full pot of water and dashed it hard into the senseless man's face. Under his nose he shoved a bottle. "Shower bath and cleaning ammonia. Slightly on the rough side, but this is no refined gent."

The man's eyes opened, the ammonia started tears in them. He was coming to. "Now for a slight and beneficial hand massage. Leave this third degree stuff to me, Dave." Birnie slapped the man hard in the face with the flat of his hand and his eyes came wide. He groaned and sat up on the floor, gasping. "Tenth and last round, chum. Get in there and fight," rapped Birnie. "You've been kayoed but you're back on your feet."

He hoisted the bony-faced man and half-lifted, half-pitched him onto the sofa, standing over him. The intruder's eyes had cleared, he had his senses back. He snarled viciously, lips twisting.

"You're in trouble, chum. Bad police trouble. Want an out? Sing!"

THE bony-faced man snarled again. "You go to hell. I don't know anything." The accent was decidedly British, although the words were mixed up as they came through the puffed lips.

"Memory bad? This'll refresh it." Birnie jammed the gun with the silencer that the intruder had carried within an inch of his head. "Sound off or this will sound off. It won't make any more noise getting you than it would have with you getting me with it coming in the door. I caught your accent, my friend here and I trained in dear old Blighty. What do we call you?"

"English Eddie," muttered the man.

"Come along and give, Eddie."

"Yah!" came from the puffed lips. English Eddie's eyes wavered. They were cold, hard eyes, but for the moment fear flickered in them. "All I do is carry out orders. I don't see the top Mr. Big, I get my instructions from Reddy."

"The one who looks like a butcher?" cut in Wayne.

English Eddie nodded. "We're all cut up into sections. The Big Shot sits on top and I don't know anything about him. I get my share on our jobs and I ask no questions."

"They sent you in here to put out the girl and answer the bell for the ambulance act? Then they left you here to search?"

English Eddie nodded again.

"Okay, where's the girl? Where did they take her?"

English Eddie's stare was frozen. "I don't know, damn you. I'm told nothing."

Wayne's stomach drew tight with anxiety. This man was telling the truth, he was nothing but an outer member of the mob who took his orders, carried them out and was paid for it. No, he didn't know where the girl had been taken to.

"So they left you behind," said Birnie. "They wouldn't do that if you didn't have a way of getting in touch with them, even if it's through Reddy. Where were you to report to if you found the Star of Burma in this flat?"

"Nowhere," answered English Eddie.

"Nowhere?" inquired Birnie. "That doesn't make sense. Don't tell me they haven't got a check on you."

"No check."

Wayne turned. In the bedroom the phone was jangling along with it. "He's lying, Birnie. There comes the check on him now. They wouldn't tell him yet where to reach them. They will if he's got the jewel."

"Go on Dave," urged Birnie. "You're sparking something."

"So I'm English Eddie on that phone. And English Eddie has found the Star."

"Good man!" said Birnie. "Come along, Eddie. With a rod in your skull you're going to prompt and prompt pretty. Take it, Dave."

WAYNE sat down at the phone. He was remembering plenty, bits and phrases, intonations he had lived with for over a year. He took up the receiver and spoke in a muffled voice. "Yes, are you there?"

"That you, Higgs?" The voice at the other end of the wire was non-committal.

"Yes. That Reddy?"

"That's right. Your voice sounds funny."

"Yours would if a lady had smashed your bridgework," fended Wayne. He muttered a London curse in a muffled tone.

"You found anything, Higgs?"

"I've got it. I'll bring it to—" Wayne sent a glance pregnant with meaning at Birnie and Birnie understood. He moved the gun with the silencer against the side of English Eddie's head where the two of them crouched next the phone.

"The name of your boss, Eddie," whispered Birnie. "Spill it or your brains get spilled."

"The Doctor, just the Doctor, that's all I know," muttered English Eddie, face pallid and sweating. There was iron resolve in Birnie.

"I'll bring it to the Doctor right off, Reddy, if you'll tell me where you are. Who's with you?"

"The Doctor and Torrance."

"You"—Wayne paused—"you got you know who there, too?"

"I'll say we've got her. Tight-mouthed as a clam. So you found it, where?"

"Inside a dance slipper in the closet, I'm bringing it directly." Wayne felt the way he had before the order came in the war to attack. Everything depended on co-ordination and timing. He was driving through but this was a mental, not a physical combat. "Where to?"

"This address." The upper Park Avenue number came. "On the entrance the sign 'Vienna Psychiatric Institute.' It's on the southwest corner. Come in the side door into the private consulting room. Ring our signal and I'll answer the peephole."

"Okay, Reddy," Wayne put down the phone, his hand shaking. "Birnie, we got it out of them. And Diana's there with three men. Park Avenue, Psychiatric Institute, peephole and private ring."

"Give me the phone. I'll roll up the wagon."

"No," burst out Wayne. He could visualize the wave of blue crashing in on the hideaway and its results. The mob, whoever they were, who were hijacking the Star of Burma taken, all right, but Diana taken along with them. There would be no charge of first degree murder on the mob, only attempted robbery, the full rap

would fall on Diana. "We'll go this alone. Get Diana out first, take care of the mob later. They might wash her out on a wagon raid before the police break in."

"Still Don Quixote of the misplaced confidence? Still want to go up against a windmill on Park Avenue?" Birnie shrugged. "You stage-managed it so far. Dave, you've done a swell job. I'll still go along but in the end I make the pinch. It's your hide you're risking but I've seen you risk your hide plenty and somehow you still have it all in one piece. Okay, Captain Wayne, Lieutenant Birnie reports for duty."

"English Eddie goes along with us," said Wayne.

"Eh, what?" gagged English Eddie.

"We want you for the face at the door. With your face expected and you ringing the signal, we get in and probably rush, with our guns out. Three of them there, Reddy said, our two guns ought to handle them on a surprise."

"That should do it," said Birnie. "Let's get going. From now on, Eddie, remember there'll be a rod in your ribs, so don't try to make any funny moves. Just walk along and act natural."

THEY went out of the apartment and down the stairs into the street. English Eddie walked along stiffly between them. He wasn't enjoying the situation. They went up the shadowed alley to the car and piled in.

"I'll drive," said Birnie. "You keep the gun on Eddie, Dave."

The car passed out of the alley, traveled the sidestreet and cut into Park Avenue. The hour was getting on and only a few limousines and taxicabs rolled along, the blocks of luxurious apartment houses towered on either side under a pale moon with hardly a pedestrian on them.

"Our corner coming," announced Birnie. His eyes were concentrated, he was missing nothing of the surroundings. "Here we are, there's the nameplate." He turned into the cross-street and Wayne caught the gleaming brass sign on the first floor of the graystone apartment house. "Side door here." Birnie slowed the car and braked some yards farther down. "I'll go out first, Dave. Keep Eddie between us."

They stood on the pavement close to the small arched vestibule. The Vienna Psychiatric Institute, Wayne estimated must run clear from the front of the building along its side. To the left of the vestibule frosted glass windows showed with a dull glow behind them, impervious to any vision from the sidewalk.

"No funny moves, I repeat, Eddie," warned Birnie. "Or Eddie goes to heaven. Into that vestibule, Dave."

They traversed the few yards and entered the square vestibule. It was ornately lined with bronze walls and directly in front was the door with the new sign: "Vienna Psychiatric Institute. Dr. Sigmund Behar."

Wayne could see the oblong Judas hole in the heavy door. Birnie jammed the gun with the silencer into English Eddie's back.

"Up to that peephole. Put your ugly mug six inches from it and ring that bell. Rod out, Dave, the minute that door opens we're going in, pushing Eddie ahead of us for a shield. Stand next the door away from the peephole, where the lookout man can't see us. All he'll see is our stool pigeon and he'll open for him. It's the old gambling house raiding stuff that wins nine times out of ten. Press the button, Eddie."

English Eddie's shaking finger went to the bell. From inside Wayne could hear the ringing, one long, followed by three short. There was a wait that seemed endless. "Again, Eddie," ordered Birnie. Once more the signal began. Wayne heard a clicking sound, the peephole had opened, but standing to the side of Eddie and pressed against the door he could not see the lookout.

"It's me," said English Eddie, hoarsely.

He seemed in a ghastly state of suspense. There was another slight sound, like the motion of well-oiled hinges. But the door against which Wayne and Birnie stood was not moving. The sound had come from behind them and to the left, instinctively Wayne started to turn and in that second hard metal that he recognized jammed into his back.

"Drop that gun!" rasped a voice that had destruction in it. "Drop your rod!" snarled a second voice from behind Birnie. Wayne's gun hit the floor—if it hadn't, a slug would have torn through his back—and he heard Birnie's gun go down.

"Yah!" said English Eddie. "Smart, aren't you?" His bony face worked with

triumph. Wayne swivelled his head, standing with his hands up and saw the door that he had never known existed in the left wall of the vestibule. It had opened noiselessly on its greased hinges and let the gunmen in behind Birnie and himself.

"See that?" It was Reddy, the butcher-like trigger man speaking and it was his gun in Wayne's back. "Go through it. You too, hotel guy."

Silently Wayne and Birnie stepped through the side door, silently it swung behind them. They stood in a softly lighted, perfectly appointed psychiatrist's private consulting room onto which it gave. There was the easy couch, the screen behind which the psychiatrist would sit out of sight of his confiding patient, relaxed at his or her ease on the couch, everything about the chamber was subdued and soothing. This Dr. Sigmund Behar was a master at stage setting, besides other things.

"Dream doctor's den," remarked Birnie. "Everything but the motto done in worsted: 'God Bless Our Home' on the wall."

"Keep going," commanded Reddy and they passed through the consulting room into another, brilliant with its overhead bowl light. "Here they are, Doctor."

Here was a second room, but this was not psychiatric, it was strictly medical. Glass cabinets held gleaming instruments, walls and ceiling were sheer white, the leather-padded examination table on castors stood in its center. Behind it, poised as though about to receive a patient, stood a splendidly assured man in the middle forties, dressed in a braided morning coat and the conventional striped trousers. Professional aptitude exuded from him, his deep black eyes behind the gold-rimmed glasses set on a beaky nose were alive with intelligence and the sense of power; his perfectly trimmed black Vandyke beard and mustaches added their own touch of distinction. No one, looking at him, would ever mistake him for anything but a doctor. A single glance would breed confidence in his judgment, his impregnability. It came to Wayne that he had never seen such a person before and probably never would again.

"Welcome," said the man in the morning coat in a resonant, cultivated voice with the barest trace of a foreign accent. "Welcome to the Vienna Psychiatric Institute, of which I am the owner." The mock politeness was superb. Then the aristocratic face with the beaky nose twisted in malevolence. "Now you are going to talk and you are going to talk damned fast."

"And who in hell are you?" Birnie's jaw jutted, the flare of belligerence was mounting in his blue eyes. He was never more dangerous than when he was in a jam, Wayne knew, he was getting himself into a reckless rage, his pride hurt by their entrapment, his courage sweeping up as it always did when danger faced. I'm Birnie, house dick at the Sefton. You give, professor. You're billed as Dr. Sigmund Behar on your shingle. What cart do you sell medicine off of?"

The shot told. "What does it matter what my sign says, whether I am Dr. Sigmund Behar, of Vienna, who never existed, or whatever other name I choose to adopt. I assure you, House Detective Birnie, that I have gone through a dozen different identities and names for my own purposes. But I am a doctor from Vienna, make no mistake about that."

"In the days of the horse-drawn busses," said Birnie. "You doubtless doctored the horses." His tone was sneering, Wayne knew what he was doing, needling the man in the morning coat, goading him into disclosure. It was working. Wayne's glance roved the clearly lit room and his jaw tightened. Nowhere was there a sign of Diana.

"I qualified, you fool! And then there evolved a slight upset regarding the sale of narcotics from the hospital where I was resident physician. I took up the study of psychiatry and under its influence a most wealthy woman divulged the hiding place of her jewels. After that Paris, London, Buenos Aires and now New York, always as the psychiatrist from Vienna to whom the women confide their secrets. This office? These headquarters? Rented from a practitioner who had gone abroad for six months. Lock, stock and barrel, equipment and all as it stands except the private confidence room from which I had the exit door cut into the vestibule for a getaway. Can you picture a better character than that of a psychiatrist to assume in high-class New York society, where the jewels are?"

Wayne stared at the beaky-nosed man with the Van Dyke in a mood approaching

admiration. No, there was no better character Dr. Sigmund Behar could assume. He would inspire confidence wherever he went.

"So now we come to the jewel itself." Dr. Behar's eyes behind his glasses glinted with sheer purpose. "English Eddie Higgs certainly has not got it or he would not have rung the signal which means acute danger on our outside bell."

"Smart as ever, English Eddie," said Birnie.

"Yes, our organization has its code of signals and Higgs gave us the danger warning. So we opened the side escape door which has its own peep slot and took you from behind in an obvious posture of using Higgs as a decoy."

"Damn well done, horse doctor," said Birnie.

"Close his big mouth, Reddy," ordered Behar. Reddy's fist crashed into Birnie's lips and blood trickled down the corner of his mouth. "Learn courtesy. I am doing no playing with you two. Now, where is the Star of Burma? We have gone too far in this matter to stop at any minor details. Diana Fentress had the Star in her hands from three o'clock this afternoon on but she hasn't got it with her now. For one solid year we have been on the trail of the Star of Burma. I am a long-haul operator who plays for huge stakes at huge risks and the Star of Burma and half a dozen other historic jewels I could name are forever targets for a unique organization like ours."

HIS glance became even more penetrating.

"No, I do not think that either of you know where the Star of Burma is so we shall resume our hitherto-fruitless questioning of Diana Fentress. And this time we shall not fail! She was placed in the side alcove while we attended to you."

Behar nodded and English Eddie stepped to a curtain and drew it back. Inside the small alcove in an easy chair sat Diana, pale and with her face strained.

"Come out, please," said Behar.

The girl put a hand wearily to her head, twitched her scarf-turban into place, rose and walked into the main room. Her small chin was set defiantly, she flashed an odd look at Wayne. He knew she was going to go on fighting.

"You still will answer no questions on the Star of Burma, Diana Fentress? We have gone over your person during your unconsciousness and know you have not got it with you. Now where have you hidden it?"

"You will never know," said Diana"

"We have some very forcible means at our command," stated Behar. His professional mask had slipped, he was a cold and ruthless criminal.

The girl's head came up. "Still you won't find out. Since you know that I've got it I know who killed my uncle." Shock ran through Wayne. His pulses pounded. Diana Fentress Mason was the niece of Angus Belding. Desperate as was the situation he felt a surge of relief. Now the truth was coming out.

"You are very bright." Dr. Behar bowed.

"Your trailer, this man Reddy, was waiting for me in the corridor outside Paul Goodman's private jeweler's office on Madison Avenue when I took the Star there just as it was getting dark. No newspapers were out yet with the story, only someone who had seen the receipt I gave my uncle for the Star would know who had it and where she was headed for with it. There was no mention of the receipt I left on the desk in the newspaper account, therefore the murderer took it."

"A woman's intuition is a wonderful thing, Miss Fentress." From his coat pocket Behar drew a folded sheet of notepaper. "On the stationery of Mrs. Charles Mason, 150A East 53rd Street. I quote, 'Receipt for the Star of Burma to be delivered to Paul Goodman for sale by him on commission at a minimum price of $200,000. The undersigned is authorized to deliver the same.

Signed, Diana Fentress
Approved, Angus Belding.'

A most formal business document. You are an excellent business woman. Yes, I took this from the desk-top in front of the dead body of Angus Belding. The old fool had a mad courage. When I covered him he reached for a gun in his desk drawer and he had it out. So I had to shoot him and your receipt told all. The wall safe behind his desk was still ajar, it had only private papers in it."

"So you went into Belding's apartment house with a doctor's bag and a professional air," cut in Birnie. "Doctors are always

going in and out of those swank spots. I suppose you got out a couple of floors below Belding and walked up the stairs that are always back of the fire doors?".

"Two flights above. I knew the butler was at the movies on his afternoon off, as we have cased his routine for a long time. A doctor's bag, yes, also an instrument that will open any apartment door. I was in Angus Belding's library with a gun at his head before he even dreamed anybody had gotten entrance. There happens to be no safe made I cannot open with these fingers." Behar flexed the long, artistic fingers, smiling.

"You have noted that this office is not five blocks from Angus Belding's residence? I came back immediately and went into action with Reddy and the others, who were waiting. Goodman was in the phone book, naturally, I phoned and asked if Miss Diana Fentress had arrived there. The clerk said yes, but Mr. Paul Goodman was out and would not be back until late. Miss Fentress had left word she would return at six, it was important. So Reddy was watching there prepared for a jewel snatch, but other people came into the corridor so he could make no move. It happened Mr. Goodman never came back at all, his clerk closed up."

"You dirty murderer!" said Birnie.

"A killing is deplorable but sometimes necessary in a high-class jewel robbery. Sometimes one killing leads to others in order to cover the first, Miss Fentress." Behar's voice became steely. "You will tell us where the Star of Burma is or—" He motioned toward the instrument-filled cabinet. "I am a doctor. I know where the nerves of the human body are located. Do you want to be a shaking wreck?"

"You'd do that. You hound!" blazed Wayne. Such rage as he had never known before swept him.

"The choice is up to Miss Fentress."

"And I say, no!" flashed the girl.

Behar raised his hand and stroked his Van Dyke thoughtfully with his artistic fingers. He seemed to have slipped back into his medical personality, he gave the appearance of a doctor pondering a difficult case.

"It seems we shall have to retreat a little in order to advance. Let me go over the past again. When Reddy came up behind you on the street a block from Goodman's office you shook him off by darting into the nearest cocktail lounge that of the Sefton. There you happily met this old friend and presumably beau of yours. Reddy could catch practically all you said and he was expertly fended off. Shall we hazard a guess as to your happiness in meeting this old friend Mr. Thompson? Shall we say that once you were in love with him, that he went to the Pacific and in those four years you gave him up and married another? Were you in love with Jim Thompson?"

Diana's eyelashes blinked suddenly. "He was like a brother to me." Her eyes glistened wetly.

"So you were in love with Jim Thompson. You still are. The threat of force has failed, now we fall back on psychology, the mental attack which can hurt still more. Reddy, put this Jim Thompson up against the end of the examination table. Give me that gun with the silencer and stand away. Keep the house covered, Higgs and Torrance."

WAYNE stood against the bottom end of the table where he had been forced. He rested his hands on it.

"Lean over a little, Thompson. Good, now you will fall forward."

The gun with the silencer, passed to Behar, was up and aimed at Wayne's heart. At any second its bullet would go crashing through. A sudden stillness fell on the brilliantly lit room, into it there came only a single sound, a queer thumping rhythm from the street outside, approaching at an even pace. It was as though a blind man was tapping his way along with a stick.

"Now, Diana Fentress," said Dr. Behar. "You will tell where the star of Burma is or I shall shoot Jim Thompson."

Every vestige of color drained from Diana's face.

"Do you want me to shoot the man you are still in love with? I shall count three. One—"

"No, no!" broke from Diana. "For God's sake, don't shoot!"

"Diana!" said Wayne hoarsely. His hands had shifted gripping the edges of the castor-mounted table, the knuckles white. "Don't give in. I'm not Jim Thompson."

"You're not—what?" The exclamation broke from Behar but his gun stayed up and steady.

"I'm not Jim Thompson, Diana. I just must look like him. I didn't want to see you go along as you would have if I'd corrected you in that cocktail lounge. I wanted to—to —see more of you. I'm nothing in your life. Look carefully at me, I'm not Jim Thompson."

A strange light glowed in the girl's eyes. "I know you're not, you never were. Jim Thompson, my brother's best friend, married my best friend. He never came back from the Pacific. I just used you, I'm afraid. But—"

"I'm nothing in your life," reiterated Wayne.

"Aren't you? You helped a total stranger, didn't you, simply because you're what you are and so did your friend Birnie. I had no claim on you to make you take the risks, but you did."

"Ah!" said Dr. Behar. An insane triumph lit his face. "Psychology wins. Love at first sight wins. Two!"

His trigger finger curled.

"Diana, don't—"

"Miss Fentress in one second more I get this man. Where is the Star of Burma?"

"Here!" Diana's hand swept to her turban-scarf and tugged. The scarf broke and unwound, falling to her shoulders. She reached into the mass of honey-colored hair, roughened upwards on top of her head, and the small black leather case came out. She flung it for the table. "There! There's your Star of Burma!"

The case struck the examination table in front of Behar, bounced and hit the floor. It broke wide open, spilling its contents and the lustrous emerald glowed on the carpeting. Behar's eyes swerved, the eyes of Reddy and English Eddie and the third man swerved to catch its glorious lucence. And Wayne acted.

"Birnie, go! Diana, on the floor!"

His hands that had been gripping the edge of the table on rollers, as he waited for the shock of the bullet, thrust forward. Driving on its perfectly oiled bearings the table was a missile, a projectile. It crashed into the stomach of Behar, propelled with every ounce of muscle that Wayne possessed. Birnie reacted like lightning, his bunched fist drove practically from his knee and took Reddy, standing close to him, on the chin.

"Police! Break that window! In here!" roared Birnie. "Dive, Dave! I've got Reddy's gun!"

Birnie had it, wrenched from Reddy's grip as the butcherlike man sagged at the knees. He fired instantly, one shot straight up at the overhead globe. Glass crashed, the room plunged into darkness. Wayne, leaping forward, got Diana about the waist and flung her onto the floor under the table. Shot after shot split the dark, Behar was firing, knocked breathless for only a moment, English Eddie was firing. Flame spurted back from the flooring. More glass crashed as the entire frosted window, giving onto the side-street, split open and a nightstick slammed through. As the pane went two guns came in and behind them bulked figures in blue, limned by the arclight across the street.

"Get your hands up, every damned one of you!" barked the order through the broken window.

"Okay, Officer!" shouted Birnie. "I'm a detective in here. Come in the side door." The room burst into light and Wayne saw Birnie, crouching under the lampstand at the side wall, hand to its switch "Rolled over here out of the line of fire, Dave. Got 'em, I guess."

The third man, Torrance, leaned limply against the wall, one arm shattered by a bullet, and Reddy lay on the floor, his eyes still stupidly glazed. English Eddie stood shaking from head to foot. The guns were on the floor and Wayne scooped one up. He heard the officers' footsteps outside in the vestibule, the smash of knocking on its main door.

"I'll let 'em in the secret exit," said Birnie. "We've got the crew."

"We haven't," said Wayne. "Behar has made his getaway." The Austrian doctor had disappeared utterly. From behind the table in the dark he had vanished as though he had never existed. On the floor there was no Star of Burma. It too had gone. Wayne groaned. "He had an out somewhere."

"Open up!" the voice sounded from beyond the consulting room. "Open up, you!" The knocking in the vestibule redoubled.

"Coming!" called Birnie. He moved into the psychiatric room. Mechanically Wayne followed him as far as its entrance. Birnie swung the getaway door open and a gray-haired sergeant and a brawny young patrolman stepped in. "Jewel thieves, Sergeant."

said Birnie. "And damn them, their big-shot, who killed Angus Belding, got away with the Star of Burma."

"No," said Diana quietly. "He didn't. "Look!" She pointed to the corner of the room where the listening screen stood. Its base was a few inches from the floor and in that opening a well-shod foot showed. "In there."

Wayne went forward and around the screen. There was the psychiatrist's desk on which he took his notes, the note pads and something else. The Star of Burma glowed on the desk top, just beyond the tips of Behar's fingers as though in his last trapped seconds he had been caressing it. Behar's body slumped over the desk, the pistol with the silencer lay on the floor where it had fallen from his hand after the shot had been fired under cover of the knocking that had torn into his brain.

IV

"THIS is really necessary," said Wayne. He lifted the highball of Scotch and water and Diana lifted hers. They were sitting on a lounge in Dr. Behar's reception room on the Park Avenue side and Birnie could be heard talking over the telephone in the small office that gave off it, the door half-closed. "Trust a house detective to be able to find a stimulant somewhere in a doctor's office. By the time Birnie is through all the loose ends will be wound up. Diana, you're a very, very smart girl."

"I had to be," she answered.

"I came across the Star in your sponge bag by chance. It was a wonderful hiding place."

"Then I changed my mind, I got nervous I guess and wanted to have it where I could feel it when I waited for Paul Goodman to come in with the $200,000. Then that man came through the window and—"

"English Eddie will be away for a long while," said Wayne grimly. "So will Reddy and the other, Torrance. Diana, I never dreamed you were Angus Belding's niece. The paper said no known relatives."

"I've only been in New York for two weeks. I came on from Denver to take a job on a magazine. Uncle Angus and I were never close, he had no contact with young people, but he trusted me. As a matter of fact I only visited him in his apartment twice, both times when the butler was out, so the man didn't know I existed. A jewel like the Star of Burma has to be sold very quietly, Uncle Angus was pressed for money due to a slump in the stock market, so he called on me. Naturally, I was nervous carrying a fortune like that around in my handbag. That's why I packed the gun. When I found I'd have to come back to Mr. Goodman's office I went around the corner to the Business Women's Club where I have a guest card and spent the time in the library. Then I went back and Reddy—you know the rest. I took advantage of you. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"No," said Wayne fervently.

"I was really afraid. The instant I dodged into the Sefton I saw you and you do look like Jim Thompson. So I switched my ring to the wedding finger and put on the act, because you seemed—" She paused.

"Yes?"

"The average young American a girl could turn to who wouldn't pull the wolf business. High School and State College probably, maybe on some varsity team, then the war and no doubt an officer."

"You have recited my entire autobiography," smiled Wayne. "So you promptly married me off and yourself as well to keep our relations platonic."

"I sublet Jane Mason's apartment. She and her husband are in California. So Mrs. Charles Mason was a good identity for a casual acquaintance. I figured I could safely invite you around for a drink after ditching the trailer and send you along before Paul Goodman showed up."

"You should be on the stage not a magazine."

"If you had denied being Jim Thompson I figured I could go all confused and pass it off as a mistake, after which we could have a laugh together while Reddy was still held off. But you accepted the role of Jim Thompson, who was the salt of the earth, poor chap, and I suppose we should have fallen in love with each other but we didn't."

"Diana," said Wayne. He stopped. Birnie was coming out of the office.

"I am now through as public relations officer, boys and girls," announced Birnie. "The D. A. and half of Homicide are on the

way. I got Goodman at his home and he arrived at your apartment just after Dave and I left with Eddie, Diana, but couldn't get in. He'll meet you at his office at ten tomorrow morning with the certified check or cash. The Robinson ambulance I called had just been notified by the police that they've found the ambulance with Moriarty, tied, gagged and unconscious inside it, over by the Hudson River, where one of the gang abandoned it after bringing you here. Behar put up a marvelous doctor's front stopping by for it in person with his crew on the way to a mental case. And the hospital said—"

"Poor Uncle Angus!" breathed the girl.

BIRNIE'S face broke into a broad grin. "The real news, the best news for the last. Dr. Glendinning, about the best brain surgeon in New York, pulled another of his miracles. Angus Belding will live. The bullet's out."

"But the radio newscast! The City News Station!" exclaimed Wayne.

"A nurse up at Mercy Hospital has a boy friend in the station newsroom. She tips him off on the quiet whenever a celebrity is brought into Mercy. This time she out-did herself to give the boy friend a real radio scoop. She killed off Angus Belding, thinking he had no chance. The eminent Dr. Glendinning is far from pleased."

"Uncle Angus will live? Thank God!" murmured Diana.

"So we're about all cleared up," said Birnie. "Diana, you sure were on a hot spot with everything pointing to you. The Star in your hands, the lipstick case on the desk, your gun fired—"

"It was Charles Mason's gun. He must have fired it some time or other, I have no idea when. Maybe at a yowling cat."

Birnie shrugged. "Who cares? Now the last thing is for me to go down the hall and try to fix the fire hydrant parking charge against Dave, here, who's due for court if I don't."

"Fire hydrant parking, Birnie? You're nuts!"

"Not nuts, Dave," grinned Birnie. "Insurance. I was driving your bus, as I pulled up in front of this dump I spotted the patrolman's call-box on the corner and the fire hydrant. Just to be sure a copper would be in the offing I parked your car bang up against the hydrant. So what? The patrolman came along on his rounds, banging his nightstick on the pavement just as I used to do when I was bored, and he had a sergeant with him. They spot the car, don't they? I heard the nightstick rapping stop right outside that office window—I knew who was there. Then I hollered copper and the whole window smacked open when the shooting started. That was no coincidence. We dicks have our own ways of summoning the law but you don't see us do it."

"Birnie, you are far from dumb." Wayne grinned back.

"Not only am I far from dumb, I hope, but I am most helpful," said Birnie. "From here I suggest we take the Star of Burma over to the Sefton, which is about three blocks from Paul Goodman's office on Madison, and stash it in the safe overnight. In the morning Diana can take it out and the two of us will bodyguard her up to Goodman's. I'll carry the old rod."

"Marvelous, House Dick Birnie. Staff work again," said Wayne. Diana nodded and there was relief on her face.

"She gets the check or the cash, the check, I'd suggest. If you like, Diana, you can endorse that $200,000 beauty over to the account of Angus Belding, for deposit only, and I'll take it down to his bank while you and Dave here look over Mr. Paul Goodman's stock."

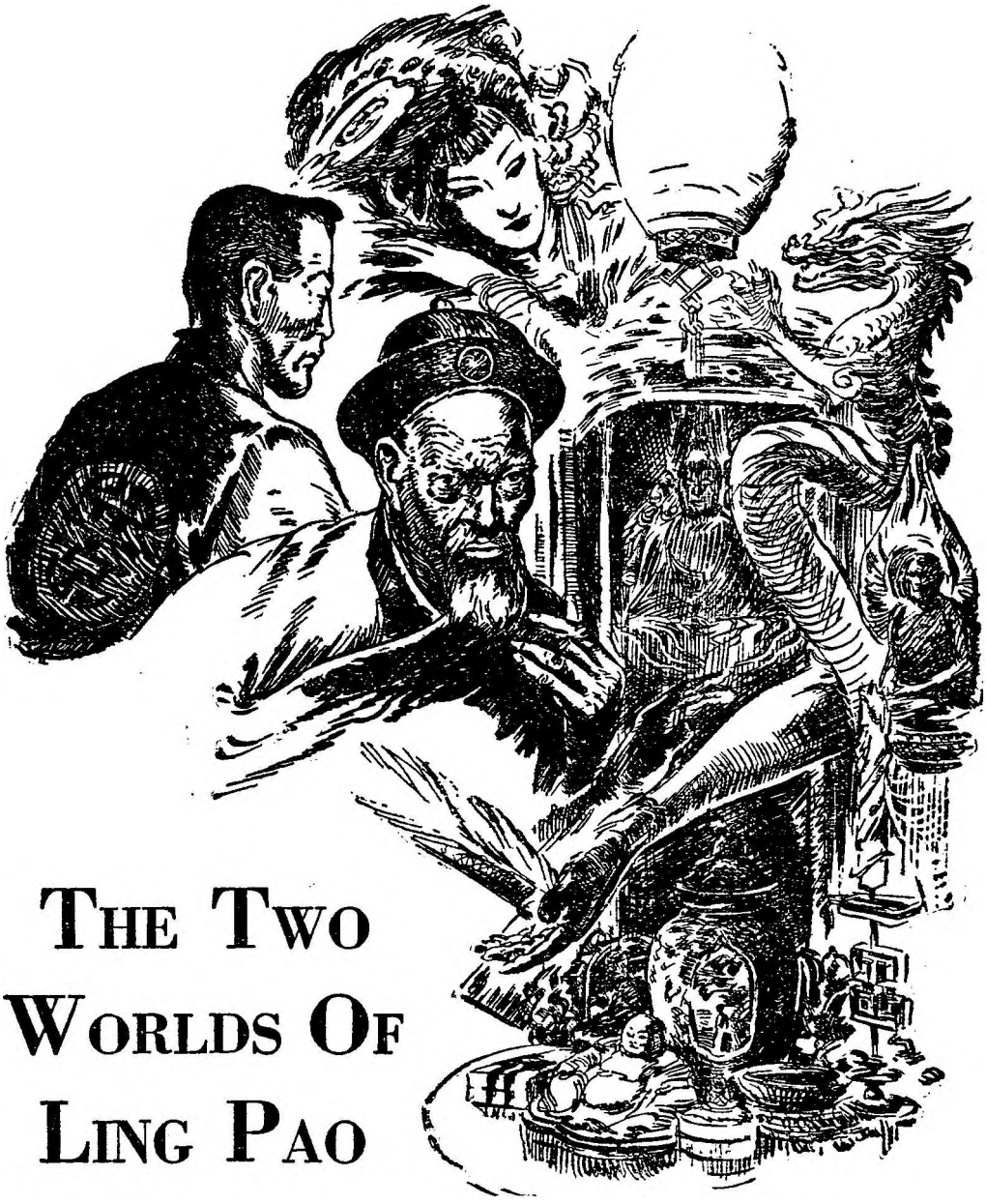
"Look over Paul Goodman's stock?" ejaculated Wayne. "If you weren't nuts the first time you are now."

Birnie turned at the entrance to the corridor that led back into the examination room where the prisoners still waited under the cover of police guns.

"Private jeweler. Rings. Most expensive, but one should last a lifetime. Think it over, Dave."

He shouldered off, closing the door quietly. Wayne looked at Diana. He didn't have to think it over. He knew. And so, from the look in her eyes did she.

Though the Seven Laws of the Ancients Were Against Change, There Might Be Futility in Carrying Traditions to Too Great a Degree



THE TWO WORLDS OF LING PAO

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

IT WAS said of gentle Ling Pao that he was an honorable man. There were those who held it against him that he had gone so far from the old teachings that he would train for years in a white man's school, when it was known for a fact that his father and his father's father and his father's father's father could neither read nor write. And they, too, had been physicians, fine upstanding men who exorcised pain with powdered toad and tiger bone elixir.

His schooling lay long before, of course, for now his hair was thin and snowy-white and the fullness gone from his fine chin whiskers. But there was still straightness in his back, and his wrinkled hands were strong and gentle in the alleviation of pain.

He was of the modern world, of course, his office lined with books he studied through square-rimmed spectacles, and honors had come his way from learned men. But he was of the old world, too; and many were the shuffling men and women who had asked for powdered shark's teeth or a tonic of distilled crocodile blood. They had not been disappointed, for he had furnished the things for which they asked, and mostly his payment had been their thanks, for his neighborhood was poor, rich only in traditional memories and respect for other's rights.

And if he added a bit of modern drugs to the things for which he was asked, then that was his knowledge, his alone, and no harm was done. His task was to heal the sick, and it was his favorite belief that illness sometimes lies in a man's mind, and to ease the mind is to relieve the body.

Which, of course, is the truth, but not a thing for a man of medicine to bandy about in conversation, for medicine is steeped in mystery, particularly among those of Dr. Ling Pao's race.

But it was not of medicine he thought this evening as he sat before the small coal fire in his apartment. A magazine lay across his knees and atop it lay his spectacles, both laid aside for the moment. Jasmine tea steamed in a fragile cup on the nearby table, its fragrance like stealthy perfume to his senses.

He thought of Mei Mei, the daughter of an ancient friend, her face as exotic as a quince blossom, tilted eyes as gay and laughing as though all life lay before her for the glorious taking. She was slim, almost boyishly so, yet she was feminine, curves softly drawn, the coquetry and desires of a woman full-flung in her heart.

He thought of Yom Kee, too, stalwart in his youth, his mind like a Manchu's knife, cutting through sham and pretense and finding the kernel of truth in everything. Already was a brilliant career predicted for him in courts of law, for he was diligent and rapacious for knowledge. He was like Dr. Ling had been in his youth, ambitious and almost headstrong, yearning to help himself and his people, always striving to further himself.

It was with these two that Ling Pao was concerned. They were in love, their youth crying out to each other. Their glances were lovers' caresses, and their few words told more to each other than a volume of poetry could to normal people. They were in love, and their wishes were futile, for custom is a thing which changes slowly, if at all, and their marriage could not be.

That was the terrible thing. Once, marriage had been in Ling Pao's mind. She had been as dainty as a gazelle, her sloe eyes looking at him from afar, for by custom he could not speak to her until full arrangements had been made for a wedding. And then, after words had been spoken by the elders, and a settlement agreed upon he had discovered that there was an opportunity to travel to the new world for the studying of medicine.

He had come, of course. No man could do other than that. She had stayed behind, her heart filled with his promises to return. There had been tears, hers bright and unashamed, his hidden deep within, for a man cannot cry except in the dark recesses of his heart.

The time had been long, filled with lessons and dreary jobs to eke out his existence. But progress had been made; and so finally came the day when she might come to him over the trackless miles of ocean. And it was on that day the message came that never could she be his bride, for death had sneaked in and folded her in his sable robe.

Some things had died for him that night, never to live again. Some had died and others had grown; yet because he was what he was, there was never another to take her place. His work had become his bride, lone thanks and well bodies his caresses. And so in many ways his life had been almost full.

BUT now, remembering Mei Mei and Yom Kee, it was as though he lived again, the situation almost the same, for word had come from the elders that no marriage could take place.

"It is a blood reckoning," Sum Duck had said, his veined hands trembling with his

years. "There is naught which can be done."

Dr. Ling Pao had argued no further then. He understood custom and knew his words would be of no avail. Somewhere, some time, there had been a feud between the people of Mei Mei and Yom Kee. Over what, and when it had happened, no one knew. Not that it mattered. Tradition and family pride were long, and custom must be kept, even at someone's sacrifice.

But still it was a tragic thing, and so Ling Pao sat in his study, pondering this and that, striving to find a loophole in old ways so that a slender girl and a stalwart young man might find their hearts' desire.

As always at night he wore his robe of heavy silk, the family marking in black against the crimson and yellow dyes. The Lings were a great family, their history a fine one of great deeds and gentle compassion. They had walked with great men and fought with humble. An Empress had lived because one had known a secret to rid her of the dragon in her vitals, and so a title had come to the family because of her pleasure.

Had he chosen Mei Mei, even at his age, none could have complained. Ling blood was good, and none would have found fault with a man whose veins carried such blood into a union.

But Yom Kee was not such a man. His origin was humble, born of farmers in the North of China. Great deeds and great people lay not in his family's history, and so he could claim no heritage to bolster his plea. He was but a young man on the threshold of a brilliant career, caught in the whirlpool of a feud of which none knew the origin. "Bah!" Ling Pao said to the gilded joss squatting benevolently in the corner. "Some customs, like wens, should be knifed from the body of my people."

And then because his thoughts went too deep for words, he sat and brooded darkly. A servant came softly and refilled his fragile cup of Jasmine tea, then drifted away; and the doctor gave no heed, for his mind spun endlessly like a weathervane in a storm, not knowing which way to point.

He heard the soft tinkling of the bell at his door, and then the quiet words of his servant came down the hall. He stirred, turning, wondering who might be ill this night that he should call so late. More words were spoken; first the protestations of the servant, then a higher voice, demanding admittance.

"Who is it?" Ling Pao cried out.

"Mei Mei," a girl's voice came, and then she was in the room, coming toward him with outstretched hands.

SHE was lovely, even his years permitted him to know that fact. She was not a woman he would have chosen for his own, for his memory served as a mirror to reflect his desires. Yet she was beautiful, and he knew the fact. He held no blame for Yom Kee and his wishes.

She was short, of course, as most women were, and her hair was of the darkness of polished ebony. Her features were even, her teeth of the whiteness of new ivory, and there was the blush of health in her skin which made the doctor suddenly conscious of his years and infirmities.

"What do you do here at this hour?" Ling Pao said gently. "And without an Amah for protection."

He saw the unshed tears standing in her eyes, saw them, and the first feeling of shock at her impropriety vanished as chaff in a high breeze. He took her hands and drew her to a seat beside him on a low divan, his eyes giving orders to the servant at the door. Within a second, another cup sat beside the first on the table, and fresh tea was being poured.

"Is there hope?" Mei Mei asked then, and he felt her urgency in the tremor of slender fingers. "I have not spoken to Yom Kee since two days past, and I am suddenly more afraid than ever."

Ling Pao sought for words and found none. Instead, he bent and caught up the tea cups, handing the first ceremoniously to the girl. He watched her drink, while sipping at his own cup, and slowly a measure of control came to her.

"He wants me to run away with him," she said finally, not looking at the doctor. "He wants me to leave with him in four days."

"And shall you?" Ling Pao asked gently.

She shivered unconsciously. "I do not know," she said. "My heart tells me that we belong together."

"And so!" Ling Pao persisted.

"I do not know."

Ling Pao swirled the fragrant tea in the

translucent cup. The joss stared blandly at him from inscrutable eyes, a thread of incense smoke swirling upward from the brass cup at its base. He could see the medical books, side by side with roll-scripts of his people. His stethoscope lay on a side table, and next to it rested the mummified body of a frog, which ground and powdered became a medicine of fecundity for barren women, or so they believed.

It was a strange room, of the old and of the new, and in their very blending lay a clash of tradition and knowledge. And he knew, too, he was like the room, for in him lay modern knowledge and ancient tradition. He knew by the seven laws that Mei Mei and Yom Kee could not marry; and yet because he had seen other changes, he saw the futility of carrying tradition and custom to too great a degree.

"I talked to Sum Duck," he said evenly, "and he tells me that no marriage can take place. Choose any man but him, choose any man whose veins carry another family's blood, and you shall have your heart's desire. Is such a thing possible?"

She looked directly at him, and deep in her eyes he found his answer, for he had seen such a light before in another woman's eyes. But then it had been for him, and to remember it was to turn a keen blade in a hidden wound which never could heal.

"He is my chosen," she said gently. "I want no other."

The tea was gone, yet its perfume hung in the still air. The joss no longer smiled; its face brooded now, the plume of smoke dead and vanished. Wood creaked overhead, and the soft shuffle of the servant's feet were clearly audible from the cooking room.

"I will speak with the elders once more," Dr. Ling Pao said quietly.

"And they will listen," Mei Mei said eagerly. "Your family is great."

He shook his head. "They will listen, for by the rules of courtesy they must. But understand, this is not an affair of my family, and so my words carry but little weight."

"But Sum Duck is your friend. He would have lost his eyes had you not saved them with your skill."

"That is another matter entirely. In matters such as these, friendship carries but little weight." He arose, lifting her to his side, one arm thrown protectingly about her slender shoulders. "Give a thought to this running away," he finished. "Happiness is born of love, and love hidden in far places, away from people and a man's work sometimes dies before full blossoming."

And then she was gone, walking with her slim grace through the door and down the hall. The servant appeared, and the doctor smiled, for the man was dressed for the street.

"See that she arrives safely at her home," Ling Pao said, and the servant bobbed his head in understanding.

ALONE, Dr. Ling Pao circled the library for minutes, his pacing slowing finally, until he stood at last before the desk, staring unseeingly into space. He combed his sparse whiskers with his fingers, the tendrils of his thoughts whipping about, seeking to grasp anything which might bring a solution.

He realized this was not rightfully his problem. By certain standards he was interfering. Yet, he told himself, with so little happiness in the world, surely he was not wrong in seeking to further what there was.

He loved Mei Mei as though she were his granddaughter, for he had known her family for years; they had visited in his home, and many was the meal he had partaken from their hospitality. It was as though she were a part of his youth recaptured, and selfishly he wanted to help.

His relationship to Yom Kee, though, was different. Had he had a younger brother, he could have wished for nobody different from Yom Kee. Ambitious and intelligent, full of the surge of living and yet mannered in the ten thousand rituals, knowing his rights, and yet deferring to the judgment of age, he was a fine man, worthy of any family, despite his humble beginning.

That he and Mei Mei should not be married was a crime in Ling Pao's eyes. He understood custom, and he believed in it. But even as laws must change with different civilizations, then traditions must change with different generations. The world moved more swiftly than people, and ideas sometimes remained stagnant in the backwash of life's stream.

He turned from the room, going toward

his sleeping chambers. There, he changed robe and slippers, wearing the finer one which hung behind the bed, and placing felt slippers of crimson and gold on his feet. He combed his hair and whiskers carefully, then blew out the lamp and emerged in the hallway. The servant was not yet back, and so he left a note, writing with a brush on white rice paper with quick skill. Then he left the house.

He smiled at the weight of the doctor's satchel in his hand. Even on an errand such as this he could not forget his calling. Emergencies might arise, as they had done countless times before. And if they did, then he must be prepared to wield his skill.

LUM FONG, the rice seller, bobbed a greeting from behind his baskets, and Koo Chee, the money lender, called greetings from where he squatted in his cubby-office, a string of cash across his lap. He went on, conscious of the voices which made the air melodious, of the thousand and one odors which filled the street. He stepped aside to let a jinriksha pass, and bowed gracefully in return to the greeting from the white officer from one of the ships in the harbor. He felt a thrill of selfish pride that even such men as this knew and respected him.

At the Street of the Four Moons he swung to the left, pausing to watch a street magician do his act. He smiled at the vanishing of five chicks and their rapid reproduction from empty hands. His fingers flexed automatically, as though they held competition in dexterity with the dirty ones and their magic gifts.

Then he strode on, taking the alleyways which led to the Street of Law, and there he climbed one flight of stairs and entered a small office. Yom Kee looked up from where he pored over a great green-bound volume, and his eyes smiled his welcome.

"Enter, most welcomed," he said in the way of the ten thousand rituals. "I am honored."

"I am the honored," Dr. Ling Pao said graciously. "For interruptions to a busy man are most irksome."

He sat on a straight chair, spreading his robe in all of its glory, bending his thanks as a cigarette was offered. He accepted a light, and then leaned back, idly smoking, waiting for the propitious moment in which to speak. It came at last, and he was proud of Yom Kee's patience in waiting him out."

"I go to the elders," Ling Pao said. "I do not know of what I shall talk; I only know that I shall speak many words. They concern you, and so I thought it possible you might choose to be at my side when my speech is made."

Grimness lay in the young man's face. His skin was dark, his eyes startlingly so. He wore his hair short, for he was of a new generation, but he did not wear western clothes, as did so many these days, and Ling Pao was glad of that.

"Shall I be given the right to speak?" Yom Kee asked. "This is a matter most close to me, and I think I have the right."

Ling Pao shrugged, his face inscrutable. "I cannot say," he said. "The elders must decide upon such things."

"Then let us go," Yom Kee said, and there was a sudden rush of blood to his face. "I grow weary of many things. I respect the dead and their rights, but I think a hand has stretched across too many graves in this instance."

"And I," Ling Pao agreed.

Their hands brushed as they crushed cigarettes in the brass table bowl and their smiles went deep into each other, searching for and finding a friendship born of deep understanding. Then they left the office, going down the steps, Ling Pao first as was his right, and on the street they turned to the left.

Yom Kee was taller by a bit, but then the years had sapped the doctor's height as it had his body. Their steps were of a sameness, and an onlooker would have been hard put to find the more youthful in their steps had he not seen their faces.

They paced rapidly, going down the Street of Law and turning off it into the neighborhood of great houses sheltered and protected by walls twice the height of a man. Through this they went, coming at last to the district of restaurants, lanterns glowing in the night, the odors of fish and rice and frying shrimp like beckoning fingers urging them to enter the wide-flung doors.

Past the Abode of Ten Thousand Delicacies, Ling Pao rapped his knuckles on an iron-ribboned gate; and when it came open,

he gave his name and entered the small courtyard. A servant bowed low, then scuttled ahead to give the news to the elders who waited for the doctor within their chamber.

Ling Pao caught a glimpse of Yom Kee's features. They were set now, for this was his one chance to make his claim. As a man of law his voice and his mind were his weapons of attack and defense, yet even he knew that they might avail him nothing against traditions which had been ancient long before his father's father's father was conceived.

THEIR footsteps were slow and muffled on the crushed-shell walk. The garden was fragrant with soft perfume, and the slow plashing of a fountain at the rear gave peace to everything. Flowers grew in splendid patterns, crimson and blue and the palest of yellows. There was quiet here, as though the city was a place far away.

Dr. Ling Pao breathed deeply. It seemed to him then that too much of his life was spent away from beauty. Such a garden as this he had always wanted, a retreat where flowers and green shrubs could be his patients. But never had the reality come; always had he been too busy with others to spend time upon himself.

He went ahead, standing beside the door of the house, with Yom Kee at his side, impatience and a vague disquiet drawing them together. Ling Pao knew the futility of the visit, yet he could not do otherwise than to come.

And Yom Kee was like a statue, rigid with impatience, his face stern and forbidding with the tenor of his thoughts. He was young, and the heated blood of youth ran in his veins. There might be trouble, serious trouble, if he were denied what he thought was his right.

The door came open. Ling Pao kicked aside his slippers and entered, followed by Yom Kee. The hallway was dim, the patterned walls close and crowding. Ahead, yellow light spilled from a doorway, and the scent of sandalwood incense made the air light and fragrant.

The servant bowed humbly and withdrew, and the two men entered the council-chamber of the elders.

They sat like caricatures of graven statues, only their eyes alive, hands folded in their laps, their legs crossed and their backs straight. None moved, except Sum Duck, and his words were slow and even.

"Enter, Esteemed Doctor and Honored Lawyer," he said.

"It is a privilege unfit for so unworthy a man as myself," Ling Pao said ceremoniously, and sat before the long low table, crossing his legs and settling his fine robe of silk.

"I deem it an honor," Yom Kee said quietly, and thumbed his chin respectfully at the elders.

He sat at the doctor's side, his eyes going from man to man, searching for an answer and finding only mirror-eyes which reflected everything and told nothing.

The elders were five. Sum Duck was there, his face terribly scarred from the bombing which had almost taken his life. Sum Long was at his left, his face round and fat with good living, his hair short and oilily black on his high skull. Wu Sao was at the side of Sum Long, thin with the illness of the lungs which had come to him in the Japanese prison. For a moment his eyes flicked friendliness at Ling Pao, then he coughed harshly into a silk handkerchief, wiping his mouth as the spasm passed.

The last two were younger than the others, although there was whiteness in their hair. One was Sum Lien and the other was Wu Tze, who was a merchant on the Street of the Silver Dog. They waited patiently, for Sum Duck would do the speaking and give their views.

"This is," Sum Duck said at last, "a difficult thing for me to say. I know this man, this Yom Kee whose clever tongue has made him a great man in the Street of Law. I know him and I respect him, for he has come far along a path beset with hazards. I count him as my friend, as I count few men. So let it be understood that there is only friendship and grief mingled in my heart."

Yom Kee made as if to talk, then went silent at the instant pressure of Ling Pao's hand upon his knee. Rich blood lay in his face, and he bit his lip in growing anger.

Ling Pao bent his head gravely. "I understand how you must feel," he said, "for Yom Kee is like a brother to me." He chose his words carefully. "And so because he

might be my brother, I wish to talk for him, as though I were an elder of his family. He is alone, his parents and his sisters dead in the last war. He is a man and can speak for himself; yet because I am old, I thought it best that I should plead his case."

He paused, and the elders nodded in unison, like puppets controlled by the same string. They watched, and their faces were impassive, their eyes clouded with their thinking. Only Sum Duck had animation, and he watched through eyes which Ling Pao and the American doctors had saved three years before with incredible skill and plasma and shining knives and keen-pointed needles.

"You have said this man is good," Ling Pao continued. "His name bears no shame. He is honest and ambitious, and his love for the girl bursts like sunrise in his heart. He will make a fine and honest husband, a splendid father." He trod on dangerous ground now, and he sought for words which would be right. "There is a blood-feud, an old reckoning which was born so many years ago that none of us knows why it was begun. Men died in that feud. Women cried, and many foul deeds were done in its name.

"I know of blood-feuds, for the Lings have two. But my family knows the cause of its feuds, and so can act accordingly. But not this one which separates a maid and a man. And so, because of that, I say this blood-feud must be put aside. A wedding must be held, and in the welding of the bloods all the past must be forgotten and new happiness brought forth."

LING PAO stopped his words. He had made his plea, made it in the face of an opposition all the more terrible because it was so passive. Were this medicine, he would know how to proceed; were this law, then Yom Kee could do what must be done. But because this was custom and tradition, because the threads of this matter vanished into the past, controlled by those long dead, a losing battle was being fought.

Sum Duck drew in his breath. "By custom," he said, "this wedding cannot be. This man is a Yom and the girl is a Sum, and the two may not marry. It is not of our choosing, for we are of a mind that the man is more than worthy. But our decision must be made against the marriage, for custom has decreed it, and we, as the elders, cannot go against that which is part of our family honor."

Yom Kee sobbed deep in his throat. He fought a wall of wind with bare hands, and the battle went against him. His mouth was tight, his nostrils distended.

"I speak in my behalf, Oh, Honorable Men," he said, despite Ling Pao's restraining hand. "I tell you this; I want no other bride than Mei Mei, and I shall have no other. I am an honest man, and I tell you truthfully that we shall be wedded."

The elders straightened, their gazes swinging from Yom Kee to Sum Duck. There was silence, except for the whispering of breeze through the glass chimes hanging from the ceiling. This was a challenge, a challenge which must be met.

Sum Duck drew his hands apart from their concealing sleeves. In one lay a short-handled hatchet, its gleaming head slender and razor-sharp. In the other lay a feather, incredibly white, its tip marked with red ink.

"The choice is yours, Yom Kee," Sum Duck said quietly. "But let it be understood that these symbolize the action which will take place once your decision is made. If you choose to ignore tradition, then the hatchet shall be yours. If not, then the quill will signify peace. But understand this, the girl may be your bride, yet she will never be your wife."

He laid the hatchet and feather upon the low table, and once again his hands were hidden in his sleeves. There was tension in the room now, born of desperation and implacable wills meeting and contending.

Dr. Ling Pao shivered, a thought crossing his mind.

"Custom is a fine thing, an honored treasure of every family," he said softly. "I am a man of two worlds, both of which I respect. But laws change, and so should custom."

"The man is a Yom and the girl a Sum," Sum Duck said imperturbably.

"And if he were not a Yom?" Ling Pao probed, thoughts fitting neatly into place in his mind.

"If that were so," Sum Duck said gravely, "then there would be no need for talk such as this. Papers would be signed, banns would be placed. There would be feasting

and much merriment; for as I have said, Yom Kee is a fine man."

DR. LING PAO smiled. "Then he shall be a Ling," he said quietly. "I am without a son, and so he shall be my son. He shall be a Ling, for I shall adopt him and endow him with all that is mine."

He felt the thrill of a battle won then. He felt a surge of excitement such as came only when a patient began to look again at life with hopeful eyes. He had found a solution, an ending, and there could be no complaints against it. His family was respected, more it was a powerful one, with men in high places. To feud with it was folly, particularly new feuding.

Sum Duck shook his head from side to side, and like their speaker the other elders copied the movement.

"It cannot be," Sum Duck said. "Our family history shows that such a thing was done long long ago, and it was not accepted. This man could bear your name, but Ling blood would not flow in his veins. He would be a masquerader, and so it would be trickery."

Yom Kee came to his feet then. He stood and towered over the seated elders, and his hands were clenched fists.

"So be it," he said. "Now have you talked, and I have said but little. I care not what a man did against a man so many years ago that even history is dust. You have said your say and now I say mine."

He bent and caught the hatchet, and it swung in a glittering arc. He buried the head for half its length in the table top, and a crack streaked the wood for a hand's breadth on either side.

"There is my answer," he said. "If any man brings that weapon against me, Sum blood shall stain it."

And then he was gone, stalking from the room and vanishing through the outer door. None moved, their eyes watching the hatchet which was an open challenge to all. Sum Duck shook a bit in anger, yet his voice was quiet as he spoke.

"Honorable Doctor," he said, "as that man is your friend, as you are our friend, do not let him do what is in his mind. For I say to you that, the moment the wedding is over, he shall die as custom demands."

"I shall do what I can," Dr. Ling Pao said shortly, and then gave his goodbyes in the way of the ten thousand rituals.

There had been horror in him at the threats exchanged in the council room, but once outside, as he slipped his feet into the crimson and gold slippers, a wide smile came to his mouth. He chuckled deep in his throat, a chuckle born of the last few minutes. An idea lay in his mind, and as he explored it to its end, he found the answer to the problem, and the sheer irony of it drew laughter to his eyes.

He went from the garden and into the street, and once there, he began to hurry, black satchel dangling heavily from his hand, impatience tugging at his heart.

AND so it was on the third day that Mei Mei became the bride of Yom Kee. A priest in yellow robes said splendid words, and the two were one in the eyes of all. Spectators made moaning sounds of happiness in their throats, and firecrackers popped and rattled and banged with glorious bursts of sound. Beggars herded about the great tables of food set aside for them, and the guests dined on rich juicy pork and lichee nuts and small candied cookies made of honey and flour. Wine was strong and without end, and the wedding was a great affair.

Ling Pao had seen to everything. Banns had been posted, even though wedding papers had not been signed. They waited now for signatures of the Sum elders, a thing which many knew would never come about.

Yom Kee was a Ling now, of course, the papers signed and witnessed and entered in the court's records. He was Ling Yom Kee now, a member of the Ling family; yet those who professed to know understood that such subterfuge could never stand against custom.

The Sums were not at the wedding, of course. The thing they planned to do was a terrible thing, and many were the words spoken, the plans made that such a thing need not come about. The elders met and talked, and even went so far as to bring in the men of other families, and still no loophole could be found through which they could make a graceful retreat from what was demanded.

This was a greater thing than their de-

sires or the desires of a youth and a maid. This was something so deeply ingrained within themselves that it was like their hearts or their livers or their stomachs. It was there and it must be obeyed; for tradition and custom were the few right things in a world of wrongs.

HAD Sum Duck had his way he would have forgiven the marriage and said no more. He was not a harsh man, and he wanted least of all to bring heartbreak to the slender girl who had been born of his love for his wife. But he was helpless in the face of things, and so he gave his consent.

He dressed in the white of mourning, as did the others who came with him to the great hall where the wedding was. He stood in the doorway, and behind him, gleaming hatchet hidden in his sleeves, was the man who was to kill Mei Mei's husband.

He saw Ling Pao at the bride's side, and he saw the stalwart body of the man who would be his son-in-law, and only his pride kept him from crying out at the terribleness of the thing which must be done. And when Ling Pao came his way, he forced his face into impassive lines, knowing the doctor would speak more words.

Ling Pao came swiftly, his thin beard and hair white in the lantern's light. He was smiling, speaking to guests, and when he stood at last before the Sums, there was mockery in his eyes.

"My son is married," he said to Sum Duck. "It is regrettable that you could not attend the wedding. But be that as it may, you are welcome to the feast."

Sum Duck compressed his lips, looking past the doctor to the suddenly blanched face of Mei Mei beside the table of wines.

"This is a thing I take no pleasure in," he said to Dr. Ling Pao.

He made a slight gesture with his hand, and the executioner took a slow step forward. It meant nothing that murder was to be done in the midst of the guests. It meant nothing that he would die for what he was about to do. The family's honor had been besmirched, and for that there could be only one answer.

And across the room, Ling Yom Kee caught his bride and swept her behind him. His face was grim, with no fright in his eyes. He stood, waiting for what was to come, ready for anything.

Ling Pao gained stature. He was a mild man, but now anger stirred in his tone, and he stopped the executioner by the sheer brittleness of his voice.

"Yom Kee is my son," he said. "The papers have been signed and approved by priest and court."

"He is a Yom," Sum Duck said briefly.

"He is a Ling," Dr. Ling Pao said quietly. His hand went to the sash at his waist and drew forth a folded sheet of paper. "He is a Ling," he repeated, "and to affront him is to invite reprisal by the family."

He extended the apper. "See for yourself, read the words and the signatures of the witnesses. Fully understand that which has been done, for such a thing was done to you three years ago."

He held the paper out, the paper which had the letterhead of the city's hospital. On it were brief sentences and the names of those who had watched what had been done.

HE TURNED back his sleeve, as Sum Duck took the paper, and there on his skin was the whiteness of a bandage over a throbbing vein.

"There is a bandage such as this on the arm of my son," Ling Pao said softly. "Each covers a scar made when blood was drawn from my arm and sent into my son's veins. He is a Ling, Sum Duck, for Ling blood flows in his veins."

He stood in the moment of his triumph, a small man now, withered by the years, and yet youthful humor lay in his eyes. He saw knowledge come to Sum Duck's face, he saw knowledge and growing admiration, and finally relief so great that tears stood in the elder's eyes.

"By custom," Dr. Ling Pao said gently, "to shed a drop of blood of a friend is beyond belief. The Lings and the Sums are friends. And my son carries Ling blood in his body."

Sum Duck straightened and then handed the paper to his family, where it passed from hand to hand. He reached and took the hatchet from his cousin, and he broke its handle with a surge of strength from his knotted hands. He held the pieces for

all to see, and then he threw them far away into a corner, where they clattered and fell, without power now. It was his answer.

"I would," he said to Ling Pao, "meet my son-in-law and wish him well. And I would like to embrace my daughter and wish her many sons."

Dr. Ling Pao smiled and combed his thin whiskers with fragile fingers. Peace touched his heart again, and he was suddenly, brightly happy.

He was of two worlds, of course, a thing he liked. Custom had not been abused, which was right and just, and two young people now stood at the threshold of a life denied himself. Momentarily, he envied them their youth and their future.

And then he caught the arm of Sum Duck and drew him toward the wine table. Two friends, understanding each other in a way words could not express, they walked toward their son and daughter, and about them the gaiety of the guests broke forth again.

Being a Gunnman, He Never Could Exactly Turn Anyone Over to the Law

A GUNMAN'S GALL

By CADDO CAMERON

SOMETIMES it takes more gall for a fella to do what he'd oughta do than it does for him to do what he hadn't oughta. For example, take me. Bein' on the wrong side of the law mighty nigh all the time the way I am and in bad with certain tough citizens here and yander to boot, there's many a place where it ain't noways safe for me to go and a whole slew of things that I'd like to do and dassn't. What I was fixin' to say is this. There's times when a fella will go someplace and do somethin' simply because he knows he'd oughta and wants to do it anyhow and to hell with everything, like the mess I got myself into up in the Creek Nation when I set out to unloose Johnny Antelope from the Eufaula jail. That taken gall and no brains.

It happens like this.

A while back I get a letter from a fella who has been workin' to square me with Texas law which, by the way, first set me off on the long trail, and he allows I can do myself some good if I'll come a-runnin' and make medicine with a certain judge who is powerful interested in my case. So I'm aheadin' for San 'Tonio hellbent on my best horse, a-countin' the hours until I get there.

At Coin's Camp a short piece north of the

Red I run onto Oily Ollinger, the medicine man who traipses around over the country a-peddlin' Chief Wahoomonga's Snake Oil. You recollect Oily. This fat little green goods man knows mighty nigh every outlaw in the West, bein' crookeder than a hundred percent of 'em himself, and he don't never forget nothin' so that you can give him a message for somebody and he'll carry it in his head until he runs across the fella and repeats it word for word. We use him that-away and call him the Office. It's a heap safer to go to Oily for your mail, so to speak, than to one of Uncle Sam's post offices where you look around and see a reward notice carrying your brands and marks. Oily swears I saved his life once, so he's strong for me.

He's a-mixin' somethin' at a fire by his wagon and he waves for me to come over there. As we shake, Oily looks all around cautious, then says, "I've been hunting high and low for you, Slim. Where in hell have you been?"

Naturally, I ain't sayin'. "Oh-h, here and yander and up and down, mostly down. Anything new?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Nope?"

"Didn't any of the boys find you? I told several."

"Nope."

Oily eases a spoonful of dough into the pot on his fire tender and careful. He has shot him some squirrel and he's a-fixin' to have squirrel and slickers. Smells damned good, too, and I'm hongry.

He puts in eight dumplin's, then talks. "The Fort Smith stage was stuck up last week, guard wounded, passengers robbed. Marshal Heck Henderson arrested Johnny Antelope and jugged him at Eufaula. Heck admits that he ain't certain Johnny done it, but he intends to hold that Choctaw wildcat until he finds out who did."

Oily takes a peek at the dumplin's. So do I. They're a-floatin' high and pretty. He goes on, "I know Johnny is a friend of yours, so I listen to what the boys and girls are saying. It's going around that Tama Torrey tipped the law to Johnny. Seems like this Tama is a woman scorned and that good-looking Indian is the scorner. The jailer let me talk to him through the bars, and he said, 'Tell Gunman to stay to hell away from Eufaula. Tama told the officers they'd better look out for him, because he'd be sure to come. She and her bunch are laying for him, too. Tell him not to worry about me. I'm all right. Tell him to *stay away!*' That from Johnny Antelope to Mister Gunman."

He takes another look at the slickers. I don't. I ain't hongry no more.

NOW, Johnny Antelope in jail ain't nothin' to get worked up about. It happens right frequent, but he never stays there long. Bein' a college-educated bank robber and smart as a whip, Johnny is so slick the law ain't been able to prove nothin' on him even when he was guilty. This is one time when I'll gamble that he's innocent, though. He don't stick up stages. Johnny is strictly a bank man—says his conscience won't let him rob nothin' but banks, because when a bank is so poor a robbery does it much harm it's about to go bust anyhow and if it's a rich bank gettin' h'isted won't hurt it nohow. But Johnny in jail this time is damned dangerous. He has been framed by a woman who is mighty nigh as smart as he is and that's a sight worse than if he *was* guilty and the law was a-workin' the case all by itself. U. S. Deputy Marshal Henderson will be fair. But evidence against a fella can be planted so infernally natural as to fool anybody, and this here Tama Torrey is just the woman to do a first-rate job of plantin'.

I thank Oily and walk over to Blaze, my tall sorrel long-horse, and go to rubbin' him down. He's hot and lathered. We've been makin' distance, a-headin' south to San 'Tonio to see a judge who maybe can square us with Texas law. Heck Henderson has already said that if I can get my slate cleaned in Texas he'll help me with the Federal boys. Seems like I always think good and straight when I'm a-foolin' around Old Blaze. Reckon he does some of my thinkin'. He's got more brains than I have. It won't never do to let 'em carry Johnny to Judge Parker's court in Fort Smith. There ain't no appeal from that court and evidence or no evidence, Johnny's reputation will hang him.

I've done a heap of ridin' with Johnny Antelope and many's the time we've slept in the same blankets, or under the same stars without no blankets. I know what's down

deep inside of that Indian. He's wild as hell, snaps his fingers at the law every chance he gets just for the fun of it, but there ain't a mean hair on him. If you'll let him he'll go hungry so you can eat and when you're in a fix and it looks like one of you is bound to go under, he'll die so you can live. That's Johnny. Now, he knows what Fort Smith and the Hangin' Judge will do to him, but he likewise knows how I stand all over the Creek Nation. So he sends me word, *Stay away!*

Pretty soon, I tell Old Blaze, "To hell with San 'Tonio. You need your rest tonight, but we're a-headin' north in the mornin'."

I'll swear—that horse swivels an ear and rolls an eye at me, as much as to say, "Naturally! But, you'd oughta be ashamed of yourself, boss. It taken you too damned long to make up your mind."

IT'S comin' dark three days later when I throw off at Frank Grace's livery stable in Eufaula to put up a tired horse—what I mean, tired. Old Blaze has traveled like he knew that he had to do it to steal a friend away from that Fort Smith gallows. I could've saved a heap of time and ridin' by cuttin' across to the Katy Railroad and hoppin' a train north, but in my business you'd better stay clean off'n trains.

The stable boss is a Texas man from my home range, so I tell him to put down his lantern and come over into a dark corner with me. "Light hurts my eyes, Frank. Is Heck Henderson in town?"

"Yep, with a wagon and two guards," answers Grace. "Their mules and his blue horse are in stalls at the far end over there. Strikes me, Slim, that you're lucky your eyes won't stand much light. 'Specially, Creek Nation light."

"Much obliged," I tell him. "Old Heck must be figurin' to gether a batch of prisoners and haul 'em to the Federal jail at Muskogee or straight to Fort Smith. Have you seen him around anywheres this evenin'?"

"Here less'n an hour ago. Told me to make shore and let him know the minute you hit town, if you did. I said I would."

"Damn! He's expecting me."

"Yep, and so are some other folks. Reckon you know that you ain't noways popular with the boys in the Creek Nation whiskey trade."

"Frank, you're a friend. When d'you figure to go and tell Heck?"

"Right away. You been here more'n a minute."

"Good idea. Go ahead."

"Uh-h, by the way, Slim. That bay gelding in the fourth stall belongs to me. He's plumb fresh, grain-fed and powerful fast, if a fella can stay on top of him."

"Much obliged, Frank. You better go and tell Old Heck what he wants to know."

I figure that Henderson will come back with Grace, and he does. I'm standin' against the wall by the door in the dark and hear 'em.

"You're just wastin' your time, Heck," declares Frank. "He's long gone by now."

"Don't believe it," growls Henderson. "He came after somethin' and if I know Gunman, he won't go away without it."

They're at the stable door, Heck a-leadin'. He bellys up against the muzzle of my six-shooter and stops sudden-like. "What the hell, Slim?"

"Howdy, Marshal," I drawl easy. "Come in and set. No smokin' in the stable, though."

"I'll smoke you if you don't put that Colt away!" growls Heck. "I ain't after you. If I was, d'you think I'd be fool enough to come bustin' in here thisaway?"

"Can't never tell about a Deputy U. S. Marshal, so I ain't takin' no chances. Why did you jug Johnny Antelope and when d'you figure to turn him a-loose?"

"Never! He's guilty as hell!"

I holster my six-shooter, step back. As I've said before, Heck Henderson is maybe the best friend I've got, but friendship don't never interfere with him doin' his job as a lawman. I'm keepin' two eyes on him when we three hunker down there by the door.

Wantin' to find out what Heck has got on Johnny, I tell him, "You know that Indian don't stick up stages. He's plumb innocent, every bit as innocent as I am and—"

"Then he's where he belongs."

"—and I betcha you ain't got a particle of evidence against the boy."

"The hell I ain't!" explodes Henderson. "Bend an ear to this. Four passengers and the driver said the leader of the bunch, who shot and wounded the guard, was a slim

man of average height with hands and feet like a woman's. He moved light and easy and his voice was low and soft and sounded like he was about to bust out laughin'. He had a sack over his head, but if that description don't fit Johnny Antelope perfectly I'm a Texas man, and may the Lord have pity on me!"

"Huh!" I snort. "That ain't evidence. You can't hold him on *that*. I'll get me a law sharp tomorrow and show you."

"Maybeso," drawls Heck sorta dangerous. "Maybe you can show me about this, too. Tama Torrey, Bob Jenks and Little Joe were ridin' down the trail half a mile or so behind the stage when it was robbed. They topped a rise in time to see the finish of it. They saw the road agents run to their horses off in scattered timber a little ways, so Tama and her boys moved into a clump of sumac and watched 'em. It was rainin' like the devil, but they saw the robbers circle through the woods and cut back to the trail. They took it less than two hundred yards behind Tama. She and Frank and Little Joe declared the three men were Johnny Antelope, Tom Bliss and that Choctaw—Long Smoke. I nabbed the three of 'em here that evenin'. They admit ridin' through the timber and onto the trail at about the time and place Tama said they did. And that's it, Slim. You know enough about evidence to know that I've got it—hangin' evidence in Judge Parker's court."

He's got it a-plenty. I'm feelin' all empty inside, but try not to let on. "Maybe you think you've got it, Heck, but I still say your evidence ain't worth a damn. Johnny didn't rob no stage."

"Prove it, then!"

"I aim to try. Don't you go and carry Johnny off to Fort Smith until you hear from me."

"And don't you try any monkey business around the jail or you'll hear from *me!*" snaps Heck. "That's what I wanted to see you about."

"Well, Marshal, I reckon you done seen me."

"Say that you won't and I'll leave you be."

"Sorry, Officer, but I ain't sayin'."

"Damn you, Slim!" growls Henderson. "I'd oughta slap you in jail, too."

"Maybeso," I drawl, "but sometimes it's powerful hard for a fella to do what he'd oughta."

Old Heck grunts and gets up. I do, too. He looks me in the eye hard and steady, then says, "I hope you can prove that I've got the wrong men. If you don't, Mister Gunman's friend Johnny Antelope is in one hell of a fix!"

As he stalks away, I'm a-thinkin' he don't have to tell me *that*. And I'm stumped, too, for the time bein 'at least. The Town Marshal here, Charley Wilson, is a good man and Heck will be keepin' one or both of his guards at the jail on account of me. I hadn't figured on those two guards of his'n. Of course, I don't aim to spring Johnny by force unless I absolutely have to, for he'd still have this charge a-hangin' over him. If I can't prove him innocent, though, I'll sure try to rip that old jail apart. Maybe I'd better mosey over to the calaboose and sorta get the lay of the land, but I'll wait until it's full dark.

FRANK GRACE and I go into the livery stable office to set and talk for a spell. Its door and window face the street, so he don't light his lamp and he cautions me to keep away from the window when I fire up a smoke.

"How come, Frank?" I ask. "I know I'm short in this Creek Country, but—"

He cuts in, "You ain't got no idea *how* short you are. Just listen to this—" Frank goes on to tell me what-all the boys in the whiskey business around here have said they'll do to Gunman if they're ever able to cripple him down and catch him alive. It ain't noways pleasant to hear. Fact is, I move farther from the window while he's talkin' and by the time he finishes I'm as spooky as a green bronc on a frosty mornin'. I sure didn't know it's as bad as he says it is. Off and on for years I've had trouble with whiskey peddlers, those that sell to Indians, because the year I lived with the Osages taught me what it does to the red man. I knew peddlers hated me and didn't blame 'em for it. I've dealt 'em plenty misery. So I'm always on the lookout for a knife or a bullet, but I never imagined white men would turn Apache to get square with a fella who has fought 'em more or less clean and wide open. Old Frank gives me plenty to think about.

Pretty soon it's dark. Steppin' out of the door and onto the sidewalk, I glance quick up and down the street and across it. On the other side there's a vacant shack. At one time it was white and now its two bare windows and door give it the look of a skull whose empty eye sockets are starin' back at me. In one of them somethin' moves! I don't have to think. I'm tight as a fiddle string. I drop. As I'm goin' down one of those empty eye sockets explodes fire. Buckshot spatters the wall and door above and behind me—enough to kill a buffalo! The roar is like a cannon. Must've been a double-barreled eight-gauge sawed-off. I never shot quicker or faster in my life. Three bullets through the black hole in the skull over there. And I never was crazier in my life, for I jump up and run zig-zag at the shack!

A man stretched on the floor in there. He's a-breathin' loud and movin' a little. Standin' against the front wall, I strike a match and cup it cautiously in my hands. Its light falls on a face I know—Little Joe, all-around badman and whiskey peddler who rides for Tama Torrey and is one of the witnesses against Johnny Antelope! Maybe he'll talk. No chance. Little Joe is dead!

Bootheels come a-runnin' from all directions.

Frank Grace a-yellin', "Slim! Oh, SLIM! You hurt!"

I slip through the back door into the dark. The moon ain't up yet, but he ain't far away, either, so I move quick around behind the store next door and on to the end of the block. Behind a wagon with sideboards I stop and watch the street crossin'. Yander goes Heck Henderson and Charley Wilson, a-runnin' like hell. Betcha they were both at the jail. Yander go everybody, all of 'em runnin', so I reload and go the other way.

This is a first-rate jail, if you like a good stout jail. It sets well back in a more or less empty block and I'm able to amble careless-like most of the way around it in the dark without bein' recognized unless some owl-eyed cuss spots my six-foot-six and long, hawk face and figures that it must be me because no other human is put together like that. The jail has got a door and two windows on the north end, the City Marshal's hangout more'n likely. There's good-sized windows in the east and west sides and south end which is the cell, of course. All windows are barred plumb heavy. After once around it I'm satisfied that the quickest and best way into this here jail is through the front door, so I head for it after makin' certain that my six-shooters are a-slidin' easy in their leather. I ain't taken more'n two steps before here comes Charley Wilson!

THE City Marshal is holdin' a high trot like he's anxious to get back to jail. Betcha Old Heck has sent him back for fear that I'll take it to pieces while he's gone. Lucky for me the moon ain't up yet and I've stepped behind a big old elm, so he don't spot me off to one side where I am. He goes in and I'm just about two minutes behind him.

I open the door and step in without no fuss or bother—sorta quick-like, though. There's a hell of a scramblement right off. Two hard-lookin' gents with big mustaches and long hair untangle their legs and make a grab for the Winchesters leanin' against the wall beside their chairs, which tells me that they're Heck Henderson's men and used to long-range work in the open. Big, yaller-headed Marshal Wilson has got his feet cocked up on a table with his arms folded and he's a-talkin' to beat hell, probably tellin' 'em about the shootin'. He stops with his mouth open—don't move. Knows it's too late, I reckon.

"Howdy, boys," I drawl. "'Tain't no need to grab iron. I come a-packin' wampum."

"Huh!" grunts Charley. "And what I mean, boys, if he'd come a-smokin' the shootin' would be over and done by now, and so would we. I'm a hell of a marshal, gettin' caught thisaway. Heck Henderson warned me a-plenty. Pull up a chair, Mister Gunman, and set for a spell. Sorry our ceilin' is so dad-blamed low."

I grin and take a chair. He's just a-talkin' to throw me off. Give him half a chance and he'll get the drop on me. "Thanks, Officer. Your ceilin' ain't to blame. It's my fault for growin' up and down so far. Why don't you turn my friend Johnny Antelope and his boys a-loose?"

Charley looks me square in the eye. "I would if he was my prisoner, but he ain't. I know that Indian. He has robbed many a bank and never shot a man while doin' it. He wouldn't bother with a little old stage-

coach, and he certainly wouldn't get spooky and shoot the guard for no reason."

"Mighty glad to hear you say that," I tell him, "because I aim to take Johnny out of your jail one way or another. Thought I'd oughta come and let you know."

"That's right neighborly, Mister Gunman. When d'you figure to do it, if it's any of my business?"

I grin again. "Hard to tell. Night-before-last, more'n likely."

The officers laugh. That's what I'm after —to loosen 'em up so's they'll let me talk to Johnny. But I'm watchin' this big marshal like a hawk.

"How's chances to make a little medicine with Johnny?" I go on casual. "Been quite a spell since I seen the pore boy. Naturally, you can listen."

"Naturally," says Wilson dry. "Shore you can see Johnny. That door there opens into a little room and the cell door is in the far wall. Go ahead and I'll foller, if you don't mind."

I shake my head serious. "I'm not at home in jail and might get lost, Marshal. You go ahead if *you* don't mind."

THE guards chuckle. Charley Wilson grins, gets up and goes to the door. Now, I've had the gall of a damned fool comin' here and turnin' my back on those guards proves it, but the only thing to do is to ride the bluff through to a finish and take my chances. Of course, neither Wilson nor Heck Henderson has got any reason to arrest me far's I know, except to keep me corralled until Johnny Antelope is salted away, but that would be the worst thing that could happen. I've got to keep myself free and a-rangin' wide so's to get that Indian out of this mess. What I want to do is to come in here and go out peaceable this time, then it will be easier to fool 'em if, when I come back next time, I really mean business.

Johnny hurries to the barred cell door. "I was hoping to hell you wouldn't come, Slim," he says quick, "but I knew you would. I'll get along all right. I'm safer in here than you are out there. Get away from town now, *tonight*. What was that shooting we heard?"

That's Johnny—just what you can expect from him. I don't say nothin' about the shootin'. "Can't get away tonight. Been ridin' some. Got saddle sores as big as my hat. Besides, I'm hongry. Figured I'd go and throw a bait at Old Man Torrey's soon as I leave here. What d'you want me to tell Tama?"

"Tell her anything—" he busts out, then stops sudden. "Say! Mister Gunman going to Torrey's Hotel will be fun. God-amighty! Wish I could go with you."

A deep voice behind me, "You can if—"

I spin and somehow I've got both guns out before I think. It's Heck Henderson. He has opened the door so damned easy I didn't hear him.

"Hold 'er!" explodes Henderson. "God, Slim, you're poison! My fault, though. I know better than to surprise a hair-trigger wildcat like you, particularly when he has just gone through a shootin' scrape."

I holster my six-shooters and again say nothin' about the killin'. "Sorry, Marshal, but don't do that again unless you aim to cut me down. Did you say that Johnny can go with me?"

"Yes, if he'll give me his word to come back in three days."

Johnny speaks up, "Sure! I'll promise. I'll—"

"No you won't!" I snap. "You ain't promisin' nothin'. Hell, boy! In three days time I may dig up enough evidence to prove you guilty, then you'd be in a devil of a mess havin' to come back. You stay right here until I come for you."

Johnny Antelope laughs, the marshals grin.

I go on to this crazy Indian, "What I want to find out from you—how far could you see through the rain the day of the stick-up when you rode onto the trail?"

"Not a foot over two hundred yards in any direction. It was a small cloudburst."

"How long had it been comin' down that-away?"

"Oh-h, close to twenty minutes, I'd say."

"Much obliged, Johnny." I grin at the marshals. "Now, if the law will let me, I'll be ramblin' on."

"Git!" says Charley Wilson.

"Good riddance," declares Heck.

"When are you coming back?" asked Johnny Antelope.

"Chances are, I'll be here by midnight. Wait up for me."

As I'm walkin' out behind Henderson

and Wilson, Old Heck grins over his shoulder at me, and drawls, "That old hat of yours is ventilated a-plenty, Slim. I noticed two holes in its crown and they look plumb fresh to me."

In the Marshal's office, I take off my hat and look. Sure enough, two of Little Joe's buckshot missed the top of my head by a hair and I never knew it. "Oh, them," I drawl. "Down on the Washita the other day a fella damned nigh got me. Mistook me for a boa constrictor."

Heck's keen eyes narrow like he's tryin' to look clean through me. "D'you know something, Slim?"

"No much."

"I think you're a-settin' out to kill off the witnesses against Johnny."

I grin. "Far's I know, there ain't no law to keep a fella from thinkin'."

Marshal Henderson is sorta riled now, or doin' a first-rate job of making out to be. "You do that, Mister Gunman, and I'll round you up if it takes all the soldiers at Fort Gibson to help me!"

A-HEADIN' back to the livery stable, I'd be a wall-eyed liar if I was to say that I ain't afraid. Although I cut across and keep clear of lighted doors and windows, I pack cold chills up and down my spine every foot of the way and twice throw down on shadows that seem to be movin' in the moonlight. Reckon you can't blame me, though. I never did claim to be bulletproof and I scare every bit as easy as the next fella. Frank loans me the gelding and I make haste to throw my riggin' onto the snorty bay. Somehow a man feels safer with a good horse between his knees.

The Torrey Hotel, run by John Torrey and his Creek wife, is known to be a hang-out for bootleggers and gamblers, and there is a heap more sleepin' done daytime than at night in its upstairs bedrooms. The front part of the first floor is a little restaurant. From there a hall runs all the way back, kitchen and storerooms on one side, two cardrooms on the other where a man can gamble for any kind of money. Both inside and outside stairs lead to the second floor.

Torrey likewise owns a horse ranch a few miles out in the country where a fella on the dodge can always get him a fresh nag, if he's got the money to pay more than it's worth and ain't too particular about the history of the animal under his saddle. A Torrey bill-of-sale is a dangerous joke. I've been knowin' that ever since a posse of cowmen caught me on a Torrey horse one time and the bill-of-sale damned nigh ruined me. The boys swore I'd ought to get hung for associatin' with such a horse. Tama Torrey mostly bosses the ranch for her dad and she lives out there, lives high, wide and handsome from all I've heard and what little I've seen of the girl and the outfit.

Maybe I've got a fool's gall to show myself at the Torrey Hotel tonight or any other night, but I simply have to find this Bob Jenks who was with Tama when they saw Johnny and I'm likely to run onto him here or at the ranch. So I leave my horse behind the place and go take a look. Standin' back out of the light, I scout the restaurant first and don't find Jenks in there. Blinds are down at the windows of the two cardrooms, which means that I've got to go inside much as I hate to. If I use the rear door into the hall I'll certainly run onto someone goin' or comin', and it strikes me that the safest bet is the outside stairs to the second floor, then down the inside stairway which ends in the hall near the door to the front cardroom. I want to take 'em by surprise and get it over with mighty quick. In the hall upstairs I meet a fella, but he's too drunk to recognize hisself in a horse trough and I make it down to the main hall without no trouble. The cardroom door is on my left.

Can't see outdoors in any direction, damned easy to get cornered in here. Everything that Frank Grace told me comes back to me and I'm scared now, *fairly scared*. I hitch up my belts, step quick through the door and close it behind me. The air is thick and blue with smoke. There are five men at a poker table, two that I know to be bad and they're lookin' straight at me.

Buzzard-faced Phil Lancaster don't say nothin'. His hand darts under the table.

Sheep-headed Hal Simpson growls, "Gunman!"

I don't waste no time—none at all. There's a big pot of chips and money on the table. My bullet smacks it, scatters everything to hell and gone. The explosion

blows the hats off'n the two men a-settin' with backs to me, and out goes the lamp. So do I. Bob Jenks ain't in there.

One jump lands me at the door to the next cardroom. Noise in here. Sounds like some fella had tipped over his chair and kicked the table as he went down. I step into the ruckus. The air is thicker, bluer and twice as dangerous in here. Three men grab for their guns. Bob Jenks ain't here. I jump back, slam the door and duck. Bullet's splinter the wood over my head. My long legs take me to the back door before anybody shows up behind me. Naturally, they're a little slow about comin' into the hall. A big fella with bleary eyes comes a-weavin' in as I'm goin' out. He goes out, too, and he lands on his shoulder-blades. Three shakes later I'm a-straddle of the gelding and we're long gone. That spooky bay horse scents gunsmoke and don't like it. Fact is, he damned nigh jumps clean from under me and I think he'll leave me a-settin' on air.

SO FAR I've come a long ways and ain't got nowhere. Johnny Antelope is still in jail and the evidence against him is bad. Even if I could, I don't want to take him away from the law and leave this robbery a-hangin' over him so that he's on the dodge until he's cleared, if ever. I head for the Torrey horse ranch a-burnin' the breeze. It ain't far and in no time I see lighted windows in its long, low log house. The bunkhouse is dark. The moon is up bright and I don't see anybody movin' around the stable and corrals. Torrey never has kept much of a crew out here and most of them are generally away stealin' horses. I sure am hopin' that they ain't got no dogs. They've got one!

He don't pay no mind to a rider, but when I get down and start walkin' to the front gallery he comes a-tearin' out from behind the smokehouse like he aims to take a leg off'n me and he's tellin' the world about it. Here goes my chance to pull a surprise. I had figured to get inside unbeknownst to anybody, for there ain't one in a hundred doors locked or bolted at night in this country. Might as well walk right up to the front door and face the music. That damned dog a-barkin' sets my teeth on edge. Hell of a situation!

The front room ain't lighted. Evidently they're in the big kitchen where they eat. I hear bootheels inside a-comin' this way and they're almost at the door. Anyhow, they won't be expecting *me*. As I reach for the latch the door swings open. I jab a man in the belly with the muzzle of my six-shooter, and growl soft, "One little squawk and I blow your gizzard apart!"

It's a hammered-down runt of a horse thief and whiskey peddler called Polly because he's got a beak like a parrot. He ain't no coward, either, but he's got too much savvy to make a play now.

He left the door to the kitchen partly open. Somebody in there wants to know, "Who is it, Polly?"

"Tell 'em it's Slim Gunman," I mutter.

Polly does. I know they won't believe him and laughter in there proves it. A woman's voice says somethin' about me that would be fightin' talk if a man said it. They go to laughin' again.

Under cover of the noise, I tell Polly, "Turn easy and walk slow ahead of me. No monkeyshines!"

He turns and starts away. I lift his gun from its holster and lay it on the floor gentle. I'm dyin' to ask Polly how many men in the kitchen, but dassn't. Don't make no difference nohow. Now that I've had the gall to go this far I'll have to go the balance of the way. He lifts his hand to push the door open into the kitchen. Workin' every ounce of my Hundred Eighty, I give the little runt a shove that almost lifts him off'n his feet and flings him headforemost into the room. Polly dives into the back of a man at the table, knocks him and the bench over and upsets the table onto a fella settin' facin' me on the far side. Tama Torrey jumps from a chair at the end. She's got a gun!

I've landed out in the room on both feet. "Drop it!" I bark at the girl. "DROP IT!"

She looks at my six-shooter, looks hard into my face, lets the Colt slip from her hand. The man who fell under the table is a stranger to me. The other is Bob Jenks. It takes them a few seconds to get untangled, just long enough for me to handle Tama, then they make their fight a-layin' on the floor. Damned nigh get me, too, though the odds are all in my favor.

Bob Jenks is a gunslingin' fool and the stranger is no slouch. Bob's gun explodes so close to my face it nearly blinds me. His bullet singes the stubble on my jaw. I've shot maybe a split-second after Bob, then the stranger and I fire almost together. He hurried his shot and I don't know where his bullet went. I taken my time, if you can measure time in a gunfight. The stranger is crippled bad. Bob Jenks is dead.

Polly has rolled to the wall and he's a-layin' there with his arms folded. Tama Torrey is standin' tall and straight and stiff as a post. Her hands are sorta grabbin' at her throat. Her mouth is open like she's gaspin' for air and the gunsmoke gives her olive skin a bluish tint. She's starin' down at the men on the floor. Then she looks at me. Her eyes are wide and plumb scared, as if the devil hisself.

I hurry to catch her while she's spooked thataway. "Look at 'em again! They ain't pretty, are they? You thought you were tough. Wanted to be an outlaw queen or somethin'. But you can't take it. Dig up the loot you taken off'n the stage or I'll lay you alongside of 'em. I'd like to do it. You framed Johnny Antelope. *I'd oughta kill you for that!*"

She swallows and tries to talk. "I—we—split—"

"Yes, I know. You've already split with Little Joe and Bob. Too bad neither one of 'em lived to spend it. Make 'aste!"

The girl jerks back a step. "Little Joe! Is he—*dead, too?*"

"Yes! Move, damn it!"

My six-shooter roars like hell under that low ceilin'. Its smoke blasts her feet and legs. A splinter of wood nicks her calf. I see it a-hangin' in her jeans. She gasps and chokes and maybe thinks she's hit, for she goes to reach down.

"Stand up!" I growl. "Go with me to get the stuff or I'll wing you again and leave you here to bleed to death. Go on!"

The girl nods, tryin' to say she will, meantime starin' at me as if she's afraid to take her eyes away.

"Polly, get up and go along," I snap. "Take the lamp."

"It's hangin' at the far end of the room near the stove. Lucky for me, gunfire didn't put it out.

Tama Torrey speaks then, "It's—it's in here. I'll get it."

She walks around Bob Jenks' body like she's afraid of it, turns her head and looks back at me. Then Tama goes on to a big woodbox that's built against the wall by the cookstove, takes a-hold of a little nail in the bottom board in this end and the board slides off easy. The box has got a false bottom. Polly plainly shows that he's surprised.

The girl takes out a canvas sack and brings it to me. "Here is my share and Bobs. Now, get out!" Then she almost screams, "GO AWAY!"

I open the sack. Jewelry and money—paper and some gold. Pickin' the three six-shooters off'n the floor, I put 'em in with the stuff. The stranger groans and moves like he's a-comin' to. Tama Torrey catches her breath. I'll swear—this tough woman has gone all to pieces when she met up with the real thing. It ain't surprisin' that she spooked and shot the guard.

I nod for them to go out ahead of me. "You're takin' a walk while I make my getaway. No tellin' how many rifles there are in this house and you can see me for three hundred yards out on the road tonight."

There's a big old sofa in the front room. I hang back a little and when they're goin' down the front steps, I slide the sack away back underneath the sofa. Now, I've got to keep 'em from noticin' that I ain't a-carryin' it away with me.

From the front door, I tell 'em, "Go on out to the corrals. I want a good head start."

Tama is too scared to put up an argument and Polly don't give a damn. In a minute I'm a-headin' for town.

I RIDE straight and fast to the jail. A glance through a window warns me that, although the two guards are gone, Henderson and Wilson are still there. I step back and make certain that my holsters are a-hangin' right and my guns a-slidin' easy, for this is where I *can* run into trouble with two of the fightin'est men I know. Then I open the door and walk in.

"Howdy, Officers. I'm back before midnight, ain't I?"

Charley Wilson grins with his eyes, but

Old Heck don't grin with nothin'. He growls, "So you're back. Why?"

I shift to one leg and hook my thumbs in my belt. "I come back to get Johnny Antelope and his boys. They didn't rob that stage."

"Can you prove it?"

"It ain't my job to prove things for the law," I tell him quiet, "and I don't never turn nobody over to the law. But if you really *want* to catch the guilty party, go and look under a sofa in the front room of the Torrey ranchhouse."

"Party? You mean parties. There were three of 'em."

"There's only one of 'em left."

"Who is it?" asks Heck sharp, frownin' plumb mean at me.

"Go and find out for yourself," I snap, "and *make 'aste*. But give me Johnny Antelope before you go."

Big Marshal Heck Henderson gets up slow and easy. I watch him mighty close. He settles his gunbelt on his hips careful and wants to know, "What in hell will *you* do if I don't give him to you?"

I grin. "It won't never do to leave Johnny in jail while you're tryin' to prove that the guilty party is guilty. No tellin' how long that will take and meantime somethin' else might turn up against Johnny. So I aim to take him with me, *now*. If I have to, Heck, I'll make a fight for him and do the best I can."

The two marshals bust out laughin'. Old Heck reaches over and gives me a slap on the shoulder that mighty nigh upsets me. "Damn you, Slim, I don't want to be around when you're doin' the best you can. I knew that Torrey woman was guilty. I caught her in the lie about how far they could see through the rain. But the law would've had a tough time pinnin' it on her. You hear things and do things that the law don't hear and can't do, Slim, so I sorta turned the case over to you. D'you mind?"

"Huh! Gimme Johnny Antelope before I prove you guilty of somethin' or other."

Report from Africa

IN A recent issue of SHORT STORIES, archeologist Dr. Harry Rimmer of the Research Science Bureau, Inc., told us of a proposed trip to the Belgian Congo. Due to his liking for the Remington Model 81 Woodsmaster .35 Rem. caliber autoloading rifle, he intended to use it on African game and promised to give us some details as to killing effect, etc.

Here is the doctor's very interesting letter:

"Nigeria, British West Africa,
July 22, 1948

"My Dear Pete:

"I left the Congo two weeks ago, and am now at Jo's for a few days en route to the French Cameroons and the Gold Coast. I shall be passing through New York on the way home about August 21, and will ring your office. If you are in town I will drop in for a full report to you. In the meantime this letter is to redeem my promise to let you know how the Remington .35 Auto works in Africa.

"Brother, that is a gun! I was sold on it from experiences in the Northwest, as I have said, but I am an addict to it now. Three of our safaris in the Congo were in tough grass country, much of it in the high (15 feet) elephant grass called *matete*. The only trails through this stuff, which resembles bamboo, are game trails or those hacked with machetes. The gun is so short and so well-balanced it is a natural for grass and bush country, and so light it doesn't wear a

man out in a day of hard, hot, sticky hiking.

"Within its range, this is the most satisfactory meat-getter I have ever used. I could be wrong, but I believe from my limited experience that the African buffalo is the toughest critter that can be hunted. But I got several with the .35 Auto, and got them good.

"The first herd we jumped was a surprise to us and to them: we came up on them in short-grass country where they were hidden behind a low knoll. We saw each other at the same time, and they started in high, as usual. The boys with the heavy guns never got a shot: my first shot was a neck shot on a young bull that weighed about 1,400 pounds, and he went down bawling.

"I waited to see if he would get up, and while I had my eye on him the rest of the herd got into the high grass. The other boys took a couple of long shots with no results. When they were set to back me, I walked in on the one I had down. He made an attempt to rise and charge, but was too hard hit. At 25 yards I put a second slug between his eyes. He bawled once and that was that. I stepped off the distance from the ejected cartridge, and it was just 60 yards.

"The second time I used it on buffalo, two of us stalked a herd of about 60 animals that were feeding along in a burned area. The wind was wrong, so we had to make a half circle, and found ourselves in a bad spot. If we left the *uma* through which we were sneaking, they would spot us. We were too far away to be sure of a shot. There was a large clump of brush 200 yards ahead of us, and we thought if we could keep that between us and the herd we might make it. It worked; we could. But the herd was too close for comfort, about 40 yards away. That is too close for sensible people to shoot buffalo!

"We decided to try to get behind a small tree ten yards to the right which we could climb in a hurry if we had to. I made it. My partner didn't. A cow raised her head and saw him, and he did the only thing possible. He fired quick, hit her in the shoulder, and she went down. (She should. It was a .375 Magnum.) The herd stampeded, fortunately away from us. I was tangled in brush and got just one snap shot as they went off, a calf of about six hundred pounds. I took him right through the head, just below the eyes, and he somersaulted and never wiggled. *O mamma yongo!* but he made good hamburger and superb roast. This was a close shot—35 yards.

"The last day we were elephant hunting, we got a huge tusker about eight in the morning. As we waited for the boys to come up and start cutting out the meat, one of the boys climbed a tree to watch the waterbuck.

"After a half-hour he called down, 'Tembu: two of them.' We asked, 'How far?' and he said they were a half-mile away, going fairly fast.

"Since we had two more elephants due on our license we decided to walk them down. We had the wind, and were going fast. After an hour we went up a tree again, and they were about 500 yards ahead. We started after them, I being the tail end of the three hunters, the gun bearers trailing behind. We were each carrying a .375 Magnum, loaded with 300-grain hard-nosed slugs. My gun bearer was just behind me carrying the .35 Auto. A bombardier beetle was on a dead limb by the side of the trail, and I stopped to play with him a minute, and the other two boys got about 30 yards ahead of me.

"As I started to catch up, I saw them stop short. The first chap said, 'Look at those skeletons right in the trail. I wonder how they got there?' Looking past him, I saw two sets of buffalo horns and the top three inches of the scalp. Like an echo to his words the two "skeletons" surged to their feet and charged. They were lying in a waterhole with just the top of their heads out.

"THE boys had their guns slung on their shoulders: mine was in my hands. Without thinking I threw up the gun and fired at the one on the left, trying for a shoulder shot to put him down; then without waiting to see what happened I threw a neck shot at the other one. My .375 was loaded with hardnose bullets for elephants. Both shots took effect, but did not stop either bull. But they turned them. The shoulder shot flung that buffalo around in a half-circle. The neck shot went right through, and

swung that fellow off to the right. The one at the left kept going, and the boys were on him. They got about five shots in him, and he went down in an uma, bawling. My gun-bearer had run up (a miracle! They generally run the other way, gun and all!) and I reached back for the .35 Auto as it was loaded with 200 grain soft-nose slugs. That was quicker than changing ammunition in the .375.

"This buffalo, turned by the neck shot, swung back and was coming fast. I took him right between the eyes and he crashed so hard the ground shook. He bawled for a minute, and then passed out. He lay 15 yards from my two buddies, about 35 yards from me.

The other one was still bawling in the uma, and the boys were going in when they changed their loads to soft-nose bullets. I handed the .35 to my brother and said, 'Here, try a good gun. Finish him off with this.' He went in on him, ably seconded by us with .375's. When he got in sight the buffalo was up again and facing us. My brother got a little excited and emptied the four remaining loads in the buffalo. The last three shots were wasted. The first one ironed him smoothly and finally.

"For antelope this is THE gun. Waterbuck, impalli, bushbuck, reed buck, and all such beasties which hide in brush are just meat for the .35 Auto. Of course, I did not try it on elephants or hippos. The .375 is the smallest thing I want for those babies, although both have been killed by the .30-'06 with well-placed shots, and at short range.

"I left the .35 Auto rifle in the Congo. I didn't have a Chinaman's chance of getting it back after my brother had tried it out on antelopes! But when I get home, I am positively going to get another if they are available. I am a .35 Remington Auto Woodsmaster fan from now on.

"The gun has three faults: two minor and one serious. The first is the way it carries in the hand. On a sling or on the shoulder it is OK and a joy to tote, but try to carry it in the hand at arm's length and the action is in the way and it will not balance. Nothing can be done about this without changing the length of the barrel, and one of the beauties of the gun is its present size. It is properly named the 'Woodsmaster.' The second fault is the method of loading. If this gun could be loaded with a clip, like the .30-'06 Garand it would improve its convenience 500 per cent. In a jam, when a fellow has to hurry, it is hard to shove shells down from the top one at a time. The third fault is the serious one. The safety is huge, convenient, positive and easy to operate, but crawling through brush it caught and slipped to firing position at least a dozen times. THIS COULD BE SERIOUS, and is a fault that should be corrected. But it is a great gun, and American hunters should get acquainted with it.

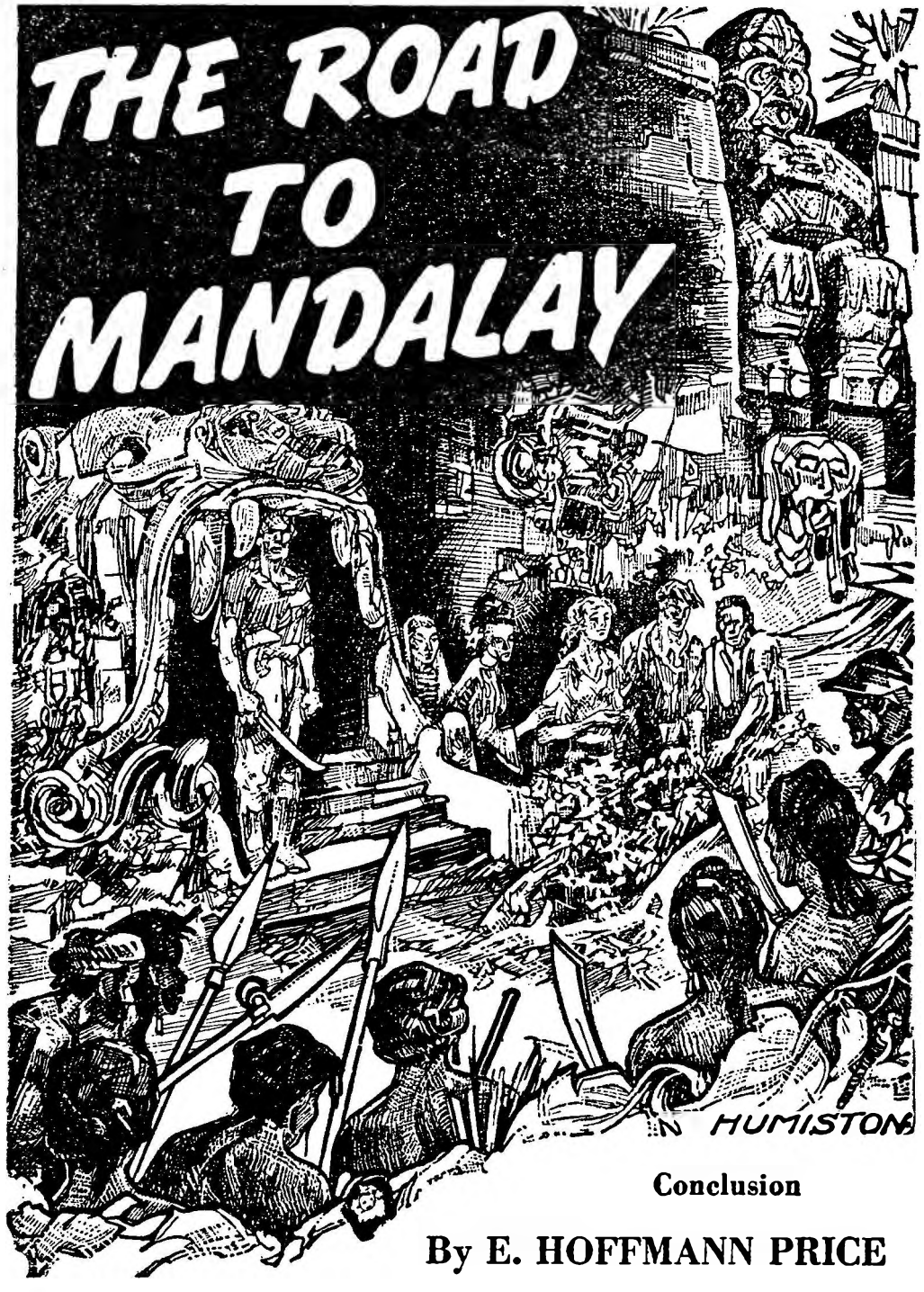
"The Eastern Congo, up near the Uganda Border, is a hunting paradise. The Belgian government treated us with such courtesy and friendliness as I never met with anywhere else in the world, possibly because we were an Archeological expedition, and the Belgians are notably enlightened and enthusiastic about scientific research. But I believe they are customarily generous with tourists. I found them a grand group to deal with. If I see you in August I will give you the score on elephants, buffalo, hippos and lesser meat. This is just to keep my promise to report on the gun from the field. Write 'OK' on the record.

"I have missed the magazine. I'll hope to pick up the back copies at the office, or from some Black Market dealer who will stick me! Well, I am willing to be stuck. The eight issues I will have missed when I get home will be the the first I have missed since SHORT STORIES was born.

"With all best wishes, I am, as ever."

Doc

Unfortunately the Shooter's Corner pilot missed Doc when he went through New York. We were in the wilds of—not Africa, but Newfoundland, on a piscatorial, not an archeological expedition. Don't grab for the dictionary, I'll tell you—we went fishin'.



Conclusion

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

THE STORY SO FAR

THIS is a story of the annexation of Upper Burma, "the road to Mandalay," where King Thibaw and his queen misruled the land, harassed European residents, oppressed and murdered Burmese subjects, including 75 royal princes and a number of princesses. This, too, is the story of Dan Kirby, who after some years in the States, returns to Burma to carry on with his father's teak interests; and finds that Thebaw has by trickery usurped the Lion Throne.

Big Game Hunters Have Advice to Offer, Do Not Think of the Game You Stalk or It Will Feel Your Thought and Notice You

Dan's story is that of a young American setting out to make his fortune, which he does, but only after being sucked into the murderous intrigues of Mandalay, and taking a small part in the closing phrase of the Third Burmese War. Dan's father had a friend a Scot, Alex Fenton, and on his return though Alex and his daughter Diane welcome him, Kirby runs right into trouble. He finds a 20,000 rupee fine levied against him and comes to Mandalay to try to have it reversed. It's just one of Thebaw's ways of raising money. In Mandalay Kirby tries to rescue his father's old friend U. Shwe Tha from threat of torture and in the course of this desperate rescue attempt, Kirby learns that the French consul is preparing to present to Thebaw a treaty favoring France, and excluding Britian. Mixed up in the deal is Pierre Lecoin, a young Frenchman, who to Kirby's way of thinking, is far too friendly with Diane.

From there on Kirby's aim is to outwit Lecoin and get Diane and her father to safety from the turmoil of Mandalay. The danger centers more in Fenton than in Diane since both he and Kirby want to get a copy of the French treaty to Rangoon.

Kirby's great ally in his venture is a native girl, Ma Khin, who repeatedly braves danger on his behalf, and accompanies Kirby and Fenton on their dash for Rangoon. "She's playing a dangerous game," says Kirby. "Once we get this treaty to Rangoon, and things begin popping, the kill-the-foreigners clique will start murdering all Shwe Tha's friends; there'll be hell in Mandalay for every native friend we've got."

XIII

FROM the futility of thinking of horses, anyone's horses, Kirby turned to another thought. "They're getting ready for the boat races," he remarked, as he and Ma Khin grounded their muskets, once they were deep in the shadows of a banyan. "Any crews from Bassein this year?"

"Yes," she answered, "and there will be much betting. Only, you couldn't bribe a crew to take us south, they couldn't get back in time for the race."

"She's quite right, Dan," Fenton said. "But if we shoved off immediately in a canoe, we'd reach the frontier before a despatch boat could overhaul us."

Kirby objected, "Those *hlawgas* are ungodly fast. Though after a good start downstream, we could take to land later, and let the boats chase to their heart's content."

A TWO-MILE walk brought them to bamboo shacks scattered along the levee which confined the Irrawaddi when it was in flood. There were beached boats of every sort, from oil barges which had come up from Yenangyaung with crude petroleum, to hollowed-out tree trunks.

Kirby thrust the documents at Fenton. "Take 'em! Let Ma Khin dicker, or scout around and pick a boat for us to steal. I'm going to get Diane."

"You're quite mad! See here—"

But Kirby, shouldering his musket, was on his way before he answered, "Be ready to shove off when we come back. I'll get some of the Frenchman's shoes, you'll need 'em."

When he got to the consulate, he booted the sleeping porter. Moonlight on uniform and bayonet made speech needless. The man *shikòhed*. Kirby stalked on. Once on the verandah, he thumped the door with the butt of his musket. A Chinese servant came to answer.

Kirby showed him a piece of paper. "For the *thakin-ma*. From her father. Get her, quickly."

Since the consul or Lecoin might appear, Kirby sidestepped into shadow, and held his weapon ready for a butt-strike. But there was no call for his handiness. Diane, in a dressing gown, hurried to the door. After

her came her *amah,* with a lamp. Kirby presented the chit.

The few words he had pencilled told her that an unusual soldier stood at the jamb. She read again, then said, "Wait for an answer."

Kirby had time to break into a sweat from thinking of how he had stretched his luck to what might well be the breaking point. He jerked as though a blast had been touched off beside him when Diane did at last come to the door. She was not alone. Ah Lok and the *amah* came after her.

Kirby did not speak until they came to the street.

"We're leaving."

"You should have said less, or more! What happened?"

KIRBY told her. He concluded, "What we are taking down the river is a fistful of war, and when it breaks out— Suit yourself, do you want to risk the trip with us, or stay here?"

"It'd be far safer at the consulate. But such safety! I'm going."

Then he saw that along with his carrying pole, Ah Lok had on his shoulder a gun in a cloth case. Kirby said, "I savee plenty, Ah Lok."

When the Chinaman plodded on without answering, Diane said, "He knows that you understand why he turned you over to the enemy, but he doesn't know what to say."

"The loot he picked up talks for him. How's the consul?"

"Finally asleep. He's been a very sick man. That's what made this so easy for us."

"Your father thinks I'm crazy, dragging you south."

"He's right. So am I."

"Right, or crazy?"

"Both."

When they came to the river, they learned that Ma Khin and Fenton had found a canoe, which was nothing but a *launggo* fitted with plank sides to make it more spacious. The hollow log foundation, serving somewhat as a keel, added to stability. Judging from the mud which caked both Fenton and Ma Khin, the owner of the boat had not been present to help them.

They shoved off, and the muddy river took charge. "Grab a paddle," Kirby said, "and have your *amah* take one. Alex, we've got to keep our eyes peeled for logs and stumps."

In the few hours remaining before dawn, long ignored strain and fatigue took their toll. The monotony of dipping the paddles began putting Kirby to sleep. His eyes glazed. He would awaken only in time to keep from losing his paddle. Fixing his eyes on the stream caused illusions so that he saw floating stumps where there was nothing. Twice he shouted a useless warning.

The moon sank behind the Pakkoku Range. Presently, false dawn relieved the dangerous darkness, but it was followed by an even deadlier gloom. When true dawn broke, the fugitives were gray faced and wan.

The piers and shacks of river villages could now be seen, whereas earlier, only the smell of fish had given their location. Fenton said, "We'd better risk eating and resting, then stuff ourself with enough of their vile *lehpet* to keep us awake until we drop from paddling."

KIRBY was beyond thinking. He could not give clear shape to his objection to Fenton's suggestion. When he did voice it, incoherently, Fenton argued, "Whether they are actually chasing us or not is pure guesswork. Whether they are on ponies or elephants is another conjecture. And we've gone with a swift current. Dash it all, they can't trail us," he concluded triumphantly. "We've left no spoor in the river."

Kirby pulled himself together sufficiently to wrangle back: "Unless someone makes a good guess and sets out in despatch boat. Two dozen experts can push one along faster than a steamer."

"Very well, we'll go ashore and let the despatch boat race down ahead of us."

Ma Khin, if she had any ideas, kept them to herself. Ah Lok was a bright-eyed mummy. The *amah* was ready to collapse.

Kirby finally groped himself into possession of a thought: "San Ya's place is well downstream. Ma Khin, how did he stand at court, how did he stand with the police? I mean, would he be hiding, or not?"

"San Ya," she answered, "had become a very poor man, and making gold is no crime. Though the king was disappointed he didn't succeed."

"San Ya, *poor?*"

"Oh, yes. Much of the 200,000 rupees he stole from the British was paid out for protection, otherwise he'd been sent back to Rangoon."

"I say, let's make for that village," Fenton demanded.

Kirby, looking far through low hanging mists, pointed to a great bulk of masonry: a ruined *stupa,* one of the many which dotted river bank and jungle. There were between Mandalay and the sea more dead cities than live, more temples and pagodas ruined than kept up If the ghost of a forgotten kingdom or capital could prowl, then surely was the country haunted.

"Make for that, it's safer than a village."

"Eat stones instead of bread."

"Ah Lok can forage," Kirby countered. "He'd draw no attention."

"Bravo! If we don't capsize hauling for the bank."

THEY did not run afoul of snags, though these caused dangerous eddies. To leave a line of retreat, they beached the dugout, a cold and muddy business.

"Dare say you didn't bring any of his excellency's brandy," Fenton reproached.

Diane dug into her bundle. "A decanter's frightfully awkward. I did grab this rum."

"Plantation St. James! Oh, marvellous! Nothing like a tot of grog. Makes water potable, you know. My bones ache. I am afraid that my fever is creeping back at me."

"Whose bones wouldn't ache?" Kirby grumbled.

They stumbled, they staggered, they tripped over thorny vines. Tall grass, drying since the end of the rains, cut them with knife-sharp blades. Dead leaves crunched and crackled under foot, and shivering monkeys cursed them from high up in padauk trees. Kirby felt better as they hacked their way into the ruin, using the *dahs* taken from the soldiers.

"We'd 've been in a pretty mess," he exclaimed, "two of us in uniform, going into a village. You're a profound thinker, Alex."

Crestfallen, Fenton grimaced. "Possibly wouldn't be so convincing in broad daylight, pretending you were herding prisoners down the river."

Once they had a fire going, Ma Khin took off the military tunic which she had put on over her jacket. "I wish I had something decent to wear!" She complained. "That's a filthy thing!"

Kirby suggested, "You might shed those pants."

"Not enough under it. And by now they've found those guards, and they'll know someone cut up her *tamein* to tie them, I'll never dare go back to Mandalay. The Supaya-lat gave it to me, you know."

Ah Lok and the *amah* went to the village to shop. Kirby busied himself looking at the guns. There was neither powder nor ball for the muskets. For the consul's shotgun, a splendid piece of gunsmithing with Circassian walnut stock, gold inlaid lock, and damascened barrel, there were half a dozen home loaded brass cartridges.

"Doubtless for pigeons," Fenton complained. "Utterly useless for anything but fowling."

Kirby dislodged a wad and looked at the pellets. "Number seven or eight," he guessed. "But the bore is full choke, so at close range, these'd give a nasty wallop. Who can keep awake for an hour? Never mind answering, I'll watch while you get some sleep."

He reconnoitered the ruin, whose plan resembled that of the one in which he had taken with Diane, east of Mandalay. The land side was not as overgrown as the river side, since it had been cleared by girdling and burning trees down to permit cultivation. It had not been abandoned long enough for the jungle to reclaim its lost ground. He scouted for and found cart trails and pony tracks. These led in several directions from the site of an abandoned village.

AH LOK and the *amah* returned soon after the end of Kirby's watch. They had rice and fish and fowl, and also, *lehpet*: "pickled tea," as the British called it, leaves of a tree growing in the Shan Hills. These leaves were mixed with asafoetida, salt, garlic, millet, and oil. By chewing enough of the smelly mess, you could go to a *pwe* at four in the afternoon, remain awake all night, watching the performance, and then sit through the following day of the show.

After they had eaten, Kirby said, "Rest up—and then load up with *lehpet.* Alex you watch while I pound my ear for an hour."

"Better take two. I'm quite refreshed."

Sculptured gods and demons looked down from the ancient masonry, neither benevolent nor menacing. They had Asia's secret, the Lord Buddha's wisdom, in being detached from a world of illusion, whose happenings could not matter, except temporarily. They looked into Nirvana; and having at last got his chance, Kirby came near following their example.

He awakened of himself. From the angle of rays lancing through rifts in the masonry, he knew that the sun was quite high. This brought him to his feet with a jerk. Then, looking about, he saw the others, all except Fenton, and relaxed. He had not been abandoned. He grimaced at the idiotic alarm which had snatched and held him for a moment.

In a niche facing the clearing, he found Fenton slumped against a buttress, and snoring. He would have shaken him by the shoulder, but for a warning crackle in the brush at the jungle's fringe. The wind brought him the scent of a horse, hard ridden and sweating. Then he caught flashes of color—the jackets and head cloths of men stalking. Steel twinkled.

Kirby choked back the urge to shout a warning. Instead, he tickled Fenton's ear with his fingers tip. When the big fellow shook his head and muttered, he repeated the touch and whispered, "Don't move, Alex, don't move. But for God's sake, wake up."

"Wha—"

"Shhhhhh! Take it easy. Something moved over there, trying to make no noise. Trouble coming."

Silence followed. Kirby could hear his own heart thump. A flight of birds took off. A peacock screeched. Monkeys chattered.

"See that bit of red?"

"No. Smell a horse. Wake the others and shove off, quietly."

"If we move, they'll spot us."

"You had to move to awaken me."

"You'd 've noticed them if you'd been awake!"

"Maybe only beaters."

"Beaters, my eye! They'd be beating the brush and whanging drums. Hunters, all right, and we are the game."

Kirby moved. "Halt!" a familiar voice called. A pistol blazed. The slug spattered itself to bits against the masonry. "Don't move!"

There was no mistaking Pierre Lecoin's English. Now that the silence was broken, his men began to jabber. They were armed with *dahs* and javelins. None were in uniform, and none of the dozen in sight carried guns. They were a hard lot.

With only six cartridges loaded with birdshot, Kirby bluffed: "When I shoot, I don't miss."

"I missed purposely," the Frenchman retorted. "A sitting duck, you know."

"I am no sportsman."

"Nor I," Fenton added. "Your band of *dacoits* might be equal to us, if you're man enough to lead them in."

After speaking a few words to someone near him, Lecoin stepped into full view. His pistol was holstered. Though bedraggled, mudspattered, he walked as though fitted out with silk hat, gloves, and stick.

"You are surrounded," he said, halting midway, and folding his arms, somewhat like an adjutant at parade rest. "It is not a case of my leading these men. It is I who keep them in check. Do you understand?"

KIRBY had to agree. Lecoin seemed to read his thought, for he went on, "Spotted men. You killed two of their comrades. They are in a nasty mood. I restrain them."

"With one pistol," Kirby retorted. "I could beat that."

"No, not with this pistol. But with my value to King Thebaw."

He had a good deal of weight behind his argument, which dealt Kirby a solid punch. When Fenton growled, "Up and at the bloody scum, they won't stand fast under fire," Kirby countered, "Don't try it, Alex! He's right."

Ah Lok crept from inside the *stupa* to say, "One piecee boat, no hab got."

Fenton sighed. "That settles our chance of sending him and the women downstream with the treaty." He raised his voice. "Just what do you want?"

"Kirby's surrender, with the treaty. As for you, you do not concern me at all. Your daughter still guarantees your good behavior, but I shall make no point of that."

"Er—ah—you—"

Kirby nudged Fenton before he could find words. *"Something's crazy, he doesn't know she's with us!"* He called, "This is then between you and me. Is that right?"

"You—me—and the treaty. That is correct. If you force a fight, I can not control these men. They are tired and peevish. They have been beating the jungle ever since you shot and ran."

And from this Kirby knew what must have happened in the palace; on recovering from their clouting, Lecoin and the Pangyet Wun had set out immediately to pursue. They must have assumed that Kirby's attack would not have been made except if he had a clear escape from palace, walled city, and town. Finally, it was plain that for some reason or other, Lecoin had preferred a private rather than an official pursuit.

"You're asking me to commit suicide, Lecoin! I'd not be crucified, I'd be staked out on an ant hill if I surrendered. You say we are surrounded?"

"Yes. We have been beating the bush in this vicinity. The villagers sent word to us when you sent for food."

"That rings true. Well, then, give me a bit of time to think things out."

"Please do think. You are very welcome. We shall wait. If you try to slip through the cordon and are cut down, that is your affair."

XIV

WHEN Kirby went into the ruin, he quickly learned that the place was indeed surrounded.

"What'll we do?" Diane demanded anxiously.

Ignoring the question he could not answer, Kirby said, "They told me that your *amah* and Ah Lok came to the village to buy food, which gave us away. But he doesn't know about you and Ma Khin. Your *amah*, as far as the villagers were concerned, was just another woman, Ah Lok, just another Chinaman. You and Ma Khin are quite safe."

"Oh, I know that! Don't be so evasive, what are *you* going to do, you and Dad?"

"We have one very neat shotgun, six cartridges loaded with small pellets, two muskets without ball or powder, but with bayonets in order. It will be bad for all of you if those *budmashes* come in. If I don't surrender, they'll come after me, and probably he can not control them, once they go wild."

"He could easily conclude," Fenton said, "that I know all about the treaty, so he can hardly afford to let me go down the river to tell what I know. Diane, you and Ma Khin hide, hide well, stay hid."

"But—"

"Do as I say, at once."

"Dan—"

"Do as I told you," Fenton repeated sternly. "Dan and I shall handle this directly. If we fail, you must be out of sight."

"Take the rations and hide them," Kirby added. "And your *amah.*"

Ah Lok joined Kirby and Fenton instead of helping the three women make for the mouth of a crypt with their hampers of rations.

Kirby regarded Fenton. "Don't be a blockhead, Alex. He figures he has a hostage for your good behavior. Laugh is on him, and it gives you your chance to get to Rangoon with your head on your shoulders. If they don't take your word for it, about this treaty you've done your duty and to hell with 'em. And you can't help me here, two aren't a bit better than one."

"Then surrender the bloody document! I say—"

But Kirby, carrying the shotgun at the trail, went to face Lecoin. He stopped in waist high brush outside the *stupa.*

"That is a tough crowd you have. I believe you would try to make them live up to civilized customs, but I doubt you'd succeed."

"I promise you I shall do my best."

"You believe that as long as they don't have occasion to get busy with their choppers, you can keep them in hand?"

"Yes. But once they go wild, no."

"You won't settle for the treaty papers, and let me go on?"

"Impossible. Picture my position with my superior—"

There was a stirring in the brush, and a cry of dismay from Fenton. "You little idiot, I told you—"

But Diane, head high, pace deliberate, ignored her father as she stepped into view. "Pierre," she said, before the Frenchman could recover from his astonishment, "docu-

ments or no, you can't any more afford to let my father go on than you can Dan. We don't—I don't trust you. You tricked us in Mandalay, and we are not going into any more of your traps. Get out of here with your ruffians, or else come in and take us by force."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and went back into the ruins. From the brush, several of Lecoin's men exclaimed, *"Amé!"* The Frenchman's posture showed plainly the shock he had got from Diane's unexpected presence. Kirby, seeing the man recoil, stepped into full view, with the consul's shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm.

"Draw and we'll settle this—now!" Kirby challenged.

He walked deliberately at Lecoin.

One—two—three. He shifted the fowling piece so that its butt was at his hip, and the muzzle ready to be flicked into line.

"Halt!" Lecoin shouted. "Stop!"

Four—five—six—seven paces.

After Diane's crazy appeal to the man's decency, Kirby was doing the only thing left to do. She had forced Lecoin into an impossible position; a position so shocking that there was only one move, striking at once, and devil take talking. Since Lecoin was shaken, hit him again. If there was a chance, this was it.

The Frenchman fumbled when he drew his revolver.

The Burmese followers shifted to right and left. They were not going to risk any spent bullets. They did not know that the light pellets would dust harmlessly about them, if indeed they carried so far. They knew only that a man who had no doubts left concerning anything at all was marching straight for their chief.

Kirby had very clear perception during that advance which shook Lecoin. His senses were sharp. He heard, he noted all manner of detail yet without missing anything of Lecoin's stance, or his way of levelling the pistol.

Lecoin fired. The slug whipped past Kirby. It spatted against masonry. Kirby's stride did not break. It did not lag, nor did it hasten. It was as though he had not heard the shot.

Lecoin's mouth opened. There was a sound, but no words. The pistol whacked a second time. A bullet jarred Kirby. He did not know whether it had drilled him, or whether it had skated along a rib. He knew only that he had been hit, and that he was still walking, steadily, with his eye on his mark. The European taste for small bore pistols had helped him. An American .44 or .45 would have knocked him down, paralyzed him, stopped him in his tracks, even though the wound were not serious.

Kirby was no longer breathing. It was as though he feared to risk any needless motion. Though close enough to shoot, he would not take any chance on the scattering of fine pellets. In his single barrelled weapon was one charge; it had to do the work, for he would have no time to reload.

The Burmese at the clearing's edge were stirring, but not to close in on him. They were wary, worried. If Kirby had been able to think, he would have known the reason. Perhaps, subconsciously, he did know, and had known from the start.

Whack!

Kirby thought that a mule had kicked him in the chest. Lucky he had got used to marching without breathing. Handy trick. Couldn't breathe now if he tried. The jungle began to weave. His vision blurred, then cleared. He heard no sound, yet a sharp pain caught him in the ribs. He was alarmed; something was going wrong when he could not hear the shot which winged him. Then he realized that he was just beginning to feel the first hit. He perceived only now the trickle of blood down his side, down to his hip, down his thigh. He gritted his teeth, and finally drew a breath. The pain was all that he could endure.

His lips froze against bared teeth. He wavered only a little, he could see the Frenchman's face now, and clearly. The thorn scratches and grass scratches made a pattern against the receding color. This encouraged him. The jungle men were muttering—exclaiming.

Kirby halted. Here we are. That much settled at least. That gun was murderously heavy. He forced it into line. He did not have to aim. He could not miss.

Lecoin, shaking so that he was unable to fire, let out a strangled yell and ran. Standing to take a charge of shot in the stomach required something other than courage. Kirby himself could not have faced any

such a weapon in the hands of a man indifferent to pistol fire. Yet it was all so unreal that Kirby had not even a feeling of triumph when Lecoin fled. Unreal—yet, as though going according to plan.

A savage scream made Kirby tighten up when he would have dropped. Ah Lok, swishing a *dah,* was bounding across the clearing. The spotted men turned tail. Kirby levelled his gun and cut loose. In their present state of mind, each pellet would have the effect of a bullet. He shoved home another cartridge, and peppered them again. Through the cloud of smoke, he saw Fenton come out with a musket, to start a one-man bayonet charge.

"Keep 'em running!" Kirby shouted, as he reloaded.

THE counter-attack stampeded Lecoin's men. Ah Lok caught one from the rear; he slashed a second, who stumbled in his haste. And then Kirby fell. He dropped into a howling darkness. He was sick, dizzy, and burned out. He didn't care what happened next, because there was nothing he could do about anything.

When at last he did know what was going on, he was being carried, lashed to bamboo poles. Fireflies floated against the jungle dusk. He shivered so violently that he could not have spoken, even had he been able to shape a question. Aches reminded him of wounds. These seemed to have been bandaged.

Finally he heard a familiar voice, and asked, "Alex, what did happen, after—after—"

"They kept running," Fenton answered. "Stark panic."

Diane came to the improvised litter which Ah Lok and her father were shouldering. "The boat was gone, we looked for it. Oh, I don't know what we'll do, where we'll go—"

"Give me a drink," Kirby demanded, thick-lipped. "Well, it worked."

Later, when exhaustion forced them to make camp, he tried to explain himself, but Diane laid her hand over his mouth and murmured. "Don't, don't try to talk, you were hit twice."

Fenton cut in, "The slugs went clean through, so you won't be able to tell all the rest of your life how many bullets you're carrying about. Most amazing, my boy, most amazing! When I was in Arakan—"

Kirby choked from trying to say, "Oh, to hell with Arakan!"

"Er—what I mean is," Fenton went on, "I thought you were quite mad, but you were entirely right. Those devils saw you take shot after shot and of course fancied some wizard or astrologer had given you a charm to make you bullet proof, and the idea of standing to face you scared them witless. They must've thought Ah Lok and I were—ah—birds of a feather, as it were."

"They—all of them—ran?"

Fenton' chuckled. "Trampling the brush! Venture to say Lecoin feels cheap. I marvel he stood as long as he did. Probably killed you very neatly if you'd gone at him with a pistol."

"He'll be back. New men maybe."

"Rot!"

"He has to. How long are you good for?"

"Eh? What's that? How long am *I* good for?"

"Yes. You. Fever. See it in your face. You're in worse shape than—you will be—than I am. Got to get to San Ya's place." Kirby spoke laboriously. Talk had worn him out. "Make for San Ya's. Get there—before Lecoin—has a fresh—start—he has to help us—will help us—"

"Ah—why must San Ya—"

"Go there—can't talk much more—damn it, *go!*"

And when he knocked himself out with that final effort, Kirby's insistence did drive the fugitive toward the embezzler village retreat. Since exhaustion kept Kirby in a coma, they could not argue; and since his previous insane whim had saved them from Lecoin's *dacoits,* they could not do other than believe, and obey.

XV

WHEN they got to San Ya's house, which for all his poverty, was well built of teak, Kirby was out of his head. And Fenton had been laid out by fever. During a lucid moment in which Kirby's wits rearranged themselves, he noted, bit by bit, his surroundings, and tried to guess what portion of his recollections were fact and what part delerium. Sometimes one's

nightmares were rational, and one's experiences the opposite. It was time to find out which was which. He had a premonition of trouble, the real kind.

Ma Khin sat on the floor beside him. It seemed she had been there for a long time, forever, in fact, serene and placid, laying a hand on his forehead at times, and somehow chasing away the complex hallucinations which had troubled him.

His head had been a whirl of elephants, spotted men, pagodas, all pinwheeling about; with wizards and astrologers and Frenchmen offering to sell him charms to make him bullet proof. And the *sayas* had ganged up, each offering to tattoo him with a pattern guaranteed to give immunity to bullet or steel or poison or fever. Get all the patterns and look like a wall paper sample book, and nothing can hurt you—but what most obsessed him was *dacoits*, always scattering, yet always coming back for another encounter.

He touched his forehead. Instead of being dry, slick, and hot, it was moist. Ma Khin nodded, and smiled a little. The fever was breaking. He sniffed the air. Her bouquet of perfume and coconut oil and pickled tea was pleasant rather than otherwise.

KIRBY demanded, "What's all the worry and trouble?"

"What trouble?"

"Something is wrong."

"Oh, nothing is wrong. We are at San Ya's house, everything is pleasant and safe. He welcomes us. This is not a rest house, not a *zayat*, this is San Ya's place."

But Ma Khin, too reassuring, was not quite convincing in her effort to drive away his notion that trouble was looming up. He pretended to be very drowsy. Actually, he was baiting her. Strength had come back surprisingly, and straightness of thinking; so that what he needed was facts and background to bring him up to date. He knew that another chore was ahead.

After leaning over to listen to his breathing, Ma Khin got up and catfooted into the other room.

"Not so loud, he notices things now, he mustn't worry."

The whisper was enough to get Kirby off his mat, and to his feet. He was wearing his Kaw mountaineer outfit, which had been neatly laundered. "Out, totally, how long?" he asked himself.

Legs buckling, he crossed the room, which was clean swept, and devoid of any furnishing except mats and water jars. In the next room, the one from which voices came, was a table. There were chairs and other European furniture, and bits of bric-a-brac.

San Ya, cunningly benevolent as ever, was not quite as smooth as he once had been. Turtle-like, he looked as though he wished he could draw his neck well into shelter, and dodge everything. Diane sat there, opening and closing her hands. She looked worried and tired.

Her father was drawn, red eyed, and sallow. His lips were grayish. He shivered and drew borrowed garments closer about him. There was nothing in the house large enough for him to wear, so he had wrapped himself up in whatever he could get. He looked like Sitting Bull in a blizzard.

"But they will follow, they have not given up. It is dangerous for you to stay here."

Though this was Kirby's first clear impression, it was enough. He must have perceived, subconsciously, a good deal during his fever. He said, "Don't try to run us out. We will not go. Do you understand?"

San Ya jerked up from his chair and thrust it back.

Kirby, as he groped for his next words, prayed for strength to drive through. He sorted, desperately, flash after flash of recollection, sifting fact from fancy and nightmare.

"Alex and the rest of them told him what I did, but San Ya is scared as though I had done it to him . . . or as if someone who had faced my show had given San Ya the pure fright of it . . . it's not a story to him, but something real."

And acting on this conviction, Kirby made his bluff. He said, accusingly, "Never mind what Lecoin's *budmashes* and *dacoits* told you. Don't be afraid of them. You will get into worse trouble turning us out than protecting us."

San Ya actually gaped and blinked from confusion. He protested, "*They* told me? How is this, who told me? No one has told me anything. Except Mr. Fenton, Miss Fenton—it is dangerous here, certainly."

"You," Kirby said, deliberately, "are hiding the truth. Lecoin, alone or with a few men, followed us here and talked to you. You would not turn us over to him, and if he had some men, they were afraid to face me. Tell me the truth. In the monastary, you learned how wrong is the not-truth?"

SAN YA made a helpless gesture. "When a man is near death, his soul goes far from his body, and he sees what the eyes do not see, and when he comes back, he remembers. Yes, that man was here. And he will come back with men not afraid to face you. Too many men."

San Ya's explanation, while fanciful, though perhaps not quite as fanciful as Kirby considered it, was nonetheless as reasonable an accounting for Kirby's hunch as any other could have been.

"If you do not protect us, you are not as smart as I think you are. Is it not written, have regard for a whole family of rats, instead of for one cat?"

"Praise be to the Displayer of the Six Glories! Surely, but who are the rats, and which is the cat?"

"Lecoin is the cat. The family of rats is in Rangoon."

"The British?"

"Yes."

"Rangoon is a long way off."

"You are an important man in this town. You can, if you want to, get the village men to stand up to all that Lecoin can bring against us. I do not blame you for not wanting to, but for your own good, do exactly as I say."

"I won't be important here when the Frenchmen gets back to Mandalay, and the king sends soldiers, too many soldiers."

"Don't be a fool!" Fenton cut in, wrathfully. "Lecoin's not gone back to Mandalay for the very reason that made him chase us himself instead of turning out an alarm. Neither he nor the Pangyet Wun wanted to let the whole court know that so-called spies had run away with the treaty."

San Ya demanded, "How can that be?"

"Because the French are promising guns, which is not the same as actually delivering guns. May take weeks for them to come from Indo-China. That is why Lecoin and the Pangyet Wun are very unhappy, very uneasy. The Taingda Min-gyi would be delighted to add another head to his collection."

San Ya shivered. "It is him I am afraid of."

Kirby broke in. "San Ya, it is written, the more you know, the more luck you have. You knew enough to take 200,000 rupees from the British, but you didn't know enough to keep them from Thebaw. You tried to make gold, and only burned your house. Turning us over to Lecoin won't do you any good. Making friends with the British will do you a lot of good. Thebaw's country has not been quite as pleasant as you expected."

"It has not," San Ya admitted. "And for 200,000 rupees, with interest at six per centum, I could make a reconciliation with the British. Only—where can I find such money? Except by getting some mercury, and—"

"Trying once more to make gold?"

"Surely. It works, when you do it right."

"I'll tell you a better way. Take these papers—Alex, where is that treaty?"

"Right here, none the worse."

THE document was blood-stained and bullet scored. Kirby grabbed it, looked at it, waggled it triumphantly. "Get this to Rangoon. The British will not throw you in jail. That would not be sporting, after what you have done for them in giving them these papers. Particularly not after you sheltered British subjects against *dacoits*."

"At the risk of my life," San Ya added.

"At the risk of your life," Kirby solemnly echoed. "It is not us Lecoin wants, it is this paper."

"Then I take it to Rangoon. With my own hands. Give me a writing, saying I am your friend, your protector, that all the people of this village are commanded to protect you. That you ordered me to leave you. That you are too sick to travel with me."

"Write it, Alex. Her Majesty's officials wouldn't remember me."

Fenton wrote; and San Ya lost little time taking to the river. He went in a fast boat, driven by twenty-four paddlers, experts, even though not quite good enough to compete in the races at Mandalay.

Kirby said, some hours later, "Alex, you and Diane could have gone with him."

"I'd not've been equal to it, this is a frightful bout, worst attack in twenty years. Furthermore and moreover, there'd be no room—he's taken the fastest thing afloat, racing shell, no room for anything or anyone but the crew."

Then Diane said, 'Let him rest, Dad. He needs it, badly."

And instead of thinking of a contrary instance in Pegu or the Soudan, Alex Fenton obeyed. He was in bad shape himself.

LECOIN did return, as Kirby had expected; but the villagers put up a stern and uncompromising front. And for good measure, they told his junglemen that Kirby was bullet proof and would put them to flight as he had the spotted men from Mandalay. This, plus a lavish display of *dah* and javelin and some illegally owned muskets, left Lecoin with no resource but to threaten to go to the capital, and return with a band of soldiers.

The villagers, inspired by San Ya's parting admonitions, mocked Lecoin and said, "When the British come up river, when they march up the road to Mandalay, there will be no soldiers for you to lead down this way."

The news of San Ya's departure, instead of heartening Lecoin, convinced him that he had come too late to accomplish anything worthwhile. He knew that nothing less important than the treaty could win the embezzler a safe conduct to Rangoon. So he went, and without ever having entered the limits of the settlement, or having seen the fugitives.

As Kirby recuperated, and rapidly, Diane and Ma Khin were kept at their wits' end trying to prevent him from fretting himself into a relapse. Kirby was worried about Shwe Tha, and the possibility that in the event of war, the venegeful Taingda would find some reason why Thebaw could violate the sanctity of the monastery where the peace loving elder statesman had found refuge. Furthermore, Kirby was mortally sick of boiled eggs, rice, and *jaggeri.*

"See here," Fenton boomed, "you've got nothing to worry about. And I can prove it. I heard—"

"I'm not interested in rumors."

"As I was about to inform you," Fenton resumed sternly, "I heard a steamer whistle. Shwe Tha, Lady Ne Htun, and all the rest of Ma Khin's friends in the palace can take refuge aboard and—Ha, another blast!"

"Let's look," Kirby suggested, with a sudden interest which did not impress or warn Fenton. "Time I stretched my legs, anyway."

The two went down to the river bank. The *Ashley Eden* steamed upstream, bucking the flood. Her stovepipe funnel spewed smoke and sparks; she was wood fired. Her sternwheel churned the river. The wake promised to capsize fishing boats which had not given her wide enough berth. She veered to avoid snags and sandbars. On deck were troops, bearded Sikhs, with ponderous white turbans, and khaki uniforms. Several light field guns were lashed to her rail.

"Should have a company of Highlanders," Fenton grumbled. "With bagpipes skirling. Hope San Ya isn't in jail after delivering the papers. Must've made notable time, to have an expedition coming up stream already."

Kirby spat, and did his best to out-do Fenton maintaining the appearance of utter indifference to the sight of what their efforts had produced. "No redcoats. Chinese Gordon said all he needed was a hundred redcoats steaming up the Nile, and all'd be well. He got 'em—day after his head was chopped off."

"Hmmm—can't be a punitive expedition. Merely delivering an ultimatum or the like. After all, there simply has to be an ultimatum."

"Ultimatum!" Kirby shouted. "Just enough Sikhs to keep the Mandalay mob from boarding her while the skipper's waiting. There'll be more massacres, more like the jail burning. See what I mean, Shwe Tha's in the worst possible danger."

"Damn it all," Fenton retorted impatiently, "the Burmese have a taste for massacres. National genius, as it were. A man simply can't be racing about the country, trying to prevent the expression of the native mind." He took him gently by the arm, and lowered his voice. "A tot of palm brandy'd do you a world of good."

"Where's the rum? Palm brandy tastes too much like kerosine and shellac."

"The rum? Oh, of course, the rum. Er. . . frightfully good for fever . . . I do believe . . . dash it all, I must've drunk the last drop of it. Not indicated for gunshot wounds, you know. Now, at this stage of your convalescence—"

"At this stage, I am fed up with eggs, rice, and *jaggeri!*"

"Quite right," Fenton said, soothingly. "Loathesome stuff! So I had some *jaggeri* distilled. A bit raw, but—"

"Wait a second. I want to talk to this fellow." He took a few steps toward the river, and hailed the Burmese fisherman who was drying nets near his beached boat. *"Kin bya! Kin Bya!"*

"Brother So-and-So" looked up and courteously answered, "Yes, *Thakin?*"

"Take me out to meet the steamer."

"I'd be swamped. The wake is bad."

"Ten rupees." Kirby winked, grinned. "Enough to build a pagoda."

"Kin Bya" eyed the current, the *Ashley Eden's* course and speed. "Maybe going downstream, could meet her, yes, maybe—"

But the deal was not closed. Fenton caught Kirby with a "come along" he had learned during his constabulary days, and Kirby, cursing furiously, came along.

"These mad impulses!" Fenton rumbled, in what he intended to be soothing friendliness, "Utterly mad! You'd be drowned certainly."

"Well, quit twisting my arm. Oh, all right, maybe I did have a crazy notion." He sighed. "I hope that palm brandy isn't too bad."

Although Kirby's strength had not come back sufficiently for him to give Fenton a tussle, he was far more fit than Fenton realized, and he was thinking somewhat faster than Fenton ever had, or would.

The sun was quite low when Fenton brought out the brandy distilled from palm sugar. Immediately on the arrival of his unwelcome visitors, San Ya had set to work fermenting *jaggeri;* like every Burmese, he believed that no "foreign animal" could be deprived of spirituous liquors for more than an hour or two without causing untold agony. Only the lowest natives ever touched the stuff—whether "Old Tom" gin, or palm toddy distillates, decent Burmese simply would not drink.

As Fenton was about to splash the brandy with a liberal dollop of water, Kirby said innocently, "Wait! Let me try it straight, first."

"Er—you mean, *neat?*"

"I want to see how it really tastes, see if it's fit to drink."

Fenton shook his head dubiously, but offered him a jolt. Kirby gulped it, beamed, licked his lips. "Harrrh! Delicious, Alex. Not quite liqueur quality, possibly a bit sharp—"

"To be sure, to be sure. Aged only thirty-six hours. As I said, San Ya prepared the mash, but this is some I cooked off myself."

Kirby poured Fenton four fingers in a tumbler. "Really good. Cuts the dust out of your throat. Not for women and children, of course—here's mud in your eye!"

FENTON, who had taken an appreciable quantity earlier in the day, as Kirby had judged from the man's breath during the futile tussle, naturally did not find the stuff appalling. Normally, it would have seared his gullet and choked him. Now it merely brought tears to his eyes, and left him breathless. Kirby had taken only half his own portion, and with a flourish of feigned gusto swirled the remainder into a flower bed.

There were refills. Fenton could not well condemn the stuff as vile and gagging. Presently, he began to applaud the bouquet. Finally, Kirby got up. He made a choking sound, and said, *"Awwww*—excuse me a—*urk*—moment—" And hurried to the rear, illogically enough, instead of to the verandah railing.

He heard a bottle gurgle. Fenton was chuckling, and mumbling contentedly. He was enjoying, as Kirby had anticipated, an older man's pride in being able to carry his liquor better than could his junior.

Having a much better head than he got credit for, Kirby was steady on his feet. While a bit giddy, he knew precisely what he was going to do, and where he was going.

He wore Kaw clothes, and a new headcloth. The local cobbler had made sandals for him. He was all ready to go places when he found Ah Lok, in the back yard, and whispered, fiercely, "You savvee, Ah Lok? Make more gagging, awking, choking, allee samee me. You savvee plenty?"

Ah Lok did savvy. He started choking convincingly.

Kirby made for the back gate of the compound. Just for luck, he took a *dah* along. There'd be walking by dark, and once in awhile, a leopard did make a pest of himself.

A hand closed on his sleeve. With a gasp, he whirled. Ma Khin was beside him, and looking up, knowingly. "I go with you, I am all ready."

She had a small bundle tucked under her arm.

When he gaped thick wittedly, she added, "I know from the first drink what you wanted to do." Confidingly, she took his arm. "I know, I think with you, I have business in Mandalay, too. We help each other, you and I."

Kirby cast a glance of pure terror back at the house. "Uh—she— I mean—you and I taking a jaunt like this—"

"You and I go," Ma Khin said, sweetly but firmly. "Or I call *him*. He can walk fast, very fast."

Ah Lok was still choking dutifully, making the most of his Chinese genius for imitation.

Fenton bawled, "I say, there! Take a bit of water—wait, I'll slap you on the back —once when I was in Pegu—"

Kirby bolted, not sure whether he dragged Ma Khin, or she, him. When they cleared the fringe of the settlement, there was not yet any pursuit or shouting.

"Well, naturally not," Kirby gasped, as dusk began to block the river trail which they followed, Indian file. "He knows I'd not have a chance walking to Mandalay."

She giggled delightedly. "Just drunk enough to forget the steamer moors at the bank every night."

"Smart girl! Now listen—*please* go back, will you? She'll never believe—"

"If I go back, I tell the old man, and he comes to the steamer to twist your arm. Listen to me, if I go with you, they let me aboard, they let me bring my friends aboard from Mandalay, when we get there. Alone, what do they do for me? Nothing."

Kirby sighed from the ankles. "Why the devil aren't you old and haggish? It'd be a lot easier explaining, later."

Ma Khin smiled, and came very close. She had all the usual Asiatic scents, excepting only the garlic. Tiptoeing, and with upturned face, she murmured, "I heard in the palace how that woman was so nice to that Pierre Lecoin—this will do her good, and you also. And explain nothing."

"Only friend I have on earth," flashed through his mind, for no reason at all; then he kissed her, and decided that there was no occasion for excuses.

Ma Khin sank to her heels, and drew a deep breath, slowly and contentedly. "I smell the steamer, not too far away."

The Sikhs were cooking on deck; the scent of curry was spicy.

"I'm having curry," he said. "No boiled eggs, no rice and *jaggeri*, but curry hot enough to raise a blister on a pack saddle. If they don't shoot first and challenge later."

"That's why it is good to have me along. I'll sing, and they'll know it is a woman, and they won't shoot before I can tell them who we are."

XVI

KIRBY and Shwe Tha sat on the verandah of the monastery whose surrounding grove of tamarinds isolated it from the walled city to the south, and from Mandalay Hill, just behind it. Each of the many monasteries about it was a small, peaceful world of its own, overshadowed by towering pagodas, and populated by many small pagodas of its own. Kirby was saying, "I came back for two reasons. To help you get away is one. The other is to find out whether you could stay and work for peace."

"How can the first be done?"

"The skipper of the *Ashley Eden* has orders to wait no longer than the 4th for an answer to the ultimatum. The fires are banked, and she is ready to cast off when Thebaw gives his answer, and they have allowed him plenty of time.

"If you want to go aboard now and wait, you will be safe. There is a company of Sikhs aboard, and a pair of six pounders. The skipper knows you are important whichever way things turn out."

Shwe Tha considered the prospect, and ended a long silence by finally asking, "How can the second be done?"

Kirby made a helpless gesture. "I don't know how you could work for peace. Maybe, with an ultimatum to bring him

to his senses, the king may squelch the people who tried to finish you, and then let you have a chance to air your views. It is all very fine, talking about being Center of the Universe. That has a splendid sound when the gongs are whanging, and the elephants parading, and the heralds sing out on *kadaw* day. But now he may remember the two wars which the kings before him invited, and quickly lost. He may take your advice on how to accept the ultimatum without losing face."

"After what has been done to you, you don't want war?"

"Of course I don't! No more than do the British. There'd be *dacoits* running wild all over the country, there'd be so much disorder I couldn't do a bit of logging for a year or two after peace was arranged. Who really does want war, when there's no need of it? The high handedness that's caused all this trouble has not even brought Thebaw's government the cash profit they wanted."

SHWE THA agreed to all this, and then mused, "After all, I died once, that night the jail burned. So I should not be afraid now. But of course, I am afraid."

"Could you trust Thebaw's safe conduct?"

Shwe Tha countered, "Could you?"

Kirby pulled a long face. "When he came to the throne—"

Shwe Tha cut into the pause for details by supplying them: "He swore by the sacred relics he would never grant a concession to a foreigner. And then he began to sell concessions. How far can *you* trust him?"

"I came to help you keep your head, not find you a sure way to lose it. Let's get aboard the steamer."

"That is not answering my question. How far could you trust him?"

Kirby had the feeling that though the old man had already made up his mind, he was baiting him for reasons of his own. "U. Shwe Tha, he did break his oath. But first he took time to find reasons to prove it was right and proper. He said the money he'd get from selling concessions would build pagodas and monasteries, and then all the people could win merit by giving gifts and alms. He'd not murder you the minute you appeared. He'd first take time to figure a way of proving someone could gain merit by violating the safe conduct."

"That is right. You have almost persuaded me. One more word, and you have done it."

The old man's tone and his eyes made Kirby uneasy, yet he ignored the warning and demanded, "What word is that?"

"This word—that you go with me, we will both have a safe conduct. What you believe for me, you can believe for yourself."

There were many reasons why Shwe Tha's argument was anything but logical, yet Kirby would not object, lest he upset the one remaining chance for peace. He said, "When you have the king's promise for both, I'll answer you. Now, with your permission, I go."

"Back to the steamer? Stay here, you are welcome. It is all right with the abbot."

Kirby shook his head. "There is Ma Khin. I knew a woman could not stay here. So, I go to wait for her in one of the caves of Mandalay Hill. There she will tell me of her friends in the palace."

"She went to the palace?" Shwe Tha exclaimed.

"I asked her not to risk it. I said that you'd have news of her friends. Not the latest, but late enough. She said that if they were in danger, the quicker they left, the better, and she'd tell them how easy it would be."

"She went in after—after all the things that happened—two of the Divine Elephant's guards tied and gagged with pieces of a very fine *tamein?*"

"I knew that'd cause trouble!"

"The Supaya-lat gave her that *tamein,* and recognized the pieces."

"When I said something of the sort, she laughed and said that she could always explain it away. Said she'd prove the guards took her *tamein* and tied each other up."

"*Amé!* Ma Khin can do almost anything, but she'd gone too far this time. When do you come back?"

"Maybe as soon as I have seen her. Maybe not until you have had a chance to get Thebaw's safe conduct for you and me."

HE LEFT, and without having asked for any protection for Ma Khin. The Supaya-lat could never forgive the use made of her discarded skirt; and she hated all other

women anyway, particularly attractive ones, who might catch Thebaw's eye. She had taught one flirtatious maid of honor a permanent lesson by having both the girl's hands chopped off.

Being well away from the town, which was west and south of the walled city, Kirby had no police to contend with as he skirted the base of Mandalay Hill. Once on its northern slope, he began his ascent toward the widely separated caves dug into the rocky incline. These tunnels had been driven by devotees who found that not even in a monastery could they find the solitude they craved for the meditation on the unimportance of life and living. And some of these caves were unoccupied.

Provided that she left and approached by dark, to avoid offending any hermit by the contaminating proximity of a female creature, Ma Khin had a safe spot from which to work; safer, probably, than the pagoda whose shelter Kirby had suggested when they had made their plans, aboard the *Ashley Eden.*

He crawled into the burrow. It was now swept clean, fitted with several mats and a water jar, and stocked with cooked rice. Since Ma Khin had refused to make any guesses as to the hour of her return, Kirby was spared anxiety on her account; or so she had hoped would be the case, a hope whose vanity she could hardly have imagined.

He distracted himself as best he could, while stretched out on the rocky floor, by wondering what he would do and feel if Shwe Tha did actually get a safe conduct from the king.

Several times during the night, he awakened with a start, as if from hearing her voice, or sensing her presence in the cell. And in his uneasy sleep, he spent much of his time half-awake, and sure that he was talking with her about happenings in the palace. By dawn, when she could no longer return, Kirby was thoroughly on edge.

The chanting of hermits in distant caves irritated him to fury. But for them, she could come and end the suspense.

The dragging of the day was no worse than that of the night. Finally, the sun was low enough for Kirby to be refreshed by the thought that he could soon leave, to begin learning and acting again.

"Act with what?" he asked himself, knowing that the suspense had burned out his energy. "Learn with what?"

Three times he went a dozen yards beyond the cave's mouth, only to turn back; since no destination called him urgentiy, he knew that his desire to leave was rooted in his wish to escape from this one spot.

Then the breeze brought a cosmetic scent, and Ma Khin was in the darkness beside him. "Getting into the palace was easy," she said. "Getting out took time."

"It did. It did, all right."

"I brought you some mangos—"

"What happened? How—what's going on?"

"No one's in danger. Not yet. Too much excitement in the palace. The Kinwun Mingyi stands up for peace. The Taingda Mingyi wants war."

"Do they—your friends—want to leave?"

"Oh, no everything may turn out well enough."

"But suppose it doesn't? Then it'll be too late to get the boat."

Instead of answering this, she asked, "What's Shwe Tha thinking?"

Kirby told her, and added, "I'm going to see him right now, and find out if he has that safe conduct. He might have, and if so, we'll get things settled and over with."

"But an oath won't cover a foreigner, he should know that!"

"I did a lot of thinking on that. I'll go, just as I said I would, instead of the way he's taken for granted I will."

"Tell me."

"If he's to make a good showing at court, he'll have to ride in a palanquin. I'll be one of the bearers. How did you get into the palace?"

"In a big basket of silk and embroidery, though I nearly smothered before I was carried into Lady Ne Htun's rooms. The Supaya-lat's making her share of trouble, she and the Taingda Min-gyi."

"I'm not amazed. Well—I'm going to see Shwe Tha now."

"I'm going, too."

"Where'll you wait?"

"In the pagoda."

"You'd better not. Someone might recognize you, even at night."

Shrine lights, and late worshippers wor-

ried her not at all; she said, "But I am going."

She settled the argument by doing just as she had said, not leaving Kirby until he came to the very gate of the monastery.

AS THOUGH he had not moved during the twenty-four hours which had elapsed, Shwe Tha sat on the verandah. Behind him was the large, open hall, with the dais at the further end the room in which monks and novices spent their days and nights. At one side he had a bowl of crude petroleum in which floated a wick. When he saw Kirby, Shwe Tha laid aside the scripture he had been reading, and picked up a length of cloth on which had been embossed Pali characters.

"It is here," he announced. "The safe conduct, signed, and sealed, and secured by many oaths."

Kirby looked at the document. "I can't read it. Do the oaths include me? With no quibbling?"

"The Golden Lord swears by the Sacred Relics, by the Lord, by the Law, and by the Assembly. And you go with me, oath-protected?"

"Yes, Shwe Tha. As parasol bearer, or palanquin bearer. But not to talk. The skipper of the *Ashley Eden* brought a message that says all there is to say."

"But you could speak without contradicting, without promising—"

"I'm not even a Britisher."

"They think you are, they think you are a spy, so they'll believe you know what you are talking about."

"Absolutely no! I promised I'd go with you, and since I am going, tell me what good can come of it?"

"That is a fair question. Now that you have promised me a promise, I shall answer. Even as a parasol bearer, it is good for you to go. If there is war, you will bear witness that I tried to have peace, that I and others tried; and so the British will deal rightly with me and with those others who are friendly at court.

"If there is peace, you will bear witness also. So that if I have to leave because of those who hate peace, I will have friends in Rangoon. In either event, I will be your witness; that you did large things with no hope of reward, and that you deserve every good that the British may be able to give you."

This satisfied Kirby, though the official safe conduct still did not seem to be a thing of great durability. Thinking of this, he said, "When you have said all there is to say, beg permission to leave, and we'll lose no time getting to the steamer."

"That is understood. But what of Ma Khin?"

"The Supaya-lat is the real enemy," she told me. "The Supaya-lat, and the Taingda Min-gyi. What has the Pangyet Wun been doing? Keeping busy with the glass factories that don't exist?"

"He stands balanced, favoring neither side, and ready to jump to whichever side has the most influence. And if there is war, he will stand balanced, to prove himself as having always been a patriot crying for vengeance, or always having been the loyal friend of the British, secretly biding the day he could help them—and, proving he did help them."

"What parasols will you be allowed?"

"One. A single golden one."

"A *golden* one? Good Lord, only important *wuns* and *min-gyis* rate that, along with royal princes."

"It is this way," Shwe Tha explained. "Thebaw himself is not a bad man. Only a weak one. He wants to hear me, and how can he listen to me, against parasol-bearing chiefs and princes, unless I have a golden parasol? So I have a special patent, and people will *shikoh* when I pass." He smiled contentedly, and added, "And they will not try to murder me, or even throw rocks at me."

XVII

THE following afternoon, half a dozen coolies carried Shwe Tha's palanquin, and only a handful of lictors preceded him. Except for the golden parasol which Kirby carried, Shwe Tha went modestly to the palace.

Once in the outer inclosure, the bearers grounded the palanquin, and Shwe Tha stepped to the paving. Barefooted, he passed the second barrier; but Kirby was allowed to accompany him to the very steps of the Hlutdaw, the Hall of Supreme council, since royalty and brevet-royalty and tempo-

rary royalty did not have to leave their parasols at the outer gate.

The Hlutdaw, to the left of the Hall of Audience, was a detached structure, a few feet off the ground, and entirely open. Its roof, carved and gilded and elaborated with pinnacles, was supported on teak pillars, vermilion at the base and gilt at the capital. Kirby seated himself at the entrance, and watched Shwe Tha join the dignitaries already awaiting Thebaw's arrival. His position was so fantastically insane that he regarded it calmly; it was another of those fever-hallucinations in which, illogically and impossibly, one always emerged with no greater harm than a drenching of sweat, and a bad case of shakes.

Since he knew this, he was neither sweating nor shaking.

Presently, the elderly Kinwun Min-gyi came in, and the scowling Taingda. The sight of the latter, as arrogant and ugly a specimen as Kirby had seen in all Burma, made peace seem a hopeless matter. He had started life as a slave, and had improved himself only in rank.

And then Pierre Lecoin approached the pavilion. Kirby, looking from the corner of his eye, recognized the man, and remembered the advice of big game hunters: do not think of the game you stalk, or it will feel your thought, and notice you. But to make one's mind blank is hard enough at any time, and before Kirby could succeed, Lecoin had noticed him. He had noticed him when by every precedent, he should have had no eye for a parasol bearer.

The Frenchman stopped, abruptly. He made as if to speak, and then seemed to change his mind. He ended, after a pause which to Kirby was interminable, by asking, "Are you not pushing your luck too far?"

While this could have been a threat, Kirby felt that the query was truly a request for information. There was no doubting that Lecoin had been shocked by this second evidence of Kirby's audacity, and that he could not help but think back to the previous example, that for a moment, Lecoin was wondering whether the men who had fled in terror from Kirby's supposed magical invulnerability might not have been right.

Kirby answered casually, "I have a safe conduct. From the king."

"I wonder," Lecoin groped. "I wonder if he would have given you one if he knew just how much you have had to do with the ultimatum?"

"I can hardly keep you from asking him."

Lecoin considered this for a moment. "Whether I do, or do not, depends on what would be lost or gained by the asking. Why are you here?"

"Before I tell you, I must figure out what would be gained, or lost, by the telling."

For a moment they measured each other, eye to eye. It was somewhat like their meeting in the jungle. Lecoin said, "I hope that my duty will permit the pleasure of a private settlement with you."

"After the way we last met, you owe yourself a private accounting, Lecoin. Though you should not be enbarrassed. I could not have faced a shotgun any more than you could. By the way, bring a man-sized pistol, and not a pea shooter."

Lecoin went on, leaving Kirby very busy making a new estimate of his chance of getting back to the steamer. The American had the feeling that as far as he was concerned, nothing which could possibly happen in the Hlutdaw could have consequences as serious as those set in motion by this meeting, and those few quietly exchanged words.

Lecoin, not being a Burmese subject, was not bound by the king's oath. And unlike the king, Lecoin had self-respect which he would be compelled to redeem.

And now the ministers of state were all gathered, feet tucked under them. They smoked, they chewed, they spat, and they waited. Then, with less delay than Kirby had expected, gongs whanged, and drums rumbled. Thebaw and his train came into the Hlutdaw. All the dignitaries got their foreheads to the floor.

Heralds chanted Thebaw's many titles. Thebaw's worshippers raised a long drawn cry, *"Payaaaaaa!"* Divinity; beneath whose Golden Feet they placed their heads, had seated himself on one of his many thrones.

THEBAW wore a splendid surcoat of crimson silk, besprinkled with diamonds. On his head was the spire-like *tharapu,* a crown shaped somewhat like a pagoda, and

somewhat like the *pyathat* of palace or monastery. Despite the flat nose, and the forehead slopping back like a snake's, he looked almost a king. On his bloated face there were no conspicuous scratches left by the Supaya-lat's fingernails.

Though court language was hard for Kirby to understand, he got as much as he needed; bad, yet with more good mixed in than he could have hoped.

The king's hatchet man, the blood-drinking Taingda, had nothing new to say: "Drive them out of Lower Burma, *Paya!* Take back Rangoon. Those we do not cut to pieces, let them try swimming home."

At last Shwe Tha got his chance to say, "Peace is better than war. But if we must have war, we need modern guns to fight it. Where are they?"

Lecoin answered Thebaw's question: "Guns are on the way from Tonkin, and so are trained soldiers. Any day, now, they will be here."

Another of the peace party had his say: "The British are at Thayetmyo. Tonkin is far away. We cannot fight with absent guns."

Shwe Tha again got Thebaw's ear: "Why need we fight? There is trade for all, *Paya.* For French and for English. The English do not want war. All they want is to wear hats and shoes when their Resident comes to put his head beneath Your Divinity's Golden Feet. All they want is exemption from insult, and from fines.

"They cannot help being foreign barbarians. They have their faults, but their trade brings many good things into our country, and they take away only what we have much of."

It was not a debate. Shwe Tha and the wise old Kinwun advocated moderation, diplomacy. They pointed out how room could be made for the French, without permitting a railroad, and without giving them a monopoly; how favoring the French, to use them against the British, would in the end give too much power to one lot of foreigners. Better let each have his share of trade, rather than let one get strong enough to drive the other out.

"Once this foreign barbarian's people—" Shwe Tha was hammering at Lecoin—"get French trained troops from Tonkin, enough such troops to beat the British, they will turn against us. A mountain is climbed by degrees; property is acquired by degress; wisdom is learned by degrees. And if the French become as strong as they want to be, they will by degrees take everything from us.

"The British took Arakan, and they took Pegu, each time, because we asked for war. Why invite France to take the rest?"

This was the old man's final effort, and his best. Whatever his plain speech might cost him later, he had left his mark. Others seconded him, gaining courage from his honesty and his courage; they remembered how Mindon Min, Thebaw's father, had regarded this elder statesman. The only opposition came from the relentless Taingda, and from Lecoin, who monotonously reiterated that guns and men would soon arrive from Tonkin.

And it sounded to Kirby as if the Frenchman was talking against his own knowledge, talking only because his shaken nerves had made him miss shot after shot, when one pistol ball could have kept an ultimatum from coming up from Rangoon, at least until the men and arms from Tonkin were actually in Mandalay.

Thebaw was weakening. Shwe Tha cited Buddhist scriptures, the very texts which Thebaw in his boyhood days in a monastery had so diligently memorized.

KIRBY began to believe that the impossible was happening. The growing assurance that his risk had not been wasted gave him the fine glow, the pleasant light dizziness of just enough, but not too much, champagne. It began to look and sound as if he would win from Shwe Tha's heroism and courage a triumph so strong that he would not have to explain to Diane that his reasons for hurrying away with Ma Khin had been strictly altruistic, and for the good of his teak lease.

Then came a speaker unannounceed by heralds: and the silence which followed her entry was not one of awe in the presence of royalty. For a crazy instant, Kirby thought that Ma Khin had come to judgment, recklessly, shattering all precedent; and that the silence was that of amazement at a woman's uninvited intrusion into the Supreme Council.

But this was not Ma Khin. The Supaya-

lat had come to help the Taingda, her ally, the man who schemed to make her Thebaw's wife, and then to make Thebaw king instead of one of the princes Mindon Min would have elected to succeed him.

The man who had made her queen was losing prestige and power. If he slipped, then so might she slip, and become one of many queens. The Supaya-lat had come to save her sponsor, and as she doubtless believed, herself also.

Despite the risk, Kirby raised his forehead high enough from the pavement so that by straining his eyes, he could get his first glimpse of the woman who had won such a hold on the king.

Being of close kin to Thebaw, she had the sloping forehead of the Alaungpaya dynasty. Like Ma Khin, she was slender and beautifully shaped; her features were finely modelled. She had splendid dark eyes, all alive and now all ablaze. She carried herself with a leopard's grace. She had a leopard's deadliness, and some of his snarl as without ceremony, she pointed to Shwe Tha and addressed the king.

"*Paya!* You have listened to woman's counsel so long, now hear another woman's! Since you must heed women and think of peace when you should fight, let your counsellor dress the part."

The audacity of words, and of her very presence, won her a silence whose totality made it easy for Kirby to hear the Supaya-lat's breathing during the moment she needed for delivering the impossible; a redoubling of what she had already done and said.

One of her ladies in waiting had come with her, carrying between her two hands a folded cloth. This the Supaya-lat plucked and whisked it, flared it out: a *tamein* of finest weave and latest royal pattern.

"This, *Paya,* for the chief of your women, the oldest of them."

Cat-quick, yet regal, she came to Shwe Tha, and gestured imperiously. "On your feet, woman!" And when he obeyed, she spoke to her attendant. The woman deftly whipped the *tamein* about the old man's hips, twisted the wrap-around skirt fast, and stepped back. Since this insult had been done at the command of divinity, Shwe Tha could only accept it.

The Supaya-lat extended both arms. "Divinity, I kowtow with my forehead!" Without waiting for answer to her request for permission to leave, the Supaya-lat left.

The Taingda and his allies cried, "*Payaaaaaa!*"

Thebaw, having to prove his doubtful claim to manliness, picked up the British ultimatum, tore it and flipped it to the floor. Then he got up and stalked after the queen.

A rupee is worth a little less than forty cents. Sixteen anas make one rupee. Four pies make one anna. And Kirby, seeing Shwe Tha come out, wearing the *tamein* he dared not snatch off lest he be deemed guilty of insulting divinity, priced both their lives in currency smaller than a pie.

UNTIL Thebaw remembered and cancelled Shwe Tha's right to the golden parasol, that attribute of near-royalty, it offered certain protection; yet Kirby held his breath until the old man was in his palanquin. When they cleared the outer gate, Kirby could not understand why some over-zealous soldier had not bayonetted the man who had been so affronted by the Supaya-lat, and with Thebaw's consent.

He said in a low voice, "U. Shwe Tha, make for the steamer, don't lose a second. Once word gets around, every enemy will come looking for you, safe conduct or no."

They had gone only a few yards when Kirby learned that news traveled faster than Shwe Tha's bearers. Loafers gathered and instead of bowing, they peered, hurled clods, sticks, fruit snatched from the baskets of peddlers. The bearers set down their burden and told Shwe Tha, with a thousand politenesses, that by going afoot, he'd be less conspicuous, and have a better chance. Although they were right, their first concern was for their own hides.

Kirby said, "Take off that *tamein!*" He knocked the golden parasol from its twelve foot handle, and used the latter as best he could: as pike, cudgel, and quarter-staff, clouting, prodding, cracking down on the rabble nearest him.

During a pause, someone nudged him. He turned, and faced not Shwe Tha but one dressed like the bearers who had deserted.

"A pistol, *thakin.*" It was Ma Khin, who went on saying, "Easy to take a bearer's place. Oh, yes, I stole this pistol on the steamer."

"Keep it, don't use it unless you really have to."

Kirby's counterattack, and the glimpse of the revolver made the crowd give ground, although those at the outer fringe, not knowing what had happened, still heaved rubbish and clods.

The three made for the eastern gate, the one furthest from the river. To have headed either for the northern or the southern would have increased, by a quarter of a mile, the distance which they would have to cover in the walled city's streets, and in the face of a growing mob. The most direct route, that by way of the southwest gate, would have entailed the longest march through the walled city. Yet in leaving by the eastern gate, the three were turning their backs on the river.

When, battered and bruised, they had the moat behind them, they had increased by more than a mile the distance they would otherwise have had to cover.

Ahead were the marshes, and Yan Kin Taung Hill. Beyond the swamp rose the Shan Mountains.

"Never make it to the mountains," Kirby muttered. "They'd run us down first. It's bluff or nothing."

Oddly, the soldiers at the gate had not opposed the harassed three. Neither had they tried to restore order. Loafers and ruffians came out over the bridge. They seemed less inclined to close in than to annoy and threaten from a safe distance. Shwe Tha's face was covered with blood from a scalp wound. Kirby's ribs ached from the impact of clods and rocks.

"We're being pocketed," he gasped. "They're beginning to guess we won't shoot unless we have to—that if we do shoot, our safe conduct is finished, and troops will turn out. Let's make for the monastery—after dark, we can head for the river—"

Going north, they skirted the moat, which protected their left. Much of the time, Kirby moved crabwise, now that he had taken the pistol. With it, he menaced those who dogged them, ready to make a good throw the moment his attention lagged.

Walking sidewise and backward was slow business, yet Kirby did finally reach the northeast angle of the city wall; the longest half mile he had ever covered. A like distance ahead, he saw the multiple roofs and the carved gables of the monastery, reaching above its grove.

They were near their haven, and as good as protected by its holiness when Kirby heard shouting and distant musketry. There was the rumble of a small cannon. The popping of firecrackers, a part of Burmese warfare as well as of festivals and funerals, told him that there was trouble along the riverfront. Then came the blasts of the *Ashley Eden's* familiar whistle. Whether an answer to the ultimatum had been accompanied by such threat of violence that departure was an immediate necessity, or whether the skipper, menaced by irresponsible soldiers, had considered that he had had answer enough, Kirby could not guess. Whichever the case, the skipper could not concern himself too much with unofficial passengers who, ignoring his advice, had persisted in going ashore.

"All aboard! All ashore, stay ashore!" Kirby said, bitterly. "Nothing to do now but wait till the mob finds some way of getting at us before the army comes to town."

Thebaw had not violated his safe conduct. He was merely taking his time about noticing and punishing those who did violate it.

XVIII

THE abbot was none too pleased at having a woman even in the compound of the monastery for longer than a brief visit, but he offered no strong objection to harboring Ma Khin.

"Since she belongs to you, and since she did so much to help you and Shwe Tha," he said, "we can not turn her away."

After an awkward silence, Kirby decided against insisting that the young lady did not belong to him. Appearances were so much against him that his efforts would succeed only in convincing the abbot that he had given sanctuary to a liar. So Kirby said, "*Paya*, she would be in danger, grave danger, if she left. Your kindness wins you added merit. And she says that she will spread her mat over there, by those little pagodas and shrines. To stay out of the sight of the *ponygis* and novices and schoolboys."

Kirby referred to the several pagodas within the compound, among the mango and tamarind trees. These small structures

rose from a brick platform whose balustrade, with stone stairs guarded by fantastically sculptured leogryphs, he had already told himself, would be the best place in which to make a stand if cornered by anyone reckless enough to invade the sanctuary. While the entire area was guarded by a teak palisade strong enough to resist elephants, there was no gate to close the entrance. In the event of attack, there would be no escape over the tall barrier, the only exit would be the one through which the enemy would be coming.

The following day, Kirby said to Shwe Tha, "Become a monk for the time. You once told me that a man can honorably take off the yellow robe, and go back into the world whenever he wishes."

The old man shook his head. "Yesterday I went out with a golden parasol, I went to argue for worldly things of tomorrow and for the days beyond, for the years beyond tomorrow. The abbot and the *ponygis* know my mind. Could I ask them to help me live a lie, even for a few days?"

Kirby, having no answer, went to sit in the shade of a palmyra near the entrance, as though to get earlier sight of trouble. He was by now sure that some of those who came with gifts for the monks were renegades bent on spying out the place, or to work up their courage to commit the unspeakable outrage of killing within the consecrated inclosure.

THEN, after a number of restless days, and sleepless nights during which he and Ma Khin took turns guarding against stealthy assassination, Kirby saw Lecoin come riding up with half a dozen attendants following him afoot.

The Frenchman said, "I come to demand satisfaction, or to offer it." He clapped his hands, and when one of his men gave him a hardwood case, he opened it. "A pair of pistols. By Gastine-Rennet. And not pea shooters."

In addition to the brace of long barrelled, muzzle loading pistols, the traditional French duelling weapons, the velvet lined case contained a powder flask, a rammer, a box of percussion caps, a bullet mould, and a device for extracting a charge. Also, there were half a dozen balls of about .45 caliber. These pistols were rifled, and had set-triggers so delicate that a hard look would set them off.

"Come out," Lecoin challenged. "Take your choice. Neither is loaded."

Kirby looked at the man's taut face and unnaturally bright eyes; these, unlike his voice, he could not discipline.

"Thanks, Lecoin. But I won't."

"Eh—what? What?"

"I said, no."

"I demand a meeting!"

"You've had it. Get out!"

Lecoin cursed fiercely, savagely, and with a contempt designed to bite far deeper than the words themselves. Wating patiently until the Frenchman ran out of breath, Kirby said, "You forgot to call me a coward."

Lecoin slammed the pistol case shut, wheeled his horse, and rode away. Kirby, when he turned from the entrance, saw the abbot nearby. "You have become very nearly like one of us," the yellow-robed man said.

"Thank you, *paya*. But it was easy."

"How, easy? You people love to fight, it is your life."

"Suppose, *paya*, that I had left this sanctuary either to kill or be killed. I am sure that if he had failed, someone else would have picked me off, to make the Supaya-lat happy. Then, by not fighting now, my chance of fighting when it is necessary will be better. If I went out to meet him, it would give some spotted man a pretext for coming in to hurt Shwe Tha, or Ma Khin."

The following day, Lecoin came alone. He stalked into the compound and accosted Kirby, who was on the porch. "Sir, yesterday I had men with me, and you might have doubted that I offered an honorable meeting. And you Americans are not accustomed to the weapons of a gentleman. Today, I have in each hip pocket a .44 caliber Colt, in perfect condition. Take your choice. We will go out in front, in opposite directions, and each will take his post behind a tree. We will step into view, and fire at sight."

"Lecoin, the Supaya-lat is using you. Once you pull me into a gun fight, public sentiment will give her a better chance to murder Shwe Tha, because he and I are together."

"You will not meet me?"

"For once and for all, no."

Lecoin slapped him, lightly but smartly, one-two.

Kirby did not raise a hand.

Lecoin reached for his hip pocket as though to draw.

Kirby kept his hands in place, instead of reaching for the weapon Ma Khin had given him. Then the Frenchman, whether believing him armed or not, did produce a pistol, butt foremost, and presented it to Kirby. And when Kirby would not accept the weapon, Lecoin laid it on the pavement.

"The next time I come, I shall shoot on sight, sanctuary or no, and if, as you fear, a mob takes me in hand, that also is good."

"Take it easy, Lecoin. I'll meet you—when the British have taken Mandalay."

"Yes, when British law forbids duelling, and I become a felon, a criminal, defending my honor! I have warned you, I return!"

Lecoin stalked toward the entrance. When Kirby finally looked about him, he saw Ma Khin cuddling something under her jacket. The .44 Colt no longer lay on the pavement.

As they went to the pagoda platform, Ma Khin said, with affectionate malice, "Climb a tall tree, to see the British so much the sooner. Maybe that woman will be hurrying after their army to see you."

WHILE Kirby hoped Diane and her father would arrive with the rear elements of the army, he also hoped that they would do nothing of the sort, for he had the uncomfortable feeling that Ma Khin would not be helpful in the explanations which he knew he could not avoid.

"Serve Diane damn well right," he told himself. "I swallowed enough of her explaining."

Ma Khin was a lady. And she'd quit eating garlic. And she had developed the trick of acting on his thoughts a moment before he himself was aware of them. What actually worried him was not what Ma Khin would or would not say when the final meeting came, but what Diane would pick from his most carefull guarded thoughts. He had somewhat too many thoughts concerned with what he called a half-pint brunette.

That night, men and women came stealthily into the monastery. Before Kirby could arouse Shwe Tha and warn him of possible danger, Ma Khin had hurried to join the newscomers. At the same time, the ever watchful abbot went to accost them.

There was talk, low, fast, and confusing to Kirby. He and Shwe Tha followed the group toward the main building. There by lamplight he saw the women's jackets and *tameins*, the men's silken surcoats, and knew that there were people of importance. Fear and anxiety had not overcome the dignity given by years of assured position.

When Ma Khin came back to Kirby she said, "The palace and walled city have become too dangerous for my friends. Before they left, they sent a courier to meet the British, and ask for a company of soldiers to protect them at this monastery, even before they make for the walled city."

"You think any British general would do that?"

"These people are valuable to use for keeping order, later. Not traitors, but people who see no hope under Thebaw. Look what the *pongyi's* son has done to his country and his people!"

Pongyi's son—son of a monk—Kirby had heard that insulting term previously, though rarely, since it was an exceedingly dangerous business to question the king's legitimacy.

"Ma Khin, is that story true?"

"No proof. But not long before Thebaw was born, there was a scandalous affair in the palace, with good reason for sending a certain monk to prison. He died quickly of 'colic.' And Thebaw's mother was sent to a nunnery. He *may* be Mindon Min's son, but does he act as if he were?"

Each day when the monks came back with the alms they had collected, they brought rumors of British defeats, of Burmese defeats: wild yarns, but enough to keep Mandalay noisy from martial music and firecrackers. Pagoda bells clanged all day.

Kirby spent all his time listening for the first sounds of cannonade. When the gunboats came within range of the forts at Sagaing and Ava, six miles below Mandalay, the show would open. He did not expect Burmese gunnery to stop the British flotilla. However, the first rumbling of artillery would end the suspense.

Meanwhile, he pictured the approaches to the capital, and tried to guess which one the British general, Sir Harry Pendergast,

would elect. Then, in the midst of Kirby's fidgetting and campaign planning, Lecoin returned.

The Frenchman dismounted some thirty yards from the compound, left his pony with attendants, and marched straight for the entrance. Even before he could have seen Kirby, he shouted, "This time, you do not get away!"

Kirby, taking the verandah steps three at a time, called over his shoulder to Shwe Tha, "Watch out! No telling who's with him. Tell those people to look out."

When he looked forward again, Kirby saw that beyond Lecoin's escort other men had come into view. They were armed with muskets, javelins, *dahs*. Though they hung back, it was plain that once Lecoin had violated the sanctuary, they would follow, to profit by his guilt. Whatever they did, blame and penalty would be his, not theirs.

"Defend yourself!" he shouted.

Kirby presented himself edgewise, and shifted a little to get directly in front of a teak pillar nearly two feet in diameter. The dark background would help.

"Get away!" he said to Ma Khin. "Stay away!"

Kirby crooked his left arm, and raised it until it was horizontal and shoulder high. He rested the cocked weapon at the angle of his elbow, to steady it. The job had to be done with one shot. He'd need every one of his cartridges when the men behind Lecoin began their rush.

No chance this time to prove that he was bullet proof. No place in Asia offered any magic to stand up to a .44 Colt. Magic worked only when the man behind the gun had a smooth bore musket which threw a slug anywhere but at the target.

Kirby's eyes had become accustomed to looking into the sunbeaten compound, whereas the invader's had not become used to probing the shadows. But Kirby held his fire; the range was still too great.

Lecoin's weapon rose, levelled off, blazed. The slug went wide by a foot. He was over-eager, just as the plotting French prime minister had been in wanting to rush from the taking of Indo-China to the snatching of all Burma. Kirby, following British precedent, waited for the situation before him to ripen. Let him come nearer.

Then, behind the Frenchman, wiry brown men raced for the entrance of the compound. They yelled, fiercely, triumphantly. Muskets boomed. Smoke billowed in dense blue clouds. Lecoin pitched forward, tried to recover, but failed. He had been hit by a wild shot from the rear; the men behind him, having an entire monastery to riddle with the one-ounce slugs and the scrap iron spewed from jezails and blunderbusses, had to hit the one man who spear-headed their attack.

The charging line passed over Lecoin as he tried to get to his knees. Instead of having one enemy to face, Kirby now had many; and they came at him, raging and howling.

Kirby answered them—once—twice. At each blast, a man doubled up and pitched in a kicking heap. Beside Kirby, a pistol whacked. Ma Khin was busy with the stolen weapon she and Kirby had been passing from hand to hand, ever since that day at the palace.

There was now no chance of missing. Ma Khin wasted no lead. The line wavered. It broke. Disciplined troops could have endured the punishment, but for a rabble of assassins, five down in a few seconds was far too much.

Kirby caught Ma Khin by the arm, and hustled her to the right. "Get over with the others, now's our chance."

They made for the balustrade where the palace refugees had gathered in a fatally tight cluster. The scattering of the *budmashes* had given Lecoin a change of front, and a clear field of fire. He was on his knees, levelling his weapon, using his left wrist to steady his right. Hard hit, he would nonetheless get in one more shot. Whether for France, or whether to redeem himself from humiliation, it depended on one trigger pull.

Ma Khin screamed.

Kirby whirled. The two guns together made a prolonged sound. Lecoin slumped. He clawed for the revolver he dropped, but could not get it.

Ma Khin lay in a heap against the platform steps. There was a red splotch on her jacket. Though gray lipped from shock, she thrust her pistol into Kirby's hand. Unthinking, he took it, and scooped her up in his arms.

"Take care of her!" he cried to the

women who came to him. "They're coming back!"

The raiders, thinking Kirby's gun empty, changed their minds when he raced for Lecoin to get the Frenchman's pistol. He snatched the weapon, and while kneeling, he fired, picking a man from the center, another from the left, another from the right.

The cold precision of it broke their hearts. And then the refugees shed their panic and came raging out from behind the balustrade. Before he could get the last two cartridges in Ma Khin's revolver on the way, Kirby had fighting men on each flank; and he was leading them. He did not stop until every invader who was able to move had fled from the compound.

And then someone yelled, "Guns! Big guns!"

There was the deep grumble of old-fashioned cannon, and the sharper blast of modern artillery; a salvo, and another, and then silence for a moment, until all Mandalay began to screech and howl as with a single throat. Kirby pointed to the gate, and yelled, "Watch here, watch here!" and then raced to the pagoda platform where the women squatted about Ma Khin. "The army's here! They're here, Ma Khin!"

And then, getting his first clear sight of Ma Khin and the conflicting efforts of the women who tried to dress her wound, Kirby forgot the cannonade and set to work doing the best he could. "Quit that screaming and stand by," he commanded. "You, there! Go to the cook house and get hot water!"

Someone came to tell him that the Kinwun Min-gyi had already gone downstream to meet the British commander to arrange for the surrender of the Burmese army, and of the king and queen.

After drugging Ma Khin with opium dissolved in palm brandy, Kirby finally succeeded in extracting the bullet. From then on, he squatted on the tiles, back against the balustrade, watching his gray-lipped patient. All he could do was wait, and keep the women from adding their bit to deprive Ma Khin of what slim chance his crude surgery had left. By day and by night he watched, driving away the wizards who came to help. And thus once more Kirby was taken by surprise when a platoon of Sikhs arrived to guard the monastery, while Colonel Sladen of the British army led the advance guard into the walled city, and into the Palace of the Golden Lord.

BUT this was of little importance except that the arrival of troops gave Kirby hope of a doctor for Ma Khin. He was still at his post when he heard a familiar English voice. He looked up, haggard and numb-witted from his long vigil, and blinked at Alex Fenton for a moment as though trying to recall him.

A steamer whistle sounded. "I say, there," Fenton began, "you look frightfully done in. Followed your example. Boarded the *Thooreah*—nasty little tub. But quite the thing for taking Thebaw and—"

"Oh, hello, Alex. Thebaw and the Supaya-lat—"

"Prisoners of war, you know. Might join me, watching them as they are carried down to board the *Thooreah*. Stimulating spectacle, do you good."

"Stray bullet, Lecoin's wild shooting, hit Ma Khin. Tell Diane her French friend is done for, though I didn't do it. Stimulating spectacle. But I'm busy now."

Fenton, after a look at Ma Khin, became grave, and sighed. "I am frightfully sorry. Idiotic trick, the way you two left San Ya's place—he's quite a hero now, by the way—Diane was terribly upset."

"I'm quite upset myself."

"Er—she's coming up soon as the military permit her."

Kirby did not answer. Ma Khin's eyelids fluttered. Her color was coming back. It was not the flush of fever. For hours, she had been in a coma. Her sudden return of vitality was more than Kirby could believe. "Can you beat that!" he murmured exultantly. "Coming out of it, when I'd written her off, hours ago." He passed his hand across his forehead. "As an M.D., I'm a perfect logger, the good Lord must've been with me."

Ma Khin said, "The *thakin-ma* will be here when it is all safe and peaceful, *shin*," using the familiar address of a woman to her lover. And Kirby could not help, and did not want to avoid answering in like style, "It's peaceful already, *mi-mi*."

Fenton coughed. "Ah—er—Diane—"

Kirby made an impatient sweep of the hand. "Save it till later!" He bent over to

stroke Ma Khin's forehead. "Feeling better, *mi-mi?* Want a drink?"

Fenton stood there, wrestling with the understanding which he got from the girl's face, and from Kirby's voice, and from her smile. The eyes were all alive and glowed like her face. She raised her head a little, and her mouth puckered invitingly. And when Kirby kissed her, she reached, uncertainly at first, but with growing strength and assurance. Then her arms relaxed. Kirby bent forward a little, and slowly, so that a moment passed before he was sure that the nape of her neck rested on the padded wooden pillow. He had not had enough time to understand what was happening. She still smiled, but now the eyes were dilated enormously, and darker than he had ever before seen them. And something had gone from them.

Then he knew that they had dilated so widely because Ma Khin was looking into the blackest of all great blacknesses. And though Kirby knew, he could not at once react to his knowledge. He got up, wearily, and turned to Fenton.

The Britisher said, "Ah . . . I know how you feel . . . when I was in Pegu—I mean, before my late second wife—"

"Thanks, Alex. Glad you came when you did. She's gone west. I think now that she must already have been gone, but came back awhile, long enough for you to see and hear."

Fenton nodded with that quick and entire understanding which he at times had. "She always did loathe Diane—by the way—" From the women, who had now realized what had happened, there came the sound of wailing.

FENTON took Kirby by the elbow. "You can't endure much of *that!* Better come with me for awhile. See Colonel Sladen. He's quite the proconsul, as it were—pardoning, sentencing, restoring, idemnifying, according as what seems good and just, undoing Thebaw's idiocities—but when his superior takes over, there'll be a stop to all that, better see him before it's too late."

Kirby had not enough will to decline any suggestion, though he paused to say to Shwe Tha, "You are safe now. Do for her what is fitting."

"She believed in modern things and ways."

"Then let it all be modern. No Burmese trimmings at all."

Fenton clapped Kirby on the shoulder. "What you need is a tot of grog or palm brandy or something—oh, by the way, Diane won't be in Mandalay for a week or two. I'm quite sure—" He gestured over his shoulder. "No explaining to be done."

"A month or so, Alex, would help. Look here! *You* see the British colonel. After all, I didn't pay that fine, so there's nothing to indemnify. I'm not interested in seeing the *pongyi's* son and that hellion of a Supayalat herded to the steamer. I'm not interested right now in anything except making sure that Shwe Tha knows what *modern* means. You mind?"

Fenton thrust out his hand. "Neither now, nor ever, Dan. We will both be glad to see you, when you feel like coming to the house. I'll tell Diane you had to hurry up to your lease, post haste. When you return she'll be waiting for you—she, too, is modern—and understanding."

They regarded each other until at last the hard handclasp relaxed. Fenton's eyes had gone far out of focus, and were looking beyond Kirby and into the past. He coughed, turned abruptly, and muttered a name which could not possibly have been that of any of his former wives.

And from this, Kirby felt less alone. All these things had happened to other people before him; and in due course, it would be good to go to the home of his father's old friend, to greet the woman who would be his wife. Meanwhile, he was glad that since Ma Khin was already outside the walled city, they would not be carrying her through the Amingala, the Accursed Gate.

And when he came to the balustrade, he said with steady voice, "Shwe Tha, there will be no rockets, and no firecrackers, and no tug of war with the coffin. But loyalty such as hers deserves a royal tribute. I will walk after her with a golden parasol.

THE END

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

By Courier

THERE was little to distinguish this train from any of the many others that rolled across the furnace-like heat of Rajputana from Lucknow and pressed through the yellow leagues of sand to the Sind; and over it to Hyderabad and on down to Karachi, where the wind comes off the sea and, after days, cools the cars.

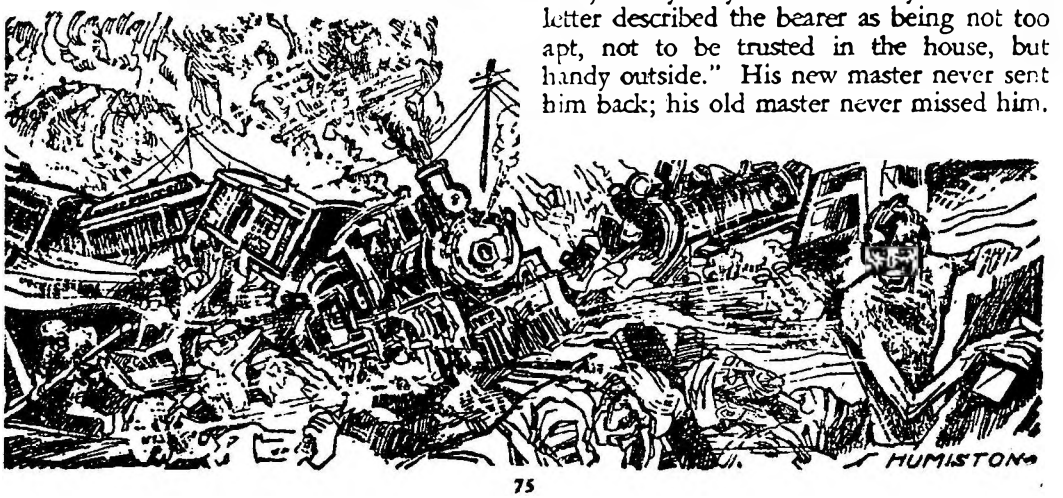
In a coach a-crawl with cockroaches he sat, this boy from the Punjab who'd been sent to Karachi by his master in Lucknow. Sent with a letter to a friend. Sent as a courier. A big assignment, an important mission. "By Courier" was written on the envelope. And he, hungry houseboy from the east, was that courier! He sat as much apart from the sweating crowds as he could; and with the night—the last night of the ride—he passed a hand around the letter to guard it with his life. The train picked up speed and rocked toward Tatta, wheels screeching and whistle piping. And the crash, the jouncing impact of derailment. . . . Scattered on the sands were the broken, the hurt, and the dead. The Punjab boy, shocked to semi-consciousness, moved away in the starlight, letter tight in hand. Karachi couldn't be far. . . . .

He stumbled, he crawled, he clawed himself west; he left the line of the railway. He sobbed beneath the blistering sun and for two searing days inched westward. A courier, he. The letter must be delivered. Wait for a rescue train? That would take a day, and within a day, he could be in Karachi. . . . "A letter, *sahib*."

Three days, now. Three times had he lay gasping in the light, senses fried to dullness by the heat. Not hearing the far whistle of the train. Not seeing the high-wheeling birds in the sky—happily.

And they found him, and he fought through his delirium and begged delivery of the letter, and it was delivered. He had lived a hundred lives and died a thousand deaths, in those three days. He was a courier.

They'll tell you today, in the Gardens on Elphinstone Street in Karachi, that the Punjab boy stayed for some years. "The letter described the bearer as being not too apt, not to be trusted in the house, but handy outside." His new master never sent him back; his old master never missed him.



Looked As If Black John Smith Was Going to Get Mixed Up in a Genuine Domestic Drama—Even on Halfaday Crick

WILLIE SHOWS UP ON HALFADAY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

I

LYME CUSHING, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, eyed the stranger who stepped through the open doorway and crossed to the bar.

The pack the man swung from his shoulder thudded upon the floor at his feet as he met Cush's gaze through narrowed lids. "This is Halfaday Crick, ain't it?" he demanded. "An' this would be Cushing's Fort where this here Black John an' his gang of outlaws hangs out, ain't it?"

Cush nodded somberly as he set out a bottle and two glasses onto the bar. "Yeah, this is Halfaday Crick. An' this is Cushing's Fort. Cushing—that's me. Fill up. This un's on the house."

The man filled his glass and glanced about the room. "Where's this Black John at?"

"I couldn't say."

"An' where's all them outlaws I be'n hearin' about? Hell, it's quiet as a graveyard around here!"

" 'Tain't noisy."

"But—there is a bunch of outlaws hangs out here, ain't there?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You sure don't put out nothin', do you?"

"No."

"Well, listen here, bud—you can loosen up with me. I'm an outlaw, too, if anyone should ask you!"

"They ain't no one asked."

The man downed his drink, and tossed a bill onto the bar. "I'm buyin' one. An' like I said, you don't need to be afraid of me."

"I ain't."

"What I mean you don't need to be afraid I'll spill my guts. Listen—jest to show you I know the right kind of folks—

do you remember a guy name of Simco Sam? An' another one name of Stiles? I ran acrost 'em in Frisco—an' a skirt name of Tacoma Kate, an' a guy they call the Chicago Kid."

Cush nodded. "Yeah. We run 'em off'n the crick fer one thing an' another. We don't allow no crime on the crick. They was lucky they didn't git hung."

"That's where they claimed they made their mistake—tryin' to pull off somethin' on Halfaday. They claimed this here Black John won't stand fer no one pullin' off nothin' here on the crick. It ain't no bad idee, at that. Accordin' to them, if someone does pull somethin', Black John, he calls a miners' meetin' an' hangs 'em. But you don't need to be afraid I'll pull nothin' around here."

"I ain't."

"Yer damn right! I don't want to git hung!"

"None of 'em did."

"I done time in Atlanta. Draw'd a twenty-year stretch fer a mail-train robbery me an' a couple of other guys pulled off. Done ten years of it an got paroled. Fill 'em up agin. I'll buy another. Ain't had a drink sence I left Whitehorse. Might's well git acquainted." The man grinned and winked. "Bill Jones is my name. Good as any other, I guess. I'll bet none of the boys here on the crick is puttin' out their right name."

"I couldn't say."

"Like I told you a while back, you don't need to be so damn tight-mouthed with me. I don't run off at the head, no more'n you do—when I don't know who I'm talkin' to. I've kinda got it on you there—I know yer all outlaws up here, an' that I'm amongst friends. But you don't know me. Fer all you know I might be some damn shamus that come snoopin' around fer to git him an eyeful. But listen—you never heard tell of no dick er hawkshaw carryin' around no sixty-thousan' dollars in cash money on him, did you?"

"No."

REACHING into his packsack the man tossed a thick packet of currency onto the bar. "Count it!" he said.

Removing the rubber bands, Cush counted the money. "Fifty-eight thousan' three hundred an' sixty dollars," he announced.

"It was sixty thousan' when I drawed it outa the bank," he said. "I spent the difference comin' up here. An' I didn't draw it out with no check, neither. Draw'd it at night with a nice electric drill an' a couple of horse blankets an' a little soup. You see, back there in stir I palled up with a couple of yeggs—post offices, an' hick banks was their line—an' they give me the low-down on how to work it. They even put me wise to a hideout they had over in Tennessee, an' when I got me a parole I slipped over an' picked up the drill an' a bottle of soup they had hid there. Then I slipped out into the mountains to a town where I come from near.

"My pa, he was a preacher back there in the hills, an' along with his preachin' he done a little farmin' on a sidehill forty. I figgers on goin' back to the farm fer a spell till I could kinda look around fer a job to pull. But when I got there the cabin was empty. I figgered mebbe pa had died an' no one had wrote me about it. So I started walkin' to town, an' I met up with a neighbor—an old fella name of Ross Sergeant, I'd know'd when I was a kid. I ask him if the parson that usta live back there was dead, and I seen right away that he didn't know me from Adam's off ox. He give a kind of a cacklin' laugh an' thumped the ground with his cane, an' set down on a rock alongside the road, an' I set down on another one, an' he says 'no sir, the parson ain't dead by a dang sight!' He called him by name, but I ain't namin' him, bein' as I already told you my name is Bill Jones.

"The old man goes on to say how Pa was about to lose the farm on a mortgage the bank held on it, when along comes a stranger an' give Pa the money to pay off the bank, an' then he buys the farm off'n Pa. He not only give Pa some cash money, but he throw'd in a house in town, an' a horse an' a red-wheeled rig, an' some kind of insurance where the company's got to pay Pa a hundred dollars a month as long as he lives. Everyone in the hills was laughin' about what a damn fool this here stranger was, makin' a deal like that, fer a woreout hillside forty. Then the old man claimed, this stranger begun depositin' gold in the bank till he'd deposited sixteen thousan' dollars' worth in about a month.

"Seems like the banker, Jud Grimm, had figgered all along there was gold somewheres in the hills on account of old Nate Bascome showin' him some samples a few years back. So when this stranger claimed he was goin' to New York an' start a company to mine this gold, Jud Grimm talked him out of it, an' offered to buy a partnership in the mine. The stranger, he took Jud up on it, an' Jud he forked over two hundred thousan' in cash fer a half interest in the mine—an' that's the last he ever seen of the stranger, er his two hundred thousan' neither.

"This here mine was s'posed to be in a cave at the back end of Pa's farm. But hell there worn't no more gold in there than there is right here in this floor—not so much, 'cause I've got fourteen, fifteen pound of it there in my pack.

"Where the stranger got the gold he deposited, er who he was no one ever found out. All Pa could tell 'em, he claimed his name was John Smith—but hell, anyone could claim their name was that, couldn't they?"

"Quite a few does."

"Well, seein' I'd changed enough so old Ross Sergeant didn't know me, an' him our next-door neighbor you might say, I figgered no one else would, neither—an' mebbe even Pa wouldn't. So I walks on to town, packin' my drill an' the soup in my keister. I gits there around suppertime an' finds board an-lodgin' with a widder name of Sloan, down by the gristmill, tellin' her I was a house painter out of a job. I'd learnt paintin' whilst I was in stir, bein' on the repair gang.

"I'd spotted the bank as I come along—a one-story brick buildin', with one of them there hick burglar alarms consistin' of a brass gong high up over the door, an' that night I got a big grin out of figgerin' how I'd take this here Jud Grimm over the jumps agin, like the stranger done.

"Next mornin' I'm walkin' down the street, figgerin' on kinda casin' the joint, when I comes face to face with Pa. He's jest stepped outa his house, which it's next door to Clem Whipple's store, an' he looks square at me, an' I seen he didn't know me, so I stops an' kinda points to his house. 'Mister,' I says, 'yer house needs paintin'. It'll be rottin' down on you 'fore long, the way the paint's wore off in spots. I'm a good painter,' I says, 'an' I'm lookin' fer a job.'

"Well, Pa he turns around an' gives the house a good look. 'Couple of coats of paint wouldn't hurt none,' he says. 'How much would it cost?' I measures her up an' give him a figger, an' he told me to go ahead. So I got a ladder an' paint an' brushes off'n Clem Whipple an' went to work. I worked all day. At noon I slipped over to the bank an' changed a ten-dollar bill, an' cased the place, an' that night I slips out about midnight an' give her the works. I carries my ladder over an' clogs up the burglar alarm with an old gunny sack, an' swipes a couple of horse blankets outa Pa's barn, an' shoots the safe without wakin' a soul in town. Then I hits fer the hills, with sixty thousan' in my keister.

"There couldn't no one ketch me in them hills—I know'd 'em fer miles around. I finally gets to Nashville, an' on to Cincinnati, an' St. Louey, an' Frisco, an' whilst I'm there I connect up with them folks I mentioned an' they told me about this here Half-aday Crick, an' how if I could hook up with this here Black John, I'd be all jake. 'But you've got to be good—damn good in yer line, er Black John won't have nothin' to do with you,' they said. An' I'm tellin' you, brother, I am good. Do you think I'm a damn dick, now?"

"Nope."

"AN' that ain't all—comin' up here, jest below Selkirk, on the Yukon, I run onto a couple of fellas headin' back to the States. They was campin' there on the bank, an' I landed, an' I seen how they kinda glanced at a pack layin' there, so I pulls a gun on 'em an' reaches fer the pack. One of 'em took to the bresh, but the other reached fer his gun er a rock, an' I let him have it. Then I throw'd their pack into my canoe an' hit on downriver—there was fourteen, fifteen pound of fine gold, kinda like sand in the pack. So now—do you figger this Black John will be interested in me?"

"Yeah," Cush replied a bit grimly. "I figger he shore will."

"When can I connect up with him?"

"When he gits back."

"When'll that be?"

"I couldn't say."

"You mean I've got to hang around here

fer God knows how long waitin' fer him to show up?"

"Nope. You don't got to. You kin keep on goin', er go back the way you come. It's all the same to me."

"You keep lodgers, here?"

"Nope."

"Where the hell can I stay?"

"One-Eyed John's shack. First cabin down the crick."

"But—where's this One-Eyed John?"

"Out back."

"Out back?"

"Yup. In the graveyard. We hung him."

"What did you hang him fer?"

"We didn't want him around no more."

The man scowled. "Well, I'm goin' to connect up with Black John if I've got to wait a month! Give me a bottle of licker an' I'll go hunt up this cabin. Damn if I wouldn't ruther stand around an' talk to a rock than you!"

"An' I'd ruther you would."

Picking up the bottle and the packet of bills from the bar the man stowed them in his pack and crossed to the doorway where he paused. "I'll be back fer some grub when I figger what I'll be needin'," he said, and disappeared.

II

ONE morning, several days later, Black John stepped into the room and crossed to the bar as Cush set out a bottle, two glasses, and the leather dice box. The big man picked up the box and cast the dice. "I feel lucky, this mornin'," he said. "I'm leavin' them three fours in one."

Cush rolled out three aces, and came back with four fives, which Black John failed to beat. He smiled and filled his glass as Cush made the proper entry in his day book. "Guess I ain't as lucky as I thought," he said.

"I know damn well you ain't," Cush replied. Filling his own glass, he shoved the square-framed steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead, and eyed the other somberly. "No, sir," he repeated, "you shore ain't."

"Oh, cheer up, Cush. Things are never so bad they can't get worse."

"The hell they can't!"

"What are you drivin' at? Has some ontoward circumstance arisen to disturb the tranquility of our crick?"

"Whatever that means, accordin' to your angle, this here's worst. A stranger come amongst us. That is, he's a stranger to me. I got a hunch mebbe you won't figger he's so damn strange."

"Cheechako?"

"Yeah, he's a cheechako, all right."

"Is he a promisin'-lookin' prospect? Does he seem fairly well heeled?"

"He's about as promisin' lookin' as a rattlesnake. An' he fetched in a little better'n fifty-eight thousan' in bills, an' right around two hundred an fifty ounces of dust."

"The proceeds, no doubt, of some crime, or series of crimes?"

"He bragged that he blow'd them bills out of a safe, back in the States, an' got the dust off'n a couple of prospectors that was headin' outside with it, on the river jest below Selkirk. Claims he shot one, an' the other tuk to the bresh."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, Downey told me about that stick-up jest before I left Dawson. Couple of lads name of Townley an' Emerson hittin' outside with two hundred an' forty ounces. Emerson's the one that got shot. Townley got a good look at the robber, an' he's hangin' around Dawson to identify him if the police pick him up. Where is this enterprisin' stranger domiciled?"

"Where's he which?"

"Where's he holed up at?"

"He's in One-Eyed John's shack."

"H-u-u-m. The amount—the fifty-eight thousan', I mean, is worth contemplatin'. The dust, of course, should find its way back into the hands of its rightful owners. I trust that this miscreant has been able to locate the cache hidden in the wall of One-Eyed's cabin."

"Oh, shore—he'd find that all right. The string that pulls out that there section of log was stickin' out jest enough so's he'd see it when he'd go to hang up his hat er coat on them nails. But hell, John—if he don't pull nothin'—like some kind of skulduggery, er somethin', here on the crick, we can't do nothin' about them bills."

"Yer in error. The p'int of law that would automatically place those bills in our custody might seem slightly involved, to the

average layman, inasmuch as the crime by which they were obtained was ondoubtless committed outside our jurisdiction. However, when viewed in its larger aspect, the problem becomes exceedingly simple. You see, the holdup there on the big river by which the dust in this criminal's possession was obtained, was committed well within our jurisdiction, which I have frequently held to include Halfaday Creek, its surroundin' an' contiguous territory, an' all subtendin' an' connectin' waters.

"All we have to do is to send down to Dawson, an' get this Townley up here, let Townley identify the robber, an' then turn over the dust to him. An' hang the culprit.

"If, in locatin' this dust, we should inadvertently happen upon some bills, that would be a matter entirely aside an' extraneous to the case in p'int, an' wouldn't be even mentioned durin' the course of the proceedin'."

Cush grunted and shrugged. "I know'd damn well you'd figger out we had jewishdiction in the case—an' I'm remindin' you, right now, if you grab off that there fifty-eight thousan', I git my half of it."

Black John grinned. "Yer choice of one little word is amusin', Cush. You know very well that I have repeatedly maintained that the surest way of teachin' a criminal that crime don't pay, is to deprive him of the emolument of his crime. Under the circumstances, you should have said *when* I grab off that fifty-eight thousan'—not *if*."

CUSH deliberately refilled his glass and shoved the bottle across the bar. "Fill up, John," he said. "I'm buyin' this un. An' I didn't make no mistake in choosin' my words, neither. I said *if*—an' by God, I mean *if*—'cause I ain't so shore you'll be grabbin' off that fifty-eight thousan'."

The big man regarded him with a puzzled frown. "What do you mean?" he asked. "It was the proceeds of a crime, wasn't it? It wasn't obtained from a poor man, or a needy one? You said it was a bank job."

Cush nodded. "Yeah—that's what the guy claimed. Accordin' to his tell, it was got off'n a man which you, yerself, told me was as mean an' graspin' a coot as ever lived."

"The big man's eyes widened, "I told you! What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"It's a kind of a special case, John," Cush replied. "An' it's goin' to be interestin' to see how it comes out. Seems like fer onct, yer goin' to find yerself right plumb in the middle of one of these here damn draymas that yer allus puttin' me in the middle of. Yes, sir—seems like, fer onct, there's a drayma comin' up that I kin set back an' enjoy."

"What in the devil are you drivin' at?"

"Well, this here stranger, he sort of run off at the head. An' some of the things he said reminded me of certain things I'd heard before. From your angle, John, I'd say the worst has happened. The way I figger it, this here stranger ain't no one else than Willie. Now—let's see you figger yer way out of that one!"

"Willie? Willie who?"

"He claims he's Bill Jones. But cripes—his hind name ain't no more Jones than what yourn's Smith. You'd know what it is—but I wouldn't."

"What do you mean—I'd know what it is?"

"By God, you'd ort to! He's yer own brother!"

"What!"

"Yup. That there brother Willie you was tellin' about bein' in the Atlanta pen. He's showed up here on Halfaday, like all the other damn crooks does."

"Did he say he's my brother?"

"No. He don't even know it."

"How do you know it?"

"Sort of figgered it out from things he said that checked up with things you told me when you come back from the outside last year. Like about his pa bein' a preacher back there in the hills an' ownin' a hillside forty with a cave on the back end of it, an' he told how some guy name of John Smith come along there an' paid off the old man's mortgage, an' traded him a horse an' red-wheeled rig, an' a house in town, an' that there insurance thing that gives him a hundred dollars a month long as he lives. Then he told how all the hill folks was laughin' about how the parson skun this guy ontil they found out about him onloadin' that cave onto that there banker, Jud Grimm, fer two hundred thousan' in cash. Then they begun laughin' at Jud."

"An' he figures I'm the John Smith that pulled off that deal?"

"Nope. He don't even suspicion that."

"How'd he get out of the pen? An' how-come he told all that—about Pa, an' Jud Grimm, an' all—if he ain't huntin' me?"

"He's huntin' you, all right, but he don't suspicion you're either that John Smith—nor yet his brother. He says he got paroled. Then he hit fer home, aimin' to hole up with the old man till he figgered out some play. But there wasn't no one around the farm, an' he asks some old guy name of Rass somethin' er other, if his pa was dead, an' this Rass, he told him all about what come off.

"So Willie, he goes on to town, an' he meets his pa, an' the old man don't recognize him, an' Willie offers to paint his house, an' that noon he cases the bank, an' that night he blows the safe an' gits away with sixty thousan' in cash.

"He winds up in Frisco, where he meets up with Simco Sam, an' Tacoma Kate, an' Stiles, an' some more of the riff-raff we run off the crick, an' they tell him about Half-aday, an' how he could hook up with you, he'd be all set. So he come on up here.

"The reason he run off at the head to me, was to prove he's an outlaw instead of a cop er a marshal. He's got better'n fifty-eight thousan' in cash on him, which is more than any police would have. Besides that he claims he's got fourteen, fifteen pound of dust. He said it like that—in pounds like a damn cheechako would—instid of ounces. An' I guess he had it, all right. His pack hit the floor with about a two hundred an' fifty ounce tunk."

"This fifty-eight thousan' Willie claims to have? If all you've got is his word for that, you might as well forget it. Because along with numerous other moral laxities Willie's the damndest liar I ever run acrost."

"I don't know nothin' about no mortal laxitives. But he's got the fifty-eight thousan', all right, in good cash money. He was so damn anxious I wouldn't figger him fer no police of no kind that he tossed the money onto the bar here, an' let me count it."

BLACK JOHN tossed off his drink and refilled his glass. "H-u-u-m," he said. "The situation does seem a might involved, at that. Let's recapitulate—we'll assume that Willie's here on Halfaday. That in itself is a catastrophe, in any man's language. He is possessed of certain funds dishonestly come by. He's seekin' to connect with me, not suspectin' that I'm his brother, or that I'm the John Smith that took Jud Grimm over the jumps, but because them damn riff-raff down in Frisco told him I'm the leader of a gang of outlaws that hangs out here on the crick. Others have done the same an' failed to discover their error till it was too late. If Willie had be'n content to show up with merely the fifty-eight thousan' he got out of the bank, there's nothin' we could have done about it, except wait till he committed some crime here on the crick. However, steeped in original sin as he is, he couldn't refrain from pullin' off that robbery down on the Yukon, an' thus place himself squarely within our jurisdiction. It is plainly our duty, Cush, to send to Dawson for Townley an' then call a miners' meetin' an' bring this miscreant to trial."

"Yeah—but, hell, John—after all, he's yer brother. I never had no brother. But seems like, if I had, I somehow wouldn't like to hang him."

"Yer p'int is well taken, an' I'm inclined to agree with you that, as a pastime, brother-hangin' ortn't to be condoned."

"Does that mean you ain't goin' to hang him? If it does, it kinda puts us in a spot, too. 'Cause, if we don't hang him, how the hell are we goin' to git hold of them fifty-eight thousan'? We can't jest go ahead an' rob his cache, much as we'd like to. Even if we went ahead an' give Townley the dust back it don't somehow seem legal. On the other hand, they can't no one blame you fer not likin' to hang yer own brother. An', on top of that, you've got to make the trip back to Dawson an' fetch Townley back yerself. 'Cause if you was to send someone else, an' you hung around here, Willie would reco'-nize you shore as hell. I rec'lect you told me you went down to the Atlanta pen an' seen him last year."

"The case has complications enough without draggin' in any more."

"Yer damn right it has. An' fer onct you've got ketched right plumb in the middle of one of yer damn draymas instid of me. The shoe's on the other foot this time—an' it's goin' to be fun to lay back an' watch you try to wiggle out of it."

"At least, we can eliminate the probability of Willie's recognizing me. It's true, I went down to Atlanta an' had a short visit with Willie, strivin' durin' the interview to pint out to him the error of his ways, an' impress upon him that crime don't pay. But before I ventured to appear anywhere in public after my business deal with Jud Grimm, I took the precaution of shaving off my beard an' mustache. If I do say it, myself, the transformation was effective and gratifying in the extreme. I wasn't a bad-lookin' fella—smooth-shaved. Guess I'll go hunt up Red John an 'send him down to Dawson to fetch Townley back. You see, I want to give Willie all the breaks he's got comin'—like if it was someone else that committed that robbery, Townley could exonerate Willie."

III

AN HOUR later when Black John returned to the saloon, Cush introduced him to the stranger who stood, glass in hand, before the bar. "This here's the guy I was tellin' you about that's be'n hangin' around fer to connect up with you. Claims his name's Bill Jones." He turned to the other. "An', Jones, that there's Black John."

Jones eyed the big man appraisingly: "So you're the one I be'n hearin' so much about, eh? Fill up. I'm buyin' one. It's about time you got back. Hell, I be'n hangin' around here fer a couple of weeks an things is so damn quiet I feel like I was in a graveyard."

"Yeah? Well, quite a few of the boys feels the same way—layin' in under them slabs, out back."

"Oh, you don't need to be afraid I'll try to pull off nothin' here on the crick. Simco Sam an' them others down to Frisco, they told me how you hang folks up here that tries to git away with somethin'. But now I'm here an' you're back, I crave action."

Black John filled his glass from the bottle the other shoved toward him. "You crave action, eh? Well, I reckon me an' Cush can satisfy yer cravin'. How about shakin' a game of dice fer the drinks?"

"Shake fer the drinks—hell! What I mean, ain't you got no job figgered out we kin go ahead an' pull? Accordin' to them ones down to Frisco, you're the damndest outlaw they is, an' I come clean up here to throw in with you—an' you want to shake dice fer the drinks!"

"You an outlaw, too?"

"Outlaw! Who—me? I'll tell the world I'm an outlaw—an' a damn good one, too! Cripes, man, I done time in Atlanta!" he added boastfully. "Yes, sir—draw'd a twenty-year stretch fer a train robbery me an' a couple other guys pulled off."

Black John grinned. "Done all right, eh? Be'n me I'm afraid I might of botched the job an' draw'd only a five, er ten-year stretch."

"How?" the man asked, regarding the speaker with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, there's several ways a job like that could be botched."

"Yeah. We didn't work it right, neither. That's how-come we got ketched."

"You must have be'n middlin' young when you pulled the train job, if you done a twenty-year stretch for it."

"I only served ten years an' got paroled fer good behavior. I'm out on parole, now."

"I trust yer reformation is more er less permanent."

"How?"

"I mean, I assume that yer moral regeneration percludes any possibility of yer reversion to type."

"God A'mighty! You talk like some damn lawyer, er jedge, er preacher, er someone like that. That time I got convicted there in court, I heard more big words spoke than I know'd there was. My pa, he's a preacher—but he don't know no big words. He's jest a common mountain preacher that goes by the Book. When he comes to a big word, er one of them funny names, he jest makes a stab at it an' keeps right on a-goin'.

"But I got a brother that's one of these here eggicated preachers. An' he talks jest like you—" Cush gulped his drink and emitted a peculiar choking cough. The speaker eyed him. "What's the matter—swaller a tonsil er somethin'?"

"No, they was a fly in my licker, an' he tickled goin' down."

The man resumed. "Pa, he wanted my brother should be a preacher like him, only better. So he sent him to one of these here preachin' cemeteries where they learn 'em how to preach to beat hell. He was in there when I got sent up. An' then, last year, he

come down to Atlanta pen to see me. Big cuss, like you, he is—only smooth-shaved. An' he stud there an' run off at the head about the errors of my ways, an' how crime don't pay, an' all that tripe. You bet I cussed him out good an' proper, an' if it hadn't ben fer them iron bars between us, I'd of give him a damn good sock in the jaw!"

BLACK JOHN grinned. "But at that, Jones, you've got to admit that if you'd heeded them early teachin's of yer pa, you might of turned out to be the same sterlin' character that yer brother is."

Again Cush gagged audibly over his drink.

"If you'd spit out them flies instead of swallerin' 'em, you'd git along better," Jones advised.

"It wasn't no fly this time," Cush explained. "I jest sucked a little licker down my wrong throat."

Jones turned to Black John. "Now yer back, you got anythin' lined up we kin go out an' pull?"

"W-e-e-l-l, just at present I can't say that I have."

"Hell's fire! I figgered you was prob'ly off somewheres casin' some job. Tellin' you about me, I crave action! I've already pulled off two jobs sence I got paroled. What I claim, the world owes me a damn good livin'—an' I aim to git it."

"Why would the world owe you a livin'?" Black John asked.

"I never asked to be born into it, did I? Well, I was. An' now it owes me a livin', don't it?"

The big man grinned. "Yeah, but look at it from the world's angle—it never asked you to be born into it, neither. In a good many respects it's a foolish old world—but not that foolish. Damned if I can see why the world should have to pay for an onfortunate biological accident."

"More big words! Hell, you give me a pain in the neck!"

"Well, we've give quite a few hombres a pain in the neck, jest above where you're standin'."

"What do you mean—above where I'm standin'?"

"Oh—two, three feet, straight up—between you an' that rafter."

The other scowled. "Then you don't aim to pull nothin' off right soon, eh?"

"W-e-e-l-l, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. The fact is, Jones, the only specific qualification you've give so far as to your ability as an outlaw, is the fact that you done time for a botched job of train robbin.' I rec'lect that you made casual reference to a couple of jobs you pulled off sence you was paroled. Was they successful in a financial way?"

"You mean—did I git away with 'em?"

"That's the p'int I was strivin' to bring out."

"I'll tell the world I did! I blowed a bank safe, back home, an' got away with sixty thousan' in bills, an' then, comin' down the Yukon River 'tween here an' Selkirk I run onto a couple of fellas campin' there on the bank. It was gittin' along toward night, so I landed there, an' when I seen 'em lookin' at one of their packsacks sort of oneasy like, I swings my rifle on 'em. One tuk to the bresh, an' the other reached fer his gun, er a rock, er somethin', so I let him have it. Then I throwed the packsack in my canoe an' got to hell outa there. I run down the river till plumb into the dark an' then camped on the other side, an' jest like I figgered, they was gold in that pack—fourteen—fifteen pound of it."

"This man you shot—did you kill him?"

"How the hell do I know? I didn't hang around to find out. What if I did? I got the gold, didn't I? An' that proves I'm an outlaw, don't it? What I mean—am I good enough to throw in with youse guys—er ain't I? Like I says—I crave action!"

"Okay, Jonesy. Just stick around an' be patient. I wouldn't be surprised if somethin' would pop up that will satisfy yer cravin' for action. Somethin' generally does when a fella like you shows up on the crick."

IV

TOWARD the middle of the afternoon, a couple of days later, Black John stepped into the saloon to find Jones shaking dice with Cush for the drinks.

"Ain't you got nothin' doped out, yet?" Jones asked, as the big man joined them at the bar.

"Well, I've got a proposition in mind that I figure you'll be interested in. All the details ain't worked out yet, but it won't be long. Here, shove me the box, an' I'll beat one of you fellas out of a drink."

Several drinks were had when, at the sound of voices, all three faced the door just as Corporal Downey stepped into the room closely followed by a man who, at the sight of Jones, leaped forward excitedly, "There he is! That's the fellow that robbed me an' Emerson—standin' right there!"

Jones stood as though petrified as his glance shifted from the man's face to the uniformed officer. "My God," he muttered thickly, "it's—it's the Law."

"That's right," Downey said, "yer under arrest. An' it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

"Good gosh!" Black John exclaimed, and headed for the door. "That worshin' of mine! I left them clothes in the b'iler an' only a little water on 'em an' a good fire goin', whilst I stepped over fer a drink! Cripes, they'll be burnt to a frazzle!"

"It's murder," Jones mumbled, clutching at the bar. "Oh my God—an' now I'll git hung!"

Black John disappeared, to return some ten minutes later. "Got there just in time." he said. "Five minutes longer an' the b'iler'd be'n dry an' them clothes would have be'n ruined. They'll b'ile all right, now. I got her filled damn near to the top."

Jones sat slumped in a chair at one of the card tables, his gaze centered on his manacled wrists, as Black John edged close to Downey at the bar. "How is he—the one that got shot?" he asked in an undertone.

"He's all right," Downey whispered. "Got it in the shoulder. Doc says it ain't bad. Jones thinks he killed him. We didn't tell him no different. A little worryin' won't hurt him none."

The big man nodded. "Ondoubtless be good for his soul. A damn miscreant like him had ort to worry." He turned to the prisoner. "Step up, Jones, an' j'ine us. I guess Downey won't object to you havin' a little drink to sort of steady yer nerves. Hell, settin' there all slunched down in that chair, you don't look like no tough outlaw, like you bragged you was. Cripes, what I claim—if a man sets up to be an outlaw he'd ort to look the part."

"By God, I'll git hung!" the man whimpered. "You wouldn't look like no tough outlaw neither, if you was goin' to git hung! Yer a hell of an outlaw, anyhow," he cried, in a sudden outburst of fury, "lettin' one lone cop come up here an' arrest a pal, right in yer own hangout!"

Black John scowled. "Listen—just because you come up here on the recommendation of as ornery a bunch as ever disgraced a crick, don't make you a pal of mine—by a damn sight. Yer attitude is wrong, not to say totally depraved. All you think about is gittin' hung. You ain't expressed no contrition, nor no sorrow over shootin' that poor cuss down there on the river."

"I'm sorry, all right," the man snarled, "sorry I didn't knock off that other guy standin' there—then I'd be'n in the clear. I'd of got him, too, if the damn coward hadn't took to the bresh! The way it is, with him swearin' the rope around my neck, I ain't got a show."

"Tch, tch, tch, yer depravity is astoundin'. But just remember this, my good man, whatever the law does to you is for yer own good."

"Fer my own good! How the hell is it fer my own good if I git hung?"

"That," replied Black John, "is a problem each man must work out for himself. Anyway, it should teach you that gettin' caught don't pay."

"Where's he be'n holin' up at?" Downey asked. "Accordin' to Townley, here, he got away with two hundred an' forty ounces. We better go dig it out."

"Dig an' be damned!" the prisoner cried. "You kin dig the hull damn country up, an' you won't never find that gold! I got it hid where you won't never git hold of it. An' that ain't all—I got better'n fifty-eight thousan' in bills hid along with it."

"Where'd you get the fifty-eight thousan'?" Downey asked. "Rob someone else along the river?"

"No. I blow'd a safe in a bank, back home. That's where I got it—sixty thousan' dollars. An' listen here, Copper, I'll make a deal—I'll split them bills even with you, if you turn me loose. Think of that—twenty-nine thousan' dollars you kin shove in yer

pocket—an' no one knows the difference jest except us. Black John an' Cush won't never blow their top, an' I'm bettin' this guy won't neither—'cause on top of that I'll give him back his gold—every damn pound of it. Hell—that's fair enough, ain't it?"

Black John grinned. "There you are, Downey. That seems like a good forthright proposition. You make a profit of twenty-nine thousan', Townley gets his dust back, an' Jones gets turned loose."

"That's right, Copper," Jones agreed eagerly. "How about it? Are you takin' me up?"

"Nope," Downey grinned. "Takin' you down—down to Dawson to stand trial. He turned to Black John. "Where'd you say he holed up? We better try to locate that dust an' them bills."

"He's be'n sojournin' in One-Eyed John's shack."

"Yeah," the prisoner taunted, "go dig fer that stuff! Dig wide an 'deep—but you'll never find it."

Downey chuckled. "It couldn't be, perchanct, that you cached it in the wall—where you pull out a section of log with a piece of cord that sticks out beside them nails where a man would hang up his hat an' coat?"

The man's jaw dropped as he glared into the officer's face. Then he whirled on Black John and Cush. "By God, it's a frame-up! Yer a hell of a gang, claimin' to be outlaws, an' all the time throwin' in with the cops!"

"Yer in error," Black John replied. "I must inform you that on Halfaday we neither help nor hinder the police. It just so happens that a year or so back, Downey had occasion to arrest another damn thief who had holed up there, an' in doin' so, he inadvertently discovered this cache. It's a trivial matter—just one of them little things a good policeman don't fergit. I must also inform you that we do not claim to be outlaws. We are a simple minin' folk, tendin' to our business, an' enjoyin' our harmless pleasures in our own placid way. If, as happens now an' then, some onregenerate an' sin-blistered soul drifts in amongst us, an' momentarily disturbs the tranquility of—"

"Shet up!" cried the man. "You'll drive me nuts—you an' yer big words! Yer worst than that damn' preachin' brother of mine. If I ever see him again, I'll give him a sock in the jaw—an' you, too, if it worn't fer these damn handcuffs!"

TAKING the prisoner with them, the three proceeded to One-Eyed John's cabin, leaving Cush alone in the saloon. Stepping to the opposite wall, Downey pulled the cord, removed the section of log, and thrusting his arm into the aperture withdrew, one at a time, three eighty-ounce moosehide sacks of dust, which Townley immediately identified as the property of himself and Emerson.

Again Downey thrust his arm into the cache, his brows drawing into a frown as his groping fingers explored every inch of the box-like enclosure. Withdrawing his hand, he eyed the prisoner. "I guess you was dreamin' about that fifty-eight thousan'," he said. "There ain't no bills in there—nothin' only them three sacks of dust."

"You lie!" the man cried, his eyes blazing. "No wonder you wouldn't take me up on that deal—splittin' that fifty-eight thousan' with you to turn me loose! You know'd all the time where the stuff was hid, an' you figgered on leavin' them bills in there an' hoggin' 'em all!"

Downey shrugged, and stepping to the man's side, unlocked a cuff, freeing his hand. He nodded toward the cache. "Go ahead an' feel fer yerself. You seen what I pulled out of there—them three sacks. An' you seen me pull my hand out empty when I went in after them bills. If you put 'em in there, they must be there, now. I shore as hell didn't get 'em."

As his fingers explored the enclosure, the man's eyes glared at the three onlookers. "By God, I put them bills in there," he shouted. "They sure as hell ain't there now! Someone got 'em!"

Black John grinned as Downey relocked the manacle about the prisoner's wrist. "You ondoubtless lied about them fifty-eight thousan'," he said. "I ain't surprised none. A man who would stoop to murder an' robbery wouldn't hesitate to lie. An' besides that, my good man, it's plain to see that a sixty thousan' dollar bank robbery would be a bigger job than a man of your calibre could handle."

"Is that so!" cried the man. "By God, I

kin prove I had that money—fifty-eight thousan' three hundred an' sixty dollars! I showed them bills to Cush—an' he counted 'em right there on the bar!"

Returning to the saloon the four lined up at the bar. "Hey, Cush," Black John said. "Jonesy, here, claims there's a rift in his loot."

Cush scowled as he set out bottle and glasses. "A what in his which? Why the hell can't you say somethin' onct in a while that means somethin'?"

"By God, them bills is gone!" the prisoner cried.

Cush eyed the man coldly. "What bills?" he asked.

"You know what bills! Them fifty-eight thousan' three hundred an' sixty dollars! You counted 'em yerself—right here on the bar the first day I come!"

Cush shook his head slowly. "It's a while back. I disremember."

"Disremember—hell! You know damn well you stud right there an' counted 'em!"

Cush stared blankly into the man's outraged eyes. "Like I says—it's a while back. A lot of loose change goes back an' forth acrost the bar every day, what with the boys buyin' drinks, an' supplies, an' cashin' in chips. No one could rec'lect all them items. An' besides that, I ketched a dost of the gout onct, a long while back, an I don't remember good ever sence."

As the others poured their drinks, Downey edged close to Black John near the end of the bar. "Admittin', fer the sake of argument, that Jones did have them fifty-eight thousan'—it's kind of queer, ain't it, that the money stole from a bank should disappear completely, while the dust stole from a couple of prospectors should find its way back to the rightful owners?"

The big man eyed the officer guilelessly. "Why, yes, Downey, sence you mentioned it—it is a kind of coincidence, at that."

"A-h-e-m, about them clothes of yours in yer wash boiler, John—are you shore you put water enough on 'em so they won't burn, this time. They've be'n on the stove quite a while."

"Oh, shore, Downey—don't you go worryin' about them clothes. I filled the b'iler damn near full—an' anyhow, the fire's prob'ly out by now."

AFTER Downey, Townley and the prisoner had departed down the creek, Black John stepped from the room to return a few minutes later and toss a huge packet of bills onto the bar. Cush counted them, credited Black John's account with twenty-nine thousand, one hundred and eighty dollars, and shoved the bottle toward him across the bar. "Fill up," he invited. "I'm buyin' this un. But at that, John, by God, if it was me, I couldn't of went ahead an' let my own brother git arrested when I know'd damn well he'd git hung. I ain't that hard!"

The big man grinned. "Don't go worryin' about Willie. He ain't goin' to get hung. Downey told me about that stick-up when I was down to Dawson. Then today he slipped me the word that this Emerson wasn't hurt bad. Willie thought he'd killed him because he prob'ly laid still after gettin' nicked in the shoulder so Willie's think he was dead, an' wouldn't shoot agin. Likewise, I knew that Downey an' Townley was on their way up here, because Downey told me he'd be hittin' for Halfaday in a couple of days an' fetch Townley with him just in case the robber had hit for here. I was jest kiddin' about sendin' Red John down for him.

"Such bein' the case I just set back an' let nature take her course. In the first place I saw to it that not one penny of that fifty-eight thousan' would ever get returned to Jud Grimm, whose record of widow-foreclosin' an' orphan-cheatin' is enough to turn an honest man's stomach. Willie will draw a good long stretch in the pen for armed robbery. An' that's a damn good place for him. His moral status is such that he's a damn sight better off in than out—an' so's society, in general. An' besides," he added, with a grin, "I don't want him runnin' around loose fer fear that sometime he might run onto that moral an' high-minded brother of his an' give him a sock in the jaw."

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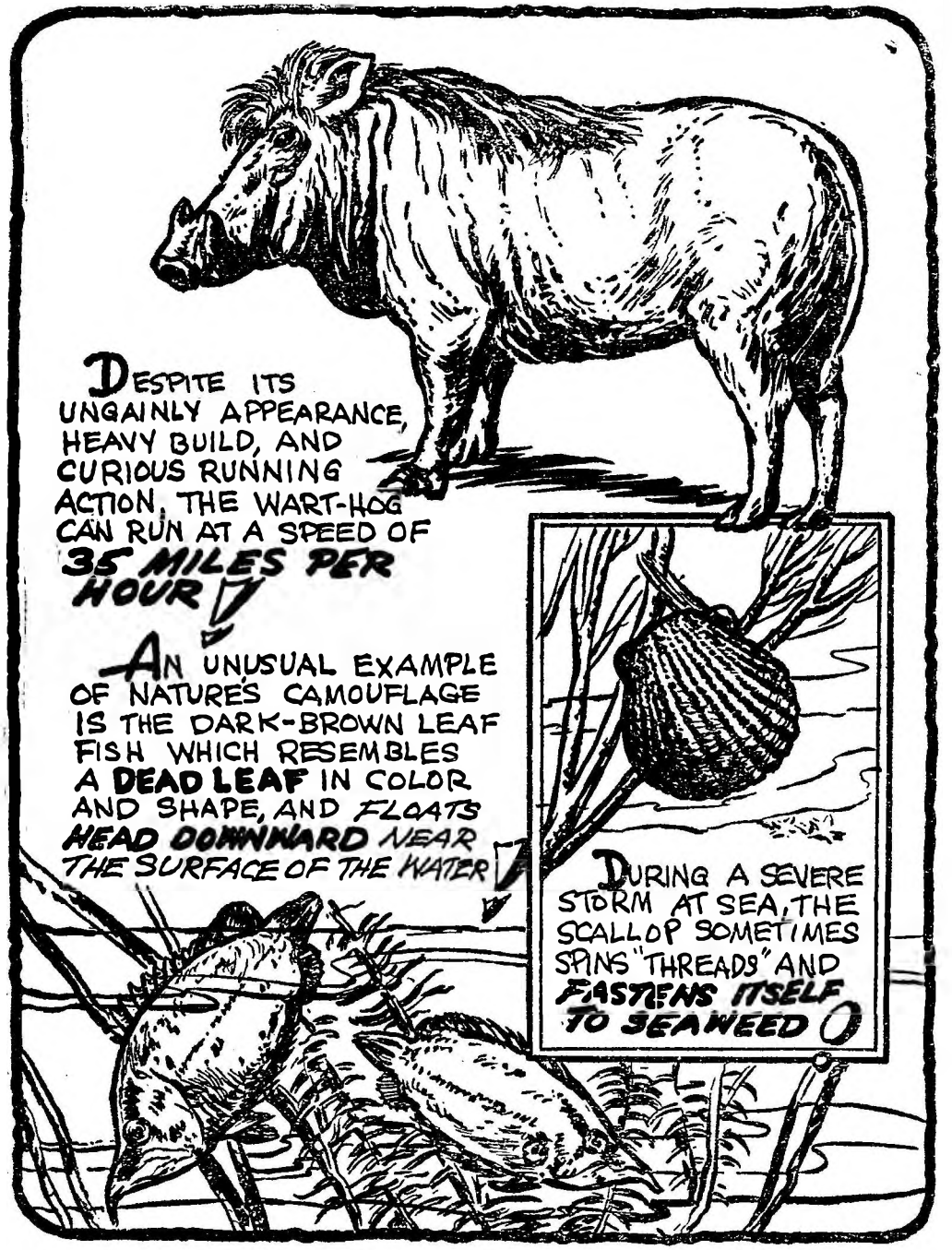


Ten Years They Expected Randy James to Be Away — but He Was Back at the End of Five

THE STRENGTH OF A HAT

By GENE VAN

RANDY JAMES came back to Granite City. The warden at the penitentiary had failed to notify the sheriff's office that Randy's ten-year sentence had been commuted to five, and that he had been released. Randy was twenty-seven. Those five years behind the bars had given him lines in his face that he didn't have five years ago, and his eyes were hard. Prison rarely makes a man soft and forgiving, and Randy was no exception.

He had been out of prison a month, and he came back, riding a fairly good horse and saddle. He tied the horse in front of the general store and stood there for a long time, looking over the main street. There had been a few changes in Granite City. Maybe the signs were just a bit more dingy, the dust deeper.

A woman came out of the store, as he turned to leave, and they came face-to-face. It was an awkward moment for both of them. The woman was about Randy's age, not too well dressed, pretty, but with tired eyes and some tight lines around her lips. After their eyes had met for a moment, she said, "Hello, Randy."

He didn't answer for a moment, but finally said, "Howdy, May."

They both seemed embarrassed. Randy said, "I—I didn't know if you'd speak—or not."

"Of course, I'd speak, Randy. Why not?"

"Yeah—why not? Still, I don't know—"

"You just got back, Randy?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. They cut my sentence in half. How's everythin'?"

"Fine." May Marks nervously brushed a lock of hair away from her eyes. "I'll see you again," she said and went on. Randy looked after her, a thoughtful expression in his gray eyes.

A man was coming up the wooden walk; a huge bulk of a man, shambling along like a grizzly. Randy tightened a little. Sheriff Newt Klump, who had proved that he was not a friend of Randy James, didn't see Randy, until they were only a few feet apart and he stopped short, his eyes wide. He never offered to shake hands, but said bluntly:

"How'd you get out?"

Randy studied the hard features of Klump for several moments, noted that the big man's right hand was swinging close to the butt of his holstered Colt .45.

"They thought five years was enough, Sheriff," he said.

"Thought it was, eh? Didn't notify me."

"You don't mean much outside this county, Klump."

"Jist as smart as ever, eh?" growled the sheriff.

"Smarter," said Randy quietly. "Yuh learn a lot—in prison."

"I hope you've learned not to monkey with the law, James."

"That," replied Randy, "will show up later."

"How long yuh been in town?"

"About fifteen minutes, Sheriff."

"Is that all? I don't reckon you've heard about Walt then."

Randy tensed, leaning forward, staring at the sheriff.

"What about Walt?" he asked tensely.

"He's in jail, waitin' the next term o' court."

Randy swore inwardly. "Sheriff—what's he in for?"

"For stickin' up stages, robbin' folks. Easy, James! Don't be a fool. Yore brother Walt was El Lobo, the Lone Wolf—a man that half the officers in the country have been tryin' to trap. We got him for stage robbery. The guard shot his hat off, an' he didn't wait to pick it up. It had his initials in it. Everybody recognized it. Kinda like you done, eh?"

"Kinda like I done—yeah," whispered Randy. "Yuh don't mean he's confessed, do yuh?"

"Confessed. Yea-a-a-ah, jist like you did. But he ain't got a leg to stand on. Well, I'll see yuh later, James. Be a good boy, an' we'll git along fine."

RANDY leaned against a porch-post and rolled a smoke. What a homecoming! Walt in jail, being tried as El Lobo. What a mess! Walt, Randy's brother, two years his junior, had always been a wild kid. Randy got letters from him once in a while, but they were more like telegrams. They didn't tell what was going on.

A man came out of the bank and walked toward the store. Randy's eyes narrowed, as he came closer. He was a man of medium size, well dressed, but rather careless about his personal appearance. Randy's lips tightened. This was Charles Marks, husband of the woman who had spoken to Randy; cashier of the local bank.

Marks didn't look up until he was close to Randy, and, like the sheriff, he jerked to a quick stop, blinking a little. His hand went up to loosen the necktie, which was already dangling.

Randy said, "Hyah, Chuck."

Charles Marks didn't respond quickly. He wet his lips, swallowed painfully and said hoarsely:

"Randy, I—I didn't know—I'm glad you are back."

"Yo're a liar," said Randy quietly. "You always were a pretty fair liar, Chuck. How's everythin'?"

"Well, I—why would I lie? I was so surprised—you aren't due to get—it was ten years, wasn't it?"

Randy laughed shortly. "I settled for fifty percent, Chuck. Tell me about Walt."

"Oh, you know! Well, there isn't much to tell. He stuck up the stage and got away with ten thousand dollars belonging to the bank, but the guard shot his hat off, when he made his getaway. It had Walt's initials in it. El Lobo worked alone and always wore black. That's all I know about it, Randy."

"Did the bank get their money back?"

"No, they never did. Walt never told where he hid his loot."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Randy. "They ain't proved him guilty yet."

Charles Marks shook his head. "Randy,

he hasn't a chance," he said. "Any jury on earth would find him guilty."

"On the strength of a hat, eh?" said Randy slowly. "Yuh remember that was the evidence against me, Chuck?"

"That's right, it was. I forgot that."

"Don't lie!" said Randy coldly. "*You* forgot that! You was the one who found my hat. My sworn best friend—you, Chuck! You could have kept that to yourself—but you didn't. And then, after I was sent up for stage robbery, you married my intended wife."

"Wait a minute," begged Marks. "She turned you down, Randy. She wasn't—you had no claims on her—after that. I've been a good husband to her."

"I'll find out if you have," said Randy. "Yo're such a damn liar, I'd never believe yuh on a stack o' Bibles."

Charles Marks flushed hotly. Such language to the cashier of a bank! He said warmly, "You can ask anybody in town—if you are so interested. Good day, sir!"

RANDY swung away from the boardwalk and went to his horse. He paused at the side of his horse and looked down the street at the sheriff's office, debating if he should visit Walt first, or go out to the RJ ranch and get the truth from old Sody Jenkins.

Randy had left Walt and Sody in charge of the ranch. Neither of them had ever written and told him how the RJ spread was getting along. They promised to work it for him.

Randy turned away from his horse, made his way to the jail, where he obtained permission from Sheriff Klump to talk with Walt. He found his brother seated on the edge of the bunk, smoking. Walt was not as tall as Randy, but heavier. His face was tanned, and he needed a shave. He looked up, expecting an officer, and when he saw Randy, the cigarette nearly fell from his lips. He got to his feet and came over to the bars where they shook hands in silence.

"I'm shore sorry, kid," Randy finally said softly.

"Yuh got nothin' to be sorry for," said Walt. "I'm here, an' it doesn't look like anythin' will get me out."

"Mebbe I'm loco askin' yuh this—but I expect the truth—was you El Lobo?"

"El Lobo's smart," replied Walt. "Does that answer yore question, Randy?"

Randy nodded. "Looks like the boys o' Old Man James wasn't so damn smart," he said. "We'll have to do somethin' 'bout our hats."

Walt smiled. "I been thinkin' about that, too," he said quietly. "Funny that it happened the same way both times—an' we both got in here fer somethin' we never did."

"It ain't funny, kid," said Randy seriously. "I know what's ahead. Five years o' hard knocks—an' mebbe more."

"Have yuh seen Sody?" asked Walt, changing the subject.

"I've only been in town an hour," replied Randy, "an' I've seen jist about everyone but Sody. I reckon he's out at the ranch."

"Good old Sody," smiled Walt. "He's stuck by me. Yuh gotta watch him, 'cause he's liable to start shootin' when they start sayin' things about you an' me."

"I'll ride herd on him," said Randy. "See yuh later, kid."

Randy walked back to his horse, swung into the saddle, and rode down the main street.

As far as he could see, there had been no change in Granite City.

THE kitchen of the RJ ranchhouse was the same as any ranchhouse kitchen, except that there was only one Sody Jenkins. Sody was cussing and discussing the merits of the wood stove to himself in no uncertain terms. He stood before the stove, hands on his narrow hips, and glared at it. There were several streaks of flour smeared across Sody's cheeks and mingled with his stubbled chin.

"Gol-durn stove!" snorted Sody. "Either yuh get too hot or yuh don't get hot at all. How can yuh expect anyone to cook on yuh?"

He turned away from the stove and crossed over to the drainboard, where he picked up a mixing bowl full of raising dough. As he started to turn away, his eyes noticed a movement outside, and he paused, craning his neck to see what it was. His jaw sagged, and he nearly dropped the bowl as he set it down hard on the drainboard. He whirled across the room, and stepped out of the rear door.

"Randy James!" he exploded as he came down the steps to the ground where Randy

was dismounting. "How many didja kill in makin' yore escape?"

Randy grinned as he stepped away from his horse. "Hyah, Sody," he said as they shook hands. "They let me out after five years."

"Did, huh?" Sody grunted as he wiped a hand across his mouth. "Shore glad to see yuh back, Randy. It's been lonesome out here."

Randy nodded. "I know all about Walt," he said. "Dropped in an' saw him before I rode out here."

"I tried my best, Randy," he said, "but it was like talkin' to a post. Walt's headstrong, an' he's the wildest cowboy I ever laid eyes upon."

"I wished you'da written me about it."

"Shucks," grunted Sody. "I didn't want to trouble yuh—you had enough trouble already."

Randy followed the old man into the house. They went to the living room where they sat down. The old home looked just the same to Randy.

"How's things been at the ranch?" asked Randy.

"Not too good," replied Sody. "I might as well tell yuh all about it, 'cause yuh'll find out sooner or later. It ain't the kinda news yuh like to hear when yuh return home, but—"

I reckon I've been through plenty in the past five years, an' a little more ain't goin' to hurt much more," said Randy.

"Well, we're about broke," Sody paused and watched Randy for a moment, then he continued, "Walt tried to get a loan from the bank, but Old Man Thorne turned him down cold. The only reason Thorne gave was that Walt was too wild an' would gamble the money away instead of usin' it for the ranch."

"Thorne hated me," said Randy. "That's yore answer, Sody. Does Walt gamble much?"

"Well, they say he does," replied Sody. "I never followed him around. I can't keep up with him, to be truthful with yuh. He'd go away an' be gone days, sometimes weeks, an' when he came back, he'd tell me to mind my own business. I learned to keep my mouth closed."

"Sounds like his father," sighed Randy. "I didn't think he'd ever be that way."

"It wasn't his fault," said Sody. "People drove him to it. He got the idea that everybody was down on him because you were sent up for a term. I tried, honest I did, but he wouldn't listen to me. May tried to have a talk with him, too."

"I saw May—an' Chuck," offered Randy. "How are they gettin' along?"

"I don't think May's happy. Chuck Marks is a no-good," replied Sody. "Oh, I guess he's a good provider, but about every three months he goes on a drunk."

"Chuck never used to drink much."

"They say he started after he helped convict you, Randy," said Sody. "I dunno much about it, but I know he's not like other folks, though. Chuck's a lone drinker. Holes up in an old shack in the hills an' drinks himself stiff for days. Doc Garbe says it's a

disease. If he wasn't Thorne's son-in-law, he'd last quick in that bank. After his drunk is over, he'll be all right for a few months, an then—bam! He's gone again. He ain't been away from the bank for two, three months now."

"Must be tough on May."

"I reckon it is, but she doesn't complain," grunted Sody. "She's a wonderful girl—or mebbe I don't have to tell you."

Randy changed the subject, asking, "How long has Walt been in jail?"

"Almost two months," replied Sody. "Yuh see, we have court here only twice a year. He'll be in there about thirty days more, before his trial is held."

"That's hell," grunted Randy as he got to his feet. "Is chow about ready, I'm starved for a real home-cooked meal. It's years since I've had one."

"I'll have it ready in a few minutes," said Sody as he headed for the kitchen, a broad grin on his wrinkled old face.

AFTER a brief visit with Walt James in the jail early the next morning, Randy James headed back into the hills behind the RJ ranchhouse to inspect the range and to make a tally of their stock, which Sody had told him the night before had nearly vanished from the spread.

By the time Randy reached the foot of the eastern range of hills, he realized that Sody Jenkins was right in his estimate of the RJ.

"She ain't worth very much, Randy," was what Sody had said.

Randy decided that it wasn't worth a plugged nickel. The feed and water was plentiful, but the number of cows with the RJ brand could be counted on the fingers of his two hands. He was disgusted as he drew rein beside a narrow, winding stream of cool running water that came out of a narrow canyon and crossed the country toward the river that ran two miles west of Granite City.

With their thirsts quenched, Randy mounted his horse and started along the base of the hills, swinging south toward RJ land. Presently he came to a clearing in the brush at the foot of the hill where a small log cabin was built. Randy swung his horse in close to the cabin. The mere sight of the old place brought back many treasured memories to him; for here he and his father had spent many nights while out hunting.

Suddenly Randy's eyes shifted from the front of the cabin to the old pole corral at the right side of the building where he saw a horse.

He stiffened slightly, wondering who was out there. Randy moved his horse back toward the front of the cabin as the door opened and out stepped May Marks!

She stopped short, her eyes wide with fright, as though she had been caught stealing something. Randy sat motionless in his saddle and eyed the girl, wondering what she was doing out here. Finally he said, "Hyah, May."

"Oh-h-h-h, Randy," she sighed and leaned against the doorway.

Randy dismounted, dropping his reins, and moved up to the front door. "Are you out here alone?" he asked, and when she nodded, he continued, "What are yuh doin', May?"

May swallowed painfully, wiped an arm across her face, and slowly sat down on the top step. Randy sat down beside her and watched as the girl stared out across the country.

"I asked yuh what on earth are yuh doin' out here?" repeated Randy.

May's face colored slightly and she looked at Randy. He could see tears welling in her blue eyes. Before Randy could say more, she produced a handkerchief and broke into a soft sob. Randy glanced about. He didn't know what to do. This was way out of his line. He cleared his throat.

"Gosh, May, mebbe if it's that bad, I can help yuh," he said.

She looked up at him, wiped her eyes, and thought it over. After some thought, and several large tears, she cleared her throat.

"Randy, you won't tell—anybody, will you?" she paused and looked up at him. He smiled and shook his head. "I know you won't," she continued. "I—I come out here now and then to bring food. No, I don't stay here, but, well it—it's this way. I don't suppose you've heard about Chuck and his little spells? Oh, you have?" She paused again and wiped her eyes with the handkerchief, then went on. "Well, this is where he comes. I like to keep it stocked for him."

Randy didn't know just what to say, and May realized it, so she said quickly, "I know it is coming—I can always tell, Randy."

"That's shore mighty nice of yuh, May," he said softly. "I know Chuck appreciates it."

"I'll ride with yuh."

"Please, I would prefer to ride home alone," said May as they went to the corral where Randy helped her into the saddle. She looked down at him and tried to smile. "This—this is our secret, Randy?"

"It shore is," smiled Randy. "Yuh can depend on me, May."

She turned the horse away and rode off across the country toward Granite City. Randy walked back to the steps, where he sat down and watched her until she was out of sight. He knew that she wasn't happy; he could tell it, but he knew that May Marks would never admit it.

"NOW that yuh know what the spread is worth, whatcha goin' to do with

it?" queried Sody Jenkins as he leaned back in his chair in front of the roaring fireplace and puffed on his smelly old pipe.

"I don't know," replied Randy. "If it's useless to try an' get a loan, about the only thing left is to sell out."

Sody puffed thoughtfully for several minutes, his eyes staring into the fire. Finally he set aside his pipe and looked at Randy.

"I wonder who'd be fool enough to buy this spread?"

Randy shrugged his shoulders. "It'll be sold cheap," he replied. "Just enough to get away from here an' to a new an' greener pasture."

"What about Walt?"

Randy sighed, got to his feet and walked over to the fireplace, where he leaned against the mantel and looked down at the crackling logs on the fire. "I've been thinkin' about that, too," he replied. "When he gets out, he won't want to face this place either. I know—I've been through the mill. We could have a new place waitin' for him."

"Say, what's that noise?" snorted Sody as he got to his feet and moved to a front window. "Sounds like a lotta horses runnin'."

Randy followed him to the front window, where they peered outside. It was moonlight, and they could see a short distance. Coming down across the open country toward the ranchhouse were six horses at full gallop.

"Company," muttered Sody.

"I don't like the looks of it," said Randy. "They don't look any too peaceful to me."

He turned and went across the room and into his bedroom, where he picked up his six-shooter just as the front door banged open and he heard the sheriff's booming voice:

"Where's Randy James?"

Randy stepped into the doorway, his gun covering the six men as they piled into the room behind Sheriff Newt Klump. They looked at him in surprise. Only the sheriff and one other man had drawn their guns.

"Easy on the trigger, gents," warned Randy. "My finger's itchin'."

"Don't be a damn fool, James!" snapped the sheriff. "We came out here to get yuh. You can't get away, so yuh might as well come peacefully."

"Can't get away from what?" queried Randy, his eyes narrowed.

"Jail," spoke up one of the men. "Tell him, Newt, or mebbe he knows only too well."

"Tell me what?" demanded Randy. "But don't come a step closer unless yuh crave strummin' a harp!"

"Someone knocked out my deputy this evenin', an' let Walt out o' jail," explained Klump slowly. "An' that ain't all. Walt went from the jail over to the bank where he held up Thorne, an' cleaned out the place an' when Thorne started to protest, Walt slapped him down with a gun barrel."

"Oh-h-h-h-h," muttered Randy, but his gun barrel never wavered. He knew now why they were there—they suspected him of releasing Walt. "Got 'em covered, Sody?" he asked.

"Shore have," chuckled Sody as he stood to one side, his gun covering the men.

"Good. They won't listen to reason," explained Randy. "So I reckon I'll pull freight for a while until they cool off. But, first, Sheriff—I didn't do it."

Randy turned and walked calmly out of the house. The men took one step toward his departing back, but Sody's voice cracked out:

"Hold it, gents! Might as well relax fer a minute, an' then yuh can all go home."

"I'll arrest yuh," said Klump.

"Go ahead, but that won't help yuh none. I know Randy didn't have anythin' to do with it, but I can't expect a thick-headed bunch like you to realize it."

"What are yuh goin' to do with us?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm goin' to herd yuh outta here an' see to it that yuh head fer town—an' don't come sneakin' back 'cause I'll be waiting with a load o' buckshot."

"He's gone now," said one of the men, "an' I don't crave ridin' after him. I'm fer goin' back to town."

THE others agreed with him, much to the disgust of the outnumbered sheriff. Sody herded the six men out of the house, down the steps and to their horses. One man cussed. There were only five horses.

"Damn him, he stole my bronc!" wailed one of the men.

"Ride double," ordered Sody as he

watched them. "Now get goin'—an' remember what I done told yuh."

Sody chuckled as the irate posse rode away and he turned and went back into the living room, where he closed and fastened the door, then he turned around and stopped dead in his tracks.

Standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen was Randy, the six-shooter still gripped tightly in his right hand. He grinned widely at Sody and said, "Better close yore mouth, or yore lower jaw'll come unhinged."

"Well, I'm—I'm a—what in blazes am I?" stammered Sody. "I thought yuh—but no, yuh didn't."

Settle down, advised Randy as he crossed over and looked out the front window. "I didn't feel like ridin' tonight, so I stole a horse an' turned it loose out back, an' I watched 'em ride away. They're goin' to be mighty sore at yuh, Sody, for holdin 'em."

"I—oh, hell, I don't care!" snorted Sody. "But you, I don't—"

"Stop worryin'," grinned Randy as he blew out the oil lamp. "I didn't want to ride—let 'em ride if they want to—I wanna sleep in a good bed."

AT SUN-UP, Randy James was far east of the RJ ranch. He had left Sody at the ranch, saddled up, and headed for the range of hills to the east. Randy didn't have any particular place in mind as he rode along, but he wanted to get away from home because he was sure that the sheriff would return, and this time his luck might not hold out.

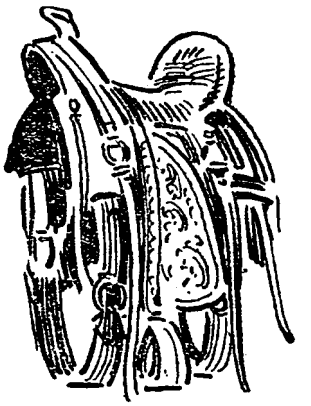
It was past mid-morning, when Randy rode along through the brush, watching closely. He knew that men would be searching the hills for him and Walt, but as yet, he had not seen a single person. Randy had an idea that he might help himself to some of the provisions in Chuck Marks' cabin. He had no idea of giving himself up to the law, at least, not until there had been more developments. The law would never give him a fighting chance—not with his background.

He rode carefully, until he came to a spot where he could overlook the little cabin. The door was open and a saddled horse stood in front of it. Even from that distance he could see that it was the same horse that May Marks had ridden there before. As he studied the place, a man came out, shut the door and sprang into the saddle. It was too far for him to identify the man, who rode swiftly away in the brush.

"That's funny business," Randy told his horse. "Let's take a look."

He rode down to a point near the cabin, concealed his horse in the brush and went cautiously ahead. There was not a sound from the cabin, as he came up to the door and carefully shoved it open. The one small window gave little illumination, but what he saw amazed him. May Marks was standing at a corner of the built-in bunk, her hands tied behind her and around the bunk-post, a gag tightly tied around her mouth. There was someone or something on the bunk, too.

With his gun gripped tightly in his right fist, Randy went into the cabin. May had a smear of blood across her face, and one eye was discolored. She stared at him, but could not speak. He went past her and flung aside the blankets on the bunk. There was Walt, tied and gagged, too. The boy



was conscious, making queer noises through the dirty rag between his teeth. Randy started to untie May, when he heard running footsteps outside. He sagged in behind an old table, as the door opened, shut sharply and a man cursed bitterly. Randy saw him as he swung around, a double-barrel shotgun in his hands. He didn't see Randy—all he saw was the sheriff's posse, riding in close. He shoved the door open a few inches, hunkered down, the shotgun lifted. He was still cursing in an undertone, when Randy snapped:

"Drop that gun, yuh fool!"

But the man didn't drop it. He spun on the balls of his feet, swinging the heavy shotgun toward the sound of Randy's voice, but Randy shot across the table, once—twice—and the man's jerking fingers fired the shotgun through the flimsy roof of the cabin before he sprawled forward on his face.

The posse was closing in, the sheriff yelling, "Open that door! This is the law! We've got yuh surrounded!"

Randy stepped past the body and flung the door open. The cabin was foggy with powder smoke, as the sheriff and his men shoved into the place. A half dozen guns were trained on Randy, and the sheriff growled, "Don't move, James! This time yuh don't get away. Wh—what in hell happened in here?"

The posse almost forgot Randy, as they stared at May Marks, and at Walt, who was trying to sit up. The sheriff rasped:

"What's goin' on here, Randy? You didn't—oh—oh!"

He stooped down and turned the injured man around. Then he stood up and drew a deep breath.

"This is Chuck Marks—dyin'," he whispered huskily. "James, you shot Chuck Marks."

"If I hadn't," replied Randy evenly, "you an' yore posse would have been pickin' shot out of yore hides for a month."

"Huu-u-u-u-uh?" gasped the sheriff.

ONE of the men had cut the gag from May's mouth, cut her hands loose and let her sag to a sitting position on the bunk. Another was releasing Walt. Randy said, "Chuck is tryin' to talk, Sheriff."

The sheriff propped his shoulders against a chair. Chuck Marks was badly hurt—and knew it. Randy hunkered down near him, and the dying man blinked at him.

"El Lobo, this is the finish," Randy said.

Chuck grinned weakly. "I fooled 'em, didn't I?" he whispered. "But the pitcher went to the well once—too—often."

"You, Chuck?" gasped Klump. "You was El Lobo?"

"Fooled you, didn't I?" gloated Chuck. "I had information on all shipments and bank money. It's all over the back corner of this cabin. I—I wanted this last bunch, and then I was quitting. I—I had to get Walt out of jail—you fools thought he was El Lobo—and if there was a big reward, I'd collect it on him—dead. Sheriff, can I have a drink?"

"But, Chuck, what about yore wife?" asked Klump.

"She knew too much. She came here to try and stop me. Walt never did know who hit him—I was sure of that."

"All right, Chuck," said Randy, "you might as well tell 'em that it was you, not me, who got stuck for that robbery. You planted my hat, just like you planted Walt's. Go ahead an' tell 'em."

"That's right," whispered Chuck. "I—I planted both hats. You was innocent, Randy. I—I had a lot of fun. I made 'em think I was a lone drinker. I had to have time to pull the jobs. The first one opened the way for me to get May away from you, Randy. They all played the games with me. But, I"—Chuck hesitated—"why—don't—somebody—light a lamp. It's—getting——dark."

Chuck's shoulders slid away from the chair, but no one paid any attention. May said, "I—I was afraid it was Chuck. He was drunk last night, and said he was coming here. He thought I went to my father's house for the night—but I didn't. I saw him come back and get an extra gun—and I—I thought—well, I came here, and he struck me."

"I heard it all," said Walt. "He took her horse away, and he said he'd find a good place to plant both of us. If Randy hadn't showed up—but he did."

Randy stepped over and put his hand on May's arm.

"I'll take yuh home," he said softly.

"All right, Randy. Maybe we can't find where he left my horse."

"My horse is broke to carry double," he said. "You don't weigh much—an' we ain't in no big hurry."

They went outside and around the corner.

The Surangani

By HUGH B. CAVE

EARNEST young men who venture north from Sydney into the islands are commonly advised not to speculate overmuch on their probable fate. Nothing much awaits them, they're told, that will not be displayed for their inspection in the eyes and attitudes of old inhabitants whose acquaintance they will make en route. They need only look, listen, weigh and measure with reasonable care, and the future will be as clear as the name they so recklessly signed to their contracts.

Which advice is good, perhaps, or good enough, and the ordinary young man would do well to heed it. But the case of Jim Kenyon was an exception.

Long before his arrival at Surangani, Jim Kenyon had shaped a mental picture of what the place would be like. The plodding island steamer paused at other plantations on the way, to deliver food, freight and mail, and Jim took stock of what he saw. He knew that he had to.

Ruavatu impressed him. A mission station adjoined the tract there; the plantation house was neat as a waterside home in Sydney; the planter and his attractive wife dressed for dinner and served Scotch with their polite conversation. Only the heat and mosquitoes were bad.

At Guvutu, his host and hostess served hot tea and smiling advice, prophesying he would find life in the islands *much* to his liking. The houseboys wore hibiscus blooms in their handsome hair-does and monograms on their calico lap-laps. Even the mosquitoes were civilized.

Jim Kenyon took it all in, harvesting information and impressions at every steamer stop. Life on a plantation could not be so very trying, he told himself. There were corrugated iron roofs to keep out the rains. There was netting to thwart the insects. Po-

. . . It Was Only a Few Years Before That the Ancestors of These Bush-village Boys Had Considered Human Heads the Perfect Household Bric-a-Brac

lite houseboys prepared one's food and saw to one's comforts. Indentured native labor attended the groves, harvested the crop, and prepared the copra for market in fine modern drying sheds with fine modern ovens. It was a snap.

Not that he would have turned back had conditions been otherwise. Not at all. James Hartley Kenyon, Junior, for all his handsome face and girlish slimness, was an angry and determined young man, a man in love. But the joke, now, was on James Kenyon, Senior, who had bluntly told him he didn't have the spine to "take it." The Old Man was not usually so far off the track.

Mentally, at least, Jim Kenyon was already composing a triumphant letter to his Lillian, telling her he'd made good despite the predictions of her pater and his, and was ready to take her for his lady.

Then, after two days of dismal travel through drenching rains and drowning seas, past a New Georgia shore whose desolation might have prepared him had he been able to remain topside long enough to see it, Jim Kenyon arrived at Surangani.

The jest was cruel.

He got his first glimpse of the place through a brief lull in the deluge, as the steamer fretfully felt her way to the ancient dock.

It was like a badly focused scene on defective photographic plate, viewed against poor light.

Dead ahead, the primitive plantation house huddled despondently against an unrelieved rampart of jungle. To its right stood a crippled building which could be only a drying shed. Right of that, ghostly palms rose raggedly from a tract long gone

to weed, and native labor sheds edged a stream crawling sluggishly from the bush.

And that was all. That, anywhere, was all. The rest was mud and jungle and mile after dreary mile of inhospitable shore.

He was surprised, in such a setting, to find even a solitary white on hand to welcome him, but one was present. In the pummeling rain he was a forlorn creature, to be sure, standing lonely on the dock with hands thrust into tattered pockets and bearded face sunk in apathy. But behind the grime and the gin fumes he was white, indubitably, and he managed to extract one limp paw for a handshake. Behind him, watching the proceedings too intently for Jim Kenyon's peace of mind, stood a dozen silent Malaitamen.

"I'm Carleton Libby, your assistant," the wizened man announced. "Welcome to Surangani, Mr. Kenyon, and come up to the house. The boys'll attend to your things."

Jim gazed anxiously at those almost-hostile black faces. At every plantation visited en route, the arrival of the steamer had been an occasion for jubilant celebration. Here the ship was a gray ghost at a gray dock, and the spectators were silent spooks.

"These are some of our workers?" he asked, wetting his lips already washed white by the rain.

"*Some* of 'em?" Libby chuckled mirthlessly. "Damned near all of 'em, I'd say. Come along, Mr. Kenyon. 'S raining."

Through ankle-deep black mud, Jim dazedly followed him to the house.

THE house was dark, partly because of the rain and partly because plaited palm fronds had been draped over some of its window apertures to replace rotted netting. Perhaps, though, the gloom was a blessing. Tired as he was, discouraged by his reception, Jim Kenyon might have fled back to the boat if shown more than he saw that afternoon by the light of smoking kerosene lanterns.

The tract itself he did not see until his tour of inspection in the morning. And the morning sun did help a little.

"It's run down," admitted Libby sorrowfully. "But I've tried, Mr. Kenyon, Lord knows. Trouble is, they're sullen and resentful—it's Mr. MacCombie's doings—and when a Malaitaman has it in for you, he won't work."

Nothing could be done at this date, Jim realized, about the chronic crookedness of the young trees. A badly planted tree is badly planted, and that's that. Nor could much be done to save the clover ground-cover which apparently had been seeded too thinly and certainly had been neglected too long, and now had lost its battle with rioting weeds. But he kicked angrily at a pile of fallen fronds and, with his knuckles white on his slim hips, said resolutely, "They will have to be made to work, Mr. Libby. This ground's to be cleared and the trash burned at once, whether they're in the mood or not. And when were these nuts gathered last?"

"Why—ah—day before yesterday," said Libby, gazing upward, solemnly, at the arched green roof under which white birds planed leisurely from tree to tree and butterflies gaily fluttered. "Or the day before that."

"Why aren't the boys at work now, Mr. Libby?"

"They've got out of the habit, I suppose."

"Then I suggest you call them."

Libby sighed at that, as if consoling himself with the thought that, after all, such an order had been inevitable. But when he cupped his hands to his mouth and screamed in the direction of the labor camp, the shrillness of his voice gave Jim a start. So did the rapidity of the natives' response. There were not many boys, but they did come quickly.

Libby put *his* knuckles to his hips then. His speech was a curious mixture Jim Kenyon never hoped to imitate or even fully to comprehend—with sound effects comparable only to the barking of dogs and the squawking of frenzied cockatoos. But the words most violently shouted were, "Boy! You fella boy! Ketchum coppera bags belong new mahster! My word! Work! Plenty work!" And then followed a session of grimacing and pointing—pointing at the new "mahster"—which Jim had to admit was impressive. But the hostile stares of the workers worried him. They were big men, these Malaita fellows, and by reputation all Malaitamen are cunning devils who'd as soon hack open a white overseer as a coconut.

Toward him Libby led one boy who seemed bigger, more muscular, more sullen, if that were possible, than the rest. "This one's the boss boy," said Libby. "You'll gather it was him I did most of the talking to. Name's Nogato."

Jim returned the gaze of the boy's deep-set eyes, which seemed smaller and nearer than perhaps they really were because the whites of them were egg-yolk yellow. It was not proper to shake hands, he knew—no indentured boy would understand such a gesture. Nor would ordinary talk mean much. But the talk, at least, was worth trying. Perhaps the tone of voice would penetrate.

Earnestly but not belligerently he addressed the fellow. "We've much work to do here, Nogato, if we're to have a shipment ready when the steamer calls, three months from now. And we're going to have a shipment—a good one. That means plenty of hard labor for all of us. But there'll be rewards for it. You boys will get your full ration of rice and meat every day without fail, and a full day's rest on Sunday, and extra presents from the master for working with a will. There's no reason we can't all of us get along together in a peaceful, productive fashion. Understand?"

After a moment of seeming bewilderment, the boy shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Tell him what I said, Mr. Libby."

"He won't savvy that kind of talk," complained the withered man. "My word!"

"Tell him, anyway."

So Libby told him—or at least used a great many trade-language words—and Nogato gazed steadily at Jim Kenyon while being spoken to. And then, stolidly, he shrugged again and turned away.

"Well," said Jim hopefully, "that's at least a start."

The glance bestowed upon him by the veteran Mr. Libby was a pitying one, to put it mildly. But Jim missed it. Fired now with ambition, he strode up through the grove, dodging spider webs and hopping irrigation ditches, on his way to the woebegone building which he had diagnosed yesterday as the drying shed. He hoped it wasn't what it seemed to be. He prayed that suddenly, out of nowhere, a more up-to-date structure would pop into view somewhere. But a drying shed it was, and the only one on the place.

A shudder touched him at sight of the tinder-dry thatch roof and the rows of grassy bamboo racks beneath it. Ignoring the rancid stench, oblivious of the frenzied copra bugs, he turned grimly to Libby for an explanation.

"I know," said the shriveled man glumly. "It's a fire trap. But the company hasn't much use for us here, Mr. Kenyon. We're so far off the beaten track that half the time they don't know we exist. Maybe *you* can persuade 'em to send us new equipment. MacCombie couldn't."

White of face, Jim Kenyon walked the length of the shed and back, eyeing the smouldering firebed, pausing here and there to nudge stray bits of smoking wood back into it. "We'll let the fires go out," he decided.

"Out?" muttered Libby.

"And replace these racks with fresh bamboo, at least, before the shed burns to the ground. Look at them, man! They're as sopped with oil as wicks in a lamp!" He glanced, frowning, at the brittle ribs of palm, dark with soot, so close overhead. "Get Nogato busy on it at once, Mr. Libby. This morning. And then return to the house, if you will, without delay."

MR. LIBBY went away from there in something of a daze, wagging his head so vigorously that his sun hat wobbled. He took himself to the grove and talked to Nogato.

Then, curious, he made for the house as instructed.

He found the house boy and the cook boy hard at work tidying up the place. And Jim Kenyon was there with them, not standing about in lordly fashion, telling them what to do, but stripped to the waist and doing it with them. Already the house had begun to acquire a clean, uncluttered look.

"I know—it isn't done," said Jim. "But it's got to be done, Mr. Libby, and if you care to lend a hand I'd be grateful." He paused to wipe some of the perspiration from the tight white skin over his ribs. "I've some netting in my trunk that will take care of these windows, I think. You might begin with that."

"My word," said Libby, scratching his

stubble with a black-tipped fingernail. But after a fashion he made himself useful.

Bed had never felt so good to Jim Kenyon as it did that night. Too done in to eat more than a mouthful of dinner, he took to his room early and lay in the dark, acutely aware of the flies and mosquitoes that assailed the netting about his cot.

It was uncomfortably hot and distressingly noisy—the house had been erected bang up against the jungle, wherein were hordes of mystifying creatures that shrieked and chuckled and whistled and sawed wood and beat on empty tins without let-up. And in the adjoining room, Libby's boots rocked the ancient floor with unnecessary force, as the wizened man arose at intervals from his lethargy to pour another drink.

Jim Kenyon lay thinking, and his thoughts were none too cheerful. He was not used to this sort of thing, he told himself. It would kill him. But that, of course, was what the Old Man had had in mind in persuading the company to send him here; not, perhaps, to kill him—killing would be a bit drastic—but certainly to break his resolve and prove him a weakling.

Captain Angus Donnell, too. *He* was undoubtedly quaking with mirth at this very moment, in his cozy cabin aboard the *Mary Kenyon*. Having called at Surangani in the past to pick up copra, he knew all there was to know about the place.

If ever a young man in love had been put through the hoop in prettier fashion, Jim Kenyon hoped he might someday hear of it, if only for consolation. But the odds were against it. Where else but here would you find the only son of a wealthy shipowner huddled sweating in a room full of bugs, to prove to an irate sire that his escapades, to date, had been only boyish pranks and not an indication of incurable weakness? Where else but in a forgotten place such as this could you find a young man frantically in love and so desperately unable to prove himself fit to say so? It wasn't real, by heaven. He was dreaming it.

But it was real enough. The Old Man's blunt prediction of failure was a thing not easily forgotten. The words he'd used—dolt, parasite, weakling—still rankled. And the grim if slightly more human challenge of Lillian's father was real, too—as square cut and solid as the man who'd framed it. "Being a rich man's son isn't good enough for the daughter of Cap'n Angus Donnell, lad. But if you're more than that, the lass will wait a bit, no doubt, for you to make the fact known to us."

No dream, that. A nightmare, maybe, but a real one—as real as the oil-drenched racks in the copra shed and the look of watchful waiting in the eyes of Surangani's boys. And he was tired to the bone already from waging a fight that was hopeless; a fight he'd have to carry on alone, for obviously the apathetic Libby, now guzzling gin in the next room, would be damned little help.

He shook the flies from his netting and turned his face to the wall, to sleep—and saw, on the sloping thatch above him, an odd patch of pink which had not been there before.

It swelled, that patch, like an opening blossom, and then began to dance like a flower in the wind. The insect netting wrapped itself about Jim's legs as he leaped from the cot to a window.

Down there on the slope a twenty-foot tongue of flame licked at the black roof of the sky!

JUST why he didn't stop in the adjoining room to wake Libby, he never knew. Perhaps it was a feeling, even then, that in a pinch the fellow would be useless. For what it was worth, he did scream at the man in passing, and then, barefoot, raced across the dark veranda and down the steps, shouting to arouse the plantation boys.

And there he stopped. There, sheepishly, he looked down the slope and chewed his lip, hoping to heaven the natives had not heard him. Libby, shuffling down the steps, found him there and blinked at him in astonishment.

"Now what?" said Libby thickly. "You told 'em yourself to burn up the trash, Mr. Kenyon."

A second flaming tower had climbed beyond the first, and now a third and a fourth blazed up. Shining black bodies moved methodically through the crimson glare, gathering fallen fronds to feed to the flames. Billows of smoke climbed the ghostly palm trunks to the sky.

"They always do the burning at night," Libby chuckled. "It's cooler." And with a

sidelong look at Jim's taut face, he lurched about and went back inside.

JIM KENYON had been at Surangani eleven days before he asked about his predecessor. As patiently as possible he had waited for Libby to volunteer that information, but Libby quite obviously was a man who volunteered precious little of anything. So then, one morning at breakfast, the question was tactfully asked.

"MacCombie?" said Libby, startled. "Why, he was a bit of both saint and devil, you might say."

"I heard nothing but good of him on the way here."

"Which isn't surprising," Libby said, scrubbing his mouth and chin with his napkin. "He saved his meanness for Surangani, Mac did, and even played the saint here when we had callers. Drink was his trouble. He did his drinking solitary—and that's bad."

"He abused the natives?"

"If you mean did he beat 'em and kick 'em about—no. Mac was an old hand at this business, Mr. Kenyon; too smart to give the blacks any cause to go complaining to the District Officer. No one but a fool would risk losing his boys in a place remote as this, with them representing an investment of fifty dollars a head and almighty hard to come by, even for that."

"Then," Jim pressed impatiently, "what *did* MacCombie do to antagonize them?"

"Why, he belittled 'em. That's all you can say. He'd a nasty attitude, had Mac, and never let 'em forget how he despised 'em. *Little* things is what done it. Like sneering at 'em when they'd be primpin' on a Sunday. Or threatening to replace 'em with brush boys when they complained of being too sick to work. They're proud as peacocks, these Malaita boys, plenty wise to white men's tricks. And what happened here—to MacCombie, I mean—is no more'n has happened elsewhere."

"What did happen to MacCombie, Mr. Libby? From all I've heard, he was drowned while on a fishing expedition."

"Turtle hunting," said Libby, "to bolster the larder. And it's true, he was drowned. But it happened, you'll recall, a good three miles down the coast from here, out o' sight of the plantation. And the two boys in the boat with him when it turned over managed to get to shore safe. Yet MacCombie could swim better'n they could—far and away better."

"Was there no investigation?"

"The D. O. stopped by to question the boys, but what could he prove? He did take 'em away with him, but it was a show, that's all, for the benefit o' the others. By now the two who murdered Mac are no doubt working on some other plantation, smug as you please and bragging on the quiet how smart they were."

"I see," Jim said, and finished his breakfast in moody silence. But, he wondered, *did* he see? If there'd been abuses at Surangani under his predecessor, the present behavior of the plantation help more or less explained itself. Natives have notoriously long memories and rather enjoy being resentful.

But how was he, Jim Kenyon, new to the game and admittedly green as grass, to overcome their resentment and put the place on a paying basis? More abuse wouldn't do it, certainly. And kindness hadn't worked. In eleven days he hadn't been able to dent the mask of indifference which every last boy on the place kept turned toward him.

There was something still very wrong at Surangani which could not be accounted for by the sins of MacCombie. Some other evil, unknown even to Libby perhaps, had hold of things. Whatever the answer, it had to be found.

He found no answer, but more evidence of the evil's existence, upon inspecting the copra shed that very afternon. Despite his insistence that the work be hurried, the shed was still not finished, and after a session in the grove he went there, determined to find out why. He went alone, quietly, with only a nod to Libby on the house veranda as he passed.

On silent feet he made his way through mounds of unhusked coconuts to the shed doorway. Only one boy was at work inside —a spindle-limbed youth squatting under the newly thatched roof, surrounded by lengths of cut bamboo that awaited splitting. But he was not splitting bamboo. He was leaning idly against the unfinished rack, chewing betel nut and exerting himself only enough to spit out the scarlet juice.

"Y'see?" said Libby's voice softly, at Jim's shoulder.

Startled, Jim turned his head. He had not heard Libby approach. Now he felt in the planter's oblique grin some of the same belittling—with himself the target—of which the man had accused MacCombie. The native on the floor jerked to attention as Jim, suddenly furious, strode toward him.

"You're paid to work!" Jim shouted. "To *work,* do you hear?"

"That's telling him," Libby muttered. "Only he don't half understand, o' course. Here—let me." And he put the command bêche-de-mer, rattling it off in a fiery blast which brought the Malaita boy to his feet.

No expression possessed that inscrutable face while Libby bellowed. But when the assistant planter stepped back, rubbing his hands in satisfaction, the mask slipped. The mouth opened in a grimace, and betel-stained teeth glittered redly. For an instant the eyes flickered with hatred.

It was only a gesture. A moment later the boy was vigorously hacking away at the bamboo sticks. But Jim did not fail to notice one important thing—the resentment had been directed at *him,* not at Libby.

And what did that signify? Why, it meant, surely, that the revolt here was bigger than personalities—that the disease afflicting Surangani was defiance of authority, pure and simple.

WHATEVER it was it continued, and there seemed to be nothing one could do about it. The plantation boys obeyed the letter of their work contracts, devoting the required number of hours to their assigned chores, but the chores persistently remained unfinished. New weeds sprang from the unkempt ground in the grove as fast as old ones were pulled and burned. Trees went untrimmed. Irrigation trenches somehow managed always to be half choked with debris despite the hours devoted to clearing them.

Even at the house there developed, in a few days, a noticeable gulf between effort expended and results achieved. Utensils clattered resoundingly in the kitchen before each meal, but the meals themselves grew worse. Not that Jim Kenyon was ever hungry—despair had long since deprived him of anything like an appetite—but a man had to eat *something* to ward off illness. And the food brought from that bustling kitchen and placed with such a show of industry and politeness on the master's table only sickened him more. When dysentery caught up with him, he wondered if he had been deliberately poisoned.

Days, he prowled the plantation, trying to do by himself the hundred and one jobs which the indentured boys only pretended to do. Nights he lay awake under his mosquito netting, or paced his room, straining desperately to find a solution.

It was hopeless. The copra shed was finished—he himself had finished it, despite the dysentery—but the sacks of marketable copra that come from the drying racks were lamentably few. At the rate they were accumulating, it would be a breach of etiquette to permit the steamer to come to Surangani at all.

She *would* come, of course. Her skipper would have instructions to look things over and file a report to the company. And what would he find? Why, the worst managed plantation in the Solomons, without a doubt—a shabby, run-down tract not worth the trouble and expense of keeping it going. Copra of poor quality and precious little of it. Natives on the verge of revolt. The assistant planter too drunk most of the time to know what was going on. The overseer, Jim Kenyon, obviously unfit.

Back to Lillian would go the report. Back to Captain Angus Donnell and James Hartley Kenyon Senior, who would shrug and say they'd have been stunned by anything better. And Lillian? By now she must be wondering why he had not written. He could explain, of course, when he did write, that to get a letter posted from Surangani one had to send it fifty miles down the coast by runner and request the people at the next plantation to take it to Segi by launch when next they made the trip. But how explain his failure as a *man* in a way she might be expected to understand? How, indeed! That, too, was hopeless.

He watched the boss boy, Nogato. Behind that handsome, impenetrable mask, he felt, lay the answer to what was wrong, for when Nogato spoke, the others listened. Possibly he had been something on his home island. At any rate, the respect they paid him could not be explained entirely

by his status as boss boy. A chief of some sort, perhaps? Or the son of one? It was hard to say. Only on Sundays, their day of rest, did any of them don the ornaments and bits of native finery that set them apart one from another, and it was best then to leave them alone. They were touchy then. Explosive. It was the day they shook the shackles from their souls and returned in spirit, at least, to a time before the white men's coming.

But he would have a talk with Nogato. A heart-to-heart conference. It was the only way, and something—please God, *something*—might come of it.

The day he made up his mind on that score, however, something else occurred. Libby slammed into the house to report that the boy who had been chided for laziness in the drying shed was too ill to work.

"What's the matter with him?" innocently asked Jim.

"Matter?" said Libby. "It's an old game, Mr. Kenyon—older than me, even, and Lord knows I've grown a beard at this business. Why, nothing's the matter, o' course, expect that you're being paid for scratching his bright black pride!"

"But surely he doesn't think to fool us with a trumped-up illness!"

"Go and see," said Libby grimly.

It was something to see, at that. At the very least it was educational. The boy was quartered in one of the thatch-roofed labor sheds at the stream's edge, on the far side of the tract, his portion of the building a parcel of space eight feet by ten in which were crowded a bunk, his personal things, and the boy himself. He occupied the bunk but was not in any sense confined to it; he merely sat upon it with his back against the bamboo wall-frame, his knobby knees drawn up to support his chin, his gaze focused vacantly on a point in space. His stare did not change even when Jim strode through his line of vision and stopped beside him, or when Libby followed.

"You fella gottem sore leg along someplace?" Jim demanded.

The boy's eyes flickered, and that was all.

Jim bent closer. The light was poor here; wall and roof cast a haze of deep green shadow over the patient. There was apparently nothing wrong internally—eyes and mouth gave no hint of fever, and the output of perspiration was no more than seasonably normal. A patch of gray above one ear, however, seemed to betray the recent application of a home remedy—probably wood ash—to some recent injury.

"You fella gottem sore leg along head?" Jim's pidgin had improved. "You fella get brokum head too much along fright?"

The boy's eyes rolled and his lips twitched—but they twitched only to close more tightly. With misgivings, Jim opened the first-aid box he had brought from the house.

That was a mistake. The boy's hands flew to cover his face, and his thin body did its utmost to become part of the wall behind him. Before ever he was touched, he began to scream.

"For heaven's sake," Jim muttered, "stop it! I only want to help you!"

But the senseless racket continued all the while his hands, clutching medicine, fluttered aimlessly over the boy's writhing body.

Up to then, Libby had not interfered. Now he did. "You'd best take it easy," he warned. "We've company."

Jim turned from the cot. Perhaps on an ordinary plantation there'd have been nothing frightening in what he saw, but at Surangani it was ominous. The shed had been empty a moment before; now no fewer than five of the sick boy's fellows stood silent and unmoving in the doorway, their round white eyes like the eyes of animals seen at night in the darkness about a campfire. Jim was shaken.

"All right," he mumbled, "I'll leave some pills here and you can take them yourself." He repeated that in pidgin, botching it badly, but was too furious and frightened to care. Leaving a tin of pills on the bunk—they were harmless bits of nothing, sugar-coated—he slammed the lid on the first-aid box and turned away.

The Malaita boys moved aside with deliberate lack of haste.

"He's putting it on," Libby said grimly, at the house. "But I'm damned if I know how to advise you, Mr. Kenyon. If this were the usual sort of place, I'd say kick the living hell out of him, charge the fine to upkeep and be done with it. They'd behave themselves then, knowing you meant business. But" —and lifting his glass of gin to his lips, he scowled and shook his head— "this isn't the usual place. A kick here, the

way things stand, and the lot of 'em might turn on us."

Jim slumped in a chair. "But *is* he faking? He'd fallen or been struck with something, from the looks of his head."

"Nothing to it," was Libby's curt verdict. "If they took sick for every scratch of that size, there'd be no work done at all. There's only one way to handle him, as I see it."

"And that?"

"Why, stop his rations. If he's too sick to work, he's too sick to eat. You wouldn't be the first to put down a revolt that way, Mr. Kenyon. It's an old treatment and works surprising well."

Jim was too discouraged to argue. His own thinking had run against a blank wall. "All right," he said. "Do what you think best. *I* don't know."

He knew soon enough, though. This was Thursday, and by Saturday the effects of Libby's counter measures were fully apparent. Not one boy was sick then, but four of them—four perfectly healthy specimens of sullen savage, sprawling about on their bunks in the labor sheds, insisting they were too ill to work.

There was no simple solution to such a situation. By the law of the islands, enforced by a D. O. to whom the natives could fly with complaints and be assured of a hearing, a sick man could not be made to work; could not be forced to do anything, even take medicine, against his will. These four, with vigor that belied their claim of illness, refused even to be examined.

Work on the tract had ceased entirely. Those not feigning sickness simply stood by, waiting to see what the master would do about the challenge laid down by their faking fellows.

SUNDAY was the worst. Saturday night is pay night, when indentured boys received their weekly rations, replenish their supply of stick tobacco at the plantation store, and spend every additional penny on trade trinkets. Traditionally on Sundays they smoke themselves into a coma, amuse themselves with childish games, and work long and hard over hair-do's, necklaces, earrings and other ornamentation to make themselves as handsome as young men of the islands ought to be. There seemed no excuse for such primping at Surangani, for the Malaitamen never went calling on the belles of the village back in the bush—the bush natives, Libby explained, had made it more than clear that they were not welcome. Yet primp they usually did, and song and laughter usually enlivened Surangani's Sundays.

This day was markedly different. There was no song and only a grim kind of laughter in the labor quarters when Jim appeared to inquire how the "sick" boys were. Sitting about in the shade of trees and buildings, the Malaitamen fell silent at his approach. None greeted him. But they stared; they watched his every step. And when he departed they followed him with their eyes.

IT WAS the stillness before storm, the dark heavy hush of the jungle which heralds the tumult in the treetops. Jim was trembling when he got back to the house.

"They're up to something," he reported. "Something devilish."

"Mr. Kenyon," said Libby solicitously, "you're not looking well. You're not sleeping enough, or getting enough to eat. You watch out. A bout of fever right now would be the finish of you." Libby had his own method of combating fever—gin, neat, and plenty of it—and had been protecting his health steadily since daybreak.

"Put away your bottle, Mr. Libby," Jim told him. "I want you to go to the village with me."

"The *village*? What for?"

"I want to talk to the *luluai*—see if I can persuade him to send some of his men to work here. It's our only hope of having a shipment ready when the steamer calls."

"It won't work," said Libby bluntly. "What's more, you'd be risking your head going in there."

"Why?"

"Why?" The shriveled man got out of his chair and walked the floor, the glint in his usually lacklustre eyes indicating stiff rebellion. "Because this plantation has a bad name, Mr. Kenyon, and the village people want nothing to do with us. They had their trouble with our boys when MacCombie was here—now it's no go, no go at all." He snatched his glass from the table and emptied it, visibly upset by Jim's suggestion. "They'll kill any of our boys who dared go

there, Mr. Kenyon. Chances are they'd even let a spear or two go at *you.*"

Jim felt the need of a drink himself then. It was bad gin. He grimaced after downing it, and had to take in a breath before speaking. But when he spoke, his voice was level.

"Mr. Libby, I'm going."

Libby's sigh was noisy. "You're grabbing at straws!"

"What else can I do?"

"Give up," Libby muttered. "Face the facts. Call it quits."

"You think we haven't a chance, Mr. Libby?"

The older man returned to his chair and sat again, a disconsolate figure, back and shoulders bowed, despairing eyes fixed on the floor between his feet. "Mr. Kenyon," he said, "I dislike to give you the truth o' this. You're as good a man as ever I've worked with, and you've done your level best to put Surangani on its feet. But it's no good. Decent labor won't come here, and if it did it would turn bad overnight. I can't explain *why*, Mr. Kenyon—I can only tell you what I see and what I know. Surangani's done for. Nothing you or I can do will save it. I give it a couple more months—half a year at most—and then the company will pull out and abandon the place. Why risk your neck trying to do the impossible?"

"Nevertheless, I'm going."

"You mean it, don't you?" Libby muttered, glowering.

Jim's silence was eloquent.

Libby rose and had another drink, a stiff one. "All right," he said resignedly. "I'll go and bring the *luluai* here—or try to. They know me in the village, and I've a better chance of getting the old boy to listen than you'd have." He clapped his sun hat on and stamped angrily to the door. Without a backward glance he made for the river and the trail leading into the jungle.

Jim waited. How he would present his case to the head man of the village even if Libby succeeded in bringing him, he did not know. He had not even laid eyes on a village native since coming to Surangani. What were the locals like, anyway? Treacherous fellows, so he'd heard, who even now on occasion took a head or two in defiance of the government. The village was but three miles distant, but that meant nothing—three miles of that black and brooding bush were through enough insulation from the feeble sort of civilization to be found here on the coast. Three, thirty or three hundred, it was all the same; the village and its people were primitive Melanesian, but one rung of the ladder removed from the stone age.

He found the waiting intolerable and presently went out. Partly that was restlessness; partly it was an effort to rid his head of its leaden heaviness, for he was a sick man and knew it, and guessed that with the first prolonged rain he would discover himself playing host to the island's finest dose of malaria. Overwork, lack of rest, insufficient and irregular eating—not for ever could a man keep up such an existence without paying the piper. Not in a climate such as this, where the sun daily boiled a man's juices to the surface and armies of ravening insects hummed about him to dine on them.

And partly he went out to find Nogato, for in his mind was still the thought that the huge, handsome boss boy could turn the tide of sentiment if so inclined or so persuaded. Jim's steps, not so aimless, led him through the tract to the labor sheds.

The Malaitamen saw him coming, and their talk ceased as it had before. Resolutely Jim halted among them.

"Me come speakum 'long fella boss boy. You fella bring him he come."

It was a direct order, quietly put, and had to be answered. But the reply was brief. "Him fella boss boy he no here."

"Him fella boy walkum off plantation?"

They nodded. "Sun he stand up, him fella boss boy he walkum."

"What name place he walkum?"

A shrug.

"You tellum boss boy," Jim said, "me makum talk 'long him by-m-by when he return. Tellum he fella come house belong mahster."

It was the best that could be done. He returned to the house and was on the veranda, pacing up and down in the copper glow of the afternoon sun, when Libby reappeared.

Libby was alone. "It's no go," he reported glumly, wagging his head. "I warned you it wouldn't be, Mr. Kenyon. Old Motuli—he's the head man—wants no part of us

at all. Got indignant as the very devil." Scowling at Jim, he flapped his hands in a gesture of defeat. "If I were you, I'd get good and drunk and forget the whole ruddy mess, Mr. Kenyon, and be ready with my things packed when the steamer stops."

"Thanks, Libby."

"It's good advice," the withered man muttered, "even if it don't seem so noble at the moment. I wish somebody'd told *me* to quit this rotten business before I'd forgot how to do everything else. Look at me, Mr. Kenyon. I had a birthday yesterday—my fifty-third."

He was not much to look at, Jim had to admit. His off-color skin seemed never to stop acquiring new creases. The sun had long since bleached his unlovely stubble, which he kept trimmed with scissors rather than endure the effort of shaving, and yellowed the straggly top hair which he never trimmed at all. Looking ten years older than his age, he was an ugly little man, unkempt and unhappy.

"Go home," Libby muttered, reaching for the gin. "You'll bless me later for advising it."

But Libby, of course, was not a shipowner's only son, desperately in love with the trusting daughter of his father's most outspoken skipper. He had only himself to consider, and needn't fret about breaking the heart of a girl.

Jim's only answer was a shrug.

IT WAS dark when Nogato came, and there was defiance in the manner of his coming—the defiance of a top quality indentured boy who considered it a favor to obey *any* sort of order on his day of independence. He marched to the veranda steps and presented himself to Libby, sprawled there with feet on the railing, and then stood straight and unmoving while the half-drunk assistant planter went inside for Jim. He stood, moreover, where the lamplight from the house gleamed down upon his polished hair-do and bright Sunday ornaments.

It was a sick Jim Kenyon who came and sat on the steps to talk to him; a Jim Kenyon half drowned with sweat, shivering with chills, all but down and out with his first go of fever. That he was out of bed at all was a thing to marvel at, for the sunset vermilion of his twitching face betokened a temperature that would have blown the mercury through the thermometer top. But he sat and talked. And if his mind wandered and his talk made so little sense that Nogato honestly could not answer it, that was neither Jim's fault nor the Malaitan's, but simply more of the same hard luck which had made Surangani the place it was.

Nothing came of it, though for half an hour Nogato listened to unintelligible questions and spoke unintelligible answers before Jim dismissed him and staggered back to bed. And yet something *did* come of it, for in the visions that accompanied the fever through the following hours, Jim kept seeing the native boy posed there like a handsome ebony statue in the lamplight. And despite the ravanges of the fever, his mind caught hold of something, held it, mulled over it, and was ready with it when the worst of the sickness passed.

Ornaments he had seen before on the Malaita boys—some of them meaningless, others indicative of birthright or social standing. Handsome tricks with the hair; pompadours and giddy topknots lacquered with shoepolish or bleached with delousing lime; bracelets, anklets, necklaces of shells and dogs' teeth and assorted other exotic items—these were to be seen any Sunday when the boys dressed up. But never before had he seen white star-flowers behind a Malaitaman's ears.

Star-flowers were worn when a young man sought a wife, and here at Surangani those particular blossoms were hard to come by. Not for any mere ornament would Nogato have endured the prodigious trouble of searching the jungle for them.

Nogato was courting, and had come to the house straight from a day of love-making. And where had he done his love-making? Where else but the village, in which, according to Libby, no plantation boy dared show his face!

More than malaria buzzed in Jim Kenyon's aching head when the possibilities of his discovery hit home. But the fever, on the heels of his bout with dysentery, effectively limited what he could do about it. For three days he was confined to the house, in bed most of the time, feebly sitting in the dusky front room when bed became no longer endurable. He could think, but he was too sick to act.

That was a good thing, perhaps. Before acting, he had to be sure—and it was not possible to verify his reasoning on a work day. True, the Malaita boys did no work that amounted to anything, but they did remain on the plantation and go through the motions; with Libby still able to get about, they had to do that much or commit themselves to open revolt. And Libby, though drunk most of the week, *could* get about. At Jim's insistence he presented a daily report of happenings, usually in the evening when, with a sigh and a grunt, he collapsed into his chair and reached for his evening bottle.

"The four that claim to be sick aren't lifting a finger," he declared toward week's end, "and the others might as well lie down with em. I've kept the fires going in the drying shed, Mr. Kenyon, but you can count the filled sacks on your fingers and toes. But why go on? It's the same tale o' woes day after day—a little worse each time, that's all."

Jim held his heavy lids open long enough to stare at the man. "Mr. Libby, tell me something. You're an old hand; you've seen a good many plantations big and small, some privately owned, others held by the combines. Tell me—if Surangani were run properly, with a smart hand in control and first class native labor, would the place show a respectable profit?"

"Maybe, if it weren't so far from things."

"Far from what, Mr. Libby? An extra day or two shouldn't mean much to a ship's captain. It strikes me that isolation in these islands is more a personal than an economic burden."

"That's enough, isn't it?" the little man muttered.

"Being shut off from things doesn't appear to trouble you much."

"I'm used to it. I've played a lone hand all my life."

"And I," said Jim quietly, "am a product of civilization." Rising shakily, he went out on the veranda to look down over the dark plantation. But what he felt was more than loneliness; it was a realization that here, where civilization was but a scratch on the black skin of time and a man stood or fell by his bedrock abilities, he had accomplished less than a blue-eyed girl expected of him. Even less, probably, than a scornful father who *knew* him would reluctantly have admitted him capable of.

The moon, rising, was fat and bright, silvering the restless sea beyond the palms that leaned back over the beach. There was so much beauty on this wild island that it took the breath away. Lillian, Jim knew, would love it here; she was half a child of the wild herself, knowing kinship with the sea and far dark places to which Captain Angus had taken her.

But Lillian would never come to Surangani. Never—

HE WAS still weak when he rose before dawn on Sunday. From the adjoining room came the wheeze of Libby's snoring. The wizened man had gone to bed thoroughly soaked in gin, and Jim was careful not to wake him. Donning high boots and his wrinkled suit of whites, he strapped on a revolver before tiptoeing through the sitting room to the veranda.

The grove, as usual in the early morning, was hung with glittering spider webs and alive with chattering birds, but he hurried through it, unseeing, and past the labor camp to the river. The labor sheds were silent, the natives still sleeping. The stream, sluggish and noisesome at low tide, donated hordes of shrilling mosquitoes to accompany him.

He followed the trail into the bush—the first time since his arrival at Surangani that he had ventured more than a few yards into that vast, dim cathedral. Three miles, Libby had said; and once the plantation was out of sight behind these dripping walls of forest, there was danger of ambush. But he felt no danger, only a loneliness that awed him.

It was like walking underground when the trail led away from the stream. The trees rose gray and bare, reaching incredibly high for a sun that warmed and dried only their distant crowns; the wet, dark ground was choked with naked roots all intertwined. The birds fell silent. Small things scurried underfoot. Larger residents rustled and squeaked and hissed and scolded, but he saw few of them. Battling the clouds of mosquitoes, he plodded on, sweat-soaked and struggling for breath.

Twice before reaching the village he had to rest, but the rests were brief because

time, he knew, was against him. Nogato, strong as a young horse and familiar with the trail—and not weakened by the after effects of fever—would make short work of the journey once he started, and probably would start with the sun. Young men in love were impatient. So Jim forced himself on. And presently the trail widened, and beside it, warm in the sun, lay a patch of garden. And around the next bend were houses.

The village was larger than he had been led to believe by Libby's indifferent accounts. It was a prosperous place, the earth hard packed and bare as macadam, the bamboo and pandanus-thatch houses extending in twin rows a hundred yards or more to the far wall of jungle. Before some of the houses women prepared food and naked children played. The small sounds were those of a community arousing itself unhurriedly for a new day's work.

He picked out the house of the *luluai* easily, for like most headmen's homes it was larger than the rest. And while he looked toward it, hoping for a glimpse of old Motuli himself, a girl emerged to stand in the shade of the overhanging thatch.

A scant yellow lap-lap was her only garment, and the form to which it clung was slim and softly curved, the proud head topped by a gay brush of black fuzz in neatest native fashion. When she stepped into the sunlight, Jim was certain she was the *luluai's* daughter—there was something of a swagger in her stride, of brisk self-assurance in her movements. The sun gleamed on skin as smooth and luminous as that of a ripe plum; it found bright white highlights in the glance of her dusky eyes and danced on small white teeth unstained by betel nut. She looked toward the trail. She was waiting—

Jim had left the path and stepped into a high growth of tiger grass beside it, or she would have seen him. He crouched, watching her. Forgotten was his weariness. The girl was expecting Nogato, he was certain.

He was right. Fewer than five minutes later the Malaitan boss boy hove into sight.

He had done himself proud this Sunday morning, had Nogato. Hours of wrist-work with a betel-wood comb must have gone into that elaborate coiffure with its eye-catching yellow peak. Bright glass adornments sparkled on his muscular arms, in his ears, about his middle. And there was something more. Probably he had worn it other times when visiting the village, but Jim had not before seen it. It was a magnificent neckband of woven pandanus strips, intricately decorated with tiny shells. No other plantation boy possessed one of those. No other could lay claim to the rank of chief among the people of his home island.

There in the village square Nogato met his lady, precisely as young men have met their ladies the world over, with extended hands and a glad smile of greeting. And she smiled, too, with a teasing upward glance and a little wriggling twist of her slim body that put her close to him. They walked together through the village, past the rows of houses, just as they must have walked many times before, for no one paid them any attention and no one challenged Nogato's right to be here where, supposedly, he was of a breed not wanted.

Jim returned to the plantation, certain now of finding a solution to the problem. After all, he too was a young man in love! To Libby's anxious question he replied that he'd been for a walk to test his legs. Then, hungry for the first time in days, he sat to a good breakfast, and afterward went to the little shed that served as a company store.

The plantation boys wore lap-laps of pale red calico, issued to them by the company. But under the store counter lay a bolt of prettier stuff which must have been shipped in for use as house drapes or curtain material. When he laid it triumphantly on the sitting-room table, Libby gave it a quizzical look.

"What d'ye want that stuff for, Mr. Kenyon?"

"I've an idea it will do us some good."

"Good? How?"

"Never you mind. This is my little game, Mr. Libby. You can sit back and watch, and applaud me later if it works."

"If you're thinking to make the boys a present o' that, to win 'em over," said Libby suspiciously, "I can tell you now it *won't* work. That's woman stuff."

Perhaps by the quickness of his smile Jim gave the game away. But all he said was, "Is it, Mr. Libby?" and put an end to the questions by carrying the flowered cloth to his room.

His plan was simple enough. When evening came he would place his gift in Nogato's hands, in front of the boss boy's wide-eyed "subjects" at the labor camp, and wish him luck with his love affair. And if *that* gesture of friendship from one heart-sick young man to another didn't turn the tide of feeling at Surangani, nothing would!

AS THE afternoon waned, Jim caught himself humming and whistling about the house, so sure was he that he had found the answer. At dinner he grinned while scolding the cook boy because the bully beef was bad. After dinner, when Libby had stepped out and the house was quiet, he sat and wrote a long letter to his Lillian, pages of which were glowingly optimistic.

He sealed the letter, picked up the bolt of calico and went out. But at the foot of the veranda steps the song died inside him.

Up the path toward him marched the boss boy, face a thundercloud and big hands twitching at his sides. Libby, close behind, held a cocked revolver in readiness and carried under one arm a cloth wrapped bundle. At a word from the assistant planter Nogato halted before Jim and stood stiff as wood.

"We've a major problem on our hands now, Mr. Kenyon," said Libby bluntly. "This boy's been stealing!"

Jim looked helplessly at them both. "Nogato—stealing? Stealing what?"

"Just about everything he could get his hands on!" snorted Libby. "I've got it here—some of it, anyway. We'll have to look into this, Mr. Kenyon. Thoroughly, and right now." He gestured violently with the gun. "Thieving's a prison offense, and this rebellious devil knows it!"

With a sigh, Jim turned back to the house.

The boss boy had nothing to say as Libby tossed the bundle on the table. But the yellowed whites of his eyes burned beneath lowered brows, and under his shining skin taut muscles twitched and quivered. It was not fear that kept him silent, but self control remarkable in a Malaitan. He watched Jim's hands as they fumbled with the bundle.

He stared at the articles as they were extracted—a bright new alarm clock, tins of food, bundles of stick tobacco and half a dozen other objects, some valuable, some not. Among them were some trinkets of the boy's own which, apparently, he had kept in the same hiding-place. The shell-and-pandanus necklace was one.

"I should have guessed what he was up to when I caught him idling around the store two or three times this past week," said Libby, brandishing the gun. "But it wasn't till just now, when I saw him skulking back of the house, that I got smart and went to his quarters for a look-see. Found this stuff stowed away behind his bunk, Mr. Kenyon—every last bit of it."

Struggling to free his mind from the numbness which had seized it, Jim replaced the stolen objects on the square of calico in which they had been wrapped. Then at last he faced the Malaitaman.

"Nogato, what name you takum this fella stuff?"

The eyes glittered; the lips parted for a second over clenched teeth. But Nogato disdained to answer. Libby replied for him.

"That's easy, Mr. Kenyon. He's been playing around with one of the village Marys."

"This stuff is a girl?"

"Worse. No boy would give this much to a girl just to be a Big Time Charlie. This is for her people—the price of a wife. He means to marry her."

"Mr. Libby, you told me yourself the boys on the plantation are not welcome in Motuli's village."

"Sure I did. But with gifts like these a welcome can be bought. This boy is shrewd. What you're missing is the real significance of all this."

"And that?" Jim retorted.

"He can't bring a wife *here*. He means to skip before his term's up and go live with her in the village. That's desertion, Mr. Kenyon—a serious offense and a case for the District Officer!"

Nogato spoke then, his huge chest swollen with a sucked-up breath. Surprisingly his voice was so soft that Jim missed the words entirely.

"What, Nogato?"

"Him fella," repeated the boss boy slowly, "talkum plenty big gamman. Work time belong me most finish. Me takum Mary after work time done."

"He's a liar," Libby croaked. "He signed

for three years and he's been on the job only two. Not even that!"

"Me go 'long recruiter for two fella year," Nogato insisted grimly.

"Three! I've seen your papers!"

Nogato's flickering gaze dropped to the gun. He was silent.

"There's only one thing to do, Mr. Kenyon," Libby said. "Lock him up and send word to the D. O. to come and get him. If he's let get away with thieving and planning to desert, you and me might as well clear out and leave the place to the natives."

Jim looked hopelessly at the stuff on the table. Beside it lay the bolt of flowered calico with which he had hoped to win the boss boy's friendship. He glanced at Nogato again and turned away, unable to face the hate in those defiant eyes. Sitting in his room a few minutes later, he heard Libby prodding the boy through the kitchen to the store shed out back, the empty rear room of which had been used as a prison cell before, when MacCombie had directed the destiny of Surangani.

He took up the letter he had written to Lillian and after staring for a time at the sealed envelope, tore it through and let the pieces fall to the floor.

IT WAS after midnight when Libby went to bed. All evening he had been thumping back and forth from his chair to the bottle on the table. When the house was quiet, Jim took a revolver and and went out. A round moon, bright as rubbed brass, gilded the sea and the island shore. The night sky over the jungle shimmered with brilliance.

He had his own key to the shed, and the same key fitted the lock which Libby had installed on the door of the rear room. With the gun holstered at his waist and only a flashlight in his hands, he entered.

Nogato, seated on a bare cot against the wall, turned sullenly to face him.

"You good fella boy," Jim said quietly. "Me speakum 'long you without one fella Libby."

The hostile eyes glittered, but the boy was silent. And that, despite Jim's friendly approach, was how he stayed. For half an hour Jim laboriously framed questions which must have been understandable—his dialect was not *that* obscure—but the Malaitan sat still as stone, hands curled on his knees, bare feet flat on the floor, offering not a syllable in reply.

The questions could have been answered easily enough. They had to do with simple things—Nogato's status in the village, his feelings for the *luluai's* daughter, his position back home among his own people, and the length of his term of indenture. Not a word about his theft or intent to desert. But through hate or frustration, or some of both, the boy had retired behind a barricade of silence that could not be shattered.

Defeated, Jim at last gave up and returned to the house. In the morning, he supposed, he would have to send a runner down the coast with a report for the D. O. He undressed and went to bed. But though the house was still enough, he was not able to sleep. Nogato, he told himself, was still the answer to the entire problem—if one could find the answer to Nogato.

The softly ticking clock beside his bed said two A. M. when he gave up trying to sleep and went into the front room. What he hoped to find he was not certain, but his mind was full of the imprisoned black boy. Opening the desk, he fumbled through its cluttered contents for the big notebook in which were kept the plantation records. Perhaps Libby had made a mistake about Nogato's contract. No hope was too small to be discarded.

The boss boy had come from Suu, he discovered—at least his papers had been signed there. The recruiter's name was Mulverson. The date of the signing was clear enough, but Jim had to draw the lamp closer to study the date of the termination of the contract. He frowned and ran a finger lightly over the paper.

He put the book away and closed the desk. Outside Libby's room he paused a moment, wondering if he dared believe a thing that probably never could be proved. This time when he strode through the moonlit kitchen, he was not wearing a gun.

But as the rear door swung shut behind him, he halted.

On a darker night he might have seen nothing at all, for even in the light of the moon the movements of the Malaita boys were uncannily stealthy. Indentured they might be, full of savvy in white men's af-

fairs, but their reversion to jungle savage must have been simple enough. Their fathers, after all, had crept through the bush in just this way, in pursuit of heads!

They came from the bush wall, not across the open plantation, and they might have been wraiths, so swiftly and noiselessly did they pass through the haze of moonlight to the shed door. A tool of some sort, thrust through the padlock staples and forced upward in strong fingers, ripped the lock from the wood. The boys disappeared inside, leaving one on guard. In a moment they were out again, Nogato with them.

They held a low-voiced conference on the dark side of the shed then, but it lasted only a moment. Nogato, tall in the moonlight, turned to look toward the house, a gesture that might have been scornful or triumphant or might have meant nothing at all. Then the group stole away, across the narrow strip of slope to the jungle.

Jim had not moved. Now, wheeling, he went quickly through the house, past the room where Libby still snored, and out again by way of the veranda. He too could be stealthy. On his way through the grove the edge of the labor camp he made no sound. There he stood quietly against the leaning bole of a coconut palm, waiting, and when the Malaitamen emerged from the bush and went to their quarters—talking now, excitedly—he looked them over. Nogato was still with them.

But Nogato could not remain with them, of course. He would have to quit the plantation quickly before his escape was discovered. Would he head down the coast, hoping to flee the region entirely? That would be the sensible thing to do, the safe thing. But there was a girl—a slim, dusky-eyed girl who would be lost to him forever if, to avoid trouble now, he fled. Jim waited and wondered, having more than an academic interest in the outcome.

Half an hour passed before Nogato reappeared. Evidently he had said his farewells, for the camp remained silent when he stepped from the shed into the moonlight. For a long moment he stood quite still, as handsome a savage as that moon had ever shone upon. Then, trotting toward the river, he was lost in the dark of trail to the village.

He went, Jim noticed, empty-handed—pride and triumph were evidently to be his only gifts. And having noted this, Jim turned back to the house, wondering what Mr. Libby would say in the morning. Or, more properly, just how Libby would say it.

LIBBY, pop-eyed with alarm and trembling with rage, said it with great clamor and stopped only when out of breath. It was a terrible thing, according to Libby: an event certain to have dire consequences. Open revolt, that was what it was. Brazen defiance of authority. And there was no telling what might happen next unless Jim Kenyon at once and forcefully laid down the law.

"You've been too easy on 'em," he croaked. "That's the whole trouble, Mr. Kenyon, if you'll excuse my sayin' so. They'd never have dared let Nogato loose if you hadn't been allowing 'em to get away with so many *little* things."

Jim, eating breakfast, eyed the man blankly. "What do you propose I do?"

"Go down there and put 'em under arrest!"

"Lock them up, you mean? *All* of them?"

"You can't do that," Libby retorted. "But you can *tell* 'em they're under arrest. You can threaten to shoot the first one that makes trouble."

Jim pondered the advice carefully. "And you, Mr. Libby—what will you do?"

"I'll make for Segi and get word to the D. O., o' course!"

"Leaving me here alone, at the mercy of aroused savages who have been taught to hate the very sight of me?"

Libby seemed to miss the important part of that. "You're armed," he insisted. "You can protect yourself."

"Was MacCombie armed, Mr. Libby?"

"Eh?"

"Never mind." Jim pushed his half-finished breakfast away and strode to the doorway. For a moment he stood on the veranda, gazing down the slope toward the grove and the sea. There might be murder in that peaceful air, as Libby insisted, but it was not evident. The morning was bright and humid, the palms listless in the still heat. Nothing moved anywhere except an occasional bird or cluster of butterflies.

But Surangani had probably seemed

equally peaceful the morning of Mr. MacCombie's turtle-hunting expedition.

"You're right," Jim said, turning. "You'd better start for Segi at once."

"I'd prefer to wait around until you've had it out with 'em," Libby muttered. "Be safer with two of us here when you do it."

"I can't face them now."

"Mr. Kenyon, you've got to!"

"Later." Jim mopped at his face with a handkerchief and, finding a chair, sank with a sigh. "I'm tired, Mr. Libby—tired beyond endurance. Before the day's over I'll do what has to be done, I promise you. You go to Segi."

"Well—"

"If you please, Mr. Libby."

Half an hour later, having stuffed the pockets of his wrinkled jacket with tins of food and a flask of water, and strapped a gun about his middle, Libby solemnly shook hands and departed.

Another fifteen minutes elapsed before Jim left the house. It took him that long to prepare the two bundles he had decided to take with him. He, too, wore a revolver, but debated some time before doing so, and took it only because he was reluctant to leave it in the house.

But when he stepped out on the veranda, he changed his mind about going that way. There was movement now in the grove—a stealthy stirring at the far end of it, near the labor camp. Bewildered by it, he drew back. Not in many days had the plantation natives appeared for work at such an hour, or burdened themselves with such an assortment of tools. This morning there was unusual design in their movements. Defiantly, not furtively, they trod the lanes of shadow toward the house.

Jim went out the back way, past the empty prison shed to the jungle, keeping the house between himself and the grove. It was hard going and would add at least an hour to his journey, but once inside that somber green temple he did not look back. Making his own trail through the bush, bearing always away from the plantation and toward the river, he came out at last on the path to the village, breathless, exhausted, layered with mud to his knees, but still clutching his bundles.

The force that drove him on was dread that Libby, finding him gone and guessing his intent, would discover some way to head him off. Because Libby, of course, had not gone to Segi and had no intention of going—not, at least, until the Malaitamen, stirred to murder by his treachery, had done to Jim Kenyon what they had done months ago to Mr. MacCombie.

It would have been obvious from the beginning, Jim realized, but Libby had made it hard to see through by being, or pretending to be, such a sluggard and a toper. The man was infinitely more shrewd than he looked, and a thousand times more ambitious. How many ugly little cruelties he had perpetrated on the natives, first in MacCombie's name and then in Jim's, was beyond estimate—but he knew all the tricks of the game, did Libby, and had undoubtedly missed no opportunities.

Little things had done it—scores of little things. Translating the master's suggestions into violent and abusive reprimands, while pretending himself to be only a neutral intermediary. Issuing orders in Jim's name—and probably, before that, in MacCombie's name—which were so obviously unfair that revolt was inevitable. Such as, for example, denying a gang of virile young men the freedom to call upon the belles of the local village. That had been one of his trumps, of course; but he had played the game cunningly from the start, making the most of every card dealt him. Had it been as easy to fool the veteran MacCombie as to pull the wool over the eyes of Jim Kenyon? Perhaps not. But with his subtle understanding of the native mind and command of native talk that went far beyond the usual clumsy patois, he had done it. He had known when to scream and when to whisper, when to strike the natives—in the name of the "Mahster," of course—and when to ply them with favors.

He had made remarkably few mistakes, had Libby. His "discovery" of stolen goods in Nogato's possession might be considered one; no doubt he had been rushed into that by the sudden appearance of the bolt of flowered calico. Falsifying the boss boy's papers revealed a touch of desperation, too, or at any rate a lack of his usual craftiness. Yet in the summing up, only a very fragile thing had thwarted him, a thing which Libby himself would never understand and hence could not have anticipated—the na-

ural sympathy of one young man in love toward another, regardless of creed or color.

And what did the man stand to get out of all this? Why, that was simple. He'd get what he wanted—the plantation. Having convinced the company that Surangani was not worth any further expenditure of time and money, he would simply wait quietly in the background and snatch it when they dropped it. And then, with an abrupt about-face in labor relations, a deal of tact and shrewdness, he would put the place on a paying basis and sit back among his six bottles to enjoy the profits. The islands were dotted with such privately owned plantations. Surangani, properly managed, would be one of the best.

This time Jim did not rest on his way to the village; his respect for Libby's cleverness was too great. Through the suffocating gloom of the bush he hurried with his two bundles, listening for sounds of pursuit. He could not know what Libby had told the Malaitamen to send them to the house on a murder mission, but they might not stop at the house when they found him absent. And at the village he would need time. Even *with* time he might fail.

AND if he failed? The answer to that was as obvious as the mud that sucked at his feet the perspiration that ran in scalding rivulets down his body. Failure would mean more than the loss of his Lillian, the derision of his father. It would mean death. He might leave the village alive, but a return to the plantation would be suicidal. And the nearest settlement was miles down the coast. He would never reach it. Libby would not permit it.

With that discomforting thought he passed the garden on the outskirts of the village and halted, at last, at trail's end. And what he saw brought a gasp of dismay from his lips. The village before him was not the peaceful, lethargic place it had been before. It was bedlam.

At least a hundred native men were present, and obviously not all of them were local residents; some had come in from other bush villages for the feast now in progress. The women bustled about. Children scurried here and there like small black chattering monkeys. Even the village dogs were as noisy as they could manage to be.

Smoke rose from a dozen cook fires, to hang in a gray blanket above the village street and the thatched roofs of the houses. The hot air reeked richly of roast pig. Fresh picked fruit, on great spreads of banana leaves, gleamed in rainbow-hued piles everywhere.

It was a wedding feast—that was apparent even before Jim discovered Nogato and the *luluai's* daughter in the midst of it, bedecked with flowers. And that it had been going on for some time, perhaps since early morning, was obvious. Excitement in the village was at fever heat. Voices were shrill, movements jerky, emotions probably as delicately balanced at straws on a knife point.

What a time for the hated master of Surangani to present himself? Even on plantations where discipline was no problem, native sing-sings were forbidden because this sort of thing inspired violence!

But he could not wait. There was no time to wait.

He did take time to steady himself with a deep breath and remove the revolver from his waist. The gun and holster he tossed into the grass beside the path—they were no earthly good against such odds and might only defeat his purpose. Then he strode boldly from the massed shadows of the jungle into the weaving, smoky sunlight of the village street.

Tense and frightened he was, and stiff as wood because of it, but that was no impediment; it made him straighter and heightened the effect of self-assurance. White he was, too, his face bleached with strain. But he was smiling—he could still manage that—and consoled himself, or tried to, with the thought that no one other than himself, in all that din, could possibly hear the hollow drumming inside his chest.

They saw him soon enough. It was as if an icy wind had suddenly swept the village. Silent, staring, every frozen gesture a threat, they let him advance. Even the children and the mangy village dogs sensed the brittleness of the moment.

The way to Nogato and his bride was open, fortunately—no one had to step aside to let him pass. Somehow he managed it without faltering. His smile endured. Halting before the scowling Malaita boy, he waited vainly for a nod of welcome—or

even of recognition—and then as best he could, made his speech.

"Mahster Libby, he bad fella, he gamman. Me find out he gamman. Me bring plenty good presents." Turning, he offered his bundles to the bride. And waited.

No man ever waited a longer two minutes!

It lay with Nogato, Nogato alone, whether or not the hand of friendship would be accepted. He was the key to the situation as he had been all along. His eyes remained unblinking under a lowered hedge of brows.

The others watched him, impatiently awaiting his decision.

At last, suspiciously, Nogato motioned the girl to open her gifts.

She unfastened the first bundle and lifted out the bolt of calico. Nogato peered at it disdainfully—as Libby had warned, it was woman stuff. Her own face a blank that told nothing, the girl laid the cloth aside and opened the second bundle. Out of it, bewildered, she took an alarm clock, tins of food, sticks of tobacco—all the things Nogato had been accused of stealing.

Still the Malaitaman remained rigid.

Desperate, Jim pulled his last gift from his pocket and stepped forward, in easy reach of a murderous embrace, to hang it on the boy's neck.

It was the shell-and-pandanus necklace.

Nogato drew a whistling breath. A tremor shook his magnificent body. All at once the black scowl vanished, the brows unbent, and a blessed grin blossomed on his face.

"You good fella Mahster," he breathed. "Me savvy!"

IT WAS something to behold, that procession from the village to the plantation. At its head strode Jim and the Malaitaman, shoulder to shoulder. Behind, jabbering like coast natives on a steamer-day spree, marched two score bush-village boys whose ancestors only yesterday must have considered human heads the perfect household bric-a-brac.

It was incredible, because bush-village men are notoriously reluctant to labor on copra plantations. It was wonderful because the white man who had overcome that reluctance was James Hartley Kenyon Junior, whose own father, no less, thought him worthless.

In stumbling words Jim explained to the boss boy what had happened. Nogato listened, understood, and nodded.

"A clever fellow, Libby," Jim said. "Clever as sin. And he'll never know what defeated him."

"Mahster?"

"I can't make you understand, Nogato. Can't find the right pidgin words for it. But—well—we're both in the same boat, you and I. We've got a lot in common. You see, Nogato—I'm in love with one good fella Mary too."

Nogato's grin was answer enough. But suddenly he halted.

Before them, where the jungle path bent toward the river bank, an armed Malaitaman had stealthily stepped into view. After him came others. The plantation natives had picked up Jim's trail.

Nogato drew himself to full height, shouted, and stepped forward. In amazement they gazed at him. He spoke with authority, and his fingers flashed up to rattle the shell-and-pandanus neckband that marked him a chief among his own people. When he was through speaking, their amazement had become understanding, and Jim stood again at the boss boy's side. The march began anew.

A spectacular thing, that parade. And so it must have seemed to the covetous Mr. Libby, when he swung his feet from the veranda rail and saw it over his glass of gin. His jaw dropped. Scrambling erect, he cursed, let his glass fall, and fled. When the plantation boys would have pursed him, Jim stopped them.

"Let him go," Jim told them. "Sooner or later, if he shows his face where there's law and order, he'll be arrested. If not, the bush can have him and welcome."

BUT Mr. Libby was not arrested and the the bush did not get him. What did happen to him remained a mystery at Surangani until the arrival of the steamer, weeks afterward—at which time Surangani was too busy to care much.

In fact, Surangani then was a place to dazzle the eyes, and the eyes it dazzled belonged quite properly to the man Jim Kenyon was most anxious to impress. He

was Captain Angus Donnell, Lillian's father, and he had brought his ship to remote Surangani at the express command of James Hartley Kenyon Senior, who, of course, was her owner.

What he expected to find there, and report upon, he did not say. But it's certain he never expected to find a new and beautifully made plantation house, and a fine new drying shed, and a gang of Malaita boys and bush-village natives working in perfect harmony side by side to produce copra from the best-run plantation west of Guadalcanal. Nor did he expect to find a shipment so large that the cabin space set aside for his daughter had to be utilized for storing the last of it.

Captain Angus Donnell hadn't anticipated anything of the sort, and hadn't wanted to bring his daughter to see what he did anticipate. "You'll hate yourself for coming," he'd warned her, "and be glad enough to get home again."

Instead of which he officiated at a marriage ceremony—he being legally empowered to do so under the circumstances, and entitled, certainly, to give his own daughter in matrimony if he wished—and then, still dazed but delighted, he left for home without her. And Surangani acquired a proud and lovely mistress.

And what of Mr. Libby? Why, remarked Captain Angus before he departed, that was an odd bit of business for sure—a rum go if ever there'd been one in the islands. He didn't know Libby personally, understand. But a chap by that name, and answering the description more or less, had turned up a few weeks before, not at Segi but in a squalid little backwater village way down the coast.

There with prodigious effort he'd hacked the jungle away from a dozen or so mangy coconut trees and settled back to develop a "plantation."

"He'd an outlandish notion," said Captain Angus, "that a man couldn't hope for success in any enterprise unless he'd a wife to work for—or, anyhow, a sweetheart. And so he was busy acquiring wives as fast as he could get 'em. He'd three when I was there—all of 'em native, of course, and ugly as sin—and was most anxiously courting others."

"If you ask me," said Captain Angus, "your Mr. Libby is balmy."

Corpse For The Cispus Trail

By COLIN CLEGG

Promises about Things in This World—or the Next—Were Something the Old Man Had No Trust In

HEARING the rustle of the brush behind him, Mike tensed and twisted around on the cedar log. Then he groped out impulsively toward his deer rifle where he had left it leaning against the trunk of a small pine. But after that he stood up, and letting his arm fall back to his side, grinned foolishly. It had been a dumb move. But there was something so grim in the face of one of the two men who had stepped out into the open, and something so purposeful about the way he gripped the big lever-action Winchester rifle, that Mike was taken off guard.

"Gee!" he said, as the two came up and stopped a few feet in front of him. "You guys gave me a scare. I didn't figure on seeing another man within twenty miles o' here."

They didn't answer. The youngest of the two, a sallow youth with scattered ugly black hairs on a chin that had never been shaved, deliberately raised the Winchester until it pointed squarely at Mike.

Mike frowned uncomfortably.

"No, Beany!" the older one, a tall spare man with piercing black eyes, said sharply. "Let's hear him talk."

It had given Mike a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. He swallowed and continued to stare at the man addressed as Beany suspiciously. "What's the matter with him?" he asked the other man.

Mike's question seemed to make Beany mad.

"Leave me plug 'im, Lafe," he cried suddenly. His voice was high-pitched and rasking like a nervous woman's.

"No, Beany! I said *'no'!"* the one called Lafe repeated. There was authority in his tone and Beany lowered the gun reluctantly. "Beany don't like strangers," Lafe explained to Mike.

"Strangers?" Mike repeated questioningly. "Why I figured you guys was up here huntin' deer, same as me. Ain't you?"

"No," Lafe answered shortly, and though Mike waited he didn't offer any more information.

Mike thought maybe they were waiting for him to identify himself first. "To tell you the truth," he said. "I'm lost. I been lost since yesterday morning."

"Yeh?" Lafe said noncommittally.

"You see," Mike explained, "at home, in the city, I'm a mechanic. For fifty-one weeks out'a every year I work. I work like hell, weekdays an' overtime on Sundays. An' most of the time while I'm workin' I got just one big idea in mind. I'm thinkin' an' dreamin' all that time about the week I'm gonna spend huntin' in the fall, an' the deer I'm gonna shoot." He paused to see if they were interested in what he was saying.

"Yeh?" was Lafe's cool invitation for him to continue.

"Well, last year," Mike went on, "I never got a shot. I got skunked. So this season I swore I was gonna get a set of horns if I killed myself doing it. That's how I came to be up here alone now."

THIS time Lafe merely raised his eyebrows a little and waited for him to say more.

"You see, me an' two other fellows hunted the country down in the lower Cispus valley for three days, but we never got sight of a buck. So yesterday morning at daylight I decided to push back up in the hills so far I'd sure find me a deer, but the other two said they were too worn out to go along. They decided to wait for me down at the forks."

"Yeh?"

"Well," said Mike, "I hiked back about ten miles from the trail an' then I cut over a couple of ridges, an' danged if when I turned around to head back I didn't know which way to go. There was too much haze for me to see Rainier, so I guess I must have gone in the wrong direction when I started out from there."

"An' so you was lost?" said Lafe.

"Lost sure," agreed Mike. "But I wasn't too much worried. There's plenty of run-

ning water around here, an' I knew that if worst came to worst and I couldn't find my way out any other way, I could follow down one of the cricks an' I'd be sure to cross a trail or a road inside of a day or so."

"There's some that gets lost in these here woods that don't always find their way out," Lafe said, and he looked hard at Mike with his sharp black eyes.

"Yeh, I guess you're right," Mike agreed, shifting his short body and running a hand nervously through the thinning brown hair around the bald spot on his head. "I heard about that fellow that got lost up this way last year. I guess they never did find hide nor hair of him. He must'a lost his head. They tell me that when a man loses his head in the woods, he'll travel around in circles until he drops dead."

"Yeh," said Lafe. "That must'a been how it was."

"Well," Mike said, "I better get started back to camp. The boys will be getting worried about me by now. I'll sure be obliged to you if you'll tell me the direction I ought'a take to get out'a this place."

Beany raised the barrel of his gun again. "You ain't goin' no place, mister," he said in a high squeaking voice.

Mike looked at Lafe.

The man's black eyes burned thoughtfully for a moment as he grimly considered. "Beany is right," he said at last. "You better come along with us."

"Huh?" Mike squinted at him unbelievingly.

"Git a'movin'!" Beany raised the rifle threateningly.

"The hell you say!" Mike wasn't one to get mad easily, but when he did he was hot clear through. The idea of these two freakish-looking characters ordering him around was more than he could take. He turned and reached for his Springfield.

"Leave it be!"

Mike heard the menacing click as the hammer came back on Beany's Winchester. He hesitated in indecision and then turned back and faced them helplessly.

Lafe stepped over quickly and picked up the gun. He motioned back through the trees in the direction from which the two had appeared, and after a moment of hesitation, Mike started walking with them following in single file behind him.

"What's the big idea? Where you takin' me?" he demanded angrily over his shoulder.

Beany's whining high voice sounded again impatiently. "What we doin' this for? If you'd only let me plug 'im like I done that other one last year—"

"Shut up!" Lafe snapped. "You was told to keep your yap shut about that."

"But, Lafe—"

The tall man's voice grew strained with temper. "Leave it go, Beany!" he commanded. "Don't say no more. We'll take him along an' see what Pa says."

They moved for a time through the trees on a gently sloping tableland, and then in answer to Lafe's instruction, Mike entered a narrow passage between gray granite cliffs that formed the wall of the valley. Moving ahead of the other two, he threaded his way between massive piles of broken rock and thickets of jackpine, and then suddenly he stepped out into the open again.

He looked around him wonderingly. Now they were on the edge of a round grassy basin about half a mile across. A little creek was flowing in wide curves through the lush green of the mountain meadow, and near the center of the basin he saw, half hidden in a grove of pines, a rambling log cabin. A wisp of smoke floated up from the rock chimney. Beyond the cabin, Mike could see the brown stalks of a corn field and grazing close by was a gaunt gray work horse.

THEY stepped out on the grass of the meadow and when they approached the cabin, Mike's nose became conscious of a strong pungent odor that was hard for him to place. As they neared the front of the log building, a stoop-shouldered, white-haired old man stepped out through the open door. At his side was a hungry-looking brown hound dog. He wore ragged blue overalls and had a fierce hawk-like look to him and a long curving nose like a hawk's beak.

"So-o-o-o," the old man said hoarsely, letting his sharp eyes travel up and down over Mike. "Who's this you got here?"

"We come on him just over on the other side of the hump, Pa," Lafe explained.

"I was gonna plug 'im, Pa," Beany said complainingly. "But Lafe wouldn't leave

me do it. I dunno why. Now he's seen our place here, an' if he gets loose—"

Lafe interrupted his brother. "He claims he come up here huntin' deer, Pa."

The old man looked at Mike again calculatingly. "That ain't too easy to swallow," he said slowly and got rid of his quid and wiped the yellow juice from his chin. "Why would any man come up this far in the hills lookin' for deer? How would he figure on packin' one out if he was to shoot it?"

Mike spoke to Pa for the first time. "I told 'em what happened," he said. "I got lost. Only I don't see what difference it makes to you. What you guys tryin' to do to me anyway?"

"You know what I think?" asked Pa darkly.

Mike frowned back at him but didn't answer.

"I think," said the old man, "you be another one of them gover'ment men. You fellas won't never give us Lonigans no peace. It ain't no different here than it was back in West Virginia."

Suddenly things began to grow clearer in Mike's understanding. The name "Lonigan" brought a dim memory. He recalled that rumor of a few years back. He remembered the story of how some members of feuding clans had found things too hot for their violent blood in the West Virginia hills, and how they had migrated and settled down to live in the wild unpopulated district south of Mount Rainier. This would explain too, the strange odor that was in his nostrils. The Lonigans must have a still close by and be up to the mountain men's old moonshining habits. It was common knowledge that the end of prohibition had not seen the end of moonshining. In fact, Mike had heard there was more profit in tax-free liquor now, since the war was over, than ever before.

"But I'm no government man," Mike protested, beginning to realize the seriousness of his position. "I just came up to this place by accident. You got to believe me. All I want to do is to get back to my wife an' two kids I got at home. I ain't goin' to say anything to anybody about you runnin' a still up here or whatever you're doin'. I don't give a damn."

Pa's sour look didn't change. "You might be tellin' the truth," he said. "But I can't take no chance on it."

Mike was beginning to feel more and more like a trapped animal. He could see the cold relentless look in the old man's face. Then he got an idea. "But I can prove I'm not a law officer," he said.

"Yeh?" Pa looked unimpressed.

"I'm not a government man—I'm a mechanic."

"How you gonna prove that?"

In answer Mike held out his hands palms up. The gnarled muscular fingers were covered with seams and callouses. Embedded in the lines and around the nails was black grease that would not wash out. You never saw a government man with hands like that, mister," Mike said.

Pa nodded his head slowly and considered again. "Maybe you do be sayin' the truth," he said.

"Maybe he do," cut in Lafe. "But that still don't help none."

The old man turned on him and squinted his hawk eyes. "How you mean, boy?"

"Beany had to open his big yap while we was bringin' him up here," Lafe said. "Beany let on about how he plugged that guy last year."

Pa glared hard at Beany for a moment and then switched his eyes to Mike. "That makes things damn bad," he said. "You can see now I ain't got no choice."

ALARM and puzzlement sank deeper into Mike's face. "What you mean by that?" he demanded. "What do you think you're gonna do with me?"

The old man ignored his question and turned back to his son. "Beany," he said, "leave me have your rifle."

Beany obediently handed him the big Winchester.

"You, Lafe," said Pa, "git a shovel an' come along." The old man looked at Mike again. "Now, mister," he said, "you start makin' tracks for that bare place up there on the side hill above the meadow."

Mike hung back. "You wouldn't!" he said unbelievingly. "You're kidding."

"Kiddin', mister?" said Pa. As he spoke the old man had drawn back the hammer of the rifle. He shifted the weapon slightly and suddenly it rocked back in his hands. Smoke belched from the muzzle and a deaf-

ening roar pounded against Mike's eardrums. He felt the ripping swish in the air as a 45-70 slug went by less than six inches from his head. "You think I'm foolin', eh?" Pa said sourly, working the lever of the gun.

Mike turned around and began to walk on shaking legs. After he had gone about fifty yards he looked back and saw Lafe come out of a shed with a long-handled shovel in his hands and start walking after them. Mike tried to think, but his thoughts and fears were crowding each other until his head seemed to go around in a dizzy whirl.

"But," he stuttered pleadingly at Pa, "I got a wife an' kids. Don't kill me. I promise not to say anything."

"Keep a'movin'," said the old man. "Promises about things in this world or the next I ain't got no trust in."

They reached the place on the slope where a landslide had left the ground bare and brown. Pa waited for Lafe to come up to them. He motioned with the barrel of the gun to a place where he wanted Mike to stand. "Let's get this over quick," he said.

Mike had an idea. "Wait," he said tensely. "You're not playing this thing smart."

The old man frowned. "What you mean?" he growled.

"Don't you see what'll happen if you kill me here?"

"Well—?" Pa was growing impatient.

"When I don't come back, the two guys I came hunting with will report me missing to the forest rangers and tell 'em I started up this way. When they hear that they'll remember the guy that disappeared in these hills last year."

"So—what?"

"Sure, you can see what'll happen. They will figure there might be something fishy goin' on, and they'll send out search parties an' go through the woods with a fine-tooth comb. And one of the search parties is damn likely to stumble on this little hideout of yours."

Pa rested the butt of his gun on the ground and scratched his head thoughtfully. "You could maybe be right," he said at last. "You got a pint there."

"You know damn well I'm right," said Mike, beginning to breath regularly again.

"Come along, Lafe," said the old man after a few moments more of thinking. "We'll take him back to the house. Then I'm gonna put my mind to it an' figure out what to do with 'im."

When they got back to the cabin Pa found a piece of rope and while Beany stood by with the rifle in his hands, he tied Mike's wrists behind him. Then they took him to one of the small sheds in the rear of the cabin and locked him in. They left him sitting in the dark between four windowless logs walls with the bindings biting painfully into his wrists and numbing his hands. Mike knew after a few tries there was no hope getting loose. Then he settled back and did the only thing he could do—just waited for the Lonigans' next move with his mind in a torment of worry and foreboding. Then he thought about his two kids back in Seattle. He thought about the boy to whom he had promised to bring home a set of deer horns.

HOURS went by. Mike wasn't sure how many. He grew cold and cramped. From time to time he dozed a little, but each time he woke with the shock of the realization that Pa Lonigan was holding him here like an animal waiting in the killing pen.

At last he heard the sound of movement outside the shed and when the door was pushed open gray light came in through the opening. Mike knew the night had gone by and that it was after daybreak. It was Pa who bent down over him, and putting a hand under his tied arm, jerked him up to his feet. He was pushed out into the open air where Lafe and Beany were standing.

"Boys, I been thinkin' what we ought'a do with this here mechanic here, an' I got an idea," said Pa.

Lafe frowned at his father questioningly. "You ain't gonna leave him loose?"

"No," said Pa. "I ain't gonna turn him loose."

"But if we kill him, it'll be like you said. Maybe the search parties'll come up here lookin' for 'im."

"No, they won't," said Pa triumphantly. "Not if they find his body, they won't."

"But then they'll know he was kill't," Beany objected in his squeaky tone. "An' the law'll come a'lookin' for us sure."

"Ain't you ever heard of a huntin' accident?" Pa asked.

"What you mean, Pa?"

"Now if they was to find him with a

bullet through him from his own weapon, an' find his gun lyin' there right close beside him, what would they think? They'd think he tripped up an' shot hisself by accident like so many of them dumb city hunters do."

"Gee, Pa," said Lafe, "you sure are right smart. How'd you ever come to think of it?"

"It just come to me suddenlike," Pa said.

"When we gonna fix it, Pa?" asked Beany, his eyes lighting up with interest in the idea.

"I'm gonna take care of it myself right now," the old man answered. "I better do it today. If we wait much longer they might start lookin' for him before we get it fixed."

"Ain't we goin' along with you, Pa?" asked Beany.

"No," said the old man. "I figure you an' Lafe better stay here. I don't want any more tracks leadin' down where they find the body than I can help."

Pa stepped inside the cabin and came out again with Mike's Springfield in his hand. He pointed at the gap in the hills where Mike had first entered the basin with Lafe and Beany. "All right, mister," he said. "Start a'movin'."

MIKE did as he was bid. He could see the uselessness of argument. He had a sick feeling inside and he had trouble controlling his feet as his mind grasped the full impact of the fate the old man had in store for him.

"Keep a'movin'!" Pa commanded as Mike began to lag. "We got seven miles to go before we hit the ranger trail. "Don't be slowin' down."

"Listen," Mike said desperately. "If I was to get you some money—"

"Nope," said Pa. "You know we killed that fellar last year. If I was to let you loose, I'd just be puttin' a rope aroun' my own neck."

Their progress through the brush and rocks became slower. Mike found it difficult to keep moving forward with his hands tied and Pa was getting more and more impatient. Finally, the old man called a halt, and taking out his knife cut the cords. "Now," he said, "Let's be a'movin' a little faster."

Mike was thinking it over. He might have a chance, he decided, if he made a break for the brush. Pa might miss him with a hurried shot. Then a clear loud whistle sounded out from the slope above them.

Mike knew what the whistle was, and he looked at Pa to see if this might be his chance to make a run for it. But Pa seemed to be reading his mind. He had given one quick look up the slope and then his eyes were back on Mike.

"Just in case you're gettin' any ideas," he said. "Maybe I better show you it wouldn't be no good." With a quick easy movement the old man threw the gun to his shoulder and pointed it up the slope. It seemed to explode almost before he had it leveled and from its perch on the rocks a hundred yards away, the gray furry body of a whistling marmot tumbled down.

Mike shivered and gave up his plan for making a break.

It was a long tiresome journey over rough ground, and both the old man and Mike were soon thirsty and wet with perspiration. When they came to the bank of a tiny stream, Pa motioned Mike to a spot several feet away from him. Then he carefully placed the rifle on the ground close beside him and sank down on his hands and knees and buried his face in the water.

Mike sensed this was his only chance. For a fraction of a second Pa would have his eyes turned away and couldn't see him. Without an instant of hesitation Mike launched himself in a flying leap for the gun, landing flat on his chest on the rocks that lined the brook. As he came down his hands groped out and found the rifle. Pa was taken by surprise. He hadn't expected Mike to make his move so quickly.

Mike pushed himself up frantically to bring his weight up on his knees. Then he had the gun in both hands and was fumbling to find the trigger with his finger. He found it and started to jerk the weapon around to bring it to bear on Pa. But something went wrong. As he struggled to swing the gun he felt a sudden bruising shock against the side of his head and whirling lights flashed in front of his eyes. He dropped the gun and sat back holding his head and trying to figure out what had happened.

"It almost worked," he heard Pa saying. "If I hadn't a' been lucky enough to lay my hand on that rock an' rap you across the head, you'd a' caught me sure."

THEY started on again. But now Pa's alertness had increased. He followed a few feet behind Mike, supporting the rifle in front of him with his finger resting lightly against the trigger. But his caution was wasted. All the fight had left Mike. He stumbled along in a daze. From time to time he raised his hand to the aching place on his head where Pa had hit him with the stone.

After about two hours they came to a place where the hills opened out and below him Mike saw a wide valley with the blue flash from a river showing through the trees. The sight made his throat tighten until he could hardly breath or swallow. He knew the stream must be the upper Cispus River and that extending along close beside it on one of its banks they would find the Forest Service trail. It would be there that Pa intended to leave his body where the first passer-by would find it and make a report.

A new wave of dizziness came over him. He hung back until the old man impatiently prodded him with the gun. "Look," Pa said. "You know how it is, an' you know what I gotta do. Don't let's make no trouble."

"But—"

"Keep a'movin'!" the old man ordered harshly, putting more force behind the poke with the gun.

Mike stumbled on again. His hurt head clouded his thinking as he strove desperately for an idea. Above all he didn't want to go out like a sheep in a slaughter pen. Better to take any wild chance that presented itself. But the chance didn't come. Pa was as wary as a cat and Mike had seen him shoot.

They came down onto the floor of the valley and began to make their way between the ugly charred stumps in a burned-over area. Years before, a forest fire had swept through, destroying all the timber in its path, and now the spaces between the burnt snags was thickly grown with a new growth of small fir and spruce. The spring saplings grew waist high and close together and made progress through them slow and difficult.

But now Mike was dreading the moment they would see the trail, and when at last it came into sight a few yards ahead of them, he stopped and swung around to face Pa. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but no words came out. His tongue seemed paralyzed as were the muscles in his arms and legs.

Pa motioned with the gun. "Over there," he said. "Close by the trail."

Mike's face was white and stricken. He stepped back but didn't move nearer the trail.

The old man slowly moved the rifle and fitted the butt up against his shoulder. "You gonna move?" he challenged in a voice that carried the cold menace of a rattlesnake's warning.

Mike knew from Pa's deadly tone there could be but one answer. He shuffled clumsily through the waist-high bushes and young trees until he stood beside the worn brown rut of the trail. He cowered there a moment and then raised his face up impulsively and spoke to Pa. "Wait!" he pleaded.

"Well?"

"I was just thinkin'. When they find my body, you'll want 'em to think I fell down over something so my gun went off by accident. Maybe if I was over close to that bunch of little spruce trees there—it'd look more like I tripped over 'em."

Pa considered with a frown on his hawk face. "Go ahead, then," he said. "Move over there."

Mike swung around. He tottered on his weakened legs. He was so shaky his feet gave way under him as he moved and he fell sprawling down in the clump of spruce. He lay there a few moments gasping for breath as Pa watched him with cold amusement. Then he laboriously pushed himself up from the ground with his hands and stood up again—awkwardly spreading his legs to balance himself in the thick growth of saplings.

Slow and deliberately Pa raised the rifle. He did it in a businesslike manner that showed his determination to get the job over with.

Mike was shivering with terror. "But there's one more thing you forgot," he rasped out hoarsely.

"Huh?"

"The powder burns."

"How you mean?" the old man demanded impatiently.

"Well, if a man was to fall an' kill

himself with his own gun, the end of the barrel would be right up against him an' there'd be powder burns on his clothes. the sheriff'll think of that when he looks at my body. There won't be any powder burns unless you stand up closer."

Pa shook his head wonderingly. "God," he said. "There ain't nothin' you won't think of an' say to give yourself a minute longer of livin', is there?"

Mike didn't answer. He stood in front of the old man, a pitiful figure, voiceless.

"But you're right," Pa said, after thinking a moment. "I should'a thought about the powder burns myself."

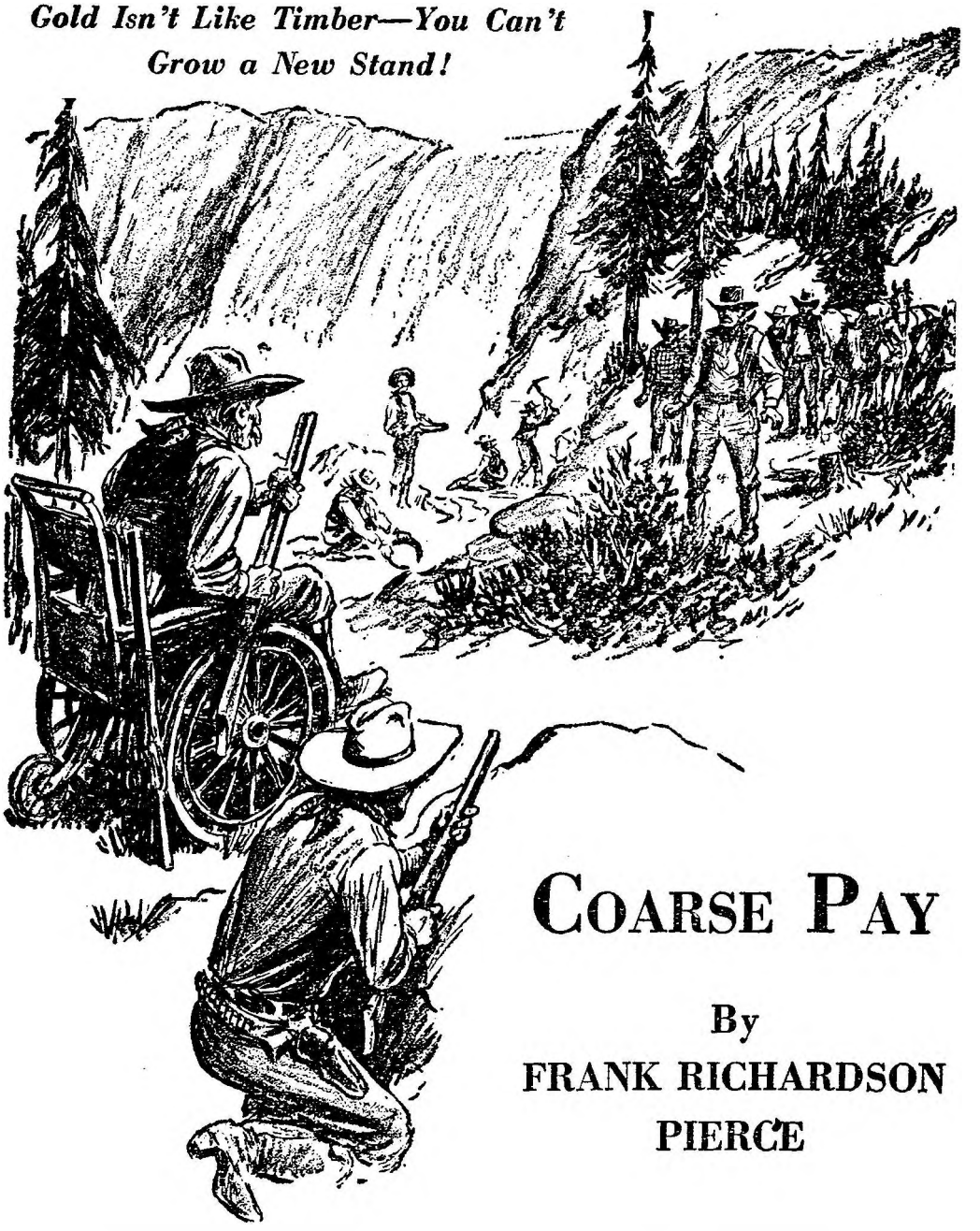
The old man slowly advanced holding the gun pointed squarely at the left side of Mike's chest. He continued his cautious advance until less than a foot separated the muzzle of the weapon from his victim. His cruel eyes were watching Mike sharply for the slightest beginning of a suspicious move. But Mike seemed to be powerless to move his arms or offer more protest. His hands hung helplessly at his sides as he flinched back, shifting his feet a little to draw away from the barrel of the gun.

Then, without warning—something happened. A dark shape sprang up from the ground faster than the eye could follow and slapped Pa a stinging blow across the face. The old man reeled backward jerking up his hands to cover his hurt eyes. And in the same instant, Mike leaped forward and the steel muscle of his calloused mechanic's fingers closed around Pa Lonigan's throat.

It was several hours later and some miles down the Cispus River when Mike explained what had happened to his two hunting companions and a forest ranger. He had met them coming up the trail to look for him after they had become worried about his long absence.

"Yeh," Mike said. "It would'a been just too bad, if I hadn't thought of fallin' down on top of that little spruce tree, an' holdin' it down with my foot 'til Pa Lonigan got close enough."

Gold Isn't Like Timber—You Can't Grow a New Stand!



COARSE PAY

By
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

PHIL BATES, the assayer at the mining town, Jerkline, needed no traveling troupe to portray human drama in all of its finer shadings. His small assay office, with its chemical smells, its ore specimens and crucibles, served as a box seat. The play had gone on for several years now. And it was the struggle between Old Man Jessup for the possession of Terry Melrose's body and perhaps the boy's soul.

There was Old Man Jessup in his wheel chair quietly, even craftily, exerting his influence on Terry's life at its most impressionable age. The old miner was patient, as if he realized only through patience would he achieve final victory. "Go after the coarse pay," he would tell the boy.

Which was another way of saying, hitch your wagon to a star; rise above your surroundings.

And there was Terry's father. Two-Bit Pete, lazy, shiftless, who had bought second-hand articles all his life. And that had included his wife's gold band wedding ring.

Then there was the outfitter, Buck Brady, who was sure Old Man Jessup knew the location of the "lost" Fryingpan mine and was waiting to cash in somehow, sometime. A cold, violent man, Buck Brady. He reminded Phil Bates of a reptile, lurking and patient. Probably Brady had committed murder, but no one could prove it. Phil Bates knew that Brady had started false stampedes in order to dispose of excess goods on his shelves, by "salting" ground.

Phil Bates knew this because the few nuggets that had been brought in had come from creeks long since worked out. An assayer can recognize gold nuggets as the average man recognizes his various friends.

But did Old Man Jessup really know the location of the Fryingpan mine? If so where was it? Near? That didn't seem reasonable when every creek in the area had been worked out during the stampede-days years and the gold had long since been converted into coin. Phil Bates only knew that Jessup had grubstaked Eddie Brand and that Eddie had been found dead, possibly from exertion, on his way to Jerkline Creek. With him was a rusty frying pan and coarse gold.

"Where did this come from?" Jessup had asked.

"Damned if I know," Bates had answered. "Never seen anything like it in my time. It hasn't traveled far since leaving the lode—it isn't worn, and has no mineral stain on it."

Jessup had gone out in an effort to retrace the dead man's trail. On his return, someone had drygulched him. Instead of killing Jessup, the bullet had created a pressure which rendered his legs almost useless. He had moved from the hospital to a wheel chair. He lived alone, shifting from bunk to chair by means of poles erected above the bunk. Through a system of ropes and pulleys Jessup exercised his legs.

Phil Bates had an idea Buck Brady or one of his men had drygulched Jessup, but he didn't know. And if a man wanted to live and remain healthy in Jerkline Creek he didn't gossip about Buck Brady.

Phil Bates had an idea the last act was about due. It was October 21, 1887, and Terry Melrose would be twenty-one, an age when a young fellow is legally his own boss and responsible for his own decisions.

There had been light moments in the drama Phil Bates watched from his office—Old Man Jessup cranking his chair, hell-bent, down the wooden sidewalks, with kids and dogs following in high glee. The old miner wheeling himself into The Pastime and lining up at the bar for a drink. And particularly Jessup sitting across the street, watching Buck Brady with his level gaze until Brady's hands sweated from nervous tension and he wiped them on his pants legs.

Phil Bates had a hunch conscience helped to make Brady's hands sweat. The man couldn't help but wonder how much Jessup knew about his wounding. If Brady was responsible, was Jessup sure of it?

Then there was the way Two-Bit Pete favored his eldest son, Al, over Terry. Al got the best of everything and Terry the left-overs.

That had made Old Man Jessup fighting mad, and Phil had done a little mouth-frothing on his own account.

WELL, the curtain was going up on the last act, and when the Melrose tribe arrived in a big spring wagon from the ranch, Phil Bates walked over and said, "Happy birthday, Terry. How does it feel to be a man?"

"I don't feel much different than I did yesterday," Terry answered. He was rugged, forthright and had a nice smile.

Terry left his family and went directly to Old Man Jessup who was sitting in his wheel chair looking at Brady's store. "Happy birthday," the miner said. "Going after the coarse pay, now, Terry?"

"Yes," Terry answered. "Your coarse pay talk put ideas into my head. You know those hundred and sixty acres next to Pa's ranch that nobody wants? I can get 'em for taxes."

Inwardly Old Man Jessup groaned. He had expected Terry to pull his freight for greener fields. And he had proposed to

point to the greener fields to their mutual profit. "What about that dry ground?"

"Coarse pay," Terry answered. "I spaded up a piece a hundred feet square. Packed water to it, and all kinds of things grew. Then I figured if I run a pipe over the ridge to Mallard Lake I could siphon all the irrigating water I needed. Seeing Ma siphon water out of the tub gave me the idea. You told me to keep my eyes open for ideas."

"I've been prospecting for coarse pay, too," Old Man Jessup said.

"You? In a wheel chair?" The younger man was amazed.

"Yes, my pay is your legs. Like I told you, use the brains God gave you and think things out," Jessup explained. "With the help of your legs I'll get enough money to have an operation so I won't need your legs any more. And you'll get enough to put in that siphon system, or whatever you want to do. You'll get there quicker working with me than you will punching cattle. And it'll be on the level, too."

"You've been pointed out as a bad example of mining," Terry said. "You never struck it."

"There's something in what you say," Jessup admitted, "but—"

"Do you know where the Fryingpan mine is?"

"I've figgered all the places it *can't* be," Jessup answered. "So it must be the only creek left."

"There're a lot of 'em, Short Creek, Deep Creek, Beaver Creek, Hungry Creek, because it petered out and proved to be hungry ground; and Bear Creek because somebody saw a bear—"

"You gamble a little of your time. That's all," Jessup said. "I've waited several years for your legs to get big enough and strong enough to serve my purpose. Of all the young fellers in Jerkline Creek, I picked you."

"What's about the feud that's supposed to have gone on between Buck Brady and you? Do I inherit that, too?"

"You'll have a head start on Brady. After that you'll have to protect yourself," Jessup explained.

"I think I'll talk it over with Pa," Terry said.

If it had been most fathers, Jessup would have instantly agreed. But on the record Two-Bit Pete could do no boy, including his own sons, any good. "You're a man now," Jessup advised him. "A man makes his own decisions."

Terry flushed. "I'll string with you," he said.

"Come along then," Jessup said, and wheeled his way to the bank. He drew two hundred dollars he had kept there while waiting for his legs to grow. "Buy yourself an outfit, Terry."

"New or second hand?" Terry asked.

"A man makes his own decisions," Jessup said again. "Come to my cabin when you're ready."

TERRY was rather grim as he passed by the second-hand store containing worn outfits. He went to Buck Brady's place and bought the best. Brady, a solid, sweaty man, with hairy hands and shrewd eyes peering from fatty pockets, waited on him. Wisely he asked no questions. He assumed an unnatural role for him—one of fatherly interest. "Mighty fine to see young fellers grow up and start out for theirselves," he said. "Mighty fine. I guess you know we handle the best line of goods in this part of the country. If there're any new strikes, you can count on Brady being there with everything a miner needs, gold pans, picks, shovels, powder, steel and grub."

"So I've heard," Terry answered. He paid Brady and piled his outfit in front of the store. "Be along later and pick everything up."

Brady turned to his silent partner, a man named Condon who kept abreast of affairs by working briefly on ranches, in mines, on the railroad, drove stage and occasionally served as a special deputy sheriff. He relayed his information to Brady for their mutual profit. He was quick on the draw, and deadly with a rifle.

"It looks, Condon, as if we'd get our hands on some of that Fryingpan gold," Brady predicted. "It took me a long time to figger Jessup's game, but it's working out now. Your job is to trail this Melrose squirt."

"I wouldn't say a cuss five feet eleven and weighing a hundred and eighty is a squirt,"

Condon said. "What do you want me to do with him? The . . . usual?"

"It depends. If he shows his hand, and you know for sure the creek, wherever it is, has Fryingpan gold, then knock him off," Brady directed. "We'll circulate a story that he talked a lot about hunting for Fryingpan Creek. You see, this set-up is playin' right into our hands. If he's following Jessup's orders he won't let on he's headin' for Fryingpan. He's just goin to some unknown place. Well, when a cuss heads for an unknown place its mighty hard to find the body if he doesn't come back."

"I'll take care of everything," Condon promised.

Brady's eyes narrowed, and he needled Condon with a terse, "You messed up the Jessup job."

"A man misses once in a while," Condon said insolently. "It was a long shot. I figgered the wind and everything else, but a puff threw the bullet off. And a good thing too, because I checked where he'd been and there wasn't a sign of gold."

"This deal shouldn't be tough. We're matchin' wits against a green kid and a crippled man," Brady said. "And there's this to figger, too. Maybe Melrose is a decoy. Some other squirt is headin' for Fryingpan Creek."

"I can't be two places at once," Condon said. "If there's another squirt, he's yours." He looked out the window several minutes later. "Here comes Terry Melrose with Jessup's pack horse."

Terry threw a diamond hitch as soon as he loaded the horse and did it with an expertness proving much practice. Brady and Condon exchanged glances. "What old Jessup learns a cuss," Condon observed, "he learns them damned well. You'd think the squirt had been packin' horses for years. I wonder if he's as good with a rifle and six-gun?"

TERRY MELROSE left town at dusk, heading southeasterly. A mile from town, he circled and entered the Jessup clearing on the northwest end of town. He left the horse with its burden and entered the cabin. Jessup was sitting in his chair, a board across his lap, sketching a map. "The plans we make now," the old miner said, "will decide whether you get that ranch with the blooded cattle early in life. And whether I get the operation that will give me the use of my legs the remainder of my days.

"If we fail," he continued, "it won't be the first time folks have done their best, then lost out. I mention that so you won't feel bad if you can't deliver your end of the deal. All I'm expecting is that you do your best, remembering the things I've learned you off and on, and following orders to the letter. I won't hold failure against you. Fair enough?"

"More than fair enough," Terry answered.

"All ropes have an end and it's about time Brady came to the end of his rope. He's been pulling dirty deals long enough. I've been working on him, by just setting in my wheel chair and looking at him hours at a time. He knows that I've been planning and waiting, and it's made him nervous. A nervous man is liable to jump to conclusions when the chips are down. He doesn't think things through. He makes mistakes. Take a good look at this map."

Terry examined the map, then looked up in surprise. "Why *that's* Hungry Creek. I thought I was headed for the mysterious Fryingpan Creek."

"Keep your shirt on, Terry," Jessup admonished. "Remember what I said about a nervous man jumping at conclusions? Well, I'm hoping Brady will do just that. Now, when you get to Hungry Creek here's what you'll find. A tough country all the way, and a deep canyon that runs for miles until it ends in a sheer wall. Here's a waterfall. She drops five hundred feet. Winter's she's a trickle. Spring and summer she's a torrent, depending on how far the snowfields in Gunsight Pass melt back. Summer before last, you'll remember, there was a long, dry spell and the snow melted so far back that rocks held in place by solid ice, came tumbling down. Folks with telescopes saw 'em.

"A mile from the falls," Jessup continued, "there's a bench—the one point on the creek that's always above high water. I want you to stake that ground for me. Call that Discovery Claim. You stake Number One above Discovery."

"I see," Terry exclaimed, grinning.

"You're tricking Brady into thinking Hungry Creek is Fryingpan Creek. Then while he's on a wild-goose chase, with half of the population after him, you send me to the real Fryingpan Creek."

"Now don't you start jumping at conclusions," Jessup warned. "When you stake and record the claims, come back and get me."

"Get you?" Terry exclaimed.

"Yep! Get me!" Jessup replied, enjoying the younger man's astonishment. "You're a strong boy. You can lift me into the saddle and out again. I'll get mighty tired, but, by golly, I'll get there."

"You sure have planned this from beginning to end," Terry said. "If Brady sees you going in, he'll sure fall for the trick."

"Had years to make Brady nervous," Jessup answered. "I've done mighty little else but think."

"Yes, and to teach me I didn't have to go through life using second-hand things if I went to school and fixed my eyes on the best in the land," Terry replied, a note of gratitude in his voice.

WHEN Terry Melrose left Old Man Jessup's cabin, his pack horses carried roughly a hundred pounds of items the miner believed he would need on Discovery Claim.

From the first he sensed that he was being followed—an instinctive warning that was strong in the caveman and has come down through the years to his descendants. His horse, looking back a couple of times, confirmed this.

He planned to cover eight or ten miles before stopping, but down timber blocking the game trail he was following forced a camp until daylight.

He unloaded the packs, hobbled the horses and spread his blankets in the center of a natural clearing. As he crawled between the blankets his eyes searched the gloomy thickets surrounding the clearing. "If Brady or Condon are there," he muttered, "they'll have to murder me in cold blood, which they aren't likely to do at this stage of the game, or come into the open."

Fifteen minutes passed, then he heard one of the horses stumbling about. "The fool got himself tangled up in a thicket," Terry growled. The horse fell with a crash that started the others to snorting.

He ran over and found the horse on its side struggling to regain its feet. As he leaned over to quiet the animal, he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure rushing at him. Terry whirled, then a body struck him, hurling him to the ground. Sparks leaped before his eyes. There was a roar in his ears, then darkness.

"You've got a lot to learn, son," Condon said. "You ain't dry behind the ears yet, and you're playin' with the tough, bad boys. Let this be a lesson to you." He drew back and drove his fist into the unconscious Jerry's stomach again and again, then finished off with a wallop to the jaw that should have cracked the bone.

He searched Terry's pockets and located the map. "Sucker," he muttered. "Carrying it where I could find it. Why didn't he keep a picture of the map in his head?"

Condon grinned. He was feeling fine. It had been several weeks since he had given another man a good working over. It was meat and drink to him, feeding his domineering nature. He walked back a quarter-mile where he had left his horse, mounted it and rode back to town where he awakened Brady from a sound sleep.

Brady sat up in bed, then said, "Light the lamp, Condon. What's wrong? You're back too soon."

"Everythin's right," Condon answered. "The kid's one of them babes in the woods you hear about. The trail's full of down timber so he makes a camp until daylight. Camps in the open where I'll have to show myself and let him get the drop on me when I move in. But I'm too smart to get caught that way. I sneak up to a hobbled horse, throw my weight against its side and down it goes. That brings the kid on the run and I let him have it."

"Did you work him over?"

"He won't feel so good when he wakes up," Condon predicted. "Chances are he's headed for Jessup's place right now. Here's what I found." He tossed the map onto the bed, then turned up the lamp.

Brady's interest changed to one of bewilderment as he studied the map. "Hell," he exploded, "this is Hungry Creek. That petered out years ago. The boys went right

down to bedrock—even cleaned out the cracks with brooms and knife blades. I can't figger it out."

"Mebbe it ain't the right map," Condon said. "I went through his pockets and packs, and this was the only paper I found."

"This is Jessup's map," Brady said. "I know his handwriting. He's scrawled, 'Discovery,' then made an X. Look here. 'Number 1 above Discovery.'"

"Then, by God, there's gold on Hungry Creek," Condon declared.

Brady's bewilderment grew. He rubbed his hands together and found the palms moist. He swore. "The old coot, setting in his wheel chair, lookin' at me, thinkin' and plannin'. If we get sucked in, we'll be the laughin' stock of the whole country. If we miss a bet, we'll be the laughin' stock, too. Damn it to hell!"

"Mebbe this is on the level," Condon said. "The word gets around. You know how the boys are. The first thing is to stake a claim and record it. And the hell with grub—just enough to see 'em through. Then they go back to make sure somebody don't jump their ground. Then you come in with a pack train of grub and they pay the price you ask. They cuss the hell out of you, but they pay it. Why, because me and two or three other cusses start the rumor there's claim jumpin' goin' on. They're afraid to leave long enough for a load of grub."

Brady nodded. That was the way they played the game. A knowledge of human nature had always paid off. "I've got it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "So Jessup figgered it all out? Well, I'm a jump ahead of him—as usual."

"Yeah?" Condon rubbed his knuckles, somewhat sore from their impact against Terry Melrose's jaw. "What'd the old boy cook up?"

"He thinks he's cooked up a meal fit for a king, but it ain't even a coyote meat stew," Brady said. "He wants us to stampede. And while we're runnin' around in circles at Hungry Creek, he sends Melrose to Frying-pan Creek. He knows if he didn't work it that way he wouldn't get a clean shot at the rich ground. He's all crippled up and a cripple can't make fast time in a stampede. It's the only chance he had to stake the Discovery claim."

"But I thought he wanted to get even with you?" Condon said. "He sure owes you plenty, for what I've done to him."

"He'll get even with me by tricking me into spending several thousand dollars freighting grub into a creek that will be deserted almost as soon as the stampeders show up," Brady said. "I'll be out the money and I'll be a laughing stock."

"What'll we do? You're the boss."

"Let him play out his hand. We'll let the suckers stampede to Hungry Creek and they will be fightin' mad when they learn they're tricked. They can't take it out on Jessup because he's a cripple. But they can beat the hell out of Terry Melrose. And Jessup will find he's pretty damned lonely when it's all over with." Brady nodded his head. "We'll see what we'll see, Condon."

"Before we'll see what we'll see," Condon said. "We'll see Terry Melrose, powerful sick, comin' back with his tail between his legs. Just about now he's wonderin' what happened."

CONDON was wrong. Terry had a fair idea what had happened as he sat up and shook off the fog that filled his head. He looked at the horse, on its side, then remembered he had been on his way to help the horse when things went black. His jaw, head and stomach ached. Things swam before his eyes whenever he made a sudden movement. He unhobbled the horse and watched the animal struggle to its feet. "Somebody beat the hell out of me," he said thickly. "Somebody is Brady or Condon." He saw a bootprint made within the past few hours in a soft spot, and he looked at it a long time. Then he sat down, sick.

He felt that he was at the cross-roads of his life. If he turned back now, whimpering, he could be turned back the remainder of his life. He would be prowling the second-hand stores looking for cheap things others had discarded. Probably a doctor would order him to bed, he reasoned. His stomach might be ruptured from the beating and kicking. He knew that he had been kicked because it felt that way, and there was mud on his shirt.

It was slow business breaking camp and packing the animals. Packs that had seemed

reasonably heavy the previous night, now were almost more than he could manage. "If we lick Brady," he muttered. "All this will be worth it."

He got on his horse and started along the game trail that led to Hungry Creek. There was lots of down timber, but in daylight he could see ways around the obstructions that were not visible at night. Several times, though, he dismounted and cut through trees or used the horses to drag them clear of the trail.

At noon he slept two hours and felt worse for the relaxation. His muscles stiffened up. Again and again came the overpowering urge to get back and rest for several days. Perhaps see a doctor. Then it came to him that Brady would plan on his doing that very thing. Smashing Brady's theory built up his courage.

He camped early that night and slept heavily. He awakened, dreading the day. He drank coffee and ate some food, which stayed down. It was the last food he wanted until late the following day when he camped where Hungry Creek tumbled from its gorge. Terry rested a couple of days before entering the canyon.

Pushing upstream meant repeated crossings as the creek bounced from wall to wall. There was no mistaking the point which Old Man Jessup had indicated as Discovery Claim.

Terry cached the grub, put up the monuments and turned in for the night. It was hard to believe that at one time men had taken gold from the sands—gold that had gone to the San Francisco mint and been turned into gold coins. But bedrock was close to the surface, and the great depth of gold-bearing gravel they had hoped for hadn't existed.

Spring floods had long since wiped out the tailing dumps. New trees had replaced those cut for fuel. The area for growing was scant enough and Terry reasoned not a stick of timber remained standing when the last miner left. "No need of panning a bar," he grumbled, gazing speculatively at his own claim. "It's hungry ground. But, mister, I'll help myself to a good claim on Fryingpan Creek."

The trip home was a hard one and he was dog tired when he stopped in Old Man Jessup's clearing. Jessup rolled his chair to the door and yelled, "Glad to see you back, Terry. Hey, boy, are you sick?"

"I was," Terry answered. "Someone, probably Condon, worked me over. Have you been to town lately?"

"Yeah, and Condon's fist was bunged up," Jessup answered. "And Brady was feeling his oats. He acted like a man who held four aces, or else had outguessed an enemy. So far we're doing pretty good. Now tell me what happened?"

Terry gave details and Jessup swore roundly. "But you didn't turn back," he said with approval. "You went ahead. Son, you're a coarse gold man if ever I saw one. Now let's mark time. No need of filing them claim notices for a day or two. You rest up, and get your stren'th back again. I figger that Brady figgers he knows what's up."

"Does he?" Terry asked bluntly.

"Nope," Jessup answered shortly. "Right now, we've got the world by the tail and a downhill pull. I think we'll change our plans a mite. Remember, son, stick to the general plan, but if you see a chance to improve it here and there, do it."

TERRY remained in the cabin the next few days while Jessup followed his old routine—sitting in his chair, watching Brady downing a drink, or playing solo.

Melrose came into town, bought a few second-hand items and asked about Terry. "The boy's doing fine," Jessup said. "You'll be proud of him some of these days."

"Doubt it like hell," Melrose said. "Brady tells me you're puttin' wrong idears into his head. He's got crazy enough idears already. Figgers to siphon water over from Mallard Lake to that dry land. Hell, you'd think he was worth a million to hear him plan." He shook an angry finger at Jessup. "And it's all your fault. He was a good boy until you got a hold of him and put fool notions in his head."

"It isn't a fool notion to want new, instead of second-hand things for a change," Jessup said. "Give him a half chance and you and your wife will be livin' in clover in your old age instead of bein' on the county."

Melrose went on, muttering. He had the common human failure of thinking of

an apt retort anywhere from one to forty-eight hours too late.

WHEN Old Man Jessup was sure Terry was his normal self, he made final plans for the trip into Hungry Creek. The younger man lifted him to his horse early one night and they rode ten miles through the darkness. "I'm standin' this right well," Jessup said as Terry lifted him from the saddle and put him to bed on the ground. He chuckled. "We snuk off without anybody bein' the wiser."

Terry wondered what Jessup proposed doing when they got to the claim two days later. He wasn't left long in doubt. First they unpacked the wheel chair; then Terry cleared a level area for Jessup to wheel himself from a trickle of water spilling from the bank to a point between two trees. Here he rigged the ropes to a pole between the trees, so that Jessup could lower himself to a bed spread on the ground, then lift himself to the chair. He cut a supply of wood, placed the grub within easy reach and asked, "What's next?"

"Take that bay horse, it's the toughest, and ride to town. File the claims, then tell the boys we've struck gold on Hungry Creek," Jessup directed.

"I don't like leaving you alone," Terry said.

"I'll manage—always have. Let's see, in about sixty hours the first stampeder will be here," he predicted.

Jessup missed it by five hours. In fifty-five hours the first man arrived. "Where's the gold?" he panted. "Let's see it."

"Ain't got any handy," Jessup answered. "But it's there. Stake yourself a gravel bar."

"Don't believe it," the other said. "This is hungry ground. Has been for years."

"Why'd you come then?" the old miner tartly demanded.

The stampeder unpacked his pan, washed a quantity of sand on Jessup's claim, then gasped, "Look! Purtiest gold I ever did see." He dropped several small nuggets into his cupped hand and went about smirking at the gold.

Suddenly the fellow shook off the trance. He staked the second claim above Discovery and then turned his horse downstream. He left at a gallop, but Jessup heard his voice echoing against the canyon walls. "It's a strike! It's a strike! Panned gold myself."

He passed others on the way, changed horses with a rancher twenty miles from town, then continued on to the recorder's office. The latter was just closing up for the night, but he remained open long enough to add the fellow's claim to the two previously filed. "So it's the real thing," he said. "Somehow I thought Jessup was up to some kind of hell." He looked intently at the small nuggets. "Phil Bates will like to see that," he added in an odd voice.

"I'll show it to him. But I've got to get grub from Brady first," the stampeder said.

He hurried over to Brady's and the latter looked at the gold. "There ain't gold on Hungry Creek," Brady said. "There can't be. Old Jessup salted the bar you panned."

"That's one thing Old Jessup wouldn't do," the other snapped.

When his needs were filled, Brady turned to Condon. "I can't figger this out," he said. "By God! You don't suppose that old coyote figgered if he told the truth about the gold we'd think he was lyin' and——"

"He had plenty of time to think," Condon said. "He caught us with our pants down. He suckered us. But I don't see how he can figger he's got even with you except to make you a laughin' stock?"

"He hasn't. Get every pack horse in town. We're goin' to clean up on this. Send a couple of the boys to stake ground and start stories of claim jumping. We want the miners to stay on their claims, buying our grub at our price, and not coming here to stock up," Brady said.

He was pleased with what he saw as he led his pack train up Hungry Creek canyon. The stream was alive with men, taking out gold. He recognized the familiar signs—men working until they dropped because each pan meant a little more gold in the poke. His advance scouts had done their work well, because each man was sticking close to his claim and greeting strangers with suspicious hostile eyes.

There was a fly in Brady's ointment. As yet he hadn't found a suitable place for a townsite—a level bench where he could put up a store and saloon, with a little gambling

on the side. He stopped the train when he saw one of his planted men leaning on his shovel. "Where can I put up a store, Patterson?" he asked.

"There's only one spot, half mile upstream," Patterson answered. "There won't be room in any other places. Looks like you'd have it all to yourself, Boss."

ANIMALS and men were tired when they arrived at the spot. Brady's eyes took in details, and he nodded with approval. It was made to order. As he started pacing off ground, a familiar voice growled from a thicket. "Get the hell off'n my property, Brady." He squinted a couple of times, then saw Old Man Jessup sitting in his chair, a sawed-off shotgun on his lap; a rifle and six-gun within convenient reach; and Terry Melrose crouched behind a boulder large enough to turn a cannon ball. "This is Discovery Claim, Brady."

"Why the hell aren't you on Fryingpan Creek?" Brady asked. "You've waited long enough to get there." He was stalling for time, thinking rapidly.

"*This* is Fryingpan Creek," Jessup answered.

"What? This is Hungry Creek."

"That's what they call it," Jessup answered. "But that yellow stuff the boys are taking out of the gravel bars ain't butter." His face grew grim. "I can't prove you or Condon shot me. But I know you did. But I'm collecting for what I've been through the past few years. I'm collecting here and now. This is the only spot on the creek where you can open up for business. That's why I staked the ground. My price is twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Twenty-five thousand dollars!" Brady roared. "That's highway robbery."

"You ought to know," Jessup said. "That's my price and I won't sell for a dollar less."

"The hell with you," Brady said. "Turn the pack train around, boys. We're going back to town." And the pack train disappeared downstream.

"Well, Mr. Jessup," Terry said, "you lost."

"I ain't so sure of it," Jessup answered. "Anyway, you won. You got a claim that'll give you money enough to get a start in life."

"What about this being Fryingpan Creek?" a miner asked. And others joined in the query.

"Fryingpan Creek *had* to be a creek in these parts," Jessup answered. "All of 'em had been mined out in the early days. Yet one of 'em was replenished with gold. Now that don't make sense. Gold isn't like timber—cut it and a new tree grows. So special conditions was the answer. It seemed to me there was a gold ledge high in the mountains that was bein' eroded, the rotten ore worked away and the gold itself brought downstream.

"Deep snows become small glaciers. Glaciers move slowly, but they grind," he continued. "Hungry Creek is the only stream hereabouts fed by glaciers. Remember, the ice is working the gold loose, but it's also holding it. Then we get a light snowfall, followed by a hot summer. What happens? Ice in the high passes and gulches melts, exposing the gold, which is carried downstream. That's how Hungry Creek got its new supply of gold. I've been scared stiff, afraid somebody might figger out the proposition and stampede the country, leavin' me in my wheel chair, twiddlin' my fingers. But the fishin' is no good; it was hard to get to, so folks stayed away."

"Brady's comin' back," a miner said. "When he realized we wouldn't turn against you and play his game, he knew he was licked. He loves money too much to take a big loss, so here he is to swallow pride and pay through the nose."

"He isn't the only one who'll pay," Terry growled. "As soon as Mr. Jessup's deal is closed, I'm going to settle a little private affair with Condon." He turned to the old miner. "Are you sure twenty-five thousand dollars is enough? Brady probably figures he'll take that much gold out of the ground."

Old Man Jessup chuckled. "That's where he'll get the shock of his life. It's all high ground. No sandy bars to catch the gold. It's probably the only hungry ground on the creek."

"But," Terry said, grinning, "it turned out—coarse pay."

Fog at Sea; That's Bad. Fog in a Man's Mind—That's Worse

THE SAGA OF FIDGETY SMITH

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

IT WAS only necessary to be near Fidgety Smith for thirty seconds to understand why he had his nickname. In that brief period of time he would have scratched his hip, pulled an ear, groped under one arm, rubbed his ankles together and probably have blown his nose. After a full minute he would have covered the body and anyone around him would begin to feel itchy too. As is well known it

is practically impossible to commit a social error, either of speech or action, in a ship's fo'c's'le, but Fidgety Smith was the exception. The freighter *Golden Dragon,* ploughing through a lazy beam sea, was scarcely clear of the China coast when the inevitable delegation of seamen came on the bridge to see the first mate.

"It's like this, sir," said the spokesman, twisting his cap. "That new A. B. Fidgety Smith. He's got all 'ands feeling there's fleas or lice aboard."

Mr. Mason, the tall, eagle-faced mate, waved his pipe around and looked bleak. 'Well, ain't there?" he demanded practically. The spokesman swallowed. "Well, yes, if you put it that way, sir. But this Fidgety makes it worse. Jest can't 'old still, and now we're all getting th' same way so we'd take it kindly if 'e could be shoved somewhere's else instead of for'ard."

Mr. Mason was jolted. Anything could happen on a tramp steamer and he was resigned to most things, but this was a surprise. "First I ever heard of a crew taking kindly to one man having special quarters," he observed. "Maybe he's lousy—doesn t wash or something."

"It ain't that, sir," the spokesman insisted. "We c'd take care of that. This bloke just can't stay put. Always wriggling, He made up 'is bunk twice in the first watch and washed 'is mess gear three times. It ain't human."

The mate coughed. "I see what you mean. Well, send him along at eight bells and I'll figure something out." He mentioned the matter to Captain McCleod on his way below but the pink-faced rotund little skipper was half-dozing in his shirt sleeves, balanced in the swivel chair before his desk, and he was far too comfortable to be disturbed.

"Extraordinary," he mumbled, folding his pudgy hands across his stomach. "Extraordinary. Man what itches." He peered over his steel-rimmed spectacles to see if the mate had maybe been drinking and then subsided. "Well, bring the man up here if you can't settle things." The mate shook his head and went below. Life was a tranquil affair on the *Golden Dragon* and you didn't get much help straightening out curious situations.

Fidgety Smith was on time and Mr. Mason felt a little surprised. He had seen the man before, of course, but hadn't paid much attention in the last minute hurry to get a few extra hands to fill out a fo'c's'le half-empty from desertions. Now he wondered how he'd ever come to sign this specimen at all. Fidgety was middle-aged and unbelievably skinny. All bones and corners. A large Adam's apple ran up and down his throat when he talked and he had a curious expression that was half-way between complete vacancy and vague earnestness, all aided by pale, watery blue eyes and a perpetual dew drop on the tip of his thin, shiny nose. The mate sighed.

"I suppose you know I've had a visit from your shipmates?"

"Aye, sir," Fidgety agreed, scratching his nose, rubbing his jaw and twisting his neck in a couple of grotesque jerks. "I ain't been myself the last few trips. Sort of worried. Seems to make the boys sore."

"That," agreed the mate kindly, "I can understand. Now, let's have the truth, man. You been on a bender and got the willies?"

Fidgety Smith seemed shocked. "I never touch liquor, sir," he insisted and rubbed his thigh, ground one heel against his instep, groped inside his shirt and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Mr. Mason fully saw the foc's'le's point of view. "We'd better go see the old man," he said hastily. "He likes riddles."

Captain McCleod had roused himself somewhat and was fumbling over some official papers when Fidgety was introduced. The captain peered at him over his spectacles and was fascinated as he watched a spectacular paroxysm that made it appear Fidgety had as many arms as an octopus. "Good God!" said Captain McCleod. "Have you some contagious disease?"

"Not since I was a nipper, sir," Fidgety declared, panting a little from his exercise. "But I been this way since I was blown up one trip. Lot of empty oil drums on the foredeck just exploded and knocked me overboard." He waved vaguely and blinked worriedly. "Some officer I saw set a fuse . . . . I guess he wanted to take the ship . . . we had a lot of bullion on board. . . . I yelled at him and he hit me, and next I knew it was all smoke and noise and I was overside. I was all in pieces when they picked me up."

"Ah," said Captain McCleod sagely. "Nervous condition induced by shock. Probably needs another shock to straighten him out."

"Got a wandering mind," agreed the mate sympathetically, "but aside from that he's a problem."

"A bad one," conceded the captain. "Belongs in a hospital. But no money probably and all he knows is the sea. Sad case, but we can't have the fo'c's'le upset all the trip."

He looked around as a knock came on the cabin door. The second mate started to come in, removing his uniform cap, and then hesitated with a soft, "I didn't know you were busy, sir." The captain waved.

"Not at all. Come in, Mr. Arnold. Maybe you'll have some ideas. Look at this." The second mate's eyes flickered to Fidgety Smith and his scratching and he seemed to tighten. "Haven't I seen you before," he said shortly. Fidgety stared at him and frowned. "I dunno, sir," he answered, still scratching. "Your face . . . but I forget, sir. Too many ships. I don't remember well much more."

"So I see," said the second mate drily. "The man's a half-wit, I'd say, sir."

"I wouldn't go that far," coughed the captain, embarrassed. "At least not before his face. Er—the main thing is what to do."

"The fellas tell me there's a spare cabin in the poop house," said Fidgety uncertainly. "Just old canvas an' rope an' spare paint kept there. Maybe I could straighten it up and bunk there, sir."

The second mate tapped his cap impatiently against his thigh, a compact, stocky man with a heavy, tanned face in which even teeth showed startlingly white when he smiled. He smiled now, somewhat twistedly, and said, "Isn't it going pretty far? Giving a sailor a special cabin? That's a good way to start fo'c's'le trouble."

"Normally, yes," Captain McCleod agreed. "But this isn't normal. And the mate tells me the men requested a shift of quarters themselves."

Fidgety Smith gave his neck a few grotesque twists and peered intently at the second mate. "Aye, your face, sir. . . . Seems I ought to know it . . . maybe on the *Tonquin* which was blown up sort of . . ."

"I was never on the *Tonquin*," said Mr. Arnold evenly. "You're wandering, man. Do you want to make it the after cabin, sir?"

"Yes, the after cabin," agreed the captain. "Get him settled and let's forget it."

"I'll see to it, sir," said the second with a rasp in his voice and when Mr. Mason jerked a master key from his ring and tossed it over he caught it with a curt, "Leave things to me," and abruptly turned and went out, jerking his uniform cap savagely over his eyes. Fidgety rubbed his hands together and wiped his nose on his sleeve and with a chattered, "I'll go for'ard and get my gear," he departed after the second mate. Mr. Mason whistled.

"What's the second miffed about?" he demanded. "Didn't even wait to say what he came here for. Doesn't like seamen getting separate quarters. Maybe he's getting class conscious."

The captain shrugged. "You're just jumpy," he said testily. "I was looking around corners myself until we were well at sea. That stuff we're saddled with ain't very good shipmates."

The mate glanced over at the small ship's safe set against one bulkhead and pursed his lips. "Two hundred grand in fancy jewels don't belong on a crate like this," he said glumly. "Something to worry about in these waters. I still think the safest bet would have been the mail boat."

"Just one of those things," observed the captain wearily. "The pirate junks've been pretty active and it's the fancy packets they pick on. Seem to know just what ship's carrying what. Chances are they'll take a crack at the mail boat anyway, figuring it's got this stuff aboard. The old technique. Couple of dozen innocent Chink steerage passengers pot out with tommy-guns and take over. Loot the ship's vault and collect anything else valuable. Couple of junks run alongside and the mob clears out and Hong Kong runs in circles and does nothing."

"Could happen to us," said the mate sourly, "even if the agents did think their fool idea was sound. Shoving some artificial junk on the big ship with all the guards and red tape for a show-off, and then smuggling the real stuff aboard here. Oh, sure. Only the agents, the underwriters and you and me know all about it, and that's four too many the way things leak off this coast."

Captain McCleod shook his white

head. "Orders is orders," he pointed out. "We ain't got no Chink passengers to jump us, and the new 'ands we signed all got good papers. I admit it gave me a turn when young Hulbert was ordered to Shanghai by the agents and we had to get a new second mate in a hurry. But they said Arnold was O.K., so that's that. Just take it easy. If it wasn't for that stuff in the safe you'd think nothing about possible trouble. Maybe you been reading too many newspapers."

The mate laughed a little. "And maybe I been on this coast too long," he said drily. "I've seen funny things happen."

FIDGETY SMITH felt almost happy, or at least he did when he remembered to think about it. He hadn't been able to think of anything for very long, not since the day he had been blown overside from the *Tonquin* and something had turned all fuzzy in his head. He sometimes remembered he'd been a smart quartermaster and been climbing the ladder fast, but since that time everything had been a little mixed. Strange ships, new ships. The boys didn't seem to like him around any more and he had learned to oblige them and stay out of the way as much as he could. Things had been easier on this ship, the *Golden Dragon*. The boys hadn't slapped him around too much, or made fun of him, and when they did complain the officers had seemed to understand and made no fuss. Only that Mr. Arnold had seemed to act funny, and he kept puzzling over Mr. Arnold. He seemed like someone he ought to know, but he couldn't place him. Except it was someone he didn't like. Someone that came into that terrible day when the *Tonquin's* cargo of empty oil drums had blown up. But it was all right now. Mr. Arnold had been very funny about it but now he had his own quarters with no one around to complain about him, and the first mate seemed to understand that was how he wanted it. He liked the first mate.

Fidgety was washing the paintwork of the poop house when Mr. Mason came aft next morning on his daily look around the ship. Fidgety knew there was something he wanted to tell Mr. Mason but he had to think hard before it came to him. The tall mate was smoking his pipe as usual and stopped to watch Fidgety, marveling how the man could switch his wash-rag from one hand to the other without missing a stroke while he scratched.

"You're fixed O. K.?" inquired the mate good-naturedly. "Probably had to chase a few rats out before you could really settle down."

"Just two rats," Fidgety agreed, grinning and twisting his scrawny neck a few times. "Very nice quarters, sir, now I got 'em cleaned up. I don't think the second mate liked it."

"Liked what? demanded the mate. Fidgety clawed at his ribs and rubbed one calf with the heel of his boot. "I mean my coming aft and disturbing folks, sir. I guess someone else was quartered there and had to move out." The mate looked puzzled.

"Nonsense! That spare cabin was locked as soon as the customs men got through. What did Mr. Arnold say?"

Fidgety thought hard and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Well, he was here looking around when I brought my gear aft last night. Had a bundle made up and when I wanted to help him with it he swore pretty bad and said I'd done enough damage as it was. And when I asked if I should take the dirty dishes and th' mess gear back to the steward he told me to throw it overboard. Never been told to throw ship's gear overboard afore, sir. That Mr. Arnold—reminds me of the *Tonquin* and that blow-up. I know 'e don't like me but I can't get things straight—it's funny, sir."

"Never mind," said the mate patiently. "Did you throw the ship's gear overside?" Fidgety shook his head and scratched a few places. "Didn't seem right thing, sir, so I thought I'd wait."

"Funny," muttered the mate, and aloud, "Let's take a look." It was only a few steps to where the door of the spare cabin was hooked back and looking inside the mate saw the half-witted sailor had neatly stacked the spare rope, canvas and drums of paint against one bulkhead, and had piled some odds and ends of other junk on one end of the worn leather settee. And on top of this were several dirty plates and coffee mugs, littered with stale breadcrusts and scraps of dry meat. The mate rubbed his lean jaw with his pipe stem and hardly knew what to make of it. The spare cabin he remembered

locking himself while they were still in port, but of course there were other keys.

"Take all that stuff to the steward," he ordered finally. "And tell me, what did Mr. Arnold have in the bundle he was taking away?" Fidgety scratched a thigh and thought. "I dunno, sir. One piece nigh fell out though—and it looked like a gun."

MR. MASON felt a little chill settle in his stomach. This was something pretty tangible, if it were true. Made his worries about the ship being taken over and looted seem more plausible. Fidgety Smith might be making some of it up, of course.

He was not exactly bright. But he certainly hadn't made up the matter of the used dishes, and it was certain Mr. Arnold had been more than a little put out when the after cabin had been mentioned as a haven for Fidgety Smith. Suppose the second had had some accomplices stowed away there and had to get rid of them in a hurry? He might have had to wrap up guns and any gear they left and put it elsewhere fast. And hide the accomplices somewhere else. Mr. Mason decided he'd have to suggest a ship-wide search to the old man.

"You're going on day work," he told Fidgety. "The watches won't want you working around them. So just look around for odd jobs that need doing. The ship's brasswork, as a starter, ain't been cleaned up right all voyage." He stared hard at Fidgety. "And let me know if you run across any more funny things, like that stray crockery."

"Aye, sir. I'll let you know," Fidgety agreed. "An' thank ye, sir. Wish I could remember why I don't like th' second mate an' he don't like me. Back on the *Tongain* —" His face faded as he started another whirl of scratching and the mate grunted and left, thinking hard. He hadn't much to go on. Even the matter of the spare cabin being occupied could be set down to one of the engineers entertaining a girl or someone aboard while in port. Lots of funny things happened on a tramp.

It was nearly noon when Mr. Mason climbed to the navigation bridge to take the sun with the second and third mates. Mr. Arnold was already fiddling with his sextant and standing by the for'ard rail, and

mainly engaged in shouting at Fidgety Smith.

"I don't want you on the damned bridge," the second mate was saying. "I don't care if you want to mess with the brasswork. You get on my damned nerves! And don't keep mumbling about knowing me before. If I ever signed on with a stumble-bum like you I must have been nuts. And I never served on the *Tonquin*. Get that through your screwy head and get out!"

Fidgety looked perplexed, groping inside his shirt with one hand and rubbing his thigh with a small bucket he was carrying, filled with bunting and rags and a can of polish. "But the mate, sir. He said I should look around. And I was just feeling we'd been on the old *Tonquin* together—"

"I said, get out!" snarled the second. "And stop mumbling about the *Tonquin*. If the mate wants you falling over his feet during his watch that's his business. I don't. Now beat it!"

Mr. Mason's jaw tightened as he came up. "There's no need to roar at the poor devil," he said shortly. "I told him what to do." The second twisted his head and gave his humorless, white-toothed smile. He was not disconcerted. "Well, it's your business, Mason. If you like to feel itchy it's okay with me. But I don't!"

The mate went a little white but controlled himself. Talk was free and easy on a tramp but this was pretty rugged. Mr. Mason made an effort and said thinly, "Well, we want no trouble on the bridge. Find a job somewhere else, Smith. I'll see you later!" Fidgety mumbled and went away, boring a finger into one ear and trying to rub his knees together as he walked. The second mate sneered.

"Sort of personal pet of yours, eh?" he suggested. Mr. Mason said nothing but strode into the chartroom to get his own sextant, boiling inside. The second mate acted pretty cocky for a new man, and maybe he could if he had some backing stowed away, with tommy guns and a sure-fire plan. The sooner Captain McCleod was told about all this the better. The third mate was bent over the chart as the first entered, and the third looked puzzled.

"Did you run off a course inshore, sir?" he inquired. "Seems like someone did—

heading us up to Bias Bay—and then rubbed it out."

Mr. Mason bit his lip and felt the cold chill in his stomach again as he bent over the chart, eyeing it sideways so the light reflected on a faint impression of a line running from the last pricked position.

"I wouldn't have noticed it if it hadn't been a new chart," the third observed. "Maybe the second or the old man's been playing around. Ain't Bias Bay that tough hangout for the Chinks?"

"Just about," the mate muttered, and let the matter drop while he went out on the bridge and shot the sun with the third and the second. Back in the chartroom he started to sweat a little as he worked out his sight. He flipped back the log book and checked the courses. Then he checked his figures again. He was aware the second was standing beside him and looking up he caught that twisted, white-toothed smile that seemed so hard and artificial. "What's your reading?" he asked the second, dry-mouthed. Mr. Arnold handed over his sextant and nodded. He looked at the third's sextant and drew a deep breath.

"Well, we can't all be wrong." He jabbed the dividers on the chart. "We're supposed to be well clear of the coast but this fix puts us here—not twenty miles clear."

"It's curious," agreed the second gently. "We must have a compass error. Those things happen. Wouldn't take much to pull us off."

"No," agreed the mate. "Someone could have monkeyed with the soft iron correctors. Did you take sights last night?"

"Naturally," said the second. "Everything seemed all right." His eyes met the mate's challengingly and the mate's dropped first. "Wish I'd taken some myself," he muttered, and inwardly cursed the easy-going tramp ship ways that left so much to one watch officer once a ship had plenty of sea room. But that was how it was. He could not call the second a liar. No one had checked on the second. The cold fact stood they were far off their course and in the most dangerous waters of all. And two hundred thousand dollars worth of fancy jewels stowed below.

"I guess I'd better talk with the old man," said Mr. Mason at last, very gruffly. He

pushed past the smiling second and clattered to the lower bridge, with almost a feeling of panic. The thing was so raw he could hardly believe it; but why not? If the stage was set what need for any conspirators to worry about secrecy now? If there were stowaways aboard with guns and all set to take over what could anyone do? The *Golden Dragon* had been neatly maneuvered into a ripe spot and any moment an ominous junk sail might appear. Or, if that wasn't in the cards, the ship could be seized and looted and the raiders could depart in one of the boats. Captain McCleod had a revolver, as did Mr. Mason himself, and maybe a few other officers. But no one was ready for such an emergency. It was all too fantastic. Mr. Mason was shaking when he stumbled into the captain's cabin and his condition was not helped by the sight of the old man blissfully dozing in his swivel chair again, a futile symbol of command when it came to brutal action.

"You'd better snap out of it, sir," he yelled, half-hysterically, "A lot of things are due to bust. Let me tell you—"

Captain McCleod roused and peered over his spectacles. "Bless my soul," he said startled. "What's the matter with you, mister?"

"Plenty," snapped the mate. "Now you listen to me! First off I recommend we put the second mate in irons!"

"Irons?" echoed the captain. "In heaven's name—" Mr. Mason jerked around as he heard a noise in the captain's bathroom. "What's that?" The captain waved a pudgy hand. "Oh, just that queer sailor what itches. Brushing up the taps. I must say they need it. I've told the steward time and again—"

Mr. Mason swore, crossed the cabin and looked inside the bathroom. Fidgety Smith was busy cleaning the bathtub taps all right and the mate exploded. This was too much. His sympathies evaporated. Fidgety Smith just turned up in the wrong places and this time very much so.

"Get out!" he choked. "I want to talk with the captain alone. You ought to be feeding now instead of fooling around here. It's after noon. It's dinner time. Now get out!"

Fidgety looked up and blinked his watery

blue eyes and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Aye, sir. Aye, sir," he mumbled. "I forgot about grub. Didn't mean to get in the way —" He started to gather up his bucket of rags and brass polish and the mate withdrew, muttering, to confront the captain again. He talked crisply and concisely, making his points, and when he had done the captain was sweating a little too and dabbing at his forehead.

"But good God," he managed, "it all sounds as you say, but we can't put an officer in irons just on suspicions. We can take precautions though and warn the other officers—" He swallowed and adjusted his spectacles. "Maybe we could send out a radio—"

"The operator's not feeling well," said Mr. Arnold pleasantly. He stepped into the cabin, with his twisted, white-toothed smile, and he was holding a gun. "That's taken care of. Everything taken care of, I think. I wasn't quite ready to start things but too much seems to have happened."

MR. MASON was not as startled as he had expected to be. This was the climax and now it had happened he felt almost relieved and quite calm. "Well, it all pointed to you, Arnold," he said drily. "And it seems to be a push-over. How'd the agents come to recommend you anyway? And how'd you know what we're carrying?" The second mate's smile broadened.

"There's not many secrets on this coast, Mason. Your head agent needed money and this looked like a good time to grab some. It was even his idea to switch the jewels to this tub to help things out. The rest was easy, even getting your old second mate transferred to Shanghai. So I step in with a few of the boys. I didn't want things to break until dark tonight but it doesn't matter. We get the stuff, lower the launch and beat it. Simple as that."

Captain McCleod's face grew a deep red and he started to rise. "If you think I'm going to open that safe for you, you blackguard, you're mistaken." Mr. Arnold said coldly, "Shut up and sit down, you old fool. Anyone could open that tin can you call a safe, even if you didn't leave your notebook lying around with the combination inside." The second mate's eyes swerved to the bath-

room door as Fidgety Smith emerged, sniffing vigorously and jerking his neck while he absently poked at the rags in his bucket of gear.

"Stand where you are!" the second snarled. "And keep still. I'm sick of you crawling around. Hadn't been for you things wouldn't be so rushed. My three boys were safely stowed in the spare cabin until you showed up." Fidgety blinked and looked vaguely around. Everything he did seemed to annoy someone. Mr. Mason said, "So that was why the mess gear was in the cabin. And where'd you smuggle the men after Fidgety chased them away?"

"In the launch," snapped Mr. Arnold, grim now. "Good place to hide under the canvas cover. They've got it swung out and lowered ready. And they've got their guns. One man's on the bridge to see the third and the helmsman behave. Now all I need are the jewels and you can relax. Get 'em, skipper. It'll save me the trouble."

Captain McCleod licked his lips and longingly eyed the desk drawer where his revolver lay. Mr. Mason swore beneath his breath and one hand groping slowly behind him found a cushion of the skipper's settee. He was boiling now. To think the ship had been taken so easily! To think that sarcastic, white-toothed, oily devil was going to get away slick as a whistle.

He played for time though he hardly knew why.

"We'll have a cutter after you before you can hit the coast," he grated, "And maybe warships. There's a squadron cruising in these waters."

"Sure," agreed Mr. Arnold pleasantly. "But Sparks has a headache and is tied up and it'd take him a month anyway to get his apparatus in shape again. Forget it, Mason. I give a yell and my boy on the bridge rings the telegraph down to stop. He herds the third mate and the helmsman along midships to help us lower the launch all the way. And we say goodbye. Nobody hurt unless they try anything. Now get the safe open."

Fidgety Smith's spell of coughing surprised everyone as they had forgotten him. He still stood perplexed in the bathroom doorway and clawed at his skinny throat as the hacking sounds came, and he waved his

work-bucket aimlessly. The second mate cursed.

"I told you to keep still," he roared. "I don't want any funny moves, even from a half-wit."

"No, sir," agreed Fidgety, recovering. "But it's grub time and I gotta be going. It's mighty hard for me to keep still, sir."

"You'd better try damned hard," said the second. "Put your hand down."

"You can't shoot a man like that," choked the mate. "He can't help himself." The second rasped, "Well, I'll teach him. About time somebody did!" Fidgety stared only half-comprehending as the gun muzzle covered him and then involuntarily reached up to grope inside his shirt. The second mate's hard gaze riveted as he fired and at that split instant Mr. Mason heaved over the cushion from the settee behind him and then made a flying tackle. At the same time the outraged Captain McCleod galvanized to life and heaving out of his swivel chair made a dive for his gun drawer. He got his feet tangled and fell across Mr. Mason just as the first mate jerked the legs from under the second.

There was a riot of thrashing limbs, flailing arms and grated curses and then the mate had the second's revolver and was up on one knee panting, trying to push the laboring bulk of the captain aside and staring down at the second mate who was making futile motions, the wind knocked out of him and his head ringing from a hard smash back upon the cabin deck.

FIDGETY SMITH'S head was ringing too, and almost seemed to be split open. The second mate's shot had slammed into his left shoulder, twisted him and flung him violently against the bulkhead, snapping his head back with stunning force. The sailor slipped to his knees, his shirt sleeve showing a widening red stain, and stared stupidly at the scene across the cabin.

"Now we'll take a hand," Mr. Mason was grating, starting to get up and holding the gun unsteadily on the wheezing Mr. Arnold. Captain McCleod was heaving to his feet and groping inside his desk drawer again for his own revolver. Fidgety Smith did not understand very well. He only knew the second mate had shouted at him

and then fired. He blinked and drew himself up, very shakily. A blurred figure appeared in the cabin doorway and it seemed to be a big sleek-faced Chinaman dressed in a rumpled business suit and soft hat and ominously swinging a tommy gun.

"Heard the fuss and came down, boss," he was saying calmly. "You all right? I laid out the two on the bridge so now we'd better be going." He was staring at Mr. Mason and he grated, "Let go the gun!"

"Sure—sure, I'm all right," Mr. Arnold was wheezing, trying to get up. Mr. Mason was rigid and staring hard and then he began to croak. "Damn you! So you're one of the stowaways, huh? This is piracy on the high seas."

"Make it murder," said the Chinaman smoothly. "What's the difference? Drop the gun."

Fidgety Smith was upright now and his head was clearing. Things snapped back into place. Captain McCleod was the master, and Mr. Mason was first mate and Mr. Mason had been good to him. "To hell with the gun, sir," he heard himself yelling. "Let him have it!" His right arm was swinging and the work-bucket was swinging too and he let it go straight and it took the Chinaman in the chest and staggered him, so he fell back a pace or so and the tommy-gun pointed aimlessly. Mr. Mason steadied himself and fired twice and the Chinaman crumpled like a wet sack. Mr. Mason did not wait to see all that. He hit the reviving Mr. Arnold with his gun barrel two or three times until the second mate gave a strangled cry and sank to the deck again. Mr. Mason was up and had the tommy-gun then and was yelling at Captain McCleod.

"We'll clean this up all right. Call the engineroom through the speaking tube and tell 'em to have the boys get up a hose and stand by. We'll wash up the two swine standing by the launch for the get-away."

He went racing off and Fidgety saw Captain McCleod move away from the tube and grope inside his desk drawer again. The rotund little master pulled out two pairs of handcuffs and bending over the second mate he snapped one pair on. He bent over the Chinaman too but there was no need for irons there. Then Captain McCleod sat heavily on his cabin storm-step and absently polished his spectacles. "Bless my soul," he managed. "Who'd ever have thought it." There was a scattering of shots from amidships and then a long drawn howl of delight and the plain swish and smash of a full force hose washing the boat deck clean. Fidgety Smith groped a way to the cabin settee and sat down, leaning his aching head back and closing his eyes. It all seemed like a dream.

HE WAS still leaning back on the settee when Mr. Mason came to look at him, along with the chief steward who was carrying the emergency medicine chest. They cut away his shirt and started to fix his wound and gave him half a tumbler of rum to kill the pain.

"That was good work," Mr. Mason said approvingly. "Just in the nick of time. If there's any reward for saving the jewels and maybe the ship I'll see you get it, man."

Fidgety opened his eyes and they were no longer very watery, and his face had somehow lost its vacant and pathetically eager look and grown strong. His voice had grown strong too.

"I remember now why the second mate didn't like me around. It was somewhere in my mind but I couldn't fix it. He was the same man who set the light to them empty oil barrels that blew up on that ship where I was hurt. Pulled a bullion robbery in the excitement . . . had men smuggled aboard then too . . . and they got clear away. I knew I had to pay him off for something . . . so I tossed that bucket. He wasn't sure I remembered him . . . but I did finally."

"That'll make good testimony when we get home," said the mate approvingly. "And as I say you'll likely get enough dough out of this to fix you up."

Captain McCleod's rotund form loomed over them and the captain coughed, peering over his spectacles. "I don't think he'll need fixing," he said drily. "Look at him."

Mr. Mason stared at the captain and then stared at Fidgety. "I don't get it, sir. The man's hurt."

"Not too much," said the captain. "Don't you see what happened? That crack on the head did it. He ain't made a move in two solid minutes. He just don't itch anymore!"