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A HASHKNIFE STORY

by

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AUGUST 25th, 1942

COVER—Pete Kuhlhoff

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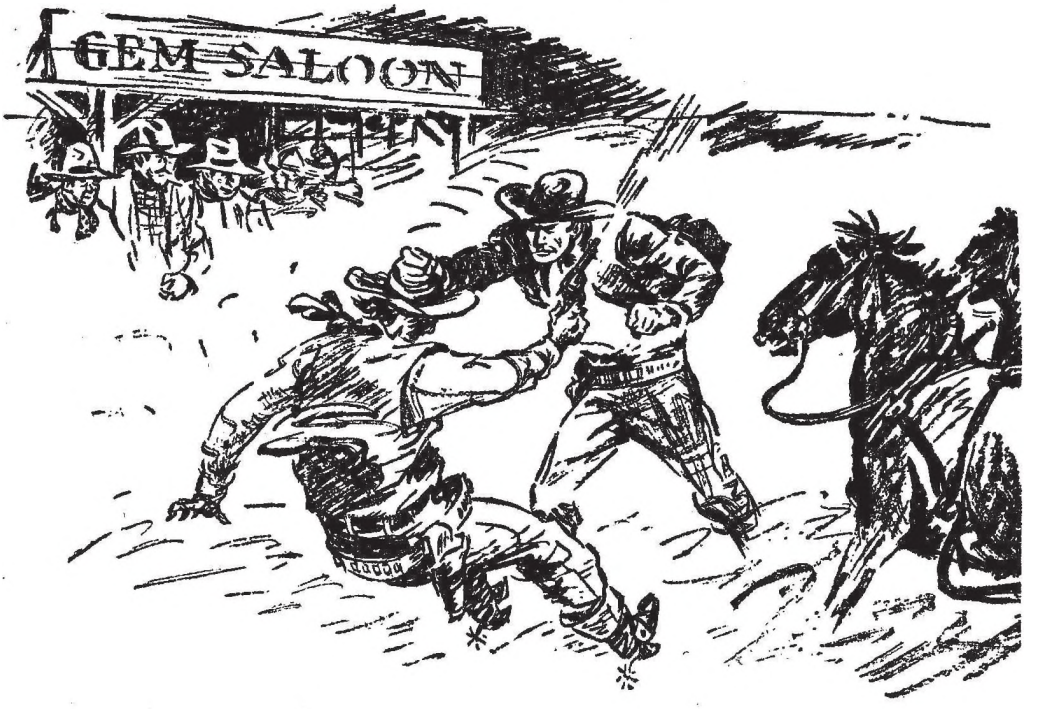
Hashknife's Motto Was—Run When You're Wrong, Shoot When You're Right



THE LOBO TRAIL

THE man was lying on the floor of the little cantina in Piute, his clothes soaking wet from the downpour. Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens, glistening in their slickers, stood beside the body, looking around at the faces of the few Mexicans in the smoke-filled room. The one light on the rough bar cast grotesque shadows on the walls. The two cowboys had just entered the cantina, and not a word had been spoken after their entrance.

"Who killed this man?" asked Hashknife, looking around.

The men shifted uneasily. One of them said, "Somebody keel heem een hees boggy. We breeng heem here, *senor.*"

"Do yuh know who he is?"

"Quien sabe? I theenk he ees from Weendy City."

"From Windy City, eh?"

"Good clothes," remarked Sleepy. "White shirt and everythin'."

"Did any of you hear the shots fired?" asked Hashknife.

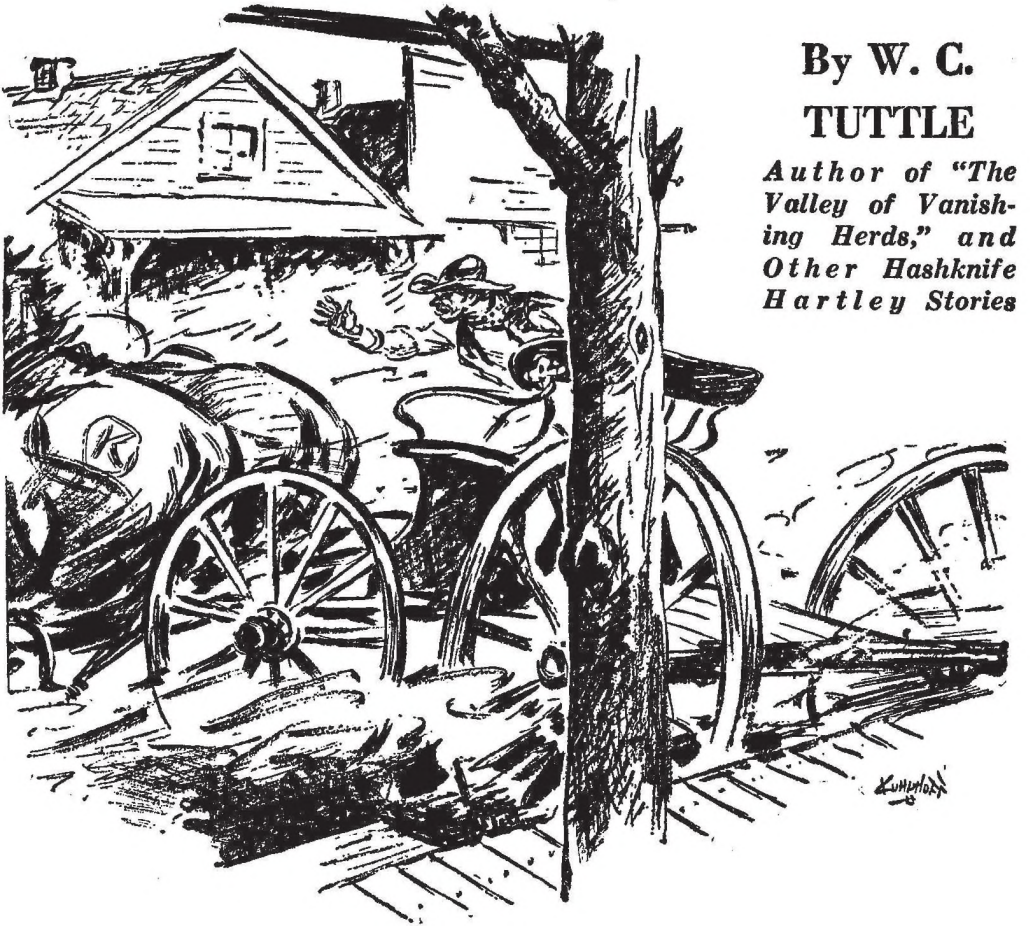
Several of the men nodded. "Jus' leetle w'ile ago," said one.

Hashknife leaned down closer. Inside the man's shirt-front was a piece of soggy paper, on which was a crude pencil drawing of what seemed to be a wolf. Hashknife spread it carefully on the bar and the Mexican bartender looked at it, his eyes narrowing.

"El Lobo!" he half-whispered. The men drew back. Hashknife looked at them and back at the drawing.

"The Wolf, eh?" he said quietly. "And who is the Wolf, my friend?"

The bartender shook his head. The



By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "The Valley of Vanishing Herds," and Other Hashknife Hartley Stories

Mexicans were leaving quietly one by one.

"Funny deal," said Sleepy. "What does it mean?"

Hashknife looked at the dead man, and back to the bartender.

"You'll notify the sheriff?" he asked.

"*Si, senor*—you bet."

Hashknife looked at his watch.

"That train is due here in about fifteen minutes," he said. "We better go over and wake up the depot agent; so he can flag it for us."

Leaning against the wind and rain they reached the little depot. There was no light. The agent slept upstairs and had long since gone to bed. There were three horses tied to a corner of the loading platform, the two cowboys almost bumped into them in the dark.

They climbed up on the platform and gained the shelter of the sloping eaves, where the cascading rain made quite a clatter. Evidently there was someone else there to meet that midnight train, and in the light of what had recently happened, Hashknife decided to be careful, until the place was investigated.

Their footsteps covered by the rain and wind, they went quietly to the front of the depot, and worked their way to a corner near the waiting room, when they heard voices close at hand. A man said:

"Don't drop that bottle. I tell yuh, there's no chance of a mistake. He'll be the only one off that train. We'll hold off until the train is goin', and then I'll walk up and ask him who he is. You fellers be right behind me, and as soon as he answers,

let him have it. Give him a-plenty. Then we'll pack him up the arroyo, dump him into the water, and by mornin' he'll be ten feet deep in silt. If he's got any valises, we'll go through 'em, and then sink 'em with him. I don't want any corpses bobbin' up on my back trail."

"You've got one now," reminded another voice. "Them Mexicans prob'ly took him over to the cantina."

"Don't worry about the Mexicans."

From far away came the eerie wail of a locomotive. A voice said:

"Cork that bottle; she's pretty close. Remember to keep in close to me. It's pretty damn dark, and we don't want any missin' in this deal."

Hashknife and Sleepy remained motionless, as the three dim figures moved forward, not over ten feet away. They could see the headlight of the engine through the drifting rain, and feel the dull rumble, as the train drew closer. Then the engine was past, and the cars were coming to a stop.

A vestibule opened and a man stepped down, carrying a valise. Then the vestibule closed and the train went on. When the last car had passed, the man was still there, as though wondering what to do next. Then the three men walked swiftly out, with Hashknife and Sleepy fairly close behind them.

"Are yuh lookin' for somebody?" one man asked.

"Why, yes, I am expecting—"

"Are you Bill McGee?"

"Yes, I am—"

It was then that Hashknife and Sleepy acted. In about three running strides they hit those three men from behind, both of them swinging heavy Colt guns as a follow-up to their crashing attack. Hashknife knocked one man halfway across the tracks. The middle one whirled, only to meet Hashkife's swinging gun-hand, and the butt of the gun, gripped in Hashknife's powerful right hand, landed solidly on his jaw.

In the meantime, Sleepy had knocked down the third man and sent him rolling along the soggy cinders. The newcomer merely stood there, as though rooted to the spot. Hashknife grasped him by the arm, and the man almost knocked Hashknife down with a hook to the left ear.

One of the surprised trio fired a random shot, and broke a window in the upstairs of the depot, Sleepy grabbed the man with the valise, and yelled, "C'mon, you damn fool—do yuh want to get shot?"

The man was willing to run. In fact, he was so willing that he dropped his valise and sprinted with Sleepy. An upstairs window was opened and a querulous voice yelled:

"Shoot through my winders, will yuh?"

Wham! Wham! A shotgun blared death and destruction out into the rain.

Hashknife caught up with Sleepy and the stranger, and quickly untied the horses.

"Can yuh ride?" asked Sleepy.

"I can certainly try it," replied the man. "But I don't understand—"

"Git on this one!" snapped Sleepy. A man came running toward them, but Sleepy fired twice at the dim figure and it went away, yelling orders to someone. Then Sleepy did a flying-mount, when a bullet sang over his head and banged against the front of the cantina.

THEN they slashed away through the mud, but pulled up a short distance beyond the cantina. This was strange territory to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"I'd like to know what this is all about," complained the man. "I certainly didn't expect to have any reception like this. It—it is ridiculous, gentlemen."

"Ain't it the truth?" chuckled Sleepy. "You ought to pick out good weather to do yore traveling."

"I—I didn't mean the weather."

"Before we do any more funny things," said Hashknife, "let's find out what this is all about. We're strangers here, too, my friend. But we heard three men plannin'

to murder you at the depot; so we broke up the deal."

"To murder me? There must be a mistake."

"Might be," admitted Hashknife. "Would yuh mind tellin' us just why yuh picked a place like Piute to get off that train."

"Why, I—I don't know just why I should. After all—"

"We didn't *have* to stop 'em from killin' yuh," reminded Hashknife.

"Yes, that's true—if they were going to kill me. Anyway, a lawyer sent me a telegram to meet him here. I rather expected him, instead of a—well, sort of a circus."

"A lawyer who lives in Windy City?" asked Hashknife.

"Why, yes—do you know him?"

"No—and I don't believe I ever will. He was killed shortly before your train arrived—by the same men who were goin' to kill you."

THE stranger was silent for several moments. They could hear voices over at the cantina.

Possibly those three men were looking for their horses.

"How do you know this?" asked the man.

"We saw the dead man in the cantina, and we heard those three men talk about it."

"Why, that is a terrible thing! They hang men for murder."

"Not until after they catch 'em. My name is Hartley, and my pardner's name is Stevens."

"I am William Michael McGee. I am glad to meet you both."

"Thank yuh, Bill," said Hashknife quietly. "You are goin' to Windy City?"

"I am—yes. It seems that I inherited the Circle G ranch, whatever that amounts to. It was left to me by the late Lincoln McGee, who happened to be a brother of my father. It is near Windy City, I believe."

"I reckon so. What was that lawyer's name?"

"James Chase. I have never met him. I believe he handled my uncle's affairs. But why on earth would anyone kill him?"

"Why would they kill you, Bill?" asked Sleepy.

"But they didn't—thank you both. I have no idea why they tried."

Hashknife got off, scratched a match on the lee side of his slicker and secured a momentary sight of the muddy road. Then he mounted and turned his horse.

"That buggy came over this road," he told them, "so it must lead to Windy City. C'mon; it's only about fifteen miles."

"Oh, I forgot my valise!" exclaimed Bill McGee.

"We forgot our war-sacks, too," said Sleepy. "Do yuh want to go back after that valise?"

"Thank you—no—not if it was filled with diamonds. Go right on—do not mind my baggage."

"Have you ever been in the cow country before, Bill?" asked Hashknife.

"Never in my life," replied Bill. "I have always been in stocks and bonds—that is, since I left school."

"We ain't never been there," said Sleepy.

"To school?" queried Bill.

"Nope—to stocks and bonds. Give yore bronc his head, Bill; and if he starts skatin' —let him skate—he'll come out of it. Yo're goin' to be awful wet before we reach Windy City."

"I shall live through it," replied Bill soberly. "Even a good wetting is better than a bullet in Piute."

It was so dark and the rain beating into their faces that they could only trust to the horses to keep on the road. It was like traveling against a black curtain. In fact, it was so black and disagreeable that they lost Bill McGee. His horse must have moved to one side, as they traveled in single file, and Sleepy's animal kept to the road. They were an hour out of Piute,

when Sleepy discovered this startling fact. He moved in to talk with Bill, and found he was talking to Hashknife, who was leading.

Of Bill McGee, there was no trace. They waited there in the rain, hoping that he might join them, but decided to go on, hoping to find Windy City.

"His bronc prob'ly headed for his home ranch," said Hashknife. "He'll show up —I hope."

IT WAS shortly after daybreak next morning when Nick Leary and Pancho Smith, humped under slickers in their buckboard, drove over the muddy road from Windy City to the Circle G ranch-house. Little arroyos, carrying too much water from the hills, cut away the road and made travel very bad indeed.

And it was still raining. Nick was a hard-faced, lean old rawhider, past sixty, and tough as rawhide. Pancho Smith, who claimed to be a Mormon from Utah, was a short, squat, middle-aged Mexican, with a three-dozen-hair mustache, which he cultivated assiduously. Pancho was a horse wrangler, and general handy man around the Circle G, and a mutilator of the king's English.

A wisp of wood smoke came from the kitchen stove-pipe, attesting to the fact that Smoky Summers, the ranch cook, was preparing breakfast. Smoky was also past sixty, grizzled and explosive. Until his advanced age, Smoky had been a top-hand cowboy, bronc rider, and at one time it was rumored that Smoky was one of a bad gang in southern Arizona.

Nick Leary got out of the buckboard, stretched his cramped muscles and looked at the kitchen doorway, where Smoky appeared, a skillet in his right hand. Nick made what might be construed as negative motions with his right hand toward Smoky, and told Pancho to stable the horses. Then Nick went slowly up to the kitchen.

"Where the hell-at is Bill McGee?" asked Smoky.

"We dunno," replied Nick.

"He never come?"

"Nope. The road's in bad shape. Vallejo Wash in a river, and every damn arroyo is runnin' full. Breakfast ready?"

"Who fer? I didn't know when yuh was a-comin'."

"Lemme git at that stove," said Nick, as he shoved past Smoky, who said:

"Rain? Huh! I 'member when I was down in Javy it rained—"

"You never was down in Javy," interrupted Nick. "Where-at is Javy?"

"Right where I left it. But where's Bill McGee?"

"He never came," growled Nick. "We spent all night, waitin' for him to come. Never got off one damn train all night. Why ain't breakfast ready?"

"For who?" queried Smoky, hauling out a strip of bacon. "How'd I know when you was comin'? I ain't no mind-reader. Yo're about the most unreasonable old woodchuck I ever knowed, Nick. Why ain't breakfast ready! Git away from that table and give me elbow room to cut bacon. Go into the other room and start a fire, if yuh want to git warm. So he never came, eh?"

"That," declared Nick, "is what I've been a-tryin' to git into yore thick head even since I got here. He—didn't — come. Plain ain't it?"

"Yea-a-ah, it's enlightnin'," admitted Smoky. "Hyah, Pancho."

"*Buenas dias,* Senor Summer," said Pancho soberly. "Breaksfas' ees not rady, I preserve."

"Anyway, yo're smarter than Nick," growled Smoky. "You mean, you persume, don't yuh?"

"Don' I am wheech?" queried Pancho.

"Aw, go to hell!" snorted Smoky. "He-e-ey! Go gouge the mud off yore boots! What do yuh think this is—a stable?"

"Fetch in some dry wood, Pancho," ordered Nick. "I'd go, but I've took off my boots."

"You've had yore boots off all yore life, if there was anythin' to do," declared Smoky.

"Beel McGee he don't came," informed Pancho.

"Much obliged, much obliged," drawled Smoky. "I was afraid he came but was transparent."

"Tramsparents?" queried Pancho.

"Go git the wood!" yelled Nick.

PANCHO went out to the wood-pile. Nick stretched his sock-clad feet to the fire and relaxed. Then he said, "I forgot to tell yuh somethin', Smoky. The depot agent at Piute sent a telegram to the sheriff that a man was murdered in Piute last night.

"He said they attacked the depot, but he drove 'em off."

"They?" queried Smoky.

"The murderers. Must have been a dozen or so, accordin' to the telegram. And was the sheriff sore? Well, it wasn't a nice night for a murder."

"I wonder who it was," said Smoky.

"The telegram said that the man had a livery-rig from Windy City, and the sheriff said he was sure John Chase went over there last evenin'."

"John Chase? Why, he was old Link's lawyer—and a damn fine feller, to boot. I—I wonder if it was *El Lobo*."

"I dunno, except what was in the telegram, Smoky. But what would Chase be doin' over at Piute. I wouldn't go over there to whip a cat."

"Mebbe somebody had some lawin' to be done. Sa-a-ay! Somethin' just struck me. Chase must have knowed that Bill McGee was comin' last night. He wrote all the letters to him, and he must have knowed—huh! Well, it ain't any of our business."

"Of course he knowed!" snorted Smoky. "He told me! How'd I know Bill McGee was comin', if Chase didn't tell me he was?"

"I jist don't know, Smoky."

"Huh. And if—well, it's all right with me. I never was built right to work puzzles."

Pancho brought in an armful of wood and threw it into the wood-box. Smoky deftly slid a panful of fried eggs onto a platter, added a pile of bacon, and placed it on the table.

"Biscuits ready in a minute," he said and walked over to the doorway.

Two riders were crossing the yard, looking toward the doorway. They were Hashknife and Sleepy. Smoky squinted at them, as they dismounted. Strangers for breakfast.

Hashknife smiled and said, "How about a little heat and food, pardner?"

"C'mon in," invited Smoky.

"Spuds burnin'!" yelled Nick.

"Oh, them damn spuds!"

Smoky ran back, followed by Hashknife and Sleepy, who removed their slickers at the doorway. Nick and Pancho looked closely at them, while Smoky juggled a hot pan and another platter.

"M' Gawd, you folks look like you'd been swimmin'!" exclaimed Nick.

"We had a shower last night," said Sleepy. "How far are we from Windy City?"

"About four miles," replied Nick. "Set down and have a snack."

"Much obliged," smiled Hashknife. "It sure smells good."

"The egg smell leetle beet bad," admitted Pancho.

"Them aigs is all right," declared Smoky. "Jist a little bit on the touchy side, but awful good. I allus figure that age brings out the best in an aig."

"That's what the hen thought," said Sleepy soberly. "Otherwise, she wouldn't set around for about three weeks. Man, that coffee is good!"

No questions were asked until everyone had finished eating, and cigarettes were burning. Then Nick said, "Which way did you fellers come?"

"Piute," said Hashknife. "Got lost in the storm."

"Piute, eh?" said Nick quietly. "How's everythin' over there?"

"All right. My name's Hartley and my pardner's name is Stevens. We've been workin' for the KB spread. They brought us to Piute late last evenin'. Right nice little town—Piute."

"Such a nice view from the front porch," added Smoky seriously.

Nick wanted to ask questions, but he wanted to be better acquainted, before going too far. This very tall cowboy, with big hands, and the level gray eyes seemed entirely at ease. And he wore a black-handled Colt in a very short holster, too. Stevens was shorter, broad of shoulder, and with innocent blue eyes in a grin-wrinkled face. He, too, wore a black-handled gun in a short holster.

"You must have gone all over the country last night," said Nick. "It's only about fifteen miles from here. Or didja start late?"

"About midnight."

Nick nodded. That telegram had come shortly after midnight. These two strangers might have been mixed up in the trouble at Piute. But far be it from Nick Leary to talk too much.

"What ranch is this?" asked Hashknife.

"Circle G," replied Smoky, "formerly owned by Lincoln McGee."

"Don't he own it now?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"Link McGee is dead," replied Smoky. "And a better man never cursed yuh for doin' the wrong thing. He was drug to death by his horse."

"And a feller named Bill McGee, a nephew of Link, owns the place," said Nick. "He was supposed to come in on a train last night, but he never showed up. Me and Pancho spent the night in Windy City, waitin' for him."

"What sort of a feller is Bill McGee?" asked Sleepy.

"We don't know anythin' about him, except his name. Old Link's lawyer handled everythin'. He told us that Bill was to come in on the passenger train a little after midnight last night, but he didn't come."

"What sort of a lookin' feller is that lawyer?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, he's about fifty," said Smoky. "Wore a little mustache. Mebbe he'd weigh about a hundred and fifty. Dressed nice. Kinda gray hair."

"He was killed in Piute last night," said Hashknife.

No one said anything. Hashknife started to roll another cigarette, as he said, "That's news—or ain't it?"

"News, yeah," admitted Nick. "As far as the name's concerned. The depot agent wired the sheriff that a man had been murdered, and that the killers had attacked the depot, but he drove 'em off."

Sleepy snorted. "Can yuh beat that?" he asked.

"Didn't they attack the depot?" asked Smoky.

"No," replied Hashknife, "they attacked Bill McGee."

"Now wait a minute!" said Nick. "This is gettin' worse, Hartley."

HASHKNIFE told them the whole story, from their first glimpse of the corpse, to the losing of Bill McGee, but he said nothing about the mark of *El Lobo* they took off the body.

"That," declared Smoky, "sounds like somethin' yuh read about. It ain't sense. Why would anybody try to kill Bill McGee, I ask yuh?"

"Why," countered Hashknife, "did that lawyer wire him to get off at Piute, instead of comin' here?"

"There yuh are!" exclaimed Nick. Smoky nodded soberly.

"El Lobo?" queried Pancho quietly. Smoky and Nick looked at him quickly.

"Who is this *El Lobo?"* asked Hashknife.

"What do you know about *El Lobo?"* asked Nick.

"I heard the name mentioned in Piute

last night," replied Hashknife. "It seemed to scare the Mexicans."

"Yeah, I reckon so," said Smoky, as he got out of his chair. "Go in the other room, while I clean up things, boys."

Pancho brought wood for the stove. Hashknife and Sleepy accepted some dry clothes from Nick, and they were soon comfortably seated around the stove, while Smoky banged the dishes in the kitchen.

"You asked about *El Lobo,*" reminded Nick.

"The name kinda interested me," replied Hashknife. "The Wolf. What's bad about him?"

"Plenty, Hartley. We ain't got any idea who he is. He might be the next man yuh talk to. He started out about a year ago, shortly after our mines started producin', and he's sure made it unsafe to have gold. You spoke about the Mexicans at Piute bein' scared of him. Well, it's the same with Americans. Yuh never know where he'll strike next.

"Two months ago Slim Farley, a puncher, made a war-talk against the Lobo in a Windy City Saloon. He told 'em that they was chicken-livered. Then he walked outside and got blasted. About three months ago Dan Evers, a prospector got a few drinks under his belt and made a talk against *El Lobo.* Next mornin' they found him roped to a corral fence, beaten to death. Pinned to his shirt was a picture of the wolf. That's his signature.

"His first job was to stick up the stage. He deliberately shot the guard, and made the driver pin the picture on the guard's shirt. He told the driver that he was *El Lobo,* and that he wasn't to be forgotten. Since then he's robbed banks, saloons, gamblin' games, and mine offices. So yuh can see why folks don't like to talk about him."

"That's very plain," agreed Hashknife. "But with all this, there must be a good description of the man."

"That's the worst of it, Hartley, you can't find two men who ever seen him alike. Scared, I reckon. But they all agree that he wears all black clothes and a black mask that covers his head. He's a good shot, and he never hesitates to shoot."

"An interestin' character," said Hashknife quietly.

"I'm not interested," said Nick. "I merely told yuh what I knew. Now what's to be done toward findin' Bill McGee? After all, he owns this spread."

"He'll show up," assured Hashknife. "You say that Lincoln McGee owned this ranch, and was dragged to death by his horse?"

"That's what the coroner's jury said."

"What'd you think?"

Nick looked sharply at Hashknife. "I wasn't on that jury, Hartley."

HASHKNIFE nodded and reached for his tobacco. It was evident that Nick Leary didn't believe that Lincoln McGee's death was accidental.

"Was this Bill McGee his only relative?" asked Hashknife.

"Nope. Dave Harris was his cousin. Dave runs the Lazy H spread. It's sort of a two-by-four layout, but Dave does all right."

"Was him and Link McGee good friends?"

"Oh, sure. Dave is a fine feller, and don't ask odds of anybody."

Smoky came to the doorway. "I jist thought," he said, "that if we looked at them three horses we might git an idea."

"That's right!" exclaimed Nick. "C'mon!"

Nick, Smoky and Pancho went down to the stable, where Pancho had taken the two horses, but came back in a few minutes.

"We don't know who owns 'em," said Smoky. "No local brands. And them two saddles ain't worth ten dollars apiece."

"We found that out," smiled Hashknife. "And if yuh don't mind, we'd like to leave 'em here, if any of yuh are goin' to town today."

"Sure, sure," agreed Nick. "I was goin' in today with the buckboard. Glad to have

yuh. I sure hope that Bill McGee shows up."

"Somebody'll find him," said Sleepy. "He's smart enough to keep travelin'."

"TUCSON" EDWARDS, th' big, bony-faced sheriff of Windy City, sat at his desk, half-asleep. It had been a hard night for Tucson, driving a buckboard team over that miserable road to Piute, in all that rain, and having to listen to the complaining voice of Doctor Miles, the coroner.

And another bad feature was the fact that Jim Chase had been a good friend to both of them, and they had to bring his body home, wrapped in a tarpaulin, and tucked into the back of the buckboard.

Buck Emory, the deputy, who didn't have to make the trip, was hunched on a chair, trying to restring an old guitar, which Buck had just acquired. Buck was small and wiry; a very serious-looking person, whose looks deceived everyone who didn't know Buck.

He was humming—

"Oh, bury me-e-e-e not on the lo-o-hone praree-e-e—"

"Can'tcha sing anythin' but that?" interrupted Tucson.

Buck looked up quickly. "I didn't know you liked singin'," he said.

"I like *singin'*," said Tucson.

"I like mine all right," sighed Buck. "When I was a young feller I sung in a church choir. Man, I could make them rafters ring. Then they had the organ fixed three times, tryin' to find out what the hell was wrong with the harmony."

"And it was you," said the sheriff.

"That," replied Buck, "was the final conclusion. Just what would yuh like to hear me sing?"

"I don't want to hear yuh sing! I don't want to hear yuh talk. I don't want to hear anythin'."

"How'd it be if I played yuh somethin' on m' gittar?"

"You can't play a guitar, Buck."

"I can't?" Buck looked appealing at the sheriff. "Then what'd yuh let me spend more'n a dollar for them new strings for? You knowin' that all the time—and jist lettin' me go, squanderin' m' money for nothin'. Why, I wouldn't—huh!"

Buck's discourse ended in a grunt. In the doorway of the office was Bill McGee, hatless, his face scratched, clothes torn. In fact, he looked as though he had tangled with a wild-cat.

"Are you the sheriff?" asked Bill McGee huskily.

"Thank yuh — no," replied Buck. "This'n is the sheriff."

"Oh—I see. Well," Bill McGee wet his lips with his tongue and came in a little further. Buck reached out a foot and slid a chair over to Bill. In the light of day, Bill McGee was rather a good-looking young man, but badly disheveled. He sat down and looked at Tucson. "I'm Bill McGee," he said.

"Yo're Bill McGee?" queried the sheriff.

"By choice, he's a little hard of hearin'," explained Buck quietly.

"Yes, I am Bill McGee."

"He heard yuh, Bill," said Buck. "You look mussed a little."

"Well, well!" exclaimed the sheriff. "So yo're Bill McGee."

"Is there anything wrong about it?" queried Bill wearily.

"Wrong? Well, no, I don't reckon so. They were lookin' for you last night, but yuh didn't come."

"I—I got off at Piute about midnight," said Bill.

The sheriff blinked and signaled to Buck to keep still.

"Oh, at Piute," he said pleasantly. "Nice place—Piute."

"You can have it," said Bill.

"He can't bring it here," said Buck quickly. "We ain't got room."

"And then what happened?" asked the sheriff.

"Things—happened," admitted Bill McGee.

"Yes, indeed," agreed the sheriff.

Bill looked at him. "How did you know?" he asked.

"Damn it, don't beat around the bush?" snapped the sheriff. "How do I know? Didn't I have to go over there in the rain, draggin' through all that mud, and bring a dead man back with me? How did I know! What happened to you, Bill McGee?"

"I got lost in the dark," said Bill McGee. "I lost the two men who were with me, too. What a night! And then I fell off the horse about a mile from here and had to walk. I liked it better."

Buck made clucking sounds. "Yore shoes are a mess," he said.

"Keep out of this, Buck," ordered the sheriff. "What happened to you? Why did you get off at Piute?"

"A Mr. Chase, a lawyer, sent me a telegram, asking me to get off there."

"Was—was he dead when you got off?"

"I presume he was. The two men told me he was."

"The two men who killed him?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"I do not believe they did. You see, three men were at the depot, going to kill me. No, do not ask me why, because I do not know. At any rate these other two men attacked the three and treated them rather roughly. Then they made me get on a horse with them, and we started for Windy City, but I got lost from them in the dark and rain."

"What was their names?" asked the sheriff.

"They told me their names were Hartley and Stevens."

"They told yuh—Hartley and Stevens? I'll be damned!"

"I've felt that way ever since I got off that train."

"You've felt how?" asked the sheriff.

"Damned," replied Bill McGee soberly.

Buck chuckled quietly, while the sheriff tried to frame another leading question. Finally he said, "Where is your horse, McGee?"

"I do not own a horse," replied Bill.

"You said yuh was on one, didn't yuh?"

"Oh, certainly. But that was one we stole, I believe. When I fell off, he went on."

Tucson Edwards opened and closed his big hands. Wasn't it bad enough to have to haul the body of one of his best friends all the way from Piute, without having Bill McGee on his hands, with his disjointed story?

"They hang men for stealin' horses down here, Bill," Buck remarked.

"What brand was on that horse?" asked the sheriff.

"I haven't any idea—I never looked," replied Bill McGee. "But what difference does that make?"

"None," said Buck soberly. "They hang yuh just as high for one as the other. What color was the animal, Bill?"

"Sort of a grayish pink."

"My Gaud!" gasped Buck. "Pink? Are yuh sure it wasn't a elephant?"

"Shut up, Buck!" ordered the sheriff. "Bill, you own the Circle G spread don'tcha?"

"I believe I own something like that," replied Bill, who was rapidly tiring of the questions. "I would be very glad if you could tell me where I could get a meal. After that I need a bath and some sleep."

"Go up to the Windy City Hotel," advised Buck. "They'll feed and sleep yuh, but you'll have to do yore own bathin'—if any. It's just up the street a ways."

"Thank you very much," said Bill McGee wearily. "Good day, gentlemen."

Bill McGee went up the street, limping slightly. Buck tested the new strings on his guitar and squinted at the thoughtful face of the big sheriff. He looked at Buck and said, "Now don't ask me any damnfool questions, Buck."

"Why should I?" queried Buck. "I know more answers than you do."

"Grayish-pink horses!"

"Strawberry-roan, Tucson. They *are* kinda pink. My, my, that poor boy had

an awful time at Piute. Hartley and Stevens, too."

The sheriff dug into a desk drawer and took out a telegram. It was from Bob Marsh, secretary of the cattlemen's association, and read:

WATCH FOR A MAN NAMED HARTLEY. I WILL BET Y'U A NEW HAT THAT HE CAN TIE A CAN ON YOUR PET WOLF. MY REGARDS TO HARTLEY AND STEVENS.

"I wondered what that telegram meant," said the sheriff. "Maybe Bob Marsh knowed that Hartley was on his way over here. But what the hell is my pet wolf?"

"*El Lobo*—mebbe," suggested Buck quietly.

"I'll take that bet," declared the sheriff. "I'll make it a forty-dollar Stetson."

"And it'll be damn cheap—even if yuh lose," said Buck.

"I never thought about losin'," said the sheriff. "Mebbe I better not mention any price."

"Unless yuh win, Tucson," smiled Buck. "How about me playin' and singin' somethin' for yuh? I've got this gittar all tuned."

"Sing to yourself—I'm goin' to get a drink."

WINDY CITY was typical of the cattle country, and was also the outfitting point for the mines of the Blacktail Range, only a few miles to the south. The opening of the mines had given Windy City a new lease on life, and had caused an influx of miners, speculators, gamblers and some very undesirable citizens. However, Windy City did not worry over the morals of its population.

The main point of interest in the town was the Gem Saloon and Gambling Emporium, which also occupied the biggest building. The owner and proprietor was a rather picturesque character, who had a passion for turquoise jewelry. He even had the gems carved into buttons for his shirts and vests. He was known as Turquoise Taylor.

There were other, smaller saloons, where games of chance were offered to the public, but the Gem got the bulk of the business The main street was only about six blocks long, unpaved and rutty in dry weather, and a sea of mud during the rains. Ore wagons rumbled through the street, while prospector's burros and wagon teams vied at the hitch-racks with cow ponies. Sun, wind and sand had scoured every vestige of paint from the buildings, and many of the business signs were perfect examples of sand-blasting.

Hashknife and Sleepy came to town with Nick Leary in the Circle G buckboard, and halted at the Windy City Hotel. They found that Bill McGee was registered there, but had gone to bed. Nick decided to let him sleep. He asked Hashknife and Sleepy to visit them at the ranch, and drove back home.

They secured a room and then went sight-seeing, in spite of the fact that they had had no sleep the night before. They looked over the Gem Saloon, which was not so busy in the afternoon, wandered down the street, and gravitated to the sheriff's office.

Tucson Edwards, the sheriff, and Buck Emory were talking with Dave Harris, when Hashknife and Sleepy came in.

"Howdy, gents. C'mon in and set down," said the sheriff.

"Howdy, Sheriff," smiled Hashknife. "Yo're Tucson Edwards. My name's Hartley, and my pardner's name is Stevens."

The sheriff introduced them to Buck and to Dave Harris.

"You came in with Nick Leary, didn't yuh?" asked Tucson.

"Yeah," replied Hashknife. "We kinda looked around the town and then dropped in here."

"Glad yuh did. Don't hurry away, Dave."

"I've got to mosey back to the ranch,"

said Dave Harris. "See yuh later. Pleased to have met you gents."

After Dave Harris left, Tucson Edwards said, "I see that the heir to the Circle G got to town."

Hashknife smiled slowly and nodded. "Yeah, we hear he's at the hotel."

"You fellers must have had quite a time at Piute last night."

"You heard about that?" queried Hashknife soberly.

The sheriff nodded slowly. "I had to go over there and bring back the body of one of my best friends, Hartley. Some of it we got there, some of it from Bill McGee. You didn't know the dead man, didja?"

"We don't even know who he was, Sheriff."

"He was Jim Chase, our best lawyer, Hartley."

"I kinda figured he was Jim Chase. Bill McGee had a telegram from Chase. That's why he stopped at Piute."

"Did somebody actually try to kill Bill McGee?" asked Buck.

"They intended to, I reckon," smiled Hashknife.

"What was Bill McGee talkin' about, when he spoke about ridin' stolen horses?" asked Buck.

Hashknife and Sleepy laughed.

"We swiped the three horses from the three gents who were goin' to kill Bill McGee," explained Hashknife.

"Why," asked the sheriff curiously, "did you gents step in and help Bill McGee. You didn't know who he was, didja?"

The odds was three to one—and in a surprise attack," said Hashknife. "Would you stand there and let three men murder one man. We heard 'em say what their plan was, before the train even whistled for the station. It was up to us to prevent a murder, Sheriff."

"Why, of course; I jist wanted to know. I'm not blamin' yuh. Hell, all I want is to find the man who killed Jim Chase."

"What about the Lobo?" asked Hashknife.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "Well, what about him?" he countered.

Hashknife drew out the wrinkled, faded drawing of the wolf and laid it on the sheriff's desk.

"That was tucked inside Chase's shirt," he said.

The two officers examined the paper carefully.

"That puts a different light on the matter," he said "I didn't know the Lobo was mixed up in this."

"Is that his trade-mark?" asked Hashknife, pointing at the paper. Both men nodded soberly. The sheriff said, "He always leaves one, Hartley."

The sheriff leaned back, opened a desk drawer and took out the telegram from Bob Marsh, which he handed to Hashknife.

"A dollar agin a doughnut, it's from Bob Marsh," said Sleepy.

Hashknife smiled and showed him the telegram.

"He don't need to send me any of his danged old regards," said Sleepy.

"I'd like to buy him a new hat," said the sheriff.

"Make it six and seven-eights—the pinhead!" snorted Sleepy.

"Well," yawned Hashknife," I reckon we better have somethin' to eat and then get some sleep. It's a long time since we hit the hay."

"What do yuh think of Bob Marsh's ideas?" asked the sheriff.

"Not much; that hat might be too expensive. We'll see yuh later."

AN HOUR later, while they were preparing for bed, Sleepy said, "I knowed Bob Marsh had a scheme in his brain—or in what he uses to do his thinkin'. Sendin' you a telegram that he'd bet yuh a new pair of boots, and a salary to both of us, that you can't find out who killed Old Lincoln McGee.

He knowed about the Lobo—the danged schemer."

"Maybe he thinks the Lobo killed Link McGee," suggested Hashknife.

"Yeah—now that's an idea. He's smarter than we are, pardner."

"That's right, Sleepy; he's the cattlemen's secretary, while we're just a pair of driftin' punchers, goin' nowhere, and havin' all our lives to get there."

Sleepy grunted and continued to undress. He knew that they would never leave that country, until Hashknife had unmasked the Lobo, even if they never found out who killed Link McGee. For years these two had ridden across the ranges together, always looking for what might be found on the other side of a hill. Both of them were top-hands with cattle, but they never worked long in any place. They needed little, asked little.

Theirs always seemed to be the trail to trouble. Any sort of a range mystery intrigued Hashknife. It was a puzzle to be solved, no matter how much danger was encountered in making the solution. Sleepy analyzed nothing; he merely followed Hashknife, with a ready pair of fists or a blazing gun. It was all the same to Sleepy, as long as there was action.

In many places they were marked men, but they grinned at danger, and came back to face it. Life had convinced them that no man dies until his number is up. Death had struck at them in many ways, but they always came out unscathed. Hashknife's motto was: Run when you're wrong; shoot when yo're right. At odd times they worked for the Cattlemen's Association, but it was not to their liking, and the generous remuneration meant little to them. They only stayed long enough to clear up a mystery, and usually left as quietly as they came.

Few men ever met the tall, gray-eyed Hashknife—and forgot him. He seemed to look into the back of their minds, and even the most confirmed liars found themselves telling the truth. Bad men, filled with the urge to kill, looked into his eyes and changed their minds. But those same gray eyes could be kind, sympathetic or filled with mirth, because Hashknife was only a normal human being, with no grudge against any human.

NEXT morning Bill McGee, somewhat refreshed by a long, unbroken sleep, examined his raiment. Rain, mud and mesquite barbs had reduced his tailored suit to a minimum. And his brown oxfords were a grimy mass of stains, scratches and cuts. He dressed and went downstairs, where he inquired of the hotel proprietor as to where he might find a clothing store.

"Mebbe the general store can fix yuh up," suggested the hotel man. "We don't go in for much style in Windy City, but Sam Kalin might be able to fix yuh up."

Bill thanked him and went out to the general store, which was decidedly not a haberdashery. Sam Kalin, fat, middle-aged and near-sighted, looked over his prospective customer smilingly.

"A new suit for you? I am sorry. We do not carry suits. I can take your measure—and in about three weeks, to a month—"

"No good," declared Bill McGee. "I need something now."

"You are staying here?" queried Sam.

"I believe," replied Bill, "that I own the Circle G ranch."

"Oh, you are Mr. McGee? Well, well! I knew your uncle for years. And a finer man never lived. For a ranch you do not want a suit. Overalls, boots, shirt. Nobody wears suits on a ranch. And for Sunday or for a dance, I can take your measure and have a suit here in—"

"Three weeks to a month," finished Bill. "I have never worn overalls, but I don't mind. You have boots, too?"

"I have everything, Mr. McGee. Even a gun, if you need one, and a classy belt, too. Chaps? I have several, with or without conchas. And hats? My, my, such a business as I do with Stetson. Your uncle never paid less than forty dollars for his hats."

"Forty dollars for a hat?" exclaimed Bill McGee. "Ridiculous!"

"Ah, yes, but a man only needs maybe one in a lifetime. I'll show you."

Hashknife and Sleepy had breakfast at the hotel and came down the street, just in time to meet Bill McGee, as he emerged from the general store. But what a different Bill McGee! Sam Kalin had sold Bill McGee. From his white Stetson to his very high-heel boots, he was as new as one second after twelve o'clock on New Years morning.

"Bill!" exclaimed Sleepy. "You went Arizona awful quick."

"Hello," said Bill, self-conscious to the nth degree, as he tried to balance on his high heels. "You knew I got here?"

"Yeah, we heard yesterday. How didja get lost from us?"

"I guess it was the horse," said Bill, with a little smile. "He had a lot of ideas. I—I fell off just outside of town and had to walk in."

"Has anybody shot at yuh since night before last, Bill?" asked Hashknife.

"Not a soul, Mr. Hartley."

"I see yo're ready for the next one," said Sleepy, pointing at the holstered gun.

"Oh, this," smiled Bill. "The man in the store said I should have one; so I took it. I notice that lots of people wear them. The same thing applies to those boots. They decidedly are not comfortable, and I have already discovered that they require practice. Twice I sat down unintentionally, and twice I knocked the hat off accidently. I suppose that even this gun requires practice. I feel as though I were on my way to a masquerade."

"You look all right, Bill," assured Hashknife.

"Well! Here comes Nick Leary and Pancho," announced Sleepy.

The buck-board team swerved in beside the wooden sidewalk and came to a stop.

"Anybody seen our new boss?" asked Nick, who had paid no attention to Bill McGee.

"He's right here, Nick," replied Sleepy, pointing at Bill. Nick and Pancho stared at Bill McGee, who looked very uncomfortable.

"Bill," said Hashknife, "I'd like to have yuh meet Nick Leary and Pancho Smith, two of yore hired hands. Gents, this is Bill McGee."

They all shook hands solemnly. Nick said, "My Gawd, I was lookin' for a tenderfoot, and I find a rawhider. Little new but not gaudy. Bill McGee, we're glad to meetcha. Say somethin', Pancho."

"*Buenas dias, senor.* How am I, you hope?"

"Thank you very much," said Bill. "I am very glad to meet both of you."

"He-e-ey, where didja buy that gun, Bill?" asked Nick.

"In the store, where I bought my clothes."

"From Sam Kalin, eh? Hold the lines, Pancho, I'm goin' in there and put m' mark on that Sam Kalin. Sellin' that old bulldog forty-four to Bill McGee! It ain't worth the first shell that busts it. What'd he charge you for it?"

"Twelve dollars—and a bargain, he said. But it is good enough for me."

"But—" Nick hesitated. "Bill, have you ever used a gun?"

"No, I never have. I—I'd hate to kill a man, you see."

"Well—mebbe you better keep it—as long as yuh hate killin'."

"I'm theenk I'm tich him for shoot," said Pancho soberly.

"You?" snorted Nick. "No, yuh don't. One wild shooter is enough on any one spread. Bill, any time yore ready, we'll take yuh out to the ranch."

"Thank you, Mr. Leary—I am all ready. All I own is the clothes I have on my back. My suit was beyond repair. Shall we go now?"

"Hop in, pardner."

"Thank you. And Mr. Hartley and Mr. Stevens, my belated thanks to both of you for what you did at Piute. Perhaps I can,

in some small way, repay you some day."

"Yo're welcome, Bill; we'll see yuh later."

They went over to the feed-corral, where they looked over several head of horses, before they found two of their liking. After a lot of dickering they bought the two horses.

"You've got two broncs that'll go far and fast," declared the dealer. "How are yuh fixed for saddles?"

They had none. He took them to the livery-stable, where they found two that were satisfactory. The sale was made quickly, and both horses were stabled, the saddles hanging behind the stalls.

"When we want to ride," explained Hashknife, "we start fast."

"I know how it is," confided the stable-keeper. "Once I had five sheriffs in one state all a-lookin' for me at the same time."

"Didn't get yuh, eh?" queried Sleepy.

"Nope—I rec'nized the advantage of speed. It's a asset, gents."

"It sure is," agreed Sleepy soberly. "See yuh later."

In spite of being a trading center for both cattle and mining, Windy City usually took a siesta about noon. Hashknife and Sleepy sat in the shade of the hotel porch, tilted back against the hotel wall. An ore wagon, dragging a trailer, went down the street, the six horses lugging heavily.

Turquoise Taylor came from the Gem Saloon, crossed the street, being careful to not soil the sheen of his patent-leather shoes, and went to the Windy City Bank, about a block above the hotel. Turquoise carried a leather money-bag.

They saw Buck Emory and the sheriff leave their office. The sheriff went across the street to a little restaurant, while Buck came up the street to the hotel. He sat down beside Hashknife and tilted his chair.

"Kinda lazy weather," he remarked. "I reckon I'm a sundodger."

"Buck," said Hashknife, "you've lived here a long time, ain't yuh?"

"Too long, Hartley," he replied. "I know everybody by their first name."

"Have you," queried Hashknife, "ever suspected anybody of bein' the Lobo?"

Buck smiled slowly. "Everybody—except me and the sheriff."

"Who has the sheriff suspected—if any?"

"Everybody—except me and him," replied Buck soberly. "I trust him and he trusts me—I think. But I wouldn't take a chance on anybody else."

"Maybe you're right," said Hashknife. "Buck, I'd like to have you tell me what

you know about the death of Lincoln McGee."

"Well, I'll tell yuh about that, Hartley. It was—"

Buck stopped. From somewhere came the unmistakable sound of a shot. The three men tilted forward and the front legs of their chairs hit the floor of the porch exactly together.

"Where did that sound like it was?" asked Buck.

As they stepped to the edge of the sidewalk, Turquoise Taylor ran out of the bank, looked wildly around and yelled at them, "Come up here—quick!"

The three men sprinted toward the bank, while several men ran from the Gem Saloon. The sheriff had heard it in the restaurant, and was coming.

"The Lobo!" gasped the gambler. "Buck, he must have had his horse at the back door. Get somebody after him—he killed Ed Martin!"

Buck whirled to meet the sheriff.

"I'll get the horses!" he yelled. "It's the Lobo—he got Martin."

Ed Martin was the cashier of the bank, and a man well liked in Windy City. His body was sprawled on the floor, inside the railing, and near his right hand was a fully loaded Colt .38. Quickly the bank filled, as the sheriff questioned the gambler.

"All he got was my money," said Turquoise. "He came in the back door, while I was talkin' to Ed. Neither of us seen him, until he said:

" 'Toss me that bag and be damn quick!'

"Well, I tossed it to him. I didn't have any gun on me. Hell, yuh never look for a thing like that in broad daylight. Then he says to Ed, 'Scoop up all the money in sight and put it in a sack. And make it damn fast!'

"Ed stepped over to obey orders, and yanked a gun out of a drawer. It was a fool move on his part. The Lobo shot and Ed went down. I guess he knew it was time to move—after firin' that shot—so he backed up and went out, slamming the door behind him."

The sheriff nodded grimly; he liked Ed Martin.

"Let's get this straight, Mr. Taylor," said Hashknife. "Where was the Lobo standin'?"

"Just about here," replied Taylor. "I was over here, and Martin was right there. He turned and went to that half-open drawer."

The crowd were watching Hashknife, wondering what his interest in the case might be. Hashknife nodded. He had already examined the bullet hole just back of Ed Martin's right ear. The cashier had been killed instantly. Buck was yelling from the street, and the sheriff ran out, mounted his horse and the two officers rode away together. Doctor Miles, the coroner, came and took charge of the body. He was a little, nervous person, with a thin, piping voice.

"A nice state of affairs, I must say!" he exclaimed. "Ed Martin, one of our best citizens. That Lobo should be boiled in oil."

Several of the men helped carry the body down to the doctor's home, and Hashknife went along. At the first opportunity he asked the doctor if he intended recovering the bullet.

"What for?" asked doctor.

"It might help to convict the Lobo, Doc."

"Help—how?"

"Yuh never can tell, Doc."

"Hm-m-m-m! Well, who in the devil are you, anyway?"

"I'm the man who wanted to see that bullet," replied Hashknife soberly.

"Yes, yes, I see. Well, I—I'll see about it. Too busy right now."

Hashknife came in for discussion almost as much as the murder of Ed Martin. Folks wanted to know why this tall cowboy, a stranger to Windy City, asked Turquoise Taylor so many questions. What business of his was it where every man in the tragedy had stood and what they had done?

One old ranger said, "That nosey high-pockets is sure breedin' a bullet hole in his hide."

In the Gem Saloon, men questioned Turquoise Taylor, who said nothing, except that he lost nine hundred dollars in the deal. He described the Lobo as about six feet tall, weight about a hundred and seventy, and wearing the complete black outfit. No one expected the sheriff's office to do more than tire their horses. The Lobo, they admitted, was a "slick hombre," and they drank to his sudden demise.

If Turquoise Taylor was annoyed over Hashknife's questioning, he did not show it. "Cougar" Jones, owner of a small mine, leaned against the bar and stated that Torquoise done exactly the right thing.

"No man's life ain't worth nine hundred dollars," he declared. "That hombre will shoot."

"He ain't never shot you," said Dave Harris soberly.

"No, and I ain't goin' to give him no chance," said Cougar. "Anyway, I ain't got nothin' he wants."

"He'll wait until yuh strike it rich on yore mine," said Dave.

"He'll be too damn old to stick anybody up, I reckon," said Cougar.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy went into the general store, and Sam Kalin hastened to sell them some tobacco and a box of cartridges.

"My, my, it is awful!" he exclaimed. "They kill Ed Martin—a fine man. I have known him for years. My daughter and his daughter grew up together. What will she do? Jane is only nineteen—and pretty. She don't like men, I guess. Dave Harris he likes her. Turquoise Taylor, too. But he is a gambler. Very nice gentleman, but a gambler. She has no mother. I guess I have her come to my house. Her father murdered—that is awful for a girl."

"Mr. Kalin," said Hashknife, "who would you suspect as bein' the Lobo?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the man quickly. "Don't ask me that! I never suspect anybody. It is not good to suspect—unless you have evidence.

"Well, if yuh happen to meet him," said Hashknife seriously, "just tell him I'm lookin' for him, will yuh?"

"Certainly, I—but I never met him. I wouldn't know him. Believe me, I wouldn't know him. You joke with me, eh?"

"Sure," laughed Hashknife, and they walked outside.

"They scare easy," remarked Sleepy. "But yuh can't blame 'em."

They met Tucson Edwards, the sheriff, and he asked them to go with him to the office.

The sheriff closed the door, took a chunk of lead from his pocket and rolled it across his desk to Hashknife.

"Doc Miles said you wanted it, Hartley," he remarked. "That's the bullet from Ed Martin's head."

It was a perfectly innocent-looking piece of lead, rather badly battered. Hashknife examined it closely, placed it in his pocket and drew out his tobacco and papers.

"Just what didja want that for?" queried the sheriff.

Hashknife smiled slowly and looked at the sheriff.

"Curiosity, Sheriff. The Lobo shoots a forty-four."

"What good does that fact do us?" asked the sheriff.

"How many men do you know who pack a forty-four?" asked Hashknife.

The sheriff squinted thoughtfully for several moments.

"I can't think of a danged one—offhand, Hartley."

"They're not popular, Sheriff. Ask in the stores, and you'll find that they seldom sell a box. It might give us a clue. You'll find that once in a while somebody packs a thirty-eight, but the most men carry a forty-five. Thirty-eight users mostly wear a shoulder-holster."

"I'll talk to Sam Kalin," said the sheriff quickly. "He sells most of the ammunition used around here. I'll do it right now."

They walked back to the general store and asked Sam Kalin, who looked over his shelves thoughtfully. There was only one box of .44 caliber revolver ammunition, and that was time-stained.

"I almost never sell forty-fours," admitted Sam. "Funny, eh? I don't sell much thirty-eights, too. Mostly forty-fives. But I can't remember who bought forty-fours. I'll watch now, you bet."

They went back to the office. The sheriff was very unhappy over the killing of Ed Martin, and his inability to curb the Lobo.

"It makes it bad for my office," he complained. "The public expects me to run

down the Lobo. You can see how hard that is, Hartley."

"I didn't hear Turquoise Taylor's description," said Hashknife.

"Turquoise said that as near as he could see, the man was about six feet, one or two inches tall. Turquoise is about six feet one inch himself. The next one will prob'ly say he was five feet nine inches. Folks get scared and see things wrong."

"Turquoise Taylor don't look like a man that was easy to scare," said Sleepy. "Maybe he's got the height about right."

"I dunno. Old Jack Means was the driver of the stage, when the Lobo held him up and shot the guard. Old Jack ain't the scarey kind. Lobo made him pin that damned trade-mark on the guard's shirt; so Jack had a good look at him. He said the man wasn't six feet tall. In fact, he said he wasn't over five feet, seven inches."

"Whatever size he is," said Hashknife, "he's a *mucho malo hombre.* He killed Jim Chase and he killed Ed Martin only hours apart. We've got to stop that *pelicano,* before he ruins the census of Windy City."

"I'm sure glad yuh said 'we'," said the sheriff. "I can't see any chance, myself. Well, I've got two inquests to arrange for; so I better get busy. I'll have to put you fellers on the stand in the Chase inquest, because you seen him right after he was murdered."

"That's all right," said Hashknife. "We'll be around handy, Sheriff."

THINGS were quiet that night around Windy City. Hashknife and Sleepy spent the evening around the Gem Saloon, listening to conversation. Ed Martin was a well-liked citizen, as was Jim Chase, and the people were in an ugly mood. They wanted El Lobo brought to justice. But most of the conversation was quiet. For all they knew El Lobo could have been any person in the saloon.

They talked with Turquoise Taylor who was greatly concerned over the death of Ed Martin.

"He was a fine man," declared the gambler. "We'll all miss Ed Martin. His mistake was to make a break for a gun. But we all make mistakes sometimes in our lives."

"We do," agreed Hashknife. "I understand that Martin has a daughter."

Turquoise nodded slowly. "A wonderful girl, Hartley. I don't know what she will do now."

"Did Jim Chase leave a family?"

"No, he was a bachelor," replied the gambler. "Jim was a fine man and a good lawyer. I wish somebody will tell me why he was killed."

"Why did three men try to kill Bill McGee?" asked Sleepy.

Turquoise shook his head. "Nobody knows. Personal matters, I suppose."

"Do yuh believe El Lobo killed Chase?" asked Hashknife.

"If he had he'd have left his trademark," replied Turquoise.

"Proud of it, I reckon," said Hashknife.

"The man must be crazy," declared Turquoise. "He can't keep this up, Hartley. Nobody is safe as long as he is alive. I'm afraid to have money in my safe. Hell, it isn't even safe to take it to the bank. I found that out. I'd have willingly given up that nine hundred dollars to have saved the life of Ed Martin."

"These things make it tough for the sheriff," remarked Hashknife.

"Certainly it does. Tucson Edwards is an honest, efficient sheriff. But what can he do? The public will blame him for not catching or killing the Lobo. I wouldn't want his job—not for any money."

"Me neither," agreed Hashknife. "I don't want any truck with that *El Lobo,* I'll tell yuh that much."

"I don't blame you, Hartley; neither do I."

Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel. Their room was on the second floor, with windows facing the main street.

Sleepy lighted the lamp, while Hashknife stretched out on the bed. He seemed to concentrate better in that position. Sleepy sprawled in a chair and rolled a cigarette.

"I'd hate to be *El Lobo,* and have that gang at the Gem get their hands on me," remarked Sleepy.

"Yeah, that's right," said Hashknife. "But the only way they'd ever get him is to have him walk in and give himself up. And *El Lobo* is no fool, Sleepy."

"I hope to tell yuh, he ain't," agreed Sleepy. "I'd like—"

Slowly Sleepy got up from his chair and walked over by the door. On the floor was a square of soiled white paper. He brought it back to the light and read aloud:

"Nobody but a fool would ignore this warning. Get out."

Hashknife sat up quickly and reached for the paper. Below the penciled warning was the crude drawing of a howling wolf.

"It must have been put under the door, and we kicked it aside, when we came in," said Sleepy. Hashknife nodded and laid the paper on the bed beside him.

"We've got him scared, Sleepy," he said.

"Got *him* scared?" queried Sleepy. "My Gawd, what about me? My skin is just like a nut-meg grater—from goose-pimples. What makes yuh think we've got him scared?"

"I've never heard of him warnin' anybody before, Sleepy."

"Well mebbe—yuh don't suppose he's tired of killin' folks, do yuh?"

"Be nice, if he was," smiled Hashknife.

"You take it so easy," sighed Sleepy. "Nobody but a fool would ignore this warnin'. What do yuh think of that?"

"I think he made a mistake, Sleepy.

"Just how?"

"He overlooked the fact that there are two fools, Sleepy. Let's go to bed—and let him do the worryin'."

JANE MARTIN was so shocked over the death of her father that she was unable to make any arrangements for the funeral. Several of the women had stayed with her, and the house had been thronged with sympathetic people. Jane had come to Windy City when her aunt, the last known relative had died in Chicago.

That morning she had finally decided to take the body back to Chicago, and had slipped away from the house alone, in order to talk it over with the sheriff and Doctor Miles. Jane was the hope and despair of every cowboy in the Windy City country. Her mother had been Spanish, and from her Jane had inherited a grace and beauty seldom seen in the rough cattle country.

As she came down the street toward the hotel, Bill McGee, Nick and Pancho drove up and tied their buck-board team. Several men were coming over from the Gem Saloon, and none of them were any too steady on their feet. Among them was Cougar Jones, unkempt, half-drunk. The men got out of the buck-board. Bill McGee was wearing the clothes he had bought at the general store, and he was also wearing that gun, which Nick didn't like.

Jane reached the group in front of the hotel, and was trying to pass, when Cougar Jones lurched in front of her. He didn't know who she was. Not that he would have cared. He said, "My, my, what have we here? A pretty girl! Hello, swee'heart."

Jane drew back quickly. One of the men said, "Let her alone, Cougar."

"This is my business," snarled Cougar. "Keep out of it."

Jane tried to pass again, but he grabbed her by the arm. As she tried to wrench away, Bill McGee grasped Cougar by the neckerchief, whirled him around, planted a foot in the small of his back and shoved hard. Cougar Jones landed in the street on his hands and knees.

Hashknife and Sleepy, just out of bed, heard the commotion and ran to the open window, just in time to see Cougar rear back and draw his gun. The crowd scattered, except Bill McGee, who drew his gun, too. Cougar's first shot smashed into

the wall of the hotel. Bill McGee's first shot broke a window in the upstairs of the Gem, and the cheap gun flew out of his hands. Jane Martin was running as fast as she could down the street, and everybody else was trying to get out of the way.

The buck-board team broke the tie-rope and began backing up across the street. Cougar Jones was trying to draw a bead on Bill McGee, but Bill was diving straight for Cougar Jones. Cougar shot, but the bullet went high above Bill McGee's head, and the next moment Bill McGee landed on Cougar Jones.

The buck-board team backed into the Gem porch, where a man caught the bridles of the horses and stopped them. In the meantime Bill McGee, who showed little science, but plenty of ambition, was beating Cougar Jones over the head with his fists, and Cougar Jones was howling for mercy.

A few moments later Tucson Edwards, the sheriff, arrived on the scene and separated the combatants. Hashknife and Sleepy came downstairs and went into the street. Bill McGee, Pancho and Nick were there, but Cougar had been taken to the Gem for first-aid.

"You missed somethin', Hartley," said Nick. "It was a dinger."

"We saw it from the window," said Hashknife. "What started it?"

"That man insulted a lady," said Bill. "I—I just stopped him."

Nick had retrieved Bill's gun. The heavy cartridge had cracked it.

"You might have lost a hand," said Nick severely. Bill looked blankly at the gun.

"Did I shoot that?" he asked. "I don't remember it, Nick."

"Yeah, and you broke a winder in the Gem Saloon," said Nick.

Bill McGee drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"It all happened so quickly," he sighed. "Was that man shooting at me?"

"What didja think he was doin'—celebratin' the Fourth of July?"

"I don't know—everything got hazy."

"Got hazy for Cougar Jones, too," said Nick dryly.

"Who was the girl?" asked Sleepy.

"I ain't sure," replied Nick, "but I think it was the Martin girl."

"The girl whose father was killed?" asked Bill.

"Yeah. I think her name is Jane Martin."

"Here she comes now," said Sleepy. "Her and Buck Emory."

Jane came straight to Bill McGee and held out a dainty hand, which Bill took gingerly.

"Thank you very much for what you did," she said.

"Oh, that is all right," said Bill. "It—it wasn't anything."

"He might have killed you," she said. "It was awful."

"Your thanks makes it well worth doing," he replied.

BUCK grinned. "One day here—and a hero. Dang it, I was born here. Bill, I deputize you to walk home with Miss Martin. Jane, this is Bill McGee."

Both of them looked rather embarrassed, but Bill said, "Nothing would please me more—if I may, Miss Martin."

"Why, I—I really do not need anyone to go with me."

"Orders from the sheriff's office," said Buck soberly. "Go ahead."

They went on up the street.

"Buck, yo're either a swell feller, or yo're scared of women," said Sleepy.

"I never know what to say to one," confessed Buck.

Turquoise Taylor came over from the Gem, looking very grave. He said to Buck Emory, "I saw what happened, and Cougar should be kicked out of town. Buck, have you any idea how much money Miss Martin has—or what she needs?"

"I haven't any idea," replied Buck.

"See if Tucson can find out, will you, Buck? I'll take up a collection at the

saloon tonight. Maybe we can pay her expenses back home."

"Dock Miles might know. Tucson has gone down to see Doc about shippin' Ed Martin's body back to Chicago. She didn't say anythin' about needin' money, but I'll ask him."

"I am willing to pay for the window Bill broke," said Nick Leary. "It was worth it—provin' that the gun wasn't any good."

"Never mind the window—that's nothing," said Turquoise.

"Now," said Nick, "I'm goin' down and stuff the remains of this gun down Sam Kalin's throat."

"Theese," declared Pancho, "ees sometheeng I'm leeve to see."

They went down the street, and Buck grinned.

"Nick'll go in there, argue with Sam for ten minutes, until both of them git so damn hoarse that they can't chirp, and then he'll invite Sam over to have a drink. They've been quarrelin' for years."

"Where did Bill McGee go?" asked the gambler.

"He walked home with Jane Martin," grinned Buck.

"Oh," said Turquoise. "I just wanted to warn him, Buck. Cougar Jones might not forget what happened. He was too drunk to shoot straight, but he might not be drunk next time. It won't do any harm to tell the tenderfoot to keep his eyes open."

"Cougar," said Buck evenly, "is just what he looks and acts like—a range bum. Sober, he ain't got the nerve to pull a gun. But I'll tell the kid. And if you see Cougar yuh might tell him that if anythin' bad happens to the tenderfoot—we'll know where to look for the cause."

"I'll certainly tell him," said the gambler, and went back across the street.

"He's sure a dude," smiled Buck. "I hear he pays eight dollars for his shoes. And did yuh ever see as many turquoise on any human bein'? He pays good prices, too. The Injuns search for good stones, and Turquoise pays real money for them."

"Tell me somethin' about Dave Harris," said Hashknife. "I understand he was a cousin of Link McGee."

"That's right," replied Buck. "Dave owns a small spread out north of here. Makes a livin', and that's about all. Dave's all right. Kinda happy-go-lucky person, good-natured, hard worker. Him and Old Link got along all right. In fact, they didn't have anythin' to do with each other. What didja want to know, Hartley?"

"You've told me about all there is to tell. How did Old Link get killed?"

"Horse threw him, his foot caught in the stirrup, and they found him next mornin'."

"Foot still in the stirrup?" asked Hashknife.

"Hell, no! The horse came to the ranch, with the saddle yanked back on its rump, and they found Old Nick beside the road, where his foot came loose. But that horse had drug him so far that his pants and shirt was all wore off."

"Is that so?" Hashknife was interested. "How tall was Old Link?"

"Oh, he was a little jigger, about five feet, six inches tall, and he'd weigh about a hundred and fifty."

"And his pants was drug off?"

"They sure was. Why—wait a minute!"

"I should think so," said Hashknife quietly.

Buck's eyes were thoughtful. Finally he said, "Yuh know, I never thought of that, Hartley. He—he couldn't have had one foot in the stirrup—and had his pants drug off thataway. He was too danged short. All he could lose was his shirt—and his pants was all worn off from bein' dragged."

"He was dragged from a rope," said Hashknife.

"Wasn't we dumb!" exclaimed Buck. "Hartley, Old Link McGee was murdered."

"It sure looks thataway, Buck."

"Wait'll I tell Tucson and Doc Miles. Hartley, we're so dumb that we don't know a murder when we meet one. I'll see yuh later."

"You should," said Hashknife. "You've had enough of 'em."

"Columbus," said Sleepy soberly, "has discovered America again."

The dancehall, upstairs over the general store, was used as a courtroom, and it was here that the inquests were to be held. Due to the prominence of the two dead men, the whole country was represented at the hearing. Doctor Miles, the coroner, presided. A jury of business men and cattlemen was quickly impaneled, and the hearing began on the case of James Chase, the lawyer, murdered at Piute.

Doctor Miles stated that he had been unable to find one Mexican at Piute who would admit seeing the body. Even the bartender was missing. Their fear of *El Lobo* made them unwilling to even admit that they had seen the dead man.

"I will call the first witness—Mr. Hartley," said the doctor.

Hashknife walked up near the witness chair and held up his right hand. Doctor Miles said, "Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give in this court is the whole—"

Crash! A front window, only about fifteen feet from Hashknife spewed glass all over the room, and a pitcher of water on the doctor's desk disintegrated like a clay pigeon under the impact of a choke-bored load of shot.

Hashknife dropped flat on the floor, and the six-man jury scattered like a flock of frightened quail, as the doctor went over backwards in his chair. The big crowd was shocked momentarily, but were quickly on their feet. The sheriff was racing for the doorway to the stairs, followed closely by Sleepy Stevens.

Hashknife got to his feet and stepped out of line with the windows. The doctor came up, crouched behind his desk, several tiny trickles of blood staining his face, where particles of glass had cut him. The crowd was streaming out and down the stairs, anxious to find the man who had fired that shot.

"What on earth happened?" asked the doctor nervously.

Hashknife gestured toward the smashed window.

"Well, don't you know?" demanded the doctor anxiously.

"Doc," replied Hashknife calmly, "do you think I'd have stood here with my right hand raised, if I had known that there was a man with a thirty-thirty on top of the Gem, notchin' his sights on that window?"

Hashknife stooped and picked up a piece of glass. It was not ordinary window-pane glass. He said, "Somebody must have repaired that window at some time, and they didn't have regular glass; so they put in panes of plate-glass. It mushroomed that bullet and deflected it. That's why nobody was killed."

"Were they shooting at you, Hartley?"

"It's just my guess, Doc."

"Well, that's a fine thing! I hope they catch him."

"They won't," said Hashknife.

THE crowd finally drifted back, unable to locate the shooter. It was difficult to induce the jury to take their seats again, and every one was under nervous tension, until after the inquests were over. Hashknife testified to what he and Sleepy had seen at Piute, while Turquoise was the star witness in the murder of Ed Martin. The jury decided that *El Lobo* killed both men, and recommended that the sheriff kill or capture him. The sheriff smiled grimly. He had been trying to do just that thing for months.

"I can't figure somethin' out," declared Sleepy, when he and Hashknife were alone. "I was upstairs in the Gem and I got on top of the building. From there yuh might be able to see a man through one of them windows, but yuh couldn't see who he was. And my eyes are pretty good."

Hashknife smiled and nodded. "I figured that all out, Sleepy. I was the only standin' figure in the room."

"Even at that, it could have been anybody else."

"Not if a man in the room signaled from another window, Sleepy."

"My gosh, I never thought of that! That's how it was done."

THEY went down to the sheriff's office, where they found Tucson and Buck, both rather disconsolate over what happened at the inquest.

"That heaped more coals of fire on my head," sighed Tucson.

"That's what it was!" exclaimed Buck. "I smelled hair burnin' and—"

"That ain't funny, Buck."

"You wasn't to blame," assured Hashknife.

"I'm to blame for everythin'—'cause I'm the sheriff."

Hashknife showed him the note that was shoved under their door at the hotel, and told him how they got it. Tucson scratched his head violently.

Finally he said, "What are yuh goin' to do, Hartley?"

"Me—I'd run!" exclaimed Buck seriously.

"That's what I'm going to do," said Hashknife, "just as soon as I can find somebody to run after."

"But—but they've already shot at yuh!" exclaimed the sheriff.

"Yeah—and missed," smiled Hashknife.

The sheriff shook his head wearily.

"I don't want to win a hat from Bob Marsh that bad," he said. "But if I was in yore place—I'd get out."

"If you was in my place," said Hashknife, "you'd do just what I'd do, Tucson. This feller ain't no wolf—he's a coyote."

"I couldn't sleep nights," sighed Buck.

"Well, I dunno," said Tucson. "Mebbe you're a brave man—or awful dumb."

Bill McGee came in, all excited over what happened at the inquest.

"Where was you, Bill?" asked Buck. "I never seen yuh in the court."

"I was not there," said Bill. "I—I took Miss Martin home, and she invited me in and—"

"And you stayed," accused Buck. "Bill, I only told yuh to take her home—not stay there. Why that was hours ago, feller. I'll say yuh *stayed!*"

"Hours ago?" queried Bill. "My goodness, I didn't realize. Do you know," Bill McGee drew a deep breath, "I am beginning to like this town."

"Hartley," said Tucson soberly, "yo're not the only dumb person in Windy City."

"Thank yuh," said Hashknife soberly. "But with me it wasn't a case of love at first sight, Tucson."

"I wish," said Bill McGee, "that somebody would help me select a new gun."

"You ain't thinkin' of suicide already, are yuh?" gasped Buck.

"Suicide?" Bill looked shocked. "My goodness—no!"

Sam Kalin came up to the doorway and looked in. Sam had a black eye. He saw Bill McGee and spoke directly to him.

"Mr. McGee, I shall be pleased to allow you a credit of twelve dollars on a new gun, if you wish one."

COUGAR JONES was still drinking that evening, and ready to quarrel with everybody. The beating he had taken from Bill McGee rankled in his heart, and he wanted revenge. Tucson Edwards tried to get Cougar to go home or go to bed, but Cougar cursed the sheriff and refused. Turquoise Taylor added his advice, only to be cursed by Cougar. He realized that he had been soundly whipped by a tenderfoot, and he wanted revenge.

Cougar knew now that the girl was Jane Martin. He was not too drunk to realize that her father was yet unburied, but that made no difference to Cougar. No

one sympathized with him. That was all right with Cougar; he didn't want sympathy. But before he was through, he'd make 'em wish they'd let him alone.

Buck Emory was watching Cougar. Buck would have welcomed the chance to jail him. Then Cougar disappeared. He slipped outside with several other men, and Buck was unable to find him again. It was a dark night. After an hour Buck went to bed.

It was shortly after daylight, when Hashknife and Sleepy were awakened by loud voices on the street. Sleepy groaned dismally and said, "I suppose Bill McGee is back again."

Hashknife went to the window. It wasn't Bill McGee this time; it was a woman, talking excitedly with several men. One of them went running toward the sheriff's office, where Buck slept in a back room.

"Somethin' has gone wrong," declared Hashknife. "Get dressed."

Sleepy complained, but obeyed, and in a few minutes they were down on the street. The crowd had broken up, but the hotel keeper told them, "That woman was Mrs. Kalin. She dropped over to the Martin house this mornin' early to help out, and she found Mrs. Wilson all tied up and gagged. Jane Martin is missin'. Mrs. Wilson says a masked man came in on 'em last night, knocked her down—and that's all she knows."

"And Jane Martin is missin', eh?" queried Hashknife.

"That's what she says. The sheriff has gone to git his horse, but he don't know any more where to look than I would."

"C'mon," said Hashknife, and led the way to the stable, where they threw saddles on their horses. They met the sheriff and Buck Emory on the street, talking with Turquoise Taylor, who was half-dressed and excited.

"I don't know where he went," declared the gambler. "He was looking for trouble, I know that much."

"He got away from me," confessed Buck. "That was before midnight."

"Who was that?" asked Hashknife.

"Cougar Jones," replied the sheriff. "Goin' with us?"

"You lead the way," replied Hashknife.

They galloped out of town, and the sheriff explained that they were going out to Cougar Jones' ranch.

"Cougar had trouble with Bill McGee over that Martin girl," he said. "Mebbe Cougar didn't have anythin' to do with this, but he's the best bet we've got."

"He's mean enough to do anythin'," declared Buck, "and last night he was poison. I wish I'd bopped him over the head and put him in jail."

"Was Mrs. Wilson hurt much?" asked Hashknife, as they swept along the road.

"She's got a lump on her head that prob'ly don't feel so good, and he tied them ropes pretty tight. All she knows is that he hit her."

They were within about a mile of the Jones ranch, when they met Jane Martin, walking down the road. Her clothes were badly torn, her face scratched, and she was a very weary young lady, almost on the verge of collapse. They dismounted quickly and grouped around her.

"No, no, I'm all right," she declared. "I'm not hurt."

The sheriff took her arm and steadied her, while he asked questions.

"Yes, it was the same man who tried to grab me yesterday morning," she said. "I was in my bedroom, and Mrs. Wilson was in the living-room. I heard Mrs. Wilson say something, but I thought she was talking to some of our neighbors. It was several minutes later, when this masked man jerked open my door. I screamed, but he shut the door and came toward me. He had a rope in his hands, but he dropped that on the floor.

"I couldn't get away from him, he was too strong. He threw me on the floor, pulled my arms down to my sides and tied me. I kicked and yelled for help, but it

wasn't any use. Then he tied a scarf around my mouth and carried me outside. I saw Mrs. Wilson on the floor."

Jane sagged a little and drew a deep breath.

"I'm all right," she assured them. "Just a little dizzy."

"He took you on his horse?" asked Buck.

"Yes—and it wasn't comfortable. I couldn't use my arms and I couldn't make any noise. I think I fainted, because I don't remember much about the ride out here. He locked me into a room in the dark. It was terrible. My arms ached, and it was hard to breathe, because most of that scarf was over my nose and mouth."

"But how on earth did you get loose?" asked Buck.

"I could hear voices," she said. "After a while I heard two shots fired. I thought somebody had come to rescue me. But it was quite a little while before I heard my door being unlocked. It was a masked man, all dressed in black, carrying a candle. He untied the ropes and took away the gag. Then he helped me get up and he led me to the front of the house. It was getting daylight, and he said, 'You can find your way home.' That is all he said—and here I am."

"Sleepy, you and Buck take Miss Martin home—we'll go on," said Hashknife.

They spurred away and raced that last mile at top speed. There was no sign of life around the place. The doors were closed. Hashknife kicked open the front door, and they walked in, guns in hand. There was still the odor of burned powder in the unventilated room. In front of a stone fireplace lay Cougar Jones, flat on his back, his sightless eyes looking up at the grimy ceiling. Cougar had been shot twice at close range; once through the heart and once through the head. Tucked inside the front of his faded shirt was a piece of paper, on which was drawn the rough outline of a running wolf.

Hashknife and Tucson, squatting on the floor beside the body, looked at each other. Tucson shook his head.

"Beats me," he said. "That's the first time *El Lobo* has done a decent thing."

"Yeah," said Hashknife slowly, "he saved that girl."

Carefully they searched the house. The rope was still on the floor of the room where Jane had been held. The bedding in Cougar's room had been flung aside, and the straw-tick, used in lieu of a mattress, had been upset and most of the worn straw dumped out on the floor. An old chest, containing some old boots, and odds and ends, had been dumped on the floor.

"What do yuh think?" queried the sheriff, after watching Hashknife's close scrutiny of everything.

"It's kinda muddled," said Hashknife. "Mebbe the Lobo came here to get somethin'. Cougar wouldn't dump his own stuff around thataway. I figure he shot Cougar and then searched the place, found the girl and turned her loose."

"Well, it was a decent act, anyway," concluded the sheriff.

"It looks thataway," agreed Hashknife. "Well, this is another job for the coroner. We've done all we can."

They rode back to Windy City, where the news was received with little expression of sympathy for Cougar Jones. Jane was at home, feeling very well, in spite of her exciting night. The sheriff and coroner went back with a buggy to bring in the remains, and Hashknife and Sleepy went to get their belated breakfast.

"CAN you figure any of this stuff out?" asked Sleepy.

"It's sure muddled," agreed Hashknife, attacking his breakfast. "This *El Lobo* is hard to figure. It may be that he wanted somethin' belongin' to Cougar Jones, and after he killed Cougar he discovered the girl."

"Do you think *El Lobo* shot at you in the courtroom?"

"It don't seem reasonable," replied Hashknife. "My testimony couldn't hurt him any. Mebbe he thought it would be better to have me out of the way—I dunno."

As they left the restaurant the sheriff and coroner drove into the main street and drew up at the sheriff's office. The sheriff looked grimly at Hashknife and said, "Cougar's ranch buildings were half burned to the ground, when we got there, Hartley. They're all gone now—and the body is incinerated. Even the stable was burned."

"Nobody around, eh?" queried Hashknife.

"Not a soul in sight," replied the sheriff.

Doctor Miles, the coroner, spoke to the sheriff, and then went on. The sheriff was mad. He flung his hat into a corner of the office and dropped into his chair.

"Three dead men in a row, kidnaped girl, and an arson case!" he snorted. "And an attempted murder, to boot. Hell, I'd rather punch cows for forty a month."

"What's yore theory, Tucson?" asked Buck soberly.

Tucson glared at Buck. "You go to hell, will yuh?" he growled. "Theory? All right, I'll give yuh one! *El Lobo!* Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it—and thank yuh kindly," said Buck meekly. "We've settled that much. Now all we've got to do is catch him."

"You *ain't* funny, Buck," declared the sheriff.

"No, but I'm awful friendly and goodhearted."

Turquoise Taylor came over to get the news. He had no sympathy for Cougar Jones, but he could see no reason for anyone burning the buildings. He said:

"If the Lobo has turned fire-bug, we'll have a real menace around here."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Hashknife. "I believe the Lobo wanted to find somethin' that he knew was there, and when he couldn't find it, he didn't want anyone else to find it; so he burned it up."

Turquoise blinked thoughtfully. "What on earth could Cougar Jones have that the Lobo would want?" he asked.

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders. *"Quien sabe?"* he replied.

"Cougar never had much money," said Buck. "The Lobo wouldn't burn up money to keep anybody else from findin' it, Hartley."

"I didn't say it was money, Buck," reminded Hashknife. "Yuh know, I've just had an idea. Cougar Jones wasn't at the inquest. Just suppose Cougar happened to see the man who shot through the courthouse window—and the man knew he'd been seen. Suppose it was the Lobo. He'd kill Cougar, wouldn't he?"

"I believe he would," said Turquoise. "Cougar was pretty drunk about that time, but he wasn't too drunk to recognize a man."

"What about the Lobo bein' masked?" asked the sheriff.

"He wouldn't be wearin' a mask," said Buck. "That'd be a bad move, right here in town. Anybody'd notice that. He had to get up on top of the Gem, yuh must remember. By golly, I'll bet Hartley is right!"

"It certainly sounds like the right theory," said Turquoise.

"But why burn Cougar's buildin's?" asked Sleepy.

"And there yuh are!" snorted the sheriff. "Allus somethin' more."

"Yeah," said Buck, "and there's another thing I've been wantin' to tell yuh, Tucson. The coroner's jury decided that Link McGee's death was accidental, didn't they? Well, it wasn't."

"Buck, yo're crazy," said the sheriff. "He was dragged to death. Why, the jury decided—"

"I know they did," interrupted Buck. "You saw the body, Tucson. The old man's shirt and pants was drug off, wasn't they?"

"Jist about drug off. But you've got to figure that the horse—"

"Wait a minute. Old Link was about five feet, seven, wasn't he? And he was ridin' a tall sorrel horse. Am I right? Sure. His left foot was the one that was caught—his boot showed it. With his feet in the air, hooked to that stirrup, how in hell could yuh drag his pants off?"

The sheriff stared at Buck, his eyes narrowed in thought. Finally he licked his lips and nodded slowly. Then he said, "His pants was worn off, down to the calves of his legs—and we didn't have sense enough to realize—Buck, you never figured that out."

"Hartley figured it out," replied Buck.

"He did, eh? That's good."

"It was only common sense," smiled Hashknife.

"Of which," said Tucson, "we have damn little in Windy City."

"Common sense is a wonderful thing," said the gambler quietly. "But I believe it will take more than common sense to stop the Lobo."

"The Lobo will stop himself," said Hashknife. "Every time he pulls a job, he makes a mistake. He's made three mistakes already. Yuh know, it don't pay to make mistakes."

"Mistakes?" queried Turquoise. "Just in what way, Hartley?"

"I wouldn't want to embarrass him by tellin', Turquoise. Yuh see, he's a vain sort of a person—but he failed to use common sense."

"Hartley, do you know somethin'?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"Nothin' that I can prove," replied Hashknife.

"Well, can't yuh give me some idea to work on? After all, I'm the sheriff—and I've got a lot of murders to clear up, Hartley."

"We'll let the Lobo make the next move, Sheriff."

"That might be too late," said Turquoise Taylor.

"I'll take that chance," smiled Hashknife. "I think I'll ride out to what's left of Cougar Jones' ranchhouse in the mornin'. Yuh know, I'm kinda anxious to find out what the Lobo wanted out there."

"You don't think he went out there to purposely save that girl?" asked the gambler.

"I don't reckon he even knew she was there," replied Hashknife.

"If there was anythin' there, it's burned," said the sheriff.

"Unless," said Hashknife, "it wasn't hidden in the houses."

"Just what are yuh goin' to look for?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"I don't know," admitted Hashknife. "The Lobo only knows, I don't."

SMOKY SUMMERS came to Windy City that evening with Bill McGee. Smoky liked a few drinks of hard liquor, and Hashknife found him in the Gem Saloon. They sat down together and Smoky confided that he didn't know what to do with Bill McGee.

"That feller don't know a thing," declared Smoky. "He's iggerent as hell."

"Where is he now?" asked Hashknife.

"Down to see that girl. He heard she'd been kidnaped; so he had to go right down there and tell her he was glad she got loose. Nick asked him if he figured on runnin' the ranch, and he said, 'Where to?' There yuh are."

"Maybe he's in love," suggested Hashknife.

"Yeah," sighed Smoky, "I reckon he is. Talked to me about her hair and her nose. I said, 'Hell, if you'd look close, every girl has hair and a nose.' He said he hadn't noticed it before. I wonder what he thought women was—some kind of a furrin object?"

"She's leavin' right away with her father's body, ain't she?" asked Hashknife.

"That's what's got Bill McGee worried. But I'll tell yuh somethin', Hartley," Smoky got confidential, "that Bill McGee took down the brands on them two horses you and Sleepy rode from Piute. This

mornin' him and Nick went for a ride back in the hills, and nobody had to show him how to put on a pair of chaps, and he had his spurs on the right feet."

"Accident?" queried Hashknife smiling.

Smoky grunted. "Mebbe. Yuh know he got a new gun. Sam Kalin allowed him twelve dollars credit. Well, when he didn't think anybody was lookin', I seen him practicin' the draw."

Hashknife laughed. "Maybe he wants to learn those things, Smoky."

"The draw—he don't need to learn," replied Smoky. "I'll buy a drink."

That evening Hashknife borrowed a rifle from Buck Emory. Buck wanted to know what Hashknife was going to do with a rifle, but Hashknife was not in an explanatory mood. He left the rifle with his saddle in the stable, and joined Sleepy at the hotel.

"We're stickin' to the room this evenin'," he told Sleepy.

"Things gettin' tight?" asked Sleepy.

"We won't take any chances. Our light goes out at ten, and at twelve, we go ridin'."

"Where?"

"Out to Cougar Jones' place."

"In the dark? Yuh can't see a thing at night. Mornin' would suit me just as well."

"We'll be there in the mornin', Sleepy."

It was only shortly after midnight when Hashknife and Sleepy went out the rear entrance of the hotel, saddled their horses and rode quietly out of Windy City. No one saw them. Even the stable-man was asleep. They circled the town and struck the old road which led to Cougar Jones' ranch. In fact, the road ended there.

There was no moon, but the starlight was bright enough for them to distinguish objects. Sleepy complained, as usual, but Hashknife paid no attention.

"I know," said Sleepy, a note of sadness in his voice, "we'll go out there, hide ourselves in the brush, and be damn uncomfortable all night."

"Bein' uncomfortable," said Hashknife, "is a frame of mind."

"I suppose if a man freezes to death—he's finicky, eh?"

"You can't freeze on a night like this."

"Well, I can git awful cold and stiff, settin' out there in ambush, with my back against a mesquite."

They rode slowly along the broken hills, when Hashknife suddenly drew up his horse. From behind them came the rattle of a vehicle, traveling over the rough road. Quickly they drew off the road into a thicket, and saw the vehicle pass, driving at fairly good speed, considering the road. It seemed to be a buckboard, with two horses, and a led horse behind.

"That's funny," said Hashknife. "They're headin' for the Jones' ranch, that's a cinch, because the road ends there."

"And no buildin's left," added Sleepy. "What in the devil would they be doin' out there at this time of night?"

"We'll have to find out about that," said Hashknife.

They spurred back into the road, rode swiftly for a short distance, and slowed down, watching for the possibility of a side road, where the vehicle might turn. But there were no side roads. There was no way to get a view of the ranch, except at close range, when the road led through an old drywash and made an abrupt turn at the main gate.

The two gate-posts were tall, made of

twelve-inch logs, with a heavy beam across the tops. They rode carefully through the dry-wash, and came out near the gate. They could see the dark bulk of the buckboard and team, apparently tied near the gate.

Another horse, the one that had been led behind the buckboard, was moving around close to the open gate, and they could hear a man's voice, apparently swearing at the animal.

They spurred in closer and Hashknife called, "What's goin' on here?"

There was no reply, no sound at all for possibly five seconds. Then two shots were fired, spaced very close together. Hashknife and Sleepy went out of their saddles, but there was no indication that the shots had been fired at them. The flashes indicated that the man was shooting into the ground. Then they heard him running. Both men raced ahead. Hashknife saw the dim outline of the man running toward the brush back of what had been the ranch-house, and fired once.

The buckboard team was trying to break loose, and Sleepy ran in to soothe them. The saddle horse tried to wedge in between them and the post, but Hashknife caught the bridle and pulled him back.

Sprawled in the middle of the road was the body of a man, arms roped, a rope around his neck, and the loose end flung over the top-bar of the wide gate. Sleepy took the rifle, stepped inside the gate and watched for the man, while Hashknife, knelt down, scratched a match and looked at the man's face. It was Bill McGee.

There was blood on his head and face, his shirt stained with gore and dirt. Hashknife yanked the rope down and quickly loosened the noose, which had not been pulled tightly. Sleepy stepped back.

"It's Bill McGee," said Hashknife. "He's been hit over the head, but he's breathin' all right. Keep yore eyes open, pardner. This—"

Hashknife stopped. Pinned to Bill McGee's shirt was a piece of paper. Hashknife lighted another match and looked at it quickly. It bore the insigna of El Lobo, and said:

Find this and see how you like it.

They loaded Bill McGee into the buckboard, and Hashknife climbed into the seat.

"Lead the two horses," he ordered Sleepy. "We'll let *El Lobo* walk."

"What was he tryin' to do to Bill McGee?" asked Sleepy.

"Hang him to the top of the gate."

"Why, the son-of-a-gun! But who was he shootin' at?"

"Bill McGee."

"Did he hit him, Hashknife?"

"I don't think so; too much of a hurry. Let's go!"

Bill McGee was conscious, when the doctor finished cleaning, sewing and bandaging him. One bullet had scored his left shoulder and another had chipped a piece of flesh from just above his right knee-cap. Bill had a bad slash across his scalp, where he had been hit with the barrel of a gun, but the doctor said grimly, "This is once the Lobo failed."

Bill didn't know what it was all about. He had left the Martin home, intending to go up and find Smoky, but something hit him, and he knew nothing, until he awoke in the doctor's home.

They examined the horse they brought back. The sheriff could not identify it. Hashknife said, "I'm not sure, but I'll bet odds it's the horse Bill McGee rode from Piute.

By the light of the doctor's lamp they examined the note which was pinned to Bill McGee's shirt.

"The Lobo was sure goin' to kill Bill McGee," declared the sheriff. "He had the note all pinned in place. Hartley, if you two hadn't got there when yuh did, Bill McGee would be dead now. Smoky was lookin' all over town for that buckboard team. He thought Bill McGee had left him. What a lot of gall that Lobo has. Comin' into town and stealin' a team."

Hashknife was studying the note, a grim

smile on his lips. Sleepy knew that smile.

When they got back to their hotel room and began undressing, Sleepy said, "I see yuh grin at that note. Yuh looked like the cat that stole the milk."

"Yuh see, pardner," said Hashknife quietly, "I've been workin' at this thing from a certain angle, but I couldn't find anythin' to prove that I wasn't barkin' up the wrong tree. It kinda had me worried —a little."

"You ain't worried now?" queried Sleepy.

"No-o-o," drawled Hashknife. "All I've go to do now is find out who is El Lobo."

"Huh?" gasped Sleepy. "All you've got to do is find out who is El Lobo?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Hashknife, as he drew off his boots. "Yuh know, Sleepy, he's an elusive rascal."

"If yuh ask me," remarked Sleepy, "you've been out too much in the cool night air."

THE slugging and attempted hanging of Bill McGee was too much for the citizens of Windy City. They met next morning at the Gem Saloon. The county commissioners were in town, as was Tom Carver, the prosecutor. They were all at the meeting. Something must be done about the Lobo.

"Unless the sheriff does something," declared Turquoise Taylor, "it will mean the forming of a vigilance committee. We can't go on like this."

"What is the good of a committee, if we don't know who he is?" asked the prosecutor.

"Then get a new sheriff," said Dave Harris. "Tucson Edwards ain't done a damn thing, except hold inquests. We want action—and he won't act."

They sent for the sheriff and deputy. The prosecutor questioned the sheriff, who admitted he had been unable to do anything. Both the sheriff and deputy realized the temper of this meeting.

Tucson looked them over grimly, as he said, "Gentlemen, this is my resignation."

"Mine, too," grinned Buck Emory. "I stick with Tucson."

"I hope you don't blame us," said Turquoise lamely. "I like you both, but you —you haven't done much—you'll admit."

"You better appoint a magician," replied Tucson. "No human bein' can find even the track of that damn wolf."

"What about Hartley?" asked Turquoise.

"Well, what has he done?"

"Nothing," admitted Turquoise.

"Well, he saved Bill McGee's life last night," said Buck. "That's more than anybody else has done for a victim of El Lobo."

Hashknife and Sleepy came from the hotel just in time to see the commissioners heading for the prosecutor's office, while the sheriff and deputy were going toward their office. Quite a crowd was on the porch of the Gem, talking earnestly.

"Do yuh reckon the Lobo struck again?" queried Sleepy.

"Somethin' happened," agreed Hashknife. "Let's ask the sheriff."

Tucson Edwards was cleaning out his desk, when they walked in, while Buck was getting his personal effects together.

"We've done re-signed," stated Buck. "Re-signed and quit. Yo're lookin' at two plain, reliable citizens right now."

"Resigned, eh?" said Hashknife. "That's too bad, gents."

"What'll this county do for a sheriff?" asked Sleepy.

"The commissioners will appoint one right away, I reckon," replied the sheriff. "I dunno who they'll select."

"Somebody who can catch *El Lobo*, eh?" smiled Hashknife.

"That seems to be their idea. I know damn well, I can't do it—and I'll sure take off my hat to the one who can."

"How is Bill McGee this mornin'?" asked Sleepy.

"He's all right," replied Tucson. "Jane

Martin has been with him ever since early this mornin'. She's made up her mind to not make that trip east. She says it's too much money."

"If yuh ask me, it's too much McGee," growled Buck.

"That ain't our business, Buck," reminded Tucson.

"Just remember, I ain't as old as you are, Tucson."

"No," sighed Tucson, "but just remember she was here a long time before young McGee came along. You had plenty time, Buck."

"Yeah, I reckon yo're right. Yuh got to talk to a girl, but after I git past sayin' I'm glad to meet 'em, I go plumb blank."

"You ain't leavin' town, are yuh?" asked Hashknife.

"Not for a while," replied Tucson. "Buck and me will batch out at my place. Come out and visit us—we'll have mulligan."

"That," declared Sleepy, "is the first word of love I've had since I hit this town. I'll come—if I have to crawl."

Dave Harris came down the sidewalk and stepped into the office.

"Tucson," he said, "don't blame me for this. That bunch of commissioners just appointed me sheriff to serve out yore unexpired term. I can tell yuh right now, I didn't have no hand in it."

"I'm not blamin' yuh, Dave," replied Tucson. "Mebbe you can do what I couldn't. Set down, will yuh? I'll be finished in a minute, and you can walk right in."

"I feel like hell about this," declared Harris. "I'm no sheriff. I've never done anythin' but punch cows. Don't even know where to start."

"All you've got to do," said Tucson soberly, "is to find the man who killed Link McGee, Jim Tolan, the stage guard, Dan Evers, Slim Farley, Jim Chase and Ed Martin, and tried to murder Bill McGee. That's all you've got to do. This job is a cinch, Dave."

"That's a long list," said Dave Harris. "But I thought Link McGee was accidently killed."

"He wasn't, Dave—he was murdered. His horse didn't drag him—he was dragged on the end of a rope."

"But the evidence—and the jury said—"

"We found this out later, Dave."

"Oh. I didn't know anythin' about that. Do yuh think the Lobo killed him?"

"Might as well blame it on him."

"Yeah, I reckon yo're right. Hartley," he turned to Hashknife, "have you been able to find out anythin'?"

"Yeah, I have," replied Hashknife quietly.

"What have yuh found out?"

"I have found out that the Lobo, ain't as smart as folks think he is.

"Just in what way?" asked Harris anxiously.

"I'll tell yuh some day," smiled Hashknife. "When I get ready to bait my trap, the Lobo will walk into it, just like an ordinary wolf."

"I hope yo're right," said Harris, "but he might fool yuh, Hartley."

"If he does, he'll have to be smarter than he has been. Sleepy, let's go and eat breakfast. I'll see yuh later, gents."

"What do yuh think of their sheriff selection?" asked Sleepy, as they sat down to breakfast.

"Might be all right. Dave don't know what it's all about, but he can learn."

"I reckon the job will help him out," said Sleepy. "Buck said he wasn't makin' any money on his ranch. Never had made any.

"Dave likes to play poker too well to ever lay up any money. But what is all this talk you're makin' about the Lobo makin' mistakes? I ain't seen any."

"If he thinks I have," smiled Hashknife, "he might get scared and do somethin' foolish."

"Yeah," agreed Sleepy dryly. "Somethin' awful foolish—like killin' both of us."

"That's right. It might happen any time."

Nick Leary came in for some groceries and to try and find Bill McGee. Smoky came back, too drunk to know why he didn't have Bill McGee with him. Nick found Hashknife, who told him what had happened to McGee. Nick swore quietly over the incident, which came within inches of being a tragedy.

"You came mighty close to bein' without a boss," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, it sounds like it," agreed Nick. "So they fired Tucson and Buck, did they? And hired Dave Harris. Hartley, I reckon it's time for me to tell you a few things that yuh don't know.

"Bill McGee ain't Link's nephew. In fact, he ain't no kin at all. It was a frame-up between Bob Marsh and Jim Chase. Jim felt that Link was murdered. Yuh see, Link made out a will. Where that will is —I dunno. I don't reckon anybody else does. If it don't show up, the property will go to Dave Harris. Anyway, Jim Chase and Bob Marsh framed up to bring a young detective in as the heir to the Circle G. Jim got a letter from Bob Marsh the day before Bill McGee was to get here—and lost the letter.

"He was scared somebody found the letter; so he wired Bill McGee to get off at Piute. From the way things worked out, Hartley—somebody found that letter, and they tried to murder Bill McGee, after they killed poor Jim Chase. I thought yuh ought to know these things."

"Much obliged," said Hashknife. "Have you told Bill McGee what yuh know?"

"Not me. I'm goin' down and haul him home, if he's able to travel."

"And yuh better ride herd on him, Nick," advised Hashknife. "He's had two narrow escapes, remember. The next one might not be close."

"I'll do my best," promised Nick.

"Did Jim Chase tell you that this Bill McGee is a detective?"

"He said he wanted to be a detective."

"I'll bet his mind has been changed," chuckled Hashknife.

A SHORT time later Hashknife met Turquoise Taylor on the street. The tall, elegant gambler looked very serious.

"My opinion may not mean a thing to you, Hartley," he said, "but I'm not in favor of their choice for sheriff. Dave Harris won't be any better than Tucson Edwards. In fact, I doubt like hell that he will be as good."

"I don't know anythin' about Harris," said Hashknife. "As far as that goes, I don't know anythin' about Tucson Edwards. Who could they have selected, who would be better than Edwards or Harris?"

"I don't know," admitted the gambler. "I suggested your name to the commissioners, not realizing that you had only lived here a few days."

"Thank yuh very much," said Hashknife soberly, "but it ain't my kind of a job. I'm a cowpuncher, Taylor."

The gambler smiled slowly. "Yes, I know," he said. "But we don't need to spar with each other, Hartley. Tucson Edwards showed me the wire he got from the secretary of the association about you. I haven't said anything to anyone about it. I'd be the last one to interfere with anything that would help us stop the Lobo. He has taken my money and killed my friends. No one knows where he will strike next."

"He's quite a mysterious young man," admitted Hashknife.

"And he's also deadly," added the gambler.

"That," smiled Hashknife, "has been proved to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. I dunno," Hashknife shook his head, "but I figure he'll be hard to stop. Yuh got to figure that he's workin' alone. There's nobody to talk. If he was a gang it would be easy. There's always a squealer."

"That's right, Hartley; he's smart to

work alone. How is Bill McGee this morning?"

"I guess he's gettin' along all right."

"Would you mind telling me how on earth you happened to be there at the right time last night?"

"It was written in the book," replied Hashknife soberly.

"Written in what book?"

"Well, yuh might call it the book of fate, Taylor. We do what is written after our names. We never can read that book. The last entry shows how we die. We can't dodge it. Bein' careful won't help none. Yo're a gambler—I'm a cowpuncher. We couldn't be anythin' else—unless the book says so. Doc Holliday came to this country to die from tuberculosis. For years he lived with a smokin' gun in his hand. He was a bad man from Tombstone, with plenty notches in his gun—and died from tuberculosis. That last entry saved him from bullets."

Turquoise Taylor smiled slowly. "I never thought about that," he said. "It's an interestin' theory. And that was why you got to the old Jones ranch in time to save Bill McGee."

"I don't reckon Bill McGee was born to be hung," said Hashknife.

"I guess that's right—he couldn't have come any closer."

A COWBOY drew up in front of the sheriff's office.

Turquoise smiled. "That's Mike Machada, Dave's hired man. He might appoint him deputy."

"Mike's a forked lookin' jasper," remarked Hashknife.

"Plenty forked and plenty dumb," said the gambler. "He knows how to handle cows, but that lets him out. Well, I'll see yuh later, Hartley."

Nick Leary and Bill McGee, all bandaged, drew up in front of the general store, as Hashknife came along. Nick went into the store, and Hashknife went over beside the buckboard. Bill McGee was profuse in his thanks to Hashknife for saving his life, although Bill had no knowledge of what happened from the time he was first knocked down near the Martin home.

"How are you and the little lady gettin' along?" asked Hashknife.

"Fine," smiled Bill. "She's a wonderful girl."

"I suppose you'll marry her and live the life of a rancher at the Circle G."

"No, I think I'll dispose of the Circle G, and we'll live in the city."

"I hope you've told her that you don't own the Circle G, Bill."

Bill McGee's jaw sagged a little, as he stared at Hashknife. Finally he smiled and replied, "Mr. Marsh said you were pretty smart—but how did you know that?"

"Did you tell her?" asked Hashknife, ignoring the question.

"Yes, I told her, Mr. Hartley."

"It's all right then, Bill. Even a detective should be honest with his girl."

"I am not a detective," denied Bill quickly. "I—I wanted to be one but it isn't what I thought it would be. I haven't found out a darned thing. All I've done is to almost get killed twice. I'm through. We are going to take her father's body back east with us."

"Bill, yo're awful quick," said Hashknife.

"Why not? She has no relatives, and neither have I. We don't have to ask advice from anyone—nor please anyone. I have money. Right now," admitted Bill, "I've got a headache."

"Sorry yuh came?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"I should say I'm not. But everything is going to be fine now."

"Love," said Hashknife, "is a wonderful thing, Bill, but it won't make the Lobo quit tryin' to kill yuh."

"Do you—you don't think he would try it again, do you, Mr. Hartley?"

"He's still alive—and so are you. Why wouldn't he? Maybe the third time would be a charm."

Nick came out of the store and got into the buckboard.

"All set, Bill?" he asked.

"Set?" queried Bill. "I'm rigid."

"Come out and see us," invited Nick. "Smoky was makin' mulligan when I left."

HASHKNIFE found Sleepy and Buck at the Gem, playing a game of pool, while Tucson Edwards kept score for them. Turquoise Taylor came and sat with them. There was not much activity at this time of day. Finally Turquoise said, "Well, I am going on a little vacation this evening. Going to take the five o'clock train for Phoenix."

"Goin' to be gone long?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, maybe a week. I get tired of the long hours here, and it is quite a tough job, keeping things going. I haven't been away for almost a year."

"Yeah, it does get tiresome," agreed Hashknife.

When the pool game was over, Hashknike and Sleepy wandered outside, and walked up to the depot, where Hashknife got a train schedule. He studied the schedule of the five o'clock train for several minutes. The first station out of Windy City was Mescal, twenty-five miles away, but it was only a flag-station for the train leaving there at five.

"Where are we figurin' on goin'?" asked Sleepy, as he rubbed some blue chalk off his thumb against the depot wall.

"No place," smiled Hashknife. "Just a crazy idea, I reckon."

They saw Turquoise Taylor and one of his men leave for the depot, carrying two valises. Then Hashknife led the way to the stable, where they saddled their horses. Sleepy did not ask any more questions, as they galloped over a road they had never traveled. It was four miles to Dave Harris' ranch, which they had never seen, but Hashknife had a fairly accurate description of the place.

There was no sign of life around the little ranchhouse, as they drew up at the front and dismounted. No one answered their knock on the door; so Hashknife shoved it open and they went inside. It was evident that Dave Harris and Mike Machado were not good housekeepers. The place had not been swept in weeks. Tobacco and cigarette butts littered the Navajo rugs. There was clothing hanging on the backs of chairs, boots scattered over the floor. On the kitchen table and stove were dirty dishes, which had not been washed for days.

Hashknife shrugged, as he looked it over. On the wooden mantel of the fireplace he found a square of dirty cardboard, which he carried over to the table. Shoving the debris aside he took out a pencil and printed in large, sprawling capitals:

COME IN QUICK BUT DON'T LET ANYBODY SEE YOU.
WE MAY HAVE TO PULL OUT FAST. DON'T WAIT. BACK DOOR OF OFFICE OPEN.

Hashknife propped it up against the lamp, where anyone would see it.

"Who are yuh sendin' that billy-doo to?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"To whom it may concern," smiled Hashknife. "C'mon, pardner."

They mounted their horses and rode swiftly back to Windy City, where they ate supper, and on the way back Hashknife was singing:

"I'm goin' back where the cattle are sleepin'
Under a Montana moon;
Back where a Jill waits for Jack to come home,
Just let me go back and I'll never more roam.
Back where the stars dance on meadow and hill,
And you'll see a weddin' in June,
Where my old buddies roam
O'er the range I call home,
Under a Montana moon."

Hashknife did not have a singing voice, and he rarely ever attempted song. But Sleepy knew now that things were getting tight. That little chorus, crooned to the beat of galloping hoofs, meant that the

hours of apparent inaction were over. Something was due to explode. He did not know why Hashknife had studied that train schedule, nor did he know why Hashknife left that note at Dave Harris' ranch.

"Are yuh sure everythin' is all right, pardner?" he asked as they finished supper.

Hashknife smiled in the dusk of the street and replied, "It's the showdown, Sleepy. Mebbe I'm wrong. All I've got to go on is my hunch. I think I know the color of the wolf's hide—and it's yellow."

THEY found Tucson and Buck at Tucson's little shack, where they had just finished supper. Tucson offered to cook more supper, but they had already eaten a big meal.

"Here's what I want yuh to do," explained Hashknife. "Saddle yore horses. Get Tom Carver, the prosecutor, on a horse, and we'll all take a ride together."

"Where?" asked Tucson and Buck in unison.

"I'll tell yuh—after we start. We ain't got much time; so let's answer questions later."

"I'll get the horses," said Buck quickly. "You get Carver."

In about fifteen minutes they started from Tucson's shack, which was out of sight from the main street. The lawyer was full of questions, but Hashknife merely said, "Mr. Carver, we're tryin' to cut the trail of a wolf. Mebbe we won't be able to do it—but it's a chance."

"What is my part in it?" queried Carver.

"I'd rather have the law see what happens than to have to explain to the law later."

It was about eight o'clock, when they reached the Harris ranch. There were no lights in the ranchhouse. They circled the corrals and tied their horses. The lawyer said, "I think we should have more information, Hartley. After all—"

"You want to catch the Lobo, don't yuh?" interrupted Hashknife quietly.

"Why, of course. But—where is he?"

"Well, I ain't got him up my sleeve—and he won't come here with any brass band ahead of him. Let's work in close to the stable, where we can hide and still watch that house."

"Is he comin' here?" asked Tucson tensely.

"That's my hunch," replied Hashknife. "If I'm wrong—we've just had a nice ride. When we get hidden, don't smoke. We can't take a chance on the wolf turnin' back. C'mon."

Hashknife led the way to the stable. Between that and the main gate was a patch of rank grass, where they sprawled and waited. Coyotes howled from the hills, and a sleepy mocking-bird practiced every sound it had heard during the day, ranging from the song of the wild canary to the call of a quail. The men talked only in whispers.

Suddenly Hashknife touched Sleepy on the arm. They had been there about an hour, and Sleepy was half-asleep. But he was very wide awake now. Hashknife whispered, "Horses comin'."

His sensitive ears had heard long before the rest. In a few minutes two riders came through the main gate and drew up in front of the house. Their conversation was inaudible to the five men sprawled in the weeds. One of the men went into the house, while the other led the two horses down past the men in the grass, taking them to the stable.

The man in the house lighted a lamp, and in a moment or two the two windows were blocked out. Then the man ran out on the porch, and went swiftly down to the stable, where the other man was unsaddling the horses. There was some quick and exciting conversation, inaudible to the men, and in a few moments the two men came out. One mounted his horse and went galloping away, while the other hurried back to the house and closed the door.

Hashknife chuckled quietly. Tucson whispered, "Was you lookin' for that, Hartley?"

"I couldn't have done it better myself," replied Hashknife. "We can relax and wait another hour—but don't smoke. We can't take a chance."

"It would seem to me," complained the lawyer, "that we should have the sheriff with us. After all, the law—"

"He'll be here," replied Hashknife.

"You don't overlook anythin', do yuh?" queried Buck.

"I hope not, Buck—but yuh never know."

Another half hour went past. It was none too comfortable, sprawled in the weeds, and there was a chill wind blowing. Hashknife got to his haunches.

"I'm goin' to the stable," he whispered. "The rest of yuh stay here. I want to be there, when them horses come, and then I'll come back here."

Tucson and Buck were content to wait, but the lawyer was impatient.

"I don't like this," he said. "After all, what right has this Hartley to order us around? The whole thing is so obscure. Why don't he—"

"Hold it!" whispered Sleepy. "You make a move to go away, and I'll tie yuh in a bow-knot. This is serious business—and you ain't goin' to spoil it. I hope that's plain enough for even a lawyer to understand."

"Well," sighed the lawyer, and subsided.

Buck chuckled. "That's tellin' him where to head in, Sleepy," he whispered.

Another thirty minutes went past, before they heard riders again. This time they came swiftly, sweeping through the main gate. There were two. They drew up at the front porch in a shower of gravel, which splattered against the wall of the house. One man dismounted and went into the house, while the other headed for the stable, leading the extra horse.

The four men tensed, as the rider dismounted at the stable. Sleepy was on his heels, gun in hand. But there was not a sound from the stable. After a couple of minutes they saw the man coming back, walking slowly. He passed about ten feet away, and Hashknife's whisper said:

"C'mon, but make it quiet."

The four men followed close behind him. Sleepy moved the lawyer to the rear, as he whispered, "Keep out of line, when the shootin' starts, Mr. Carver."

"Will there be shooting?" he whispered.

But there was no time for Sleepy to answer, because they had reached the porch. Hashknife whispered, "I'm goin' in. They'll be lookin' for Machada. As soon as I open the door, move in fast and be ready for anythin'. All right."

Hashknife stepped briskly up on the wooden porch and opened the door. In front of the fireplace stood a tall, black-clad man, adjusting a black cartridge belt around his waist. From the kitchen came Dave Harris' voice:

"Go ahead and run yore damn neck into a noose, if yuh want to. Me—I'm headin' for Mexico. I never left that note on the table, and if anybody—he-e-ey, Mike! Throw a saddle on Red Cloud for Turquoise. He's the fastest horse in the country."

"Are yuh goin' some place, Taylor?" asked Hashknife quietly.

The tall gambler whirled like a cat, his right hand streaking for his holstered gun; but too late. Hashknife's black-handled Colt blasted twice in quick succession, rattling the loose windows of the ranch-house. Turquoise Taylor, shocked to his heels, tried to lift his gun, but the effort was too great. He let it fall from his limp fingers, and then crumpled back against the fireplace and went to the floor.

The kitchen door banged open, as Dave Harris made his break for liberty, but Sleepy Stevens, alert for just such a move, was running around the house. Cursing bitterly, the new sheriff of Windy City, emptied his six-shooter, but the shots were going wild, because he was going around and around in a circle, due to the shocking

power of a forty-five bullet in his left shoulder. Then he went sprawling in the dirt.

"It's about time, yuh danged merry-go-round!" panted Sleepy, as he ran in and kicked the gun from Harris' hand. He grasped Harris' neckerchief and collar and they carried him into the house. Sleepy said, "What about Taylor, Hashknife?"

"He died on his feet," replied Hashknife quietly.

"And with his Lobo clothes on!" exclaimed Buck. "Can yuh beat that?"

Harris' eyes were open and he was looking at them.

"Taylor—dead?" he asked painfully.

The man nodded, and Tom Carver, the lawyer, said, "My God—Dave!"

"*El Lobo* number two," said Hashknife. 'Yuh see, there were three Lobos; Turquoise Taylor, Dave Harris and Cougar Jones. That was why nobody ever gave the same description. But I reckon Dave Harris was the worst of the trio. He murdered the stage guard and started this deal. Then he killed Dan Evers and Slim Farley, because they talked against El Lobo. Then—"

"Wait a minute!" whispered Harris. "Yore rope's twisted, Hartley. Taylor started it. It was his idea. He killed that stage guard. Me and Cougar wasn't in on that."

"You murdered Jim Chase, the lawyer," accused Hashknife. "You wanted the Circle G; so you killed Link McGee. You found a letter that Jim Chase lost, and yuh went to Piute to kill him and Bill McGee."

"Smart, eh?" sneered Harris. "Prove it, damn yuh. I told the boys we'd have to kill you to save our necks. Taylor didn't believe it. See what he got."

"You planted Cougar Jones on top of the Gem to kill me that day, Dave."

"Turquoise done that. It damn near worked."

Hashknife laughed quietly, as he looked at the expression on Tom Carver's face. The prosecutor was getting one surprise after another.

"You killed Cougar Jones," said Hashknife. "He was gettin' dangerous. Then you burned his place, because yuh couldn't find his El Lobo outfit and his money. You didn't want the law to find it, Harris.

"But the big mistake was made by Turquoise Taylor, the day Ed Martin was killed. Was it you or Cougar Jones that tried to pull that holdup?"

"Cougar," whispered Harris painfully. "What mistake?"

"From Taylor's description," replied Hashknife, "Cougar couldn't have shot him near the right ear, Harris; it had to be Taylor, who didn't have any gun in sight. I got that bullet from the doctor. It was a forty-four caliber, shot from a smooth-bore derringer or sleeve-gun. That spotted Mr. Taylor as the killer."

"But how in hell didja figure Turquoise was comin' back here?" asked Tucson Edwards. "It don't make sense, Hartley."

"Tucson, it was a guess," smiled Hashknife. "*El Lobo* was gettin' himself into a hole. Maybe he thought I suspected him. Anyway, he bought a ticket to Phoenix which would be his alibi for what *El Lobo* might do. I figure he was goin' to make a strong try to wipe me off the map. I got a timetable and found the first flag-stop out of Windy City. My hunch was that Mike Machada, who is tied up in the stable, with a sore head, would meet Taylor there and bring him back here. I was right."

"We better get Harris to a doctor," said the lawyer weakly. "We want to hang at least *one* of the Lobos. But what about Mike Machada?"

Harris shook his head painfully. "Mike never killed anybody. He's just a dumb animal. That's why I hired him—he don't know right from wrong. I—I don't reckon the rest of us was any—better—"

"Oh-oh!" grunted Sleepy. "He's passed out."

Buck and Sleepy took Harris and Machada back to Windy City in the buck-

board, while Hashknife, Tucson Edwards and Tom Carver rode back together.

"I wish I knew somethin'," said Hashknife, as they rode along.

"*You* wish?" snorted Tucson.

"Yeah. Yuh see, there never was any Bill McGee. That kid wanted to be a range detective; so Bob Marsh and Jim Chase framed up a fake heir to the Circle G, because neither of them believed that Link McGee was killed accidentally. Jim Chase is dead—and if there was a will, where in the devil is it?"

"I have it," replied the lawyer. "It is in my safe. Jim Chase asked me to keep it safely, and to probate it if anything went wrong with him."

"That's great!" exclaimed Hashknife. "Who gets the Circle G?"

"Right now, you mean?"

"Right now?" queried Hashknife. "I don't reckon I understand."

"The property of Lincoln McGee," replied the lawyer, "was all willed to Dave Harris."

"No!" exclaimed the ex-sheriff and Hashknife in unison.

"It's a fact," declared the lawyer soberly. "But it contains the provision that if anything happens to Dave Harris, it is to be evenly divided between Nick Leary and Smoky Summers."

"Somethin'," said Hashknife quietly, "happened to Dave Harris."

"And more to come," added the lawyer soberly. "Tucson, you and Buck will go back into office."

"I'd like to, Tom," replied Tucson. "With the Lobo gone—I might be all right."

IT DIDN'T require much time for Windy City to wake up to the fact that the Lobo menace was over. They got Dave Harris and Mike Machada into strong cells, and summoned the doctor. Hashknife told Buck to tell the story, and to make him and Tucson look good in the telling. Buck said:

"If I do that, Hashknife, I'm the biggest liar in Windy City—and I am."

Hashknife and Sleepy slipped away from the crowd, paid their bill at the hotel, and rode down to the depot, where Hashknife wired Bob Marsh:

I WEAR NUMBER NINES AND I LIKE FANCY TOPS. REGARDS FROM SLEEPY.

The agent read the telegram and grinned.

"I just sent that same man another wire a few minutes ago," he said. "It sure is a loco wire and it don't make sense. Here it is."

The wire read:

PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION AS WOLFER. I GOT SHOT WITH AN ARROW BY A LITTLE NUDIST AND I HOPE IT WILL TAKE ALL THE REST OF MY LIFE TO GET OVER IT.

It was signed by Bill McGee. Hashknife grinned at the agent, and they walked outside. A few minutes later they were riding knee-to-knee up the road, while the lights of Windy City faded out behind them. They did not want thanks for what they had done. It was all in a day's work for these two. The law could handle the rest.

Far off to the north was a jagged line of hills, where the stars seemed to twinkle along the rough edges.

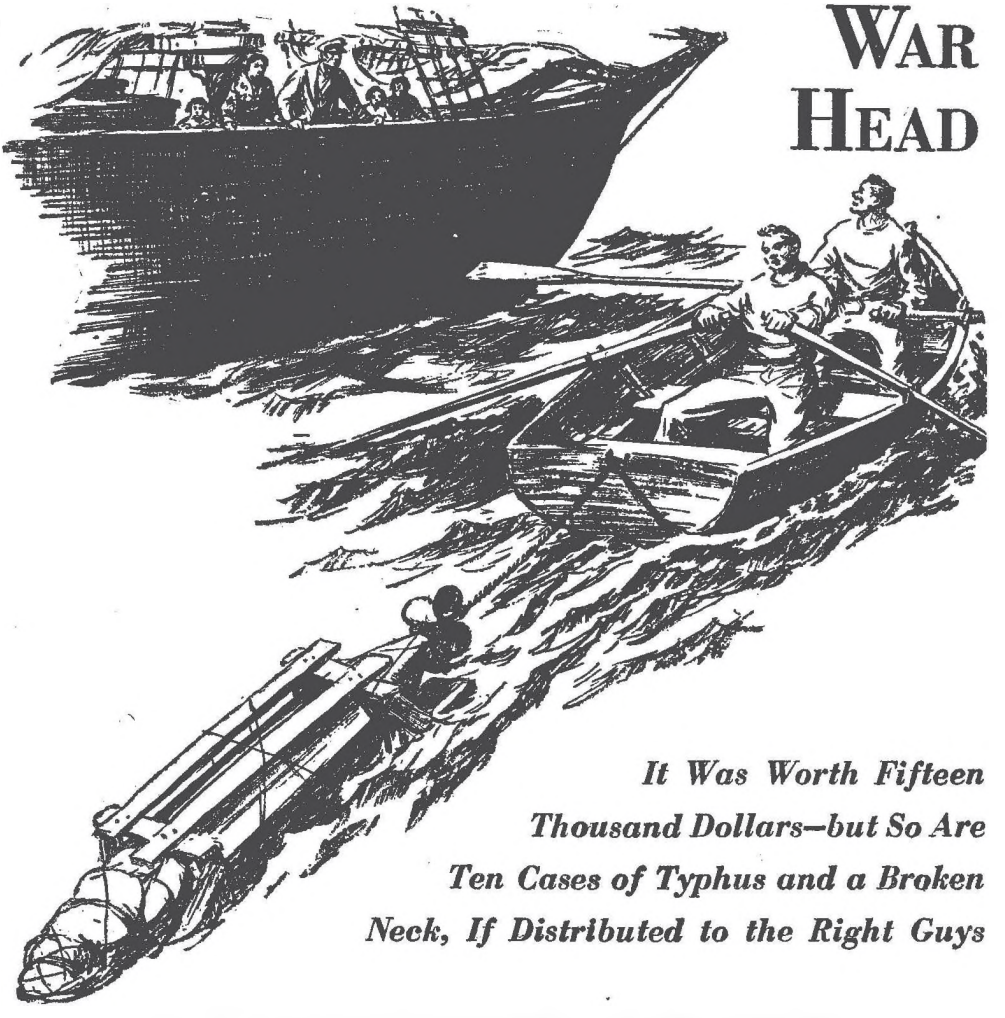
"Like silver tumbleweeds," said Sleepy quietly, as though they had been speaking of that certain range.

"Yeah," agreed Hashknife. "I was lookin' at 'em yesterday. Must be something on the other side, pardner."

"We'll look," said Sleepy. "It's sure nice to be footloose again."

"It sure is," agreed Hashknife, and then there was only the jingle of bit-chains, the creak of saddle-leather and the dull plop, plop, plop of hoofs, as they left Windy City for new ranges.

WAR HEAD



It Was Worth Fifteen Thousand Dollars—but So Are Ten Cases of Typhus and a Broken Neck, If Distributed to the Right Guys

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Murder Has a Headache," etc.

THE man in sun-faded dungarees on the stringpiece was shaking a coil of line enticingly with one hand. With the other he was pointing at the food around the galley stove amidships on the open deck of the 'Rican schooner.

Marty Wicker, who had been wandering morosely along the Marina, stopped to watch.

When a seaman covets the grub they put out on a native schooner he is hungry. And when he is willing to trade a good piece of three-eighths Manila for it he is mighty hungry.

Marty looked curiously at the would-be trader, a leather-faced young man with yellow hair. His jaws and the front of his neck were a lighter shade of brown than the rest of his face, indicating that he had just shaved off a beard.

Of a sudden he saw that the man was Jim Burr. Marty Wicker had been shipmates with Jim Burr on a Baltimore-African run. Queer fella, they'd called him in the fo'c's'le. He realized that he was in danger of a touch. He started quickly away in the direction of San Juan's custom house.

Fifty feet down the line he heard a

hail and running feet. Then Jim Burr had his hand on his arm.

"Marty Wicker!" he said. "Marty! I'm glad to see you! I need your advice."

Marty Wicker stopped. Still wary, he went through the motions of a reunion. That "advice" crack wasn't deceiving him. But he remembered that in the *Emma Ahearn* Jim Burr had never borrowed a nickel from him.

"What are you doing, boy?" Marty asked heartily. "Did you ever break that ticket of yours in on a third mate's job?"

"Come out to my boat, Marty," Jim Burr said. "You're just about the guy I want to talk to."

Marty hesitated. But he had little to lose, not even to a guy who was peddling lines for grub. This boom town, so alluring at first, was getting him down. A deck wouldn't be too tough on feet long burned by hot cobblestones. He might even ship.

He followed Jim Burr. Jim led him through the turmoil of stevedores to a rowboat—a square-ended pram, very short. Jim rowed him out into the busy harbor of San Juan.

"I've got something but I can't figure out how to handle it, Marty," the queer fella said. "I was never much use ashore. Too many things going on at once."

Marty Wicker grunted. There was plenty going on out in the harbor, too, with the huge U. S. drydock over at Isla Grande sucking in lighters like a ball game draws cars.

"What are you in?" Jim Burr asked. He was making the square-ender move.

"I'm on the beach," said Marty Wicker. "Just about broke, too."

Jim Burr didn't flinch. He didn't stop rowing, either.

Marty jerked a thumb toward the Marina. "That's a boom town," he said. "Since Pearl Harbor the navy's got ants in its pants. The U. S. is pouring in the jack, making this whole island a base—ships, planes, men. You'd think a guy could get something soft—real jack and no rust to chip."

He leaned forward and tapped Jim on the knee.

"I jumped ship," he said. "Had a carpenter's berth. In war, Jim, a ship is no place for a guy with brains. A few people in the world are going to make real jack out o' this war. You want to think. You don't want to get excited."

He nodded his head.

"Look at the Germans an' Japs, shootin' an' torpedoin' everybody to prove they're wonderful, an' still nobody loves them or pays off. Look at us and the British throwing everything we can lift at 'em, no matter how much it costs. In a set-up like that a man that keeps cool ought to cash in enough to sit pretty for the rest of his life."

Jim Burr didn't say anything.

"This island, where they're throwing the jack thickest, was what I picked," Marty said. "I wanted some job—you know, supervisin'—something like that, where you use your brains and maybe your pull and make a little piece of change out o' this war."

He spat. "What they want is carpenters and mechanics," he said. "Construction work. A white man ain't supposed to work with his hands in the tropics. An' here's one that won't."

He looked up, past Jim Burr's streaming face. A stubby-masted little sailing craft, cutter rigged, not thirty-five feet long on the waterline, was rising up ahead.

"What's— Is this yours, Jim?" he asked.

Jim Burr's nod was abrupt but proud.

"You got a sailboat like you was always figuring?"

The queer fella nodded again. "I'll be sailing around the apple before I'm dead," he said. He sat staring at the little cutter until Marty shifted his weight impatiently.

"I got her off a Boston man who used her with three other Americans to sail from England to Lisbon," Jim Burr said.

"This guy had piled her up on the Portuguese coast so I got her for near nothing. I just about starved but I spent four months repairin' an' fittin' her out for the big jump."

"You crossed the Atlantic in that thing?"

"Lay off!" said Jim Burr shortly. *"Sea Lure's* not so bad. Plenty of smaller boats have done the same. By way of the Azores, with the northeast trade on the quarter, it was a pipe."

"If you got some cock-eyed idea of signing me on that teacup put me back now," Marty Wicker said.

"I sail alone," said Jim. "I sail this little ship to Jacksonville. There's a guy there, a boat-yard owner on the St. John, that I can trust to keep her for me. When I've got her hauled out I'll ship in the navy. But I want to tell you what happened off Pico in the Azores."

He made a cone of his hands. "Pico," he said. "A volcano sticking up out of the sea, almost all rock along the coast but a few sandy spots. It makes one side of a passage. A British freighter was heading for that passage. I was nosing along the shore, looking over a cove where I could drop the hook and catch up on my shut-eye.

"All at once the limey ship cut loose at something with her guns—the other way from me. And she swung hard. I went up the mast rings. I saw the track of a torpedo. It missed the Britisher's bow. She'd swung in time. I was a long way beyond her but the white torpedo streak kept coming my way."

HE BROUGHT the pram alongside the cutter. He and Marty grabbed the gunwale. Marty sat still so Jim Burr went on talking:

"That tin fish had me worried. After a while the track showed less plain as the propellers slowed up at the end of its run. The thing was missing me some. But I was too close to the rocky shore to be happy. If it hit I'd get a deckful of granite on me. But the torp petered out altogether. It stuck its nose up like a porpoise and then sank."

"They're supposed to," said Marty Wicker.

"The limey had ceased firing. She was going away hell bent. I never saw the sub. I sailed back to where the torpedo had sunk. It was shoal there. I nearly grounded on the sand bottom and I only draw five feet. I could see this thing, like a sleepin' fish, lying there on the sand—a long round chunk of steel. I remembered that those things cost ten or fifteen thousand dollars."

"And more," said Marty.

"A tenth o' that would fix up me and *Sea Lure* with provisions and gear to get half around the world," Jim Burr said. "I could buy a decent camera, too, an' take pictures of places, birds, different kinds of ships and small craft. I ought to be able to make a living selling 'em to newspapers and magazines. Sort of a picture story, it would be. This was before I'd heard the Japs had got gay and we were in it."

"Sure, sure," said Marty impatiently. "What are we waitin' for?" He climbed aboard the cutter and Jim Burr followed him.

"I got to thinking," Jim said. "That torp was probably the latest. The Germans specialized on torps. Our navy would be crazy to look at it."

He paused.

"I took a chance," he said. "I anchored, went overboard and got a line on that baby's propellers."

"Uh huh," said Marty. This sounded lengthy enough to be the prelude to a touch. He was getting restless.

"It was safe, as long as nothing hit the war head a wallop," Jim Burr said. "I've done riskier things than that just for the fun of it."

Marty was silent.

"I buoyed it and left it in the water. Then I sailed along the coast until I came

to one of these slanting farms the Portuguees have on the mountain side. Wood is scarce but I traded my binoculars for some good, light timbers and some more rice and stuff. I gave the timbers a coat of anti-fouling bottom paint.

"That night I towed the torpedo onto a sandy strip in the cove and rigged the timbers around it like splints. I wadded canvas around the head and wrapped a spare jib over the whole works. With a half-inch line to the propellers it towed along behind the boat easy enough. I got out of there before morning."

"Sure you did," said Marty. "But how about comin' to where you were trying to swap a piece of three-eighths-inch Manila for some Porto Rican grub two thousand miles away from there?"

Jim Burr grinned. "All right," he said. "I'll come to that—and the advice I need. Strip off your shirt and pants. Feel under the boat, alongside the keel, port side."

Marty Wicker looked into the brown face, with that curious suggestion of a shaven beard. He stared hard but there was nothing to be made out but Jim's complacent grin. His jaw dropped.

"You want me to believe—more than two thousand miles you towed that thing?"

"Why not?" asked Jim. "It cut me down about two knots—but I wasn't in any hurry. I'd got extra grub at Pico. The trade wind made it a downhill run. Forty-one days. Twice I lay to the torp like a sea anchor when gales worked up a dirty sea."

"Huh!" said Marty Wicker. He looked hard at a couple of lines, one made fast to the main shrouds and the other from further aft, that disappeared into the water down each side of the boat.

"On the voyage I had a chance to think," Jim Burr said. "In a way, this thing being valuable to the navy and us almost in war, it seemed wrong to hold 'em up for a reward."

Marty Wicker snorted. Never taking his suspicious eyes off Jim Burr's face, he began to strip. He kept his shorts on, glancing toward a 'Rican schooner anchored two hundred feet away. He piled his clothes on deck and fumbled with them uncertainly. Slowly he laid hold of the port toerail and slid feet first into the water alongside. Hanging onto the rope at the main shrouds he thrust his feet out under water toward the keel of the cutter.

His toes recoiled from the bite of barnacles clustered thickly on the strakes of the cutter's bottom. Thrusting deeper he encountered something else—canvas, stretched over a solid thing—rotten canvas. His toes went through the fabric. All at once they touched something that was not wood. It was hard, smooth, rounded. It was steel, steel too highly polished to give asylum to grass or barnacles. Steel! He jerked his foot away. Enough stuff in that thing to tear a cargo ship into two pieces.

WITH a hand from Jim Burr he climbed aboard *Sea Lure* again. In silence he began to dress. There were better places to be than a couple of feet above that thing.

He scowled across the water at the dirty white Porto Rican schooner. Three men, a woman and two children on her deck were watching him with wide eyes.

"They know I've got something hidden under the boat," Jim Burr said. "That squat bald one—he's the master—spotted the lashings. But he couldn't guess what it is and Porto Ricans don't have anything to do with Americans. Bald Pate won't blab."

"Maybe," said Marty. "But you've put yourself in the barrel."

"It was the only way I could handle it, coming into port," Jim Burr said. "It's secure and it's secret. I couldn't tow it in. I figured the navy wouldn't want it known that they'd got one. I had the right papers and ducked questions from the port doctor and the rest of 'em. I kept ducking when I heard we were at war."

"It's worth fifteen thousand," said Marty. "But so are ten cases o' typhus and a broken neck, if distributed to the right guys. I'm not in the market myself. What d'you want with me?"

Jim Burr laid a hand appealingly on his arm.

"Three times I been up to the navy headquarters in town," Jim Burr said. "I don't want any reward now we're in it. But—it's ticklish. Once I started to sail over to Isla Grande, where the drydock is. But—I don't know how to handle it right. I want to reach somebody with rank to tell about it. Only I look like a beachcomber. How do I get by the gate?"

Marty stared across at the mighty drydock. Much better than dreamy Jim Burr he knew the value of this latest hunk of destruction. He scowled. Here was a guy like Jim Burr maybe making a big piece of change out of this war while he walked the Marina and dodged a mechanic's job under a high sun. His mind dug at all the possibilities while Jim Burr stared hopefully at his face.

"I could write 'em a letter," Jim said.

Marty frowned again. An idea was framing up. It was a swell notion, an idea that would bring in the jack.

"Count me out," he said, putting on his linen coat. "I want to get ashore. D'you know what you've done? You've sneaked a torpedo loaded with God know how many hundred pounds of TNT into a U. S. naval base. It could sink a battleship or blow a hole the size of Morro in that graving dock. And you got some cock-eyed notion that they're goin' to thank you for it! For all they know you could be a Nazi agent. Put me ashore!"

Jim Burr indicated acute unease.

"It ain't that bad, Marty," he said. "Not if I go an' tell 'em about it. Why, I'll be joining up myself one o' these days after I get *Sea Lure* laid up safe in Jax."

"Tell 'em about it!" Marty said explosively. "If you told 'em now the only difference to those hard-boiled babies would be they'd stick you in a nut house instead of a jail."

He shoved out his lower jaw at Jim.

"That chatter about you thinking the navy'd be crazy to get a Nazi torpedo is bunk. We've sunk a few U-boats off our own coast. But even if we haven't captured a sub don't you suppose the British who've grabbed plenty, would have passed on the dope about Nazi tin fish to our navy months ago?"

"That's so," Jim muttered anxiously.

"They're sensitive here about torpedoes since that cargo ship went down a hundred miles north o' this base. The survivors were near burnt up by the sun when they got here. The commandant is going to figure you meant to pull something, lost your nerve an' are switchin' sides, like agents do, to cash in. I'm not gettin' caught with you."

He hauled the dinghy alongside.

"I couldn't stand bein' locked up," Jim Burr said harshly. He jerked a hand around the horizon. "I got to have space. That's why I blew my last nickel on this little ship. Space—an' the sea. You won't give me away, Marty?"

"I never gave away a pal in my life," Marty asserted. "Only—" He stopped. "Jim, there's one way I could get you out o' this, and maybe with a little jack."

"I'll settle for enough to get me to Florida," Jim said. "And that isn't much. I wish I'd never seen that torpedo track."

Marty Wicker's mind was working smoothly now.

"We get out o' this port," he said. He threw his eyes compellingly on the worried

sailor. "We tow this thing to Miami. That's no naval base, Jim; that's the sucker center o' the universe. Miami! Everybody goes there to have some fun and everything goes. The game is to see who can grab the jack away fastest. Night clubs, dog races, clip joints, horse races—anything. They had an old sub on view and packed 'em in. The war hasn't stopped anything."

He nodded his head vehemently. "We go in Government Cut flyin' a red flag, towing that torpedo, blowing a foghorn and howlin' for the Coast Guard. But we'll see that the newspaper men get to us first.

"We invite the navy to take a look; we don't crawl to 'em. We can get a lawyer to make sure of our rights."

He leveled a finger at Jim Burr before he could speak.

"Even if they take the torpedo away the publicity'll put us in a grand spot, Jim, especially with me to handle it. The thing isn't just the torpedo, it's you telling the suckers, buying their way onto the *Sea Lure* at a quarter a head, about your towing it across the Atlantic for the sake o' your country. All that hooey. We'll coin the jack. You'll be famous."

Jim Burr shook his head. "Crowds and publicity aren't down my alley at all," he said.

Marty slid over the side into the pram. "Oke; put me on the Marina," he said shortly. "I got to think this over; you're actin' sort of curious about this torpedo. After all, I got my duty to my country, ain't I?"

"Wait, Marty!" Jim Burr said. He gripped the painter and held it alongside. "I've got to think. How could we get this torpedo to Miami? I'm down to the bottom of the locker on provisions."

Marty Wicker gulped air. "I'll stock her for the run," he said. "It won't be fancy grub. But I'm willing to share an' share alike with you to get an old shipmate out of a bad hole, Jim."

THE voyager's face was anxious. Marty sat rigid in the boat and looked across at Isla Grande. He waited. He'd been waiting quite a while now to make a bit out of this expensive war. He could wait a while longer. He had Jim Burr bewildered and worried. That little dig about being locked up was what was getting him. Some fellows couldn't stand being locked up.

Sure, he could wait a little longer. But sitting there over that torpedo laden with TNT while gaunt Jim Burr squirmed in thought was tough going. The sweat kept running down Marty's face.

"Make up your mind!" he said harshly. "And don't figure you can refuse and eat off me. Your troubles are all yours except this torpedo."

"I can't trade another piece of equipment and be safe to go to sea," Jim Burr said slowly. "I'll take you, Marty."

Marty stood up. He ironed out an involuntary grin of triumph. This queer fella and his tin fish would be a gold mine in Miami. But right now he wanted to get away from that boat with death lashed alongside her deadwood.

"Come ashore with me," he said. "We'll buy the grub together in the market. Don't get big ideas."

Jim Burr did not object to the cheap and Spartan grub that Marty bought after much haggling.

"I've been eating worse right along," he said cheerfully.

Marty grunted. He hadn't been.

"You better get your clearance papers," he said. "We ain't going to do any lingering. I don't like them Porto Ricans on the schooner gawkin' at us. We go!"

"Suits me," said Jim Burr. "The sooner I can get Miami hull down astern the sooner I'll be seeing old Jax rising up ahead."

Marty stood by on the Marina, watching the bunch on the Porto Rican schooner to make sure they didn't get too inquisitive. But they only stared and chattered.

Together they ferried the supplies out in the pram.

Late in the afternoon they tailed onto the quarter inch anchor chain and broke out the hook by hand.

"Take it easy," Jim Burr said, noting Marty's washboard forehead and jumpy movements. "The war head's pointing aft; nothing's apt to touch it."

"Not unless your lashings slip and she works back into the propeller," Marty snarled. His mouth was dry. "Can't we sail out?"

"If she slipped even the blade of the dead wheel would touch her off," Jim Burr said cheerfully. "The boat will handle better under motor till we get the torp towing astern."

Marty couldn't deny that. He stood in the bow, not that that would help, and let Jim Burr work her out. Though his throat was so arid his face ran water. His hands shook on the head stay. TNT—hundreds of pounds of it—laying for him!

THE way she handled, with the tiller hard over to compensate for the drag of the torpedo, was a dead giveaway. So, too, were the lashings running down the sides of the cutter. Marty was sure an inquisitive navy picket boat or coast guard would stop them. But nothing challenged them; they ran the Catano Range and with Morro Castle towering overhead chugged steadily seaward.

Off the entrance a strong southeasterly breeze saluted the *Sea Lure*. Marty cursed to himself at her lively motion.

"We'll run west fairly close to the coast till we can get the torp out on a towline," Jim Burr said. "There'll be a sea further out that'll throw her around too much."

"There's plenty here," Marty croaked. He looked back toward the harbor entrance and gave vent to a crisp expletive. "Here comes that native schooner," he said. "Old Bald Pate's getting nosy."

Jim Burr stood up to stare attentively at the dirty little schooner. "He's just looking," he said. "People like that have time to satisfy their curiosity."

Marty pivoted, scanning sea and shore. The *Sea Lure* was taking the choppy little seas on the port quarter with a dancing movement that kept the lashings tightening and slackening unendingly.

Jim cut the motor.

"Stand by to lend a hand," he said coolly. "I'm going to cut loose these lashings now and tow the torp. Forget the Porto Ricans. I've got a rifle below to scare 'em off. If Bald Pate wants to look at the timbers an' canvas covering the torp he's welcome. Come on."

"Be careful!" Marty rasped at him.

Jim Burr smiled. He did not answer. He pulled a worn half-inch tow line out of a locker under the after deck, slid out of his faded dungarees and lowered himself over the port side. He thrust his legs in under the bottom.

"Let go the lashings," he said. "I'll make sure the war head doesn't scrape coming up."

Marty hesitated. But the way she was rolling decided him. With eyes squinting and teeth gritting he tugged at the lines. His fingers were too weak and unresponsive to ease off the knots. With a snarl he pulled out his knife and cut the ropes.

Sluggishly there rose to the surface alongside the cutter the canvas-covered thing he feared. Jim Burr guided it carefully away from the hull. The timbers that floated the engine of death disguised its shape. It reminded Marty of the canvas-wrapped body of a seaman he had once seen buried off Liberia. But it was much larger than that—more than twice as long and broad.

Jim made fast to the propellers under the canvas the line Marty passed him. Then he shoved the floating thing well away from the boat. He climbed aboard and paused in the stern a moment to open up and examine the fibers of the half-inch line.

"It's the best I've got," he said.

Marty was already starting the motor.

He flung out a hand toward the approaching schooner. "Hustle, you! Make sail!"

Jim looked at him with steady eyes. "Giving orders?"

"Okay; you take her," Marty said, relinquishing the tiller. "I'll get the rags on. We got to get away from here fast."

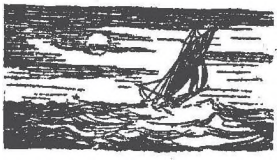
He scowled formidably. "This coast around San Juan is swarming with patrol ships an' planes since that torpedoing to northward. They could get curious. Or Bald Pate might squawk."

Amiably enough, Jim Burr put a leg against the tiller and steered easily as he threw stops off the mainsail. Marty went forward and got up the jib and staysail.

With canvas on her *Sea Lure* picked up her heels. She rode the seas that overtook her and added something of their impetus to her own pace.

Jim Burr glanced at the torpedo towing astern. He throttled down the motor and watched a moment.

"That's about all the strain that towline will take," he said and joined Marty in studying the schooner astern. She, too, had a motor. And occasional swirl of white vapor around her quarters showed that she was using it.



Jim Burr tossed up a hand to indicate the sun dropping rapidly toward the sea ahead.

"Bald Pate and his friends will quit gawking at dark," he said cheerily. "He's probably just making a passage, like us, and his wife is crazy to know what we're towing."

Marty grunted. He pointed to a destroyer knifing along further to northward.

"You better hope Bald Pate don't try to call that fellow over to ask him to satisfy his wife's curiosity," he said morosely. "Destroyers are curious, too, these days. Worse'n women."

He stabbed a finger skyward, to a plane racketing along over the coast line. "An' so are them!" he added.

Jim Burr laughed. "How's he going to call 'em? It'll soon be dark, anyhow. Then we'll be okay."

He swung down through the companionway to throw together some supper while there was still the light to see by.

Marty Wicker, with an uneasy glance astern, changed course a couple of points, edging seaward. The schooner followed. Slowly, a notch at a time, he speeded up the motor. The *Sea Lure* slid neatly through the water in spite of the drag of the torpedo.

Down below Jim Burr had the kerosene vapor stove going. It seemed to Marty that *Sea Lure* was now working out a longer lead over the schooner. His eyes wandered more often down into the cabin. With the crinkly mountains of Porto Rico cut up into light peaks and black valleys by the dropping sun, the cutter seemed infinitesimal and Miami half around the world ahead.

A sea broke, white and erratic, somehow, off to starboard. That could be a shark, breaching. But Jim Burr was coming up with some grub.

Jim put the food on the cockpit bench and hooked his arms over the side of the companion for a look around. He drew his breath in with a queer sound. Marty followed the stare of his straining eyes.

WHERE he had thought a shark had broken water there was something else. In spite of the uncertain light it was plain enough. The thing was a metal tube —moving through the sea, with a feather of white water behind it.

"Periscope!" said Jim Burr.

Marty Wicker gulped. "The damn things come up for a look—at this time o' day," he said. He clutched at a reassuring thought. "Hell, Jim, it could be American!"

Jim grunted. He was watching. The periscope had slipped under after only the time it would take a watcher to see the cutter, close at hand.

"It isn't acting American," he said. "Remember that torpedoed freighter!"

He stood there, frozen. Marty, recovering a bit from the jolt, didn't get it. Why that much emotion? No U-boat would attack such small fry as this cutter, especially in such dangerous waters. She'd approach San Juan naval base this closely only for a crack at something big.

Jim Burr's forehead was scored with wrinkles. Beyond a slow turn of his head toward the destroyer to northward he didn't move a muscle. Then, with furious speed he leaped aft across the cockpit to the heavy cleat where the towline was belayed. He cast off the line. The end trickled over the stern into the sea. The canvas-covered torpedo astern ceased to move. It was adrift.

"What's that for?" Marty asked harshly. His hands were cold on the tiller. "D'you think that U-boat's goin' to run into it? They ain't that obliging."

"Keep her going!" Jim Burr said. He darted down into the cabin again.

In an instant he was back, with a rifle across his arm. He was stuffing cartridges into the pocket of his sawed-off pants.

"What the—"

"I'll show you how to call a destroyer, Marty," he said. "And get answered—fast!"

Marty got it. His eyes leaped from the torpedo dropping astern to the rifle.

"You're nuts!" he cried. "You fool; if that thing lets go anywhere near it would make cat's meat out of us!"

"Wars are like that, Marty," Jim said. "Risky!" His eyes never moved from the innocent looking canvas bundle astern.

He turned to go forward to the mast; then stopped abruptly. His eye had been caught by the schooner.

There were two men on the bowsprit of Bald Pate's dirty white schooner. At her stem head clustered the women and children. She was throwing a big bow wave as the man at the motor controls ran her wide open toward that floating engine of death.

"Those crazy fools! They don't know! If they let that warhead touch her side—" Marty Wicker stammered.

Jim Burr leaped for the mast, with his fingers white on his old Enfield. "Keep her footing!" he said to Marty. He slung the rifle across his back, grabbed a halliard and clambered up the mast rings. He went up fast. He slung a leg over the jaws of the gaff and raised the rifle. As fast as he could work the bolt he fired five shots at the canvas-hooded torpedo. The pitch and scend of the trembling cutter and the lurching of the mast made aiming difficult.

"Put her about, Marty!" he called. "Head for the torp!"

"Head for—you're crazy," Marty bawled. He held course.

Jim fired another clip. He missed. Nearer, now, that schooner—nearer to death. Cursing, Marty put the cutter about. He lined up the jib stay with the torpedo and sailed for it.

"Both crazy!" he snarled.

The schooner looked close. So, too, did the cutter. But as fast as he could reload, Jim Burr fired again. He had a big target, that warhead. Marty gritted his teeth and steered. Jim shot.

Marty, crouching low beside the cockpit bench with the tiller clenched in his hands, went over backward. A blast of air had hit him. Sound, palpable as a fist, dealt him a roaring blow on the eardrums. The cutter had shuddered under him.

He scrambled up, shaking. Already a fountain of sea water was descending from the air, breaking up and hurling itself toward them on the wings of the wind. Spray drenched his face.

With starting eyes he sought to pierce that swirling curtain of blasted water. He made out the schooner beyond. One of the men was dangling by the foot-ropes from

the bowsprit; the other was clinging to the headstay.

Aft, across the deck, fled the woman and the two children, screaming. The two men followed as nimbly.

Bald Pate, at the wheel, jammed it over. The schooner, with sails shuddering, headed up into the wind and went racing away. Bald Pate's voice squalled commands at the men. He was pointing a frenzied finger at the flogging sheets. Motor alone wasn't taking Bald Pate away fast enough. He wanted sail, too.

From aloft Jim Burr hailed him.

"She's coming, Marty! She's coming!"

"She's going, you mean, an' hell bent," Marty shouted back. But it wasn't the schooner that Jim Burr was talking about. It was the destroyer. She was bow on to them already and white water was piling up against that bow in a way that meant high speed.

Jim came scrambling down the mast rings. "Couldn't spot the sub," he said. "I hope—" He dropped the rifle on the cabin top.

"We've been holed!" he said. "A chunk of steel—holed us!"

Marty Wicker could feel the cutter going dead under him. Jim was right. She was taking water. He cut the motor and threw her up into the wind. He remembered vaguely a scream that had come with that blast. It had been screaming steel. The cutter had shivered under its impact.

He plunged below on Jim's heels. Jim was snatching up a hammer, nails, a piece of wood. Marty grabbed a sail bag of heavy canvas. They both knew that the flying metal must have hit the cutter forward, close to the water-line.

As Jim slung a bowline around under his arms a seaplane from nowhere came storming down close to them.

"That thing saw the burst!" Jim said, as he started to slip over the side. "Now if they can—"

Something dropped from the plane. It hit the sea. Smoke poured from it.

"They spotted the sub!" Jim cried. "That smoke bomb's to mark the position—for the destroyer!"

Jim went under. Marty stood by with hammer, nails canvas.

"Can be done!" Jim gasped, emerging. "Canvas—quick!"

Working fast, they missed seeing most of the dash of the destroyer, guided by the seaplane's smoke bomb and the sound of the sub's propeller as recorded in her hydrophones. Depth charges were lobbed into the air from the stern of the ship, depth charges in a deadly pattern. The thunder of their underwater burst shook the cutter.

They couldn't miss that.

Jim crawled aboard, chest and arms interlined with red scratches from the barnacled bottom. He started to get up and then froze on the fore deck. Across the water from the destroyer came a sudden ragged, swelling cheer.

"They've seen an oil slick on the water," Marty Wicker deduced. "There's one snake gone below that won't bite any more seamen."

"Aft and pump!" said Jim Burr. "D'you want to follow him down?"

They pumped. They were throwing out the water when a launch from the destroyer headed their way.

"You better think up a story fast!" Marty panted.

"I've got one for the admiral's own ear," said Jim Burr. "It's the story of the torp that traveled two thousand miles out o' one U-boat to sink another! That ought to be good for a berth in the navy after I lay up *Sea Lure* in San Juan. Just plain truth."

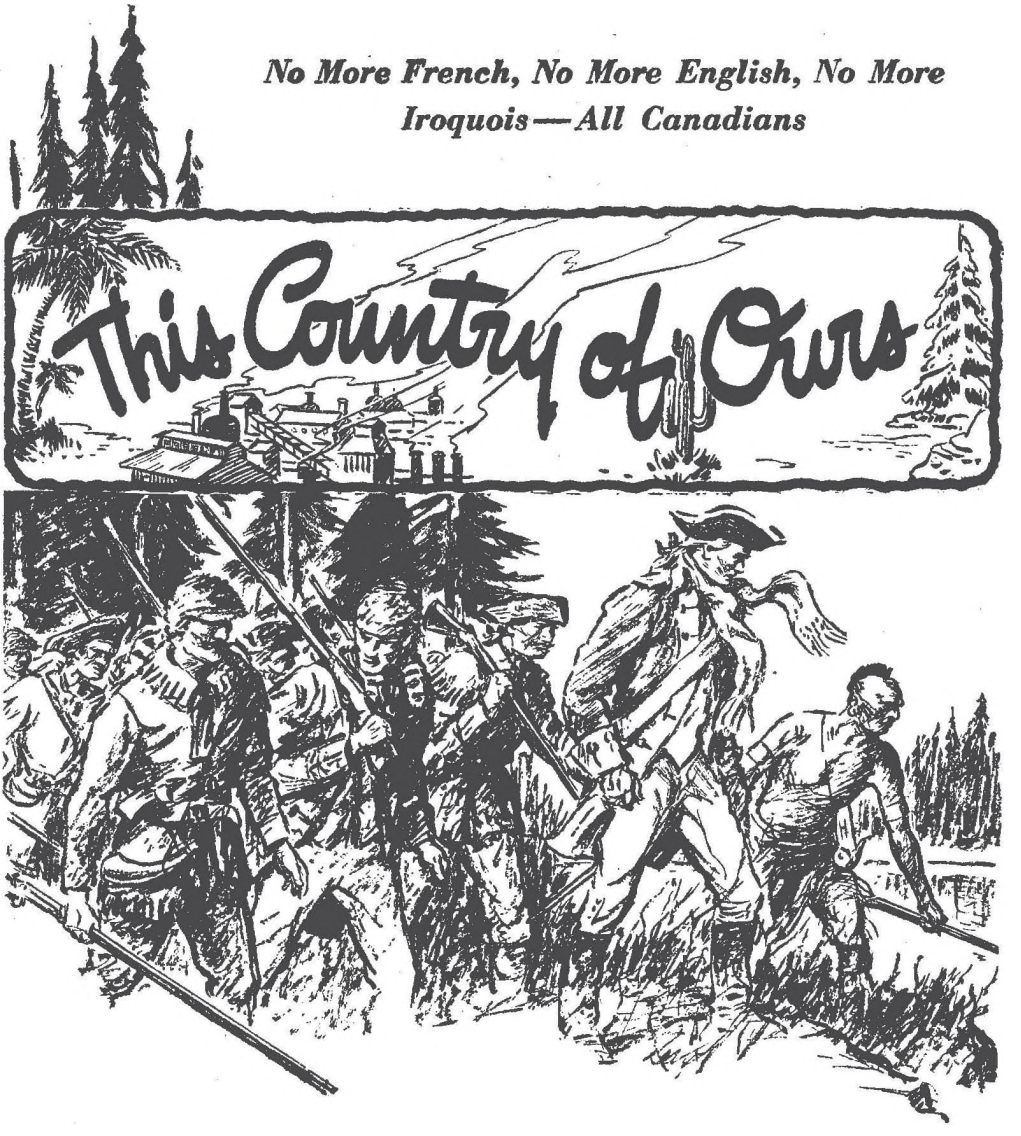
He grinned at Marty Wicker.

"Good for one berth—and maybe two!" he said. "Here's your chance to cash in on this war—right!"

Marty Wicker was stunned. The truth! Well, maybe the queer fella was calling the turn, at last.

"Make it two," he said.

No More French, No More English, No More Iroquois—All Canadians



E PLURIBUS UNUM

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

"From many peoples, creeds and races bred,
Increasing this our land from sea to sea,
One people shall arise in unity—
From Many, One!" the founding fathers said.
But now their vision grows to greater scope;
Old hatreds die, and the old ties of blood
Grow weaker, as the world in eager hope
Wakes to the dawn of all men's brotherhood.

"From Many, One!" From Melbourne to Bataan,

From Halifax to Unalaska's bay
The boundaries go down. The Rights of Man
And Heaven have swept the old frontiers away;
And from this bloody mire where armies trod
Peace shall arise, and love—for love is God."

IN REVIEWING the somewhat sensational evidence left to posterity by Père Jacques Toynard, it must be remembered that the good father was a hard-headed, practical man. He had been a soldier; before abjuring sword for cossack, he had served in the musketeers. And since then, he had spent most of his life in foreign parts. He makes a good witness.

Now he was an old man, a teacher in the seminary of Foreign Missioners in the Rue du Bacq, as it used to be spelled. Why should he, of all the priests in Paris, have been chosen this night to carry the Viatecum to a dying man? Purely by chance, you might reply; but some hold that there is no such thing as chance. Look up Emerson's essay on the subject.

It was close to midnight when the summons came. The servant of the dying man would guide him, and there was not far to go; but the night was blowy and blustering, so old Pere Toynard wrapped himself well. The servant, one Hamel, was a toothless old fellow, even more wrinkled and withered than Pere Toynard. He had a windproof lantern and was wrapped in a frayed military cloak, and mumbled that he was an army veteran like his master.

The priest still had a soldier's erect carriage. As he strode along, curls of white hair blew about his collar and he held his head high. He paid no heed to the indistinct words of Hamel. He had no interest in man or dying master; he had been summoned to shrive a passing soul, and was intent upon this errand to the exclusion of all else.

That the witching hour of night was near at hand meant nothing to him, nor did he regard the howling blasts of wind that whistled up the Seine and sent chimney-pots crashing here and there on the old roofs. As Hamel had said, they had not far to go. Their destination was one of the once elegant dwellings in the Rue Jacob. Paris, in 1768, was a city of teeming squalor and blatant riches, of forgotten glories, of decadent memories, soon to be swept away by the Revolution.

Hamel ushered the visitor into an apartment of two rooms. He muttered that a leech had been here but had gone, since his master refused to be bled. A hard man, his master. Well, and who was this master of his? queried Pere Toynard, unbuttoning his wraps.

"But I told you, Monsieur!" mumbled toothless Hamel. "He is M. de Bienville. He lies in the bed yonder."

Bienville? The priest frowned slightly as at some uncertain recollection, then he shook his head. Names meant little these days, when any upstart could assume honored titles.

He advanced into the farther room and centered his attention upon the frail figure lying propped up in the huge canopied bed. Here was an old, old man of delicate wrinkled features, still holding traces of their ancient charm, who smiled upon him.

"Why, here's a mere youth!" quavered the dying man in sardonic humor. "A suckling child, come to shrive my ninety years! Or close to ninety, at any rate. Welcome, father; you'll find cakes and wine ready to refresh you. Hamel! A glass of wine to clear my throat!"

The servant brought wine in a fragile Venetian goblet, but Pere Toynard refused a second proffered him. The dying man emptied the goblet at a draught. His eyes quickened and a little color crept into his faded cheeks. He was not only perfectly

conscious but quite sane and sound in mind, as the priest took note.

"I regret," said Bienville, courteously, "to have disturbed you upon so stormy a night, good father; but he who would cheat the devil cannot choose his road! Now let's to the work you came here to do; we'll get about it in good soldierly fashion—"

So the priest went about his business, while toothless Hamel knelt at the foot of the bed and wept softly to himself. Blasts of wind whirled about the ruinous, ancient building, clattering at the windows and swooping along the narrow street beside the Seine. Shrived and blessed and set to die in sanctity, the old man lay with his eyes closed.

"Now," said the priest, with duty done, "can I be of any service to you?"

Bienville made no reply, beyond a slight shake of the head. Only when his name was requested, did he open his eyes and speak.

"Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville."

Pere Toynard started in amazement.

"But that is impossible!" he murmured incredulously. "True, the servant said Bienville but I did not place the word—look at me, Monsieur! Why, I was your neighbor, back there at Ville-Marie! Don't you recollect me, Monsieur! Jacques Toynard, the miller's son?"

Bienville looked at him, but the faded eyes were vacant and empty; he made no response. With a sudden gush of memories tearing at his heart, Pere Toynard stood in pity and awe; now, at last, he knew with whom he had to deal. He had spoken too late; the dying man had slipped past the bounds of consciousness. However, he had received the sacraments in a sane moment; that was the main thing.

THE priest glanced around the two rooms; this was no abode of poverty. On the walls were crossed swords, handsome blades; two or three portraits, medals and orders in a case. The hangings and appointments were of the best quality.

Bienville! The wonder of it grew upon Pere Toynard. To think that he, of all people, should have been brought here to shrive this man! The long decades of the years fell away and he saw once more the tumbling rapids of the St. Lawrence, the long green fields, the chinked log houses of the early settlers, the handsome newer buildings of later days. And he, the miller's son, playing with these children of the Le Moyne household! He had never seen old Charles Le Moyne, but the world had rung with stories of him in those days—

Remembering himself, the priest gestured to the toothless servant.

"Pray for his soul, my son, with me."

"You will remain, Father?"

Pere Toynard nodded and knelt, crossing himself. He thought he heard a laugh from the bed; his eyes closed, he prayed quietly. Outside, the wind howled and howled fiendishly—then another laugh, a laugh ringing and vibrant, came from the bed.

Pere Toynard, startled, jerked up his head. Old Bienville was sitting up, eyes wide, face alight, staring at the air.

"I hear you, warriors!" came his voice, firm and strengthening. "Silence, Mohawk and Huron! Make room, yelping Ottawa and Onondaga; stand aside, Alabaman and Abnaki chiefs! He comes to take the salute—he, Seigneur de Longueuil! Worthy father, love and greetings! Here am I, last of all your sons born in the old house at Ville-Marie, ready to make report. Age is but the dust of the journey home, lying thickest in the day of return; I have little to regret, my father. Ah, how the heart sings at sight of you! It is like looking again down the old village street, and out across the fruit trees—Canada, Canada! God, how my soul has been sick these many years for the sight of you again!"

White hair tossed, he paused. "Back,

Huron! Silence, Mohawk!" he said suddenly. "He comes, he is here!"

It was obvious that the old man was in delirium. Outside, the wind-noises had ceased for the moment; there was a stillness upon the place. Then the toothless servant fell to mumbling at his prayers, and Pere Toynard knelt as though frozen, for upon the silence crept a sound, as it were the pad-pad of moccasined feet. But there was no one else.

Always, they said, Charles le Moyne had worn moccasins to the day of his death. He was a massive, vigorous personality, a presence felt in any company. Voyageur and fighter, great dominant figure of the early colony, captive among the Iroquois and released by them, his bare word more powerful than a regiment of men, finally ennobled by the King for his services to Canada—

"See what you gave, my father!" exclaimed Bienville. To the startled, watchful eye of the priest he seemed quite sane. It was clear that he fancied others to be present; so impressive were his looks, his gestures, that Pere Toynard instinctively glanced around, then signed himself again.

"Aye, see what you gave to this country of ours!" went on the dying man, a blithe note in his voice. "Here's the worth of it all, in your blood; you did as other men must do, and praised God when your sons died worthily. A sweet country, Father; your country, our country! It was you who taught us the word Canadian; no longer French, said you, but of this our own land, we Canadians, your sons! Why, here comes Charles, your first-born. Welcome, good brother, welcome. Stand here at my right, Charles, Baron de Longueuil, good son of a good father."

Pere Toynard, in his lifelong service among barbarous peoples, had experienced some queer things, but nothing stranger than this. He had the feel that others were present in the room; no doubt it was caused by the magnetic personality of this dying man. Perhaps, too, because he himself had known this same Charles le Moyne, second of the name, created a baron for his services—had known him very well indeed at Montreal.

There was a man for you! Sent to France as a boy, a cadet in the campaign of Flanders, a lieutenant in the regiment of St. Laurent—then back to Canada, sweeping into the wild life of the frontier, by war-trail and council-fire, by raid and massacre, rising ever higher in executive positions—

"Charles, Charles the first-born!" exclaimed the dying man. "Trail-blazer, Iroquois fighter, you've gone a long way in your day! Aye, you were ever the soldier, and you came back to the uniform when you tired of Indian gear—major of Montreal, royal lieutenant, governor of Three Rivers, then of Montreal—well done, Charles! Your spilt blood watered many a spot in the great valley of Canada, your country and mine, Canadians both! *De par le Roi,* I salute you!"

Withered fingers lifted for an instant to withered cheek. Then the bright, keen old eyes whipped around, and Bienville held up his hand as though to grip another hand. But the air was empty.

"What, Jacques, gay and smiling as ever!" he cried. "Greeting, brother; greeting, Sieur de Ste. Helene. Woods-loper, raider of Hudson's Bay, Mohawk protégé, named by Charlevois the bravest of the brave, how greatly did Canada lose when the enemy balls struck you down at Beauport. But you died well, voyageur of the north; your blood consecrated another bit of this our native land; your thirty years were filled full, abrim with valor and glory. Shame upon me, who die in my bed so far from our great valley of Canada! The country of the St. Lawrence—surely there is no other so fair under the sun—"

His voice became faint and fainter. He sank back upon the pillows; it was the end, thought good Pere Toynard, the end of delusions and life together. He bowed

his head and his lips moved. Upon the hushed air dinned a muffled sound; it was the bell of St. German des Prés, close by, striking midnight. He prayed for the dying man and the dead, together.

He had not known Sainte Helene, who was dead before the miller's son was born, but had heard countless tales of that young hero, called the most beloved man in Canada—master of forest rovers, going overland to Hudson's Bay with his voyageurs, a name for fiery intrepidity and laughing gallantry of youth.

Then he looked up in astonishment. Old Bienville was sitting up again, pawing at the air as though gripping hands with someone, breaking into joyous laughter—ah, poor man, that he should die so hard! More delusions, evidently; yet, somehow, there seemed to be a queer sort of sanity in these delusions.

"Ha, brother Paul!" he was saying. "I thought I heard an Onondaga whoop. So they adopted you into the tribe and made you a chief, eh? Well, you had full forty years before your tired body broke up and you took the ghost-trail—you didn't miss much in those years, eh? What a tireless devil you were, during the fighting on the Bay! I remember they said you were worth full fifty men yourself at Tadoussac and Beauport; and when we raided the Iroquois country, and in the Newfoundland campaign you were ever a man of iron! Didn't M. de Callieres make you a captain, toward the end? Well, you died in the old house; you had lived too hard, fought too hard. But they'll never put me in the churchyard at Ville-Marie, Paul! Bend closer. I want to whisper something in your ear—"

Smiling, Bienville lowered his voice; his words became lost.

IT DID not matter; Pere Toynard was not listening. He was all astare, enwrapped in old days. Yes, he had known this Paul le Moyne, Sieur de Maricourt—had known him well as a boy, had gone to his funeral! He remembered him now, clumping about the house, telling tales of the wild fighting on Hudson's Bay and in the Iroquois country! It was fact that he had been adopted by the Onondagas, too—truly a man of iron, dead at forty from privations and hurts and sufferings—

"You lived for Canada, Paul, and died for her," Bienville was saying, in a steady voice. "They tell me our Canada has grown into a great land these days, but for us she will always be the lovely great valley of the St. Lawrence, with the little villages and the bell-towers—ah, listen, listen! Those are Huron war cries pealing up the night, and well I know what they mean, and who is coming—listen!"

Old Bienville had stiffened, senses alert, eyes fixed on nothing.

Huron war cries? Pere Toynard hastily signed himself and muttered a desperate prayer; he was beginning to doubt his own senses. Once, as a child, he had heard Huron whoops yelping down the valley, and had never forgotten those savage voices. And now, as the gusty whirling wind swooped anew about the windows and cornices of the old house, he could hear the howling ferocity of those Huron voices ringing shrill.

The dying man somehow contrived to lend ghastly reality to the imagined scene—he was throwing up his arms, as though embracing someone who leaned over the canopied bed.

"Ah, Francois, dear Francois!" came his voice in tender greeting. "I was only a boy of eleven when you left us. It's good to have you by me now, the touch of your hand heartens me as it did in the old days. Sieur de Bienville—they gave me your title, did you know it? Titles were hard to find for so many lusty youngsters. It seemed hard to all of us when the Huron balls took your life. Francois, you were only twenty-five then. I remember how our mother sobbed; she died a little while afterward. Eh? What's that you say?"

The old man cocked his head as though

listening. Then he nodded repeatedly, and spoke so sanely, so quietly, that Pere Toynard stared in frozen immobility.

"Yes, you say aright. It was at Repentigny you fell, Francois; our le Moyne blood has been shed everywhere along the great river. Aye, no matter where we died, our blood was shed there, even a little of mine, and all of yours. That is our country; we have clung to it fiercely, we have fought well for it; a lovely country, Francois, a land of beauty. I wish they might lay me there, instead of behind some Parisian churchwall!"

He paused, breathing hard, plucking with his fingers at the coverlet. Pere Toynard watched him, fascinated, while the servant Hamel mumbled away at his prayers. Francois le Moyne, the first Bienville, whose title had been passed on after his death to the younger brother? Yes, one had heard much of him, too, in the brave days of childhood; struck down by Huron bullets, a memory of bravery told to boys about the fire in winter. The priest glanced up. He met the gaze of the dying man, found the bright eyes looking straight at him.

"What, drums?" he was saying. "Your drums, Louis?"

Pere Toynard started; a light sweat beaded his brow. Then he relaxed in swift relief. Bienville was looking not at him, but through him at nothing. Yet there were drums—by the saint, roll upon roll of muffled drums, ah, no! Only leafless branches outside, hitting against a window in the blast of wind.

"Embrace me, dear brother Louis, embrace me!" The dying man smiled gently; a tender radiance was in his wrinkled features. "I was fourteen when you died; you were only eighteen, on your first war trail, at the taking of Fort Nelson! Like Francois, you gave your title to another of our brethren; you, Sieur de Chateauguay, who died so young! Do you know, Louis, there was much grief for you? Strange how we clutch so selfishly at our loved ones, isn't it! Strange that we never seem to realize how they merely step over and then await us, as you await me now. There's none here to mourn me, however; only another old pensioner of the King gone. And your body lies up in the northland, dear Louis—in our land, our country. You'll take me back with you, eh? I've been so many years away—hello, here's your brother Antoine, the other Chateauguay! How brave you look, standing there together!"

BIENVILLE clutched out with both hands, as though gripping those of some unseen presence, and the joyous smile on his old face was sweet to see.

"Dear Antoine, you served me well, always!" he exclaimed. "Battling by sea and land, but never for the land we so loved. By the rivers of Louisiana, by the war trails of Alabama, under the guns of Pensacola, side by side with me and Serigny; at Martinique, at Port Massacre, at New Orleans! You did well, Antoine—governor of Guiana, royal lieutenant, governor of Cap Breton—"

He paused, with failing voice, then went on, faintly.

"And who's this you bring by the hand? Why, it's the little Gabriel, Sieur d'Assigny—he who died at twenty, of the San Domingo fever! He, too, on his first campaign, afar from home. Bless you, little brother of my heart! Stand with the others, stand at salute with this bright company—first to bear the name Canadian—"

The words became too faint to hear. The good priest looked up at the painted ceiling; he was badly shaken. He had known this Antoine, this second Sieur de Chateauguay, had seen him several times, returning to the old house at Ville-Marie on his brief visits home, splendid in his brave uniform. Of young Sieur d'Assigny he knew only the name, for the youth had left home at nineteen and no more had been seen or heard of him; only another

memory of boyhood, thought the priest, of those who had died young.

An odd thing Bienville had said; the words tormented the worthy father in this moment. About stepping over and waiting for the loved ones to come. Those were hardly the words of a good conventional Catholic, he reflected; still, it was clear that this dying man was now out of his mind and not responsible. Age learns toleration, and foreign missioners in particular must have good dosage of it.

"Wine, Hamel! More wine!" came the feeble voice.

It was Father Toynard who filled the goblet and brought it to the bedside, and helped Bienville to drink. The dying man sighed in satisfaction; the keen eyes looked up at the priest. They were very sane and clear.

"Ah, good father! Thank you. Did I not hear you mention a name? It struck me as familiar. Thoynard, I think?"

Delighted that the delusions were past, the priest assented.

"Yes, but I have made it Toynard, as being more convenient. I was born in Ville-Marie near your house."

"Then you are the miller's son! Wait, I know the name—it was Michel, eh?" Bienville laughed lightly. The wine had put color in his cheeks again. "Someone told me you had gone into the musketeers, I recall."

The priest thrilled. It was nice to be remembered by such a man, he who had been only a boy in those days!

"I am glad, Monsieur, that you recall the name," he replied. "If there is any way I may be of service to you, pray command me. I am delighted to see that your fancies have departed and you are yourself again."

"Eh? What fancies do you speak of?" demanded Bienville.

"You have thought, Monsieur, that members of your family were present—"

"Well, are they not?" Bienville swept his hand out. "Look! Cannot you see them? Of course they're present! That is, all except two, who have been delayed."

Dismay took hold of Pere Toynard. Impossible! Those old eyes were quite clear and sane—desperately, he pulled himself together.

"It pleases you to jest, Monsieur," he said gently. "Apparently I shall have to make report of this matter—"

"Make it, make it; you'll find quills and ink on the table in the next room," said Bienville brusquely. "Jest? Faith of a Canadian! No wonder Serigny's laughing! Ha, Joseph, good brother!" He held up his hand as he spoke. "Greetings, Sieur de Serigny, Capitane de Vaisseau—brave old seaman! The winds that blow between the worlds have brought you back to me at last. Welcome to our company!"

A spasm of horror shook Pere Toynard. He backed away; the dying man paid no further heed to him, but was once more intent upon the empty air. So splendidly vigorous and vital was the mien of old Bienville, so high rang his voice, that the priest hurriedly signed himself with a touch of more than fear.

"Ha, Serigny! We'll greet him together, you and I," cried Bienville, a joyous eager ring in his voice. "You knew him as I did, across the years—ha, Joseph! Listen."

Pere Toynard also listened, but heard nothing. Serigny? He knew of that man, he had seen him in the old days, had talked with him—that gallant seaman who carried the le Moyne name so bravely afar. He was not thinking of Serigny now, however, but of the dying man and the report he must make.

Delusion? Crackpot fancies of an age-enfeebled brain? He hesitated at the thought, desiring to reject it, yet bound by conscience in the matter. Those visions, these words to unseen visitors, might be caused by the wine or by fever in the old veins; be charitable, he thought to himself, be charitable. After all, the eyes of dying men are said to see strange things—

And now happened what was neither

fancy nor delusion, a thing so real that it shook Pere Toynard to the very depths.

"He comes, he comes!" repeated old Bienville eagerly. "He loved this country of ours, dear Joseph, as we did; his heart swelled to the sight of those pleasant fields after long trails or voyages. His were those long campaigns, his those bitter raids, his the ceaseless battle by sea and land—listen. Even in the land of death they salute him with drums and trumpets —listen!"

The dying man sat silent, motionless, finger upraised. And now, not for the first time, a shiver took Pere Toynard; for upon the wings of silence he heard, he actually heard, a faint faery echo of distant drums and clarions. It was no illusion; it was real. He went to his knees, amazed and transfixed; and still he heard them, silvery trumpets far away.

He found himself trembling; but then, suddenly, the explanation burst upon him. This night the King was at the Louvre, and guard was being changed, and the howling wind swept the sound of trumpet and drum upriver and across to this left bank—

"Salute, Pierre! Salute, Sieur d'Iberville," cried out the old man, joy in eyes and voice. "Ha, Pierre, glorious rascal, it's good to feel your hand again. Just think—sixty-two years since you lay dying aboard your frigate at Havana—why, it's like yesterday, now."

Pere Toynard scarcely heard, for the tumultuous relief of his heart that he had found so excellent an explanation of that faint music. This business of the supernatural had badly shaken him; the more strange, because his whole life dealt entirely with the supernatural, and in his journeyings in pagan lands he had seen more than a little of such things. But he could not and would not admit any share in the delusions of this dying man. The room was empty, and he knew it perfectly well.

What most worried him, to do him justice, was whether he could subscribe that M. de Bienville had died in the odor of sanctity. He was of two minds about this.

AS TO Pierre le Moyne, the great Sieur d'Iberville—in his childhood he had met this man twice, and since then had heard of him often. Seamen told wondrous tales of Iberville; to the navy he was a legend and a hero, never defeated in fight, vanquished only by death, as the saying went. And for some years, the boy Michel Toynard had cherished dearly a broken plume from Iberville's hat, given him laughingly outside the church at Ville-Marie.

What stories redounded of this man! Stories of battle by snow and ice, of savage raids, of seamanship beyond compare—always of Iberville and his Canadians, who had carried the Fleur-de-lys from the Arctic to the tropics. Abruptly, the priest was recalled to the present by the tones of Bienville.

"But today, dear Pierre, let be forgotten all your conquests, all your campaigns and victories and spoils—today remember one thing, the thing you always preached at me from the floes of the Bay to the swamps of Mobile—this country of ours, this splendid land of vistas ineffable, these fields of heart's love and heart's blood, this Canada! Why, Pierre, it chokes me to think that you and I, tonight, will be going back there together—all of us in company—"

Indeed, emotion stilled his words, joyous though they were. He came to one elbow and waved his hand at nothing, so that the priest, too, stared up at the empty air. Bienville must have caught sight of his face, for a laugh came from him.

"Michel Toynard—do you remember the miller's boy, Pierre, from Ville-Marie? You do? Speak closer—I cannot hear." Bienville paused, as though listening; then he looked at the staring-eyed priest and laughed. "He says, good father,

to ask if you still keep the plume from his hat that he gave you one day?"

Pere Toynard shrank back, and made the sign of the Cross on his soutane, a sudden choking in his throat. But Bienville regarded him no more.

"Ah, Pierre, I outlived you long, but not your fame!" he was saying. "Governor of Louisiana after you, royal lieutenant, governor again and yet again, with the city of New Orleans to bear on my name and yours; yet that was not my country, Pierre, nor yours. Give us, rather, the long sweet fields above the great river, the war-trails and the cities of the north. There we'll go together, all brethren in company, to watch upon the green hills and keep our endless ward upon the rapids and the narrow seas—"

The voice failed, the man lay back upon his pillows, exhausted, but his keen rapt eyes spoke on amid the silence. They moved from point to point, as though searching from face to face of those whose invisible presence stood about him.

"An old man on pension, dying upon a Paris midnight!" rose the voice faintly, in sardonic accents. "Last of us all to go, unmourned and forgotten of men—to go whither? Why, there's the mad folly of mankind—to go, you say, to go. To leave this world and go into the darkness of the ghost-trail—devil take such nonsense!"

His voice shrilled. He sat up again, shaking his hand in air.

"Rather, to remain in the world that we loved, the long valleys rich with our blood and sweat. Rather, to keep our watch and ward upon our country, now and always; no, no, not our country alone, but theirs as well, Mohawk and Tory, too! A new thing shall come into the world, brethren; no more French, no more Iroquois, no more English—but brotherhood of all, as the warriors of the Iroquois clans were brothers. Why, that's the great pattern of life to be some day learned! Eh, Pere Toynard? Is it not so? Is not that the very preaching of Christ?"

So startled was the priest at this abrupt appeal that he could scarce find voice, but he managed a stumbling response.

"Why, why, of course—something of the sort. Of course the world's not ready for it yet—"

"Bah! An ancient lie—the world has discarded it, you mean!" leaped out the dying voice. "Therefore it will be forced upon the world in blood and agony, perhaps long ages hence—but it is coming! Eh, Pierre? That's what you've been trying to tell me, isn't it? So all you brethren know it, realize it?"

Bienville looked up and listened. His face changed and softened, and then he crossed himself and went on speaking.

"Yes, I understand a little, only a little; how wondrous it all is!" he murmured. "Like a vista seen in dream—like the beautiful country below Trio Rivieres in the springtime! Think of us, Huron and Canadian, French and Boston man, all friends together—no war-trail, no looting, so scalps danced around the black post. Yes, they say only a dying man can see the pattern of life; that is why I can see it now, the whole vision of brotherhood that shall fill this country of ours—"

His voice jerked suddenly. "Coming, father! Coming, brethren! Your hand, Pierre, your hand—ha, Serigny! Salute!"

His head lolled over sideways; it was the end.

FOR the last time, Pere made the sacred sign, and his lips moved. A medley of sounds reached into his heart and terrified him anew; a chorus of voices all talking at once, a joyous outburst of greetings faintly stirring the air and dying away upon the windy night—

Men passing in the street outside, he told himself desperately, and with his prayers fiercely banished superstition. Then he moved to help the toothless servant; they laid out the withered old figure in decent composure. The priest noted the rapt smile upon Bienville's lips; the harsh

touch of age seemed to have fled, and he looked younger again, quite at rest, peaceful in his last sleep.

"Sieur de Bienville—" wrote out the good priest, preparing his report. Then he paused, frowning uncertainly. Delusions, of course; the errant figments of a dying brain. Then why had he himself been so shaken? Imagination, no doubt. He had let himself become subject to the evil spirits that roam the world. Again he dipped the quill, resolutely, and leaned over the paper.

"Sieur de Bienville, dead about the hour of midnight—" He paused anew and then shook his head, looking at the words. He glanced at the canopied bed in the farther room. Well, it was a matter of conscience, of duty! One must tell the exact truth. He began to write with a gesture of decision. All this fanciful nonsense about visions was false —

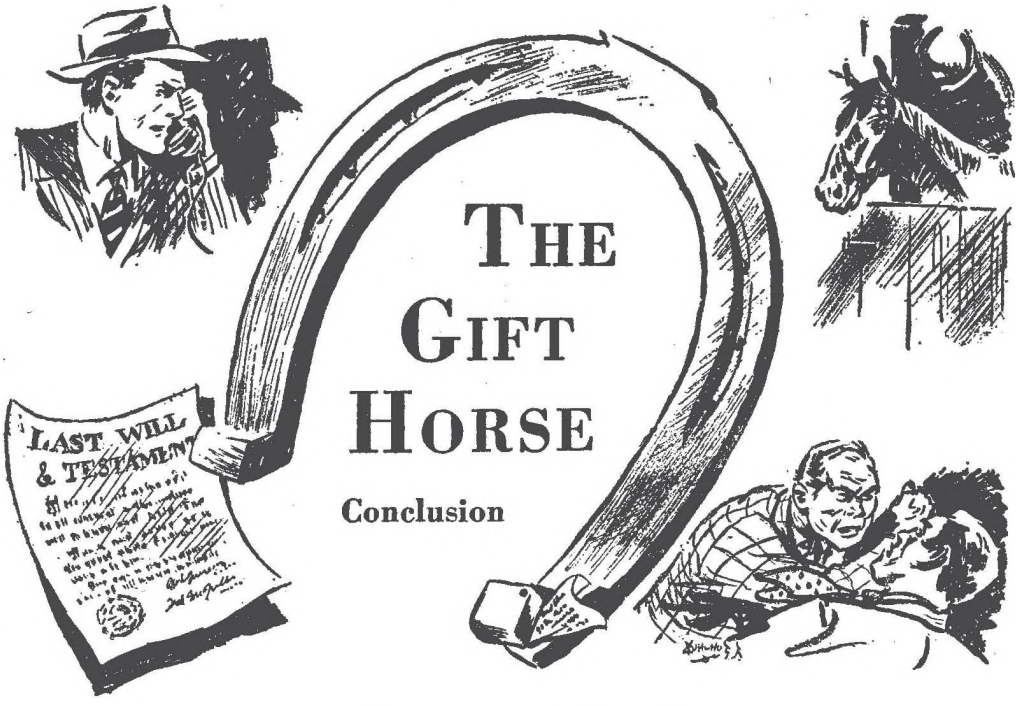
False? He wiped the feathered end of the quill across his brow; drops of sweat fell from it. False? But the feather, the broken plume from Iberville's hat, a lifetime ago in Canada?

How in the name of all the saints could dying Bienville have known about that plume—unless the invisible Iberville had actually told him? How, unless those dying eyes had seen what no mortal could see?

A shiver took Pere Toynard. He shook off all these thoughts and leaned forward, and wrote:

"Of sound mind and tranquil heart, dying as a good Christian with the rites of the Church. May his soul rest in peace!"

Johnny Fletcher Turns Out to Be Not Such a Poor Detective, After All!



THE GIFT HORSE

Conclusion

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of
"The Mighty Blockhead" and other Johnny Fletcher mystery stories

XVI

WHITEY hung up the receiver and shifted his automatic from his left hand to his right. "It'll take the boys almost an hour to get out here. Be damned if I'm going to stand here and watch you birds all that time. There ought to be some rope around here. Look for it, Pat."

"There's some out in the stable," Wilbur Ganz suggested.

"Yeah, and you think I'm going to let you out to get it?"

"I'll get it," volunteered Pat Shea. "And I'll tie the knots. I used to be a sailor—"

"They don't take dwarfs in the Navy," Sam Cragg said.

"Dwarf!" cried Pat Shea. He rushed headlong at Sam and swung his fist at the big fellow's jaw, almost standing on tiptoes. The blow didn't land, however. Sam flicked out with his hand and for the second time in twelve hours Pat Shea turned a somersault, propelled by Sam Cragg. He brought up almost at Whitey's feet.

The gunman looked down at Pat, then up at Sam. "Not bad. You got a lot of weight behind those mitts of yours."

"Like to show you," Sam offered pleasantly. "Put down the rooty-toot and we'll waltz a round. I'll even hold one hand behind my back."

"You might at that," Whitey said thoughtfully. "I think maybe I'd be safest just to let you have it, say about the third vest button—"

"Hey!" cried Sam, in alarm.

Whitey shook his head. "No, I can't do that. Willie said not to knock you off.

But he said it would be all right if I just crippled you. A bullet in the kneecap'll do it, nicely."

On the floor Pat Shea started kicking. "Gimme a baseball bat," he moaned. "Gimme a bat and I'll kill him."

Whitey touched Shea with the toe of his shoe. "Up, sonny boy. You had it coming, trying to pick on your betters."

Pat Shea sat up and called Sam a dirty name.

Sam took a step forward, but Whitey gestured him back with the gun.

"Sit down on the floor, big boy. With your back against the wall. And you, *Mister* Johnny Fletcher, sit down beside him."

"Maybe I can find some rope in the kitchen," Wilbur Ganz volunteered.

"We'll do without it. The boys'll be out here in a half hour or so. I guess I can hold a rod that long. Sit down with the rest of the class, boys."

"Me?" asked Pat Shea.

"You, sweetheart. And the other monkey. I don't trust any of you. Now, I'll just sit down in this chair across the room and we'll hold kindergarten classes."

WHITEY backed to an overstuffed chair and settled himself comfortably with his hands resting on his knees. The muzzle of the automatic was pointed carelessly at the four men who sat across the room, their backs against the wall.

"Know any funny stories, Mr. Fletcher?" Whitey asked pleasantly. "Something to while away the time?"

"I know a lot of stories," Johnny said morosely, "but they don't seem funny to me just now."

"But maybe they will to the rest of us. Say, tell how you got out of the Bull Dog and Pussy Cat. That's a good one. Ha-ha-ha!" Whitey slapped his knee with his free hand. "The Fire Department coming into the joint didn't have anything to do with your getting away, did it? Boy, what a panic. Eighteen women fainted—and a couple of firemen are going to lose a week's pay for losing their raincoats and helmets."

"Serves them right," Johnny snapped. "They had no business letting drunks borrow their clothes for a measly twenty bucks apiece."

"Ah-ha! But how about the sewers? Or did a couple of the boys turn in a false report? No, I don't think they did. You both look pretty dirty."

"What I'm thinking about you is dirty, too," grumbled Sam Cragg.

"I'll bet, but it ain't one-half of what's going to happen to you gazabos when Willie gets here. You know how much you cost him today?"

"He told me. Eighty grand. Or maybe it was eight million. I wouldn't know. Only I didn't have a thing to do with it. Ulysses went in to win and I even put an honest jockey on him, to make sure. I didn't trust Shea any farther——"

"Nobody trusts you, you lousy book-agent," Pat Shea snarled.

Johnny nudged Sam who was sitting next to Shea. Sam shuddered and his elbow went into the jockey's ribs, bringing forth a yelp.

"Children should be seen and not heard," Sam cried.

"Ha-ha, that's rich," chortled Whitey. "Why don't you laugh, you fellows?"

At Whitey's elbow the phone suddenly rang. Whitey started so violently he almost dropped his automatic. "Who the hell?" he asked.

"I'll answer it," Wilbur volunteered, half rising.

"Sit down!" Whitey snapped. "What a spot. It might be Willie and then again it might be—someone else."

"Answer it and find out, Whitey," Johnny suggested.

The telephone rang steadily and Whitey chewed his lower lip with his teeth. He reached out and touched the telephone, but let go of it again. The phone continued to ring.

Whitey groaned, "I gotta take a chance." He took up the handset and brought it to his ear. "Hello," he said. "What—? Hello— Hello!"

His mouth twitched and he replaced the phone on the cradle. "They hung up," he said.

"Sure," said Johnny. "You always hang up when a man answers."

"It's screwy," muttered Whitey. "Why should they hang up when they get the number? They didn't even ask— Say, you"—nodding at Wilbur—"you live here. Who'd call you and hang up?"

"Search me," said Wilbur. "I work out in the barn. I never get any telephone calls. Ask Fletcher, he's the boss around here these days."

Whitey glanced at Johnny, then shook his head. "Naw, you ain't even lived out here. Unless——"

"Cops," said Johnny. "They call up here right along and when I don't answer they come out."

"What? Why—the cops are looking for you as bad as we were."

"That's what you think."

Whitey jumped up from the chair. "Gee, what a spot. I wish to hell Willie was here. What's keeping him?"

"His car; it can't fly. He won't be here for a half hour."

"It's almost a half hour since I called; I came out myself in fifty minutes."

"The police station is just up the road. They can be here in five minutes."

"Shut up, Fletcher!" Whitey yelled. "I can't even hear myself think."

"Think fast, Whitey. You're in a tight spot. You can't—"

The phone rang again and Whitey lunged for it. "Hello!" he roared into the mouthpiece. "Hello, hello—!"

A shudder shook his body as he replaced the receiver once more. "I don't like it," he whined. "Willie didn't have any business sending me out here alone. I'll tell him a thing or two."

"I'll bet you will," said Johnny.

"I told you to shut up. You—"

Whitey rushed forward, stepping on the Navajo rug that touched Sam's hands at the far side of the room. Sam gripped the rug and jerked with all his strength. A table and chair crashed to the floor. And so did Whitey.

THE gun didn't fly out of his hand, but it might just as well have. Before Whitey recovered, Sam was swarming all over him and the capture of the gun was a mere formality. Sam tossed it to Johnny, then smashed his fist against Whitey's jaw; not hard, just hard enough to take most of the fight out of Whitey.

Sam got to his feet then.

"Not bad," said Johnny. "Not half bad."

The phone rang again.

Johnny stepped swiftly across the room and scooped it up. "Fletcher talking!"

A metallic laugh answered him. Then the connection was broken. Johnny put the receiver back and a shiver rippled through him.

"A guy with a warped sense of humor," he mumbled.

"Let's get out of here," Sam Cragg said. "Willie'll be here in a little while."

"Tsk. Tsk. The long drive for nothing. Too bad. Whitey, I know quite well what I would have got if Willie had got here in time. I want you to think of that when we back out of the door. The first one of you sticks his head out gets a slug. I won't be aiming in particular; just at the door. Remember that!"

Sam pushed open the door and turned back. "Where's your car, Whitey?"

"Up the road a half block. Pulled off," Whitey replied sullenly.

Sam went out and Johnny lingered in the doorway a moment. Then he stepped out into the macadamed drive. His heels rang out as he ran after Sam. He caught him at the street.

"Sam, there's the car up ahead. Get it and hole up in a hotel at Great Neck."

"Aren't you coming?"

"No. I've got to look around here. I can't do it if they think we're both still here. Start the car and drive off."

"All right, but I'll come back."

"No. Willie's due here and there'll be fireworks. I'll keep out of sight. I promise."

"Your promise ain't worth a damn, Johnny. I know you."

"Whitey's coming!" Johnny exclaimed softly. "Go—!"

He gave Sam a shove and stepped sidewards into the shelter of the trees. He dropped to the ground and lay still. He could hear Sam's heels clicking on the concrete, and straight ahead Whitey's shoes scraping the macadam as he advanced cautiously to the street.

The motor roared up the street and became a steady hum.

Whitey's shoes clicked back to the house. In a moment loud voices came to Johnny's ears, followed by a cry of pain. Then, low steady talking. Whitey had taken over once more.

Johnny got to his hands and knees, rose to a crouch and began circling the house.

He proceeded cautiously and took five minutes to make the circuit. In the shadow of the long stable he moved quicker. He groped along the wall and found the door. He tried it and discovered that it was latched, but not locked. He started to pull the door open when a flicker of light flashed against the wall near him.

At the same time he heard the low hum of an automobile. Willie Pipett was coming along at top speed.

JOHNNY went quickly to the end of the stable, stepped behind and peered around the edge. The headlights were bright on the road now, and the motor came louder and louder. Its tone changed suddenly and the lights, full and bright, turned into the driveway.

Johnny pulled back his head.

The motor died smoothly and heels rang on pavement. A door slammed and Johnny heard excited yells. The chattering went on for two or three minutes, although Johnny could not distinguish any words.

Then the voices came out into the open and heels clicked and the motor roared into life. The headlights backed away and after a moment were turned back toward Northern Boulevard. The car went off.

Johnny waited a good three minutes more before venturing out from behind the stable.

He whistled softly. The lights in the house were all out. Very considerate of them to turn them off when they were leaving. That meant Wilbur Ganz and Pat Shea had gone off with them.

Nevertheless, Johnny approached the house cautiously. He had no intention of falling into a trap. He crossed the macadam on his toes and struck off into the grass for the rear of the house. When his outstretched hand touched the wall, he groped along softly until he came to a window that was partially opened from the bottom. He stood beside it for thirty seconds, holding his breath and straining his ears.

He heard only the sounds of the night, twigs rustling, crickets chirping, and inside the house a creak or two as the house settled.

He moved along the wall to the door that opened on the drive. It had not been closed altogether and Johnny listened once more, before venturing inside.

He stood in the living room for awhile and became quite convinced that the house

was absolutely deserted, except for himself. But he still took no chances and went to the bedrooms and lit a match in each to satisfy himself that they were empty.

At last he left the house and returned to the stable. He pulled open the door, stepped inside, and closed the door once more. He struck a match and, holding it high, looked around. The room seemed to have been fitted up as a combination supply room and office. There was a roll-top desk at one side, a swivel chair and behind the desk, a cot on which a crumpled blanket lay, partly dragging on the floor.

On the other side of the room a shelf was well stocked with bottles of liniment, a few halters and numerous odds and ends. The match burned Johnny's fingers and he dropped it and struck another. The second match revealed a shaded lamp over the roll-top desk and Johnny decided to risk switching it on.

He adjusted the green shade so that the light would shine directly downwards. He doubted if anyone would see the light at any distance through the tiny window beside the door, yet there was sufficient light for him to examine the desk.

He found the roll-top of the desk down, but not locked. He ran it up and went through the pigeon holes of the desk. There were a good many papers in the desk, but most of them were Racing Forms and dope sheets, although there were a few receipted bills for supplies and equipment.

He went through the drawers and found stationery and envelopes, some more Racing Forms, and some entry blanks for various race tracks, including Jamaica, Pimlico and even Churchill Downs.

He closed the drawers and sighed lightly. Then he moved to a door at the side of the room, which apparently led into the stable proper. The door was closed with a wooden latch which Johnny lifted.

A low whistle came from his lips. The room was a little smaller than the office, but it wasn't a stall. It was a completely equipped blacksmith shop, containing a forge and bellows, an anvil, a tub still containing water, evidently used for tempering steel, and more than a dozen horseshoes hanging on the wall, most of them in the large, crude form.

Johnny opened the door wide so that the reflection of light from the other room gave him more illumination to examine the smithy.

There was still another door at the far side of the blacksmith shop and Johnny approached it. As he did, he smelled the stable odor and knew that the next room was Ulysses' stall.

He pulled open the door and reached into his pocket for a match. He struck it on the floor—and the light flared up into his face, penetrated and exploded in his brain.

He fell forward to his knees, gasping in agony. Another blow on the back of his head, drove him down to his face—and into unconsciousness.

XVII

JOHNNY FLETCHER'S desertion had been too sudden for Sam Cragg. Always he had depended on his friend for guidance in every problem that came up. Now, in Whitey's car, roaring up the road, Sam was completely lost.

Johnny had told him to go to Great Neck, but he didn't even know how to get to Great Neck. He came to a cross road, turned right on it, and drove for two miles to a traffic light. There wasn't another car in sight on the road, but the light was red and Sam stopped the car.

By the headlights he saw a road sign, *Great Neck, 2 miles.* The direction seemed wrong to Sam Cragg, but he turned and after a mile or so, came to another road, which was marked 25A. He crossed it and saw a road sign, *Great Neck Plaza.* When he saw the lights of the town ahead,

he pulled the car to the side of the street and, switching off the lights and motor, climbed out. The car was a stolen vehicle and Sam had no intention of being arrested in a stolen car.

He walked ahead to the viaduct, under which the Long Island trains ran, and continued on into the town. At an intersection he looked to the right and saw a sign, HOTEL.

SAM turned and walked briskly to it. It had been an exhausting day—and night—and he was completely exhausted. He turned into the hotel and saw that it was a quarter after three. The lobby was deserted, but Sam, approaching the desk, saw a man sleeping on a couch.

He slapped the desk. "Hey! Room service."

The clerk's eyes opened. He looked at Sam, closed his eyes and opened them once more. Then he sat up suddenly. "Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

"A room."

"Yes, sir. I can give you an outside room with tub and shower for four dollars, or—"

"Any kind of a room," said Sam, "as long as it's got a bed. I don't even care if the bed's soft. I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

"Very well. In that case, I can give you a room for two dollars and fifty cents. Umm, 301." The clerk took a key out of a slot and came around the desk.

"Your luggage, sir."

"I haven't got any."

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to pay in advance. Regulations, you understand."

"All right," Sam said and reached into his pocket. Then a chill settled on him. He had given Johnny all his money at the end of the cab ride almost two hours previously. He was broke—no, he found a half dollar and a dime.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, chum, but I haven't got any money with me. But don't let that worry you. My pal's coming around first thing in the morning."

"I'm sorry," said the clerk. "I'd lose my job if I let you have a room without payment in advance."

"You'll be better off. What kind of a crummy job is it where you have to turn away customers, just because they've forgotten their money? I said I'd pay you in the morning, didn't I? I'm not going to run off with the hotel."

The clerk shook his head adamantly. Sam bared his teeth. "I said I was tired and sleepy. I'm almost dead on my feet. Gimme that key and let me go to sleep."

"Please! If you don't leave, I'll have to call the police."

"Call them," snarled Sam. "Call them and see if I care. I'm tired and——"

The clerk stepped to the desk and then picked up the telephone. "Police," he said.

Sam cleared the distance to the door in three big jumps. He hurtled out of the hotel and walked savagely back to Middle Neck Road. He turned the corner and almost collided with a uniformed man.

"Hello," the policeman said. "Fine night, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Sam, nervously. "Yeah, sure."

He sidled away from the policeman. His actions were plainly so skittish that the policeman suddenly held up his hand. "Just a moment. You're out rather late, aren't you?"

"Yeah," said Sam, "but I'm on my way home now."

"Where do you live? You're a stranger around here."

"No, I live over in Manhasset."

"Manhasset? Where's your car?"

"I haven't got one," said Sam.

"But how do you expect to get home at this time of the night? The bus' have stopped running hours ago."

That was how Sam got his bed without paying for it. Johnny Fletcher, with his poise and gift of talk, could have got out

of it easily. Sam Cragg blundered in deeper with every word he spoke. No policeman who started out to question Sam could have wound up with anything but a keen suspicion of him. And when a policeman is suspicious, he functions like—a cop. He takes the suspect to the police station.

THERE was a mattress on the cot. It was hard and lumpy and covered with thick, black oilcloth. There were no blankets. Policemen have an idea that overnight prisoners will rip blankets into strips and hang themselves. They took away Sam's suspenders and necktie for a similar reason.

Sam was still sound asleep at eight o'clock in the morning when the turnkey unlocked his cell and brought in a breakfast consisting of oatmeal, black coffee without sugar, and a thick slice of bread.

"You see the judge at nine o'clock," the turnkey told Sam.

"What for?"

"Maybe for thirty days. It's been done. But I'll give you a tip. You'll see Judge Simmons. He's a sucker for the mother story. Tell him about your poor old mother, who's sick. You were walking the streets because you'd sent your mother the last dollar you had in the world and now you were trying to get home, to be with her in her last hours. If you make it good, you may get off altogether. There was a guy in here couple of months ago was so good the judge even gave him a five-dollar bill. Now, go in there and fight and remember if you get off, who told you. A buck or two helps along. I got a wife and six children myself and the way prices are going up is something terrible."

"Gee," said Sam. "Why don't *you* try the story on the judge?"

"I did; that's how I got this job."

An hour later the turnkey came for Sam, bringing his necktie and suspenders. "Put them on, pal. Then go in there and do your stuff. Put a tremble in your voice whenever you say the word 'Mother.' Boy, you'll kill him."

The turnkey led Sam into a tiny courtroom, with a desk on a platform behind which sat the judge. Sam looked at the judge's face and realized for the first time that you simply couldn't judge a person by his looks.

The judge had the sourest face he had ever seen on a human, either that or he had just sucked a dozen lemons. He had beetling brows, a big nose and a square, pugnacious chin.

"Is this the prisoner?" he boomed. "What's the charge?"

The same policeman who had brought Sam in said: "Vagrancy, Your Honor. I found him wandering around Middle Neck Road at three-fifteen this morning. I questioned him and he acted suspicious. Then when we brought him here to the station, we found that he had only sixty cents."

"What'd you do with the sixty cents?" roared Judge Simmons.

"Oh, he has it."

The judge sniffed. "If it'd been sixty dollars, he wouldn't have it. Let's see—Scragg, is that your real name?"

"No, sir," said Sam. "It's Cragg."

"Scragg suits you better. You're charged with vagrancy and being a suspicious character. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Sam took a deep breath and plunged. "Only this, Your Honor. I got a letter yesterday from my poor, sick mother."

"Mother!" bellowed the judge. "You mean to tell me you've got a mother?"

"Yes, Your Honor. She lives in Cleveland. She's a poor, sick woman, and when I got this letter and heard how she needed money for medicine and doctors, I sent every nickel I had."

"Except the sixty cents the arresting officer found on you. Why didn't you send that, too?"

Sam coughed. "Why, uh, I did. I mean,

I sent the sixty cents too. No, I sent all the money I had, then raised the sixty cents by hocking my overcoat."

"Go on," Judge Simmons urged. "You started out pretty bad, but you may come up with a good one yet. You pawned your overcoat. What then?"

"That's all. I'm trying to get to Cleveland."

"By way of Long Island? Wouldn't it be easier to go by way of the Panama Canal?"

"No, sir, I mean, yes, sir. No."

"Proceed. Don't let me confuse you. It isn't going to make any difference anyway in your sentence, but I'm making a collection of mother stories and I'd like to hear yours."

"I want a lawyer!" Sam Cragg cried. "I got a right to call my lawyer."

"Indeed! What is the name of this law-

yer who will take a case for sixty cents?"

"Judge Krieger. He lives right here in Great Neck."

"Judge Krieger's your attorney? Well! How interesting. I'll tell him about you—some time."

"Tell him now. I want to get out of here."

"Tut-tut, my man. You tempt me. Yes, sir, your brazen effrontery tempts me sorely. I'm tempted to just add on another thirty days."

"You can't do that," Sam cried desperately. "I mean, Judge Krieger."

"A sporting proposition then, Scragg? Double or nothing. I'll just have the clerk telephone the judge and if he says he's your attorney, the case is on me. But if he says he never even heard of you, which I'm certain will be the answer, why, then you owe the court sixty days. Is it a deal?"

"Yes!" Sam cried hoarsely.

The judge nodded to the clerk, who sat at a small table beside the bench. The clerk got up and went to a phone and dialed a number without even looking it up. He said: "Judge Krieger? This is the clerk of the police court. We have a vagrant here who insists that you are his attorney. It's ridiculous, of course, but Judge Simmons thought it best, nevertheless. His name? Mmm, Cragg. Yes, Sam Cragg. What—? Very well, sir, thank you."

He put down the phone and turned to Judge Simmons. "He's coming right over."

"Eh? He knows this man?"

"From the tone of his voice, I—I think so."

Judge Simmons looked over the bench at Sam. "So you gave the wrong name, eh?"

"No, Your Honor. My name is Sam Cragg and the judge is my mouthpiece. You'll see."

Judge Krieger came bustling into the courtroom three minutes later. "Ah, Mr. Cragg! What's this?"

"You know this man, Ben?" Judge Simmons asked.

"Of course. My client. Can't understand why he didn't call me right away. What's the charge?"

"None—definitely. I think the arresting officer made a mistake."

"Ah, but that's too bad. Overzealous, I imagine. Yes, yes. Mr. Cragg is my

client, of course. Terribly sorry you've been inconvenienced, Mr. Cragg. It's all right, Luke?"

"Certainly, Ben!"

XVIII

THE trumpeter sounded the charge and the troop of cavalry wheeled into single file formation and advanced at a swift trot. As the horses neared Johnny Fletcher, they went into a gallop. He tried to roll out of the way of the thundering hoofs, but couldn't make it. Each individual animal pounded on his head. The pain was agonizing and when the troop was halfway across, Johnny could stand it no longer.

He cried out and opened his eyes. He looked at the buff-colored ceiling and sat up.

He was sitting on the floor in a sparsely furnished room. Four feet away, a bleary-eyed man was slouched in a chair, reading a Racing Form.

Sunlight was streaming through a window and Johnny knew that he had been unconscious for hours. He had been struck down in Ulysses' stall, on the Sibley farm. But this room was not in the Sibley house and Johnny had never seen the man before.

The student of horseology put down his dope sheet. "Morning, neighbor. Have a nice nap?"

Johnny put his hand to his head to stop the throbbing and touched a lump as big as a robin's egg. It was roughened from dried blood.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's after breakfast. Too bad that you missed it. I had buckwheat cakes and sausage, two cups of coffee, and for dessert some yummy mush."

"How about a big pitcher of ice water?" Johnny asked.

"Why not?"

"When?"

"When the boss says to give you some."

"Who's the boss?"

The horse doper chuckled. "Now, ain't that a silly question to ask? The guy who pays me, that's who the boss is."

Johnny put his hands on the floor and pushed himself up. The genial man in the chair put aside his Racing Form and showed Johnny a .32 caliber pistol that he was holding in his lap.

"Siddown across the room."

Johnny walked to a threadbare couch and seated himself. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you that I don't even know why I'm here."

"I believe you, Mister. Fact, if you said you knew, I wouldn't believe you. This is very hush-hush."

"Yes? Your name, too?"

The other shrugged. "It isn't Hutchinson, but it might be so you can call me that. Think you're ready for the boss, now?"

"What do you mean, ready?"

"Why, things might not be altogether pleasant. If you know what I mean. But I'd like you to know that there ain't nothing personal in this. It's a job of work with me."

Hutchinson stooped and rapped three times on the floor with the butt of his pistol. After a moment Johnny heard footsteps on stairs and looked curiously at the door. Wilbur Ganz came in, followed by Pat Shea. The latter closed the door behind him.

"Surprised, Fletcher?" sneered Ganz.

"Yes and no. I'm surprised that you're here, but I'm not surprised to learn for sure that you're a louse. I suspected that."

"You've still got that big mouth," Pat Shea said. "Well, maybe you can use it for something besides wise-cracking. Like——"

"I'll ask the questions, Pat," Wilbur snapped.

"Go ahead, then."

"All right, Fletcher. We want something. You had it yesterday. The shoe that Ulysses lost at the track."

Johnny's eyes opened wide in surprise. "You mean you want a horseshoe? Hell, there're a whole bunch of them at the place."

"We don't want those; we want the one that Ulysses threw at the track. Sonny Wilcox brought it in and you took it from him. What'd you do with it?"

"Search me."

"We did. You didn't have it. But you had it when you left the track. Where'd you go from there?"

"To a hotel."

"What hotel?"

"Some dump across the street from the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel."

"The shoe is there?"

"I don't remember."

Pat Shea danced forward and swung his small, but hard, fist at Johnny's jaw. Johnny jerked his head to one side and took the blow on his left temple. Streaks of fire shot through his head.

He started to spring to his feet, but Hutchinson pushed past Pat Shea and thrust the pistol at him. "Easy, Fletcher."

Pat Shea took up a fighting stance. "Talk, Fletcher."

"Is the horseshoe in that hotel?" Pat Shea repeated.

Johnny made no reply.

Shea feinted with his left and lashed at Johnny with his right. Johnny's fist whipped out and knocked the jockey's arm to the side. He started up to his feet and once more Hutchinson's pistol was poked into his face.

"What kind of a setup is this?" Johnny cried. "Stick a gun in my face and let a little squirt like this take punches at me without me being allowed to hit back! I'll tell you what; tie one arm to my side and I'll fight you, Shea."

"This is paying you back for that gorilla partner of yours, Fletcher," Pat Shea said savagely. "He knocked me around last night and yesterday. Now I'm paying back—with interest!"

He struck again at Johnny, hitting him on the left cheekbone and breaking the skin. Johnny felt the warm blood trickling down his cheek.

"I said it might be rough, Fletcher," Hutchinson offered. "Better talk."

"All right," said Johnny. "We'll talk. What's the proposition?"

"The proposition is that you kick through with that horseshoe," Wilbur Ganz said.

Johnny sighed. "Is the horseshoe made of gold? It looked just like a horseshoe to me."

"For the last time—is it at that hotel?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"I'll get it for you. That's my best offer."

"Too bad," said Hutchinson, shaking his head. "Now, I've got to work you over. The little man don't hit hard enough."

"I can hit hard enough to lay you out," Shea snarled.

"With a baseball bat, maybe," Hutchinson said sarcastically. He put his revolver in his hip pocket and took off his coat. He rolled up his sleeves and exposed forearms corded with muscle. "I hate to exercise so soon after breakfast, Fletcher. I might get sore, so I'll give you one last chance."

"You mean that?"

"Yep. This horsing around isn't getting us anywhere."

He took a step toward Johnny and the latter threw up his hand, palm outward. "Hold on, I'm no bloody hero. If this is going to get serious, you can have the lousy horseshoe." He reached into the side pocket of his coat and fished out a round metal disc. "Here!"

Hutchinson reached forward and took the disc from Johnny. "What's this?"

"A hat-check from the Bull Dog and Pussy Cat. I left there in such a hurry last night I didn't have time to pick up my hat."

"The horseshoe's in the hat?"

"They're checked together. But I'm afraid you'll have to wait until this evening. Night clubs aren't open in the mornings."

Hutchinson walked to the door and pulled it open. Just outside, in the hall, was a wall telephone. He took down the receiver and dialed a number.

"Hello," he said, after a moment. "Hutchinson. He talked. He checked the shoe with his hat at the Bull Dog and Pussy Cat last night. He didn't pick up the hat. Yeah, I've got the check. A round brass piece, with the number 87 on it. The hat—? Just a moment." He covered the receiver and called into the room. "Describe the hat, Fletcher."

"Brown felt, snap brim. Brown band with a feather on the right side. Size 7½."

Hutchinson repeated the information into the telephone, spoke for a moment longer, then hung up. He came back into the room, closing the door.

"We'll know in a half hour whether you were telling the truth, Fletcher."

"I've seen the hat," said Wilbur Ganz. "It's like he said, only I wouldn't know about the size."

Hutchinson picked up a hat from the floor and sailed it over to Johnny, who caught it. "Try that on for size."

Johnny put the hat on his head. It was a little too small.

"Yeah," Hutchinson admitted. "You take a big size. That hat's seven and a quarter. Seven and a half would be about right for you."

Wilbur chased Johnny from the couch and produced a pack of cards. He and Pat began a game of gin rummy. Johnny sat on the floor nearby, watching, and Hutchinson resumed his seat on the chair at the other side of the room.

XIX

THE telephone out in the hall finally rang and Hutchinson got up and went to answer it. He left the door open and Johnny could hear one end of the conversation. "What's that? The hat is a gray Homburg, six and seven-eights? Can't be. I tried my own hat on him. He wears seven and a half, all right. Hold the line a moment."

Hutchinson dropped the receiver, so that it dangled at the end of its cord.

"Fletcher," he said, "the hat's no good. You got your hat out last night."

Johnny pointed at Wilbur Ganz. "You heard Whitey tell how I got out of the Bull Dog and Pussy Cat. You and Pat both heard."

"That's right," said Ganz. "He called the fire department and swiped a fireman's helmet and slicker."

"Then you never checked a hat last night. No hat and no horseshoe."

"Wait a minute," said Johnny. "I went in with a party of six drunks. We all checked our things. The girl got the checks mixed."

Hutchinson's nostrils flared. He walked back to the hall and this time closed the door. Johnny could hear only a rumble through the panels. Hutchinson was gone for more than five minutes. When he finally returned, his jaw was set and his mouth taut.

"We're going into the city, fellas. Fletcher, we're going to let you find those drunks you were with last night."

"What? Why, I don't even know their names."

"You picked them up at the Commodore Bar, didn't you?"

"Yes, but — say, how do you know that?" Johnny looked sharply at Hutchinson, then bobbed his head. "Ah! So that's who the boss is!"

Hutchinson shrugged. "Now, here's the lay. We've got a car outside. Wilbur's going to drive it and you're going to sit beside him. On the other side will be Pat. You're going to be between them, just so you don't try hopping out of the car. Then I'm going to be in the rear with the business. We've been taking

things easy up to now, but I may as well tell you that we're talking about big business. The piece I'm getting out of this will keep me in Guatemala for two-three years. Catch on?"

Johnny nodded.

"And furthermore," Hutchinson went on, "when we get out of the car, you'll walk between the boys and I'll be right behind. Any funny stuff and I'll mow you down even if it's right in the Grand Central. Now, let's go."

They left the room in the order prescribed by Hutchinson, descended a flight of stairs and walked down a graveled drive to a small frame garage. A big touring sedan stood inside.

They got into the car and then Wilbur started the motor and backed out. A moment later he turned into a macadam street. Johnny noticed that the nearest house was a hundred yards away.

It was a strange neighborhood to him.

Wilbur spent ten minutes confusing Johnny, shooting down one road, then turning into another and rocketing along to the next intersection and making another turn. Johnny was almost sure that they wound up on the same road that they had first traversed.

AFTER awhile Wilbur turned the sedan into the parkway and Johnny saw a sign, Marcus Avenue, and knew that they had originally been somewhere in the vicinity of Manhasset. That was not too surprising. He had been knocked out and made prisoner near Manhasset.

The drive to the city was without event. Even when they stopped to pay the toll at the Triborough Bridge, Johnny made no attempt at escape. As he had told Hutchinson and the others, he was no hero. Ulysses' shoe meant nothing to him.

Wilbur parked the car on East Forty-Third Street and the quartet, the three men in front and Hutchinson in the rear, walked to Lexington and 42nd and on to the Commodore Bar.

There they had a glass of beer and Johnny sized up the bartenders. "Sorry," he said to Hutchinson, "this was late in the evening. A different crew was on then. I don't think these bartenders would know the men."

"I was expecting that," Hutchinson said. "So we'll just go into the Grand Central and make a telephone call. You may be surprised."

In the Grand Central the four men crowded into the narrow aisle between two rows of telephone booths and with the door of one of the booths open, Hutchinson made his phone call.

"Hutchinson," he said. "We're at the Grand Central. He doesn't know the bartenders. Yes. Swell! I'll let you know as soon as we get it."

Hutchinson hung up and grinned at Johnny Fletcher. "We got an organization, neighbor. All those boys are staying at a dump on 41st, near Park Avenue. In case you're interested, they're wheat farmers from South Dakota."

Johnny shook his head in admiration of the thoroughness of Hutchinson's "boss."

They left the Grand Central and then walked down Park Avenue. In the middle of a block was a hotel that had been a well-known hostelry at the turn of the century, but was now only a genteel relic.

Entering, the quartet proceeded to a rickety elevator which took them to the

fourth floor. There Hutchinson knocked on the door of Room 400.

"C'm in!" shouted a voice inside.

Hutchinson nudged Johnny and the latter opened the door. A couple of the drunks from the night before looked at him over glasses. Either they were still drunk or well on the way to brand-new jags.

Johnny smiled. "Hi, fellows."

"Hey," said one of the men. "I remember you. You're the guy took us to that clip joint last night."

"Clip joint? The Bull Dog and Pussy Cat is one of the best night clubs in the city."

"Yeah? Well, it's a clip joint just the same. They handed us a bill for $92 and all we had was a few bottles of champagne. And then they stole my hat."

"That's why I came here," said Johnny. "They didn't steal your hat. They merely got the checks mixed up. I think this is your hat. And you got mine."

HE TOSSED the hat to the man, who tried it on his head. "She fits, so she must be mine. Well, there's your sombrero." He pointed to a dresser.

Johnny walked into the room to get his hat and exposed Hutchinson and the two jockeys. The man whose hat Johnny had returned exclaimed. "Hello. I didn't know you had friends with you. Come in and have a drink, neighbors."

"Don't mind if I do have a short one," Hutchinson drawled. He gestured to Johnny Fletcher, who was putting on his hat.

Johnny said, "Oh, yes, there was a horseshoe with my hat. My good luck piece."

"Holy Sitting Bull!" exclaimed one of the men. "You mean you carry that thing around just like that? Isn't it kind of big for a watch fob?"

"It is, without the chain," said Johnny.

The man shook his head. "The way I got it I, figured it might bring *me* luck." He went to the dresser and pulled out a drawer.

He took out the horseshoe and handed it to Johnny. Johnny turned and extended the shoe to Hutchinson. The latter, who had his right hand in his pocket—gripping his gun—reached to take the horseshoe with his left.

Johnny flicked up his wrist and the iron shoe rapped Hutchinson on the chin. The gunman cried out, tugged at the gun in his pocket and fell forward against Johnny. The latter tapped him again with the shoe, lightly on the side of the head.

Then he turned to face the two jockeys, who quickly backed away.

"So long, suckers," Johnny said and walked out of the room. The instant he reached the corridor, however, he became greased lightning. He rushed to the staircase and took the stairs going down four at a time.

He brought up panting in the lobby and went swiftly through the revolving door. On 41st Street, he proceeded to Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street where he stepped into a bus. At 44th he changed his mind and, getting out, walked west to Eighth Avenue.

IT WAS ten minutes to eleven, he noted by a clock in a restaurant window, as he approached the El Camino Apartments. He climbed the four flights of stairs and pressed the door buzzer of Helen Rosser's apartment.

Ed Rosser opened the door. Johnny looked over his shoulder at Helen Rosser, who was dressed for the street in a smart mustard-colored suit. She was pulling on a pair of doeskin gloves.

"You!" said Rosser.

"You can't keep a good man down."

"What a pity," Helen Rosser said witheringly.

Johnny grinned. "Can I come in?"

"Could we prevent you?"

"No." Johnny crowded against Ed Rosser and forced the latter into the room.

"Miss Rosser," Johnny said, "are you ready to lay all your cards on the table?"

"What table?"

"Are you really Joe Sibley's niece?"

Helen Rosser sighed. "Mr. Fletcher, you're not going to go into that routine again?"

"I may have to. Because if you can convince me that you are actually Sibley's niece, I'm going to sign over my interest in the estate."

"Hold everything!" exclaimed Ed Rosser. "I got a paper here to which you can put your autograph. A lawyer fellow drew it up for me."

"Charles Conger?"

"Yeah. Save you lots of time and trouble, this paper. Conger says that you wouldn't have a chance in court, anyway."

"Father," said Helen Rosser. "Please—"

Johnny regarded her thoughtfully. "You don't want me to sign the release."

"I don't want anything that my uncle didn't want to give me. I think entirely too much fuss has been made about this entire affair."

"You think so? Then maybe I'd just better forget the whole thing. I'll consider that Joe's intentions were good and remember him for that. Wilbur Ganz can take care of Ulysses."

"You mean you'll just walk out?"

"There's no money in it for me, is there? According to the will, I get only what Ulysses wins in purses. He's never won a race in his life—and I don't think he ever will."

"Probably not. I think you're right."

JOHNNY nodded and walked to the door. With his hand on the knob, Helen Rosser said, "I suppose you ought to go through some formality. I don't see why you should, but Charles, being a lawyer, is so stuffy about those things. Why don't you stop in at his office?"

"What's the use? The horse is there and the farm is there. I haven't taken a thing."

Helen Rosser tapped her white teeth with a gloved finger. "I know how you feel. I feel very much like that myself. But since I'm going over to Charles' office right now, you might as well ride along in the taxi. Charles is expecting me and he shouldn't detain you more than a couple of minutes. Then you'll be all clear."

Johnny shrugged. "If you wish. You coming too, Mr. Rosser?"

"Naw, there's a serial coming on the radio in a few minutes I don't want to miss."

HELEN ROSSER was a very attractive girl, Johnny thought as he followed her down the stairs. She lacked only one thing, as far as he was concerned. Warmth. Another man, to whom she felt attracted, might never notice that lack. It probably wouldn't be lacking then. Her obvious dislike of Johnny, no doubt, made her cast a continual chill upon him.

On the street, Helen Rosser signaled to a cab and when it drew up, Johnny opened the door for her.

"The Jordan Building, on Fifth Avenue," she called to the driver.

The cab started off and Johnny leaned back against the leather cushion. He tried to make conversation with Helen Rosser, but she answered him in monosyllables.

She let Johnny pay the fare as they climbed out before the Jordan Building.

Lefty stood at the entrance of the building, his hands behind his back. He was teetering back and forth and whistling tunelessly. He merely nodded to Johnny as the latter passed through the door.

Yet as Johnny stepped into the elevator, Lefty was behind him.

"The boss'll be glad to see you, Fletcher," Lefty said.

"I'm not going to see him. Not if I can help it."

Lefty grinned. Helen had already called the floor and the elevator stopped. The girl got out and Johnny and Lefty followed.

Helen Rosser strode briskly ahead of Johnny. A door was pulled open ahead of her and Charles Conger stepped out. "Helen!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect you quite so soon."

"Mr. Fletcher wanted to see you," Helen Rosser said.

Conger nodded to Johnny and the latter stepped through the door. Conger let the door swing shut.

"Straight ahead to my private office," he said.

The anteroom was rather large, containing, beside a receptionist's desk, a red leather couch and four leather chairs to match. The receptionist was not at her desk, however.

Helen Rosser headed for a door marked "Private." She opened it, revealing Willie Pipett inside.

XX

AS Judge Ben Krieger and Sam Cragg left the Great Neck Police Station, Sam said admiringly, "You sure got a drag in this town, Judge."

The judge grunted. "I've been around here a long time. From the looks of old Simmons when I came in, he was all set to slap you with thirty days."

"Sixty," said Sam. "We tossed, double or nothing. Wait'll I see that turnkey again, telling me to spring the mother stuff on the judge."

Krieger chuckled. "Mose? That man's got a sadistic streak in him. Get him in trouble sometime. Well, here's my car. Get in."

"I don't think I'd better," said Sam. "I've got to find Johnny Fletcher."

"Eh? Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"You don't? I thought you two were inseparable."

Sam put his foot on the running board of the car and fidgeted uneasily. Then suddenly he blurted out, "Judge, we were getting along swell until Johnny received that inheritance. We were broke and enjoying ourselves. Now—" Sam shuddered—"the things that've been happening to us——"

"You mean that matter of the jockey being killed? Pshaw! The police are making a hullabaloo over nothing. They may pull you in for questioning, but that's about all. In fact, I think you'd both be wiser to give yourselves up and get that business over with. I advise it strongly. Now, where is Fletcher likely to be?"

"I don't know. I lost him last night." Sam hesitated. "We were at the farm and some things happened. Johnny told me to grab the car and go to a hotel in Great Neck. I did, then discovered that I only had sixty cents to my name. The hotel wouldn't let me have a room."

The judge grunted. "Why didn't you phone me? Mmm, I wonder if I shouldn't drive out to the farm right now. Fletcher's there, no doubt."

"No. I'm sure he isn't."

"Why not? Where else would he be? Here—there's a drug store. Instead of running over, I think I'll just make a phone call. Wait here."

Sam opened the door of the car, a convertible roadster of an expensive make. He got in behind the wheel while the judge went into the drug store.

Krieger was gone more than five minutes. When he came out he was mopping his brow. "That friend of yours, Cragg, is certainly an unpredictable person."

"You mean you didn't find him?"

"I located him all right, although I had to make three calls. That wasn't what I meant. Do you know what he's about to do? Sign away all his right in Joe Sibley's estate, for a mere pittance. Doggoned if I like that! I don't think I'll put up with it. The Sibley family can afford to pay. It'd cost them thousands to break the will—and it's not too certain that they could do it. I believe you and your partner are entitled to at least ten thousand. Slide over."

Sam obeyed and the judge got behind

the wheel. He started the car and turned out into traffic.

"Where we going?" Sam asked.

"To the city. I made Fletcher promise not to sign anything until I got there. The fool! I got him just in time."

"You mean we can sure enough get ten thousand out of this? In cash?"

"Certainly. And perhaps more, if you'd stick it out. But Fletcher won't do that. The girl's got to him. Funny, what a man'll do for a woman."

"Not Johnny. He falls for them, but he never takes his eye off the old ball."

"Pah! They all weaken. Age or sense is no preventive."

The judge was a pompous man in almost every respect, but there was nothing pompous about the way he drove a car. It was five minutes to eleven when he drove them into a parking lot on 44th and Sixth Avenue. From there he and Sam Cragg walked to the Jordan Building on Fifth Avenue. As they approached it, Sam, who had been scowling uneasily, suddenly winced and caught at the judge's arm.

"That man by the door! He's one of Willie Pipett's gunmen."

"Pipett? Who's Pipett?"

"A bookie," said Sam.

Lefty saw him and saluted mockingly. The judge brushed past the gunman and followed Sam into the building.

When they got off the elevator, the judge led the way to an office. He pushed open a door.

Whitey got up from a red leather chair and showed Sam Cragg a gun. "The moose season opened today. I owe you one."

Charles Conger opened an inner door. "Ah, Judge!"

"Are they here yet?"

"No, but I just got a phone call. They are on the way. Ought to be here in five minutes."

"Johnny?" cried Sam Cragg.

Whitey came up and prodded Sam in the back with the muzzle of his gun. "Inside."

Reluctantly, Sam went into the private office and faced Willie Pipett, sitting in a big leather armchair, facing the door.

"See," said Pipett. "You were just wasting your time yesterday. Although I'll admit that that pal of yours is quite versatile. I could use a man like him in my business."

"They ought to be about here now," Conger said.

He went out. A moment or two later Sam heard his voice, talking to Johnny Fletcher. Sam opened his mouth to yell a warning and Whitey stepped up to him, a glint in his eyes. He put the muzzle of the gun within six inches of Sam's face.

THEN the door was opened and Conger came in with Johnny Fletcher and Helen Rosser. After a moment, Lefty followed.

"Johnny!" Sam said bitterly.

Johnny Fletcher drew a deep breath. "How they going, Sam?"

"What I've gone through!" Sam Cragg wailed.

Johnny passed a hand over his forehead. "Me and you both."

"And me," said Willie Pipett, the bookie. "You gave me quite a chase."

"Harump!" Judge Krieger cleared his throat. "Let's get this affair over with. Fletcher, you have something in that sagging coat pocket; that wouldn't be a horseshoe, would it?"

Johnny took the horseshoe out of his pocket. "It isn't a ham sandwich."

The judge reached eagerly for the shoe, but Johnny avoided the clutching hands and tendered the iron shoe to Helen Rosser.

"You earned this, Miss Rosser. Leading me into the lion's den."

Helen Rosser bit her lower lip. She took the iron shoe, turned it over and tried twisting it. Conger moved over to

her and took the shoe from her hands. He, too, examined and tried twisting it. He exclaimed in chagrin. "The cleat at the end," said Johnny. "It pulls off."

Conger gripped the turned-down cleat at one end of the horseshoe and tugged at it. A short section of the shoe came away, exposing the fact that the shoe was hollow. Conger peered into the hole.

"It's empty!"

"What?" cried Judge Krieger.

Helen Rosser's nostrils flared. "You've taken it, Fletcher."

"The will, Miss Rosser? The one that was made *after* Judge Krieger's will."

"What'd you do with it, Fletcher?" Conger demanded, harshly.

"Nothing. There wasn't any will."

"You're a liar!"

Johnny gave Conger a contemptuous glance, then turned to Willie Pipett. "Nice act they're putting on, Willie."

"Your act isn't bad itself, Fletcher."

"You like it? Then let me put on another. A quiz act, Willie. How much money does Judge Krieger owe you?"

"Fletcher!" boomed Judge Krieger. "What did you do with the will?"

"I'll answer your question, Fletcher," Willie Pipett said suddenly. "He owes me sixty thousand dollars."

"Pipett," blustered the judge. "I don't think you had any call to tell that."

"Why not?" Pipett asked calmly. "You are going to pay me, aren't you?"

"If, as and when he can plunder Joe Sibley's estate," Johnny Fletcher said, "The way the will stands now, it's not so good. Actually, the estate is tied up for an indefinite period of time. Of course, as executor, the judge might do a little looting, but that's a pretty risky proposition. So the judge is quite willing to permit the discovery of a more recent, holographic will, which leaves the entire estate, without any strings, to Sibley's niece, Miss Helen Rosser. Especially since Miss Rosser and the judge are, shall we say, good friends. The judge has been very kind to Miss Rosser, has even given her a beautiful, twenty-five hundred dollar automobile."

"Krieger," said Charles Conger thickly.

"That's a lie," the judge said hoarsely.

"Go on, Fletcher," said Willie Pipett. "Your act's warming up. It might be good."

"You're wondering where you come in, Willie. You don't. The judge is a prominent citizen, a pillar of society, as it were. Good connections and a swell front. But I guess that didn't cut any ice with you, Willie?"

"Sixty grand is sixty grand."

"You were crowding him for the money? Maybe threatening to tell a few prominent citizens? So there was Joe Sibley, with this screwy will."

"Have a care, Fletcher!" Judge Krieger shouted. "I'll sue you for slander."

"Judge," said Willie Pipett. "Shut your mouth."

"Joe Sibley—er, died," Johnny went on. "Judge Krieger wasn't overly grieved. A million dollar estate was coming into his hands and it looked as if he certainly ought to be able to skim off a measly sixty thousand to pass on to you, Willie. But what happened? Relatives popped up. Relatives popped up on all sides. The first thing you know they were filing injunctions against the estate, making it impossible for the judge to tap the resources. Not so good, Willie, for you. Especially since the judge confided in you that he suspected Joe Sibley had actually made a later will, the discovery of which would probably take the estate completely out of his hands. Without that second will the relatives would have a hard time breaking the will, would probably even lose. It meant a delay, but a delay was better than nothing. So you loaned a lot of your boys to the judge, just to make sure the second will didn't see daylight."

Johnny looked at the cold, boring eyes of Willie Pipett. "Only there wasn't a second will."

"What was in the horseshoe?" Pipett snapped.

"A hole."

"That's a lie!" cried the judge. "You found the will and destroyed it."

Johnny reached down suddenly and unlaced his right shoe. Removing it, he fished a small folded piece of paper from the shoe. He opened it. "This is what was in the horseshoe. Let me read it:

"To Whom It May Concern:

Anyone claiming to be a relative of mine is an impostor. This refers specifically to a girl who may say her name is Helen Rosser. Helen Rosser died fifteen years ago, at Pryor, Oklahoma. Proof will be found at that place.

Joseph Sibley."

"Let me see that," Willie Pipett said, reaching for the piece of paper.

Johnny handed it over. "That's why Joe Sibley was murdered. So Helen Rosser could come forward and make good her claim that she was Sibley's niece."

"Very interesting," said Helen Rosser. "Interesting, if true. I suppose you're intimating that *I* killed my uncle?"

"No," said Johnny. He suddenly stepped forward and, stooping beside Willie Pipett, whispered into the latter's ear. For once Pipett's nonchalance deserted him.

"No!" he cried in astonishment.

"Yes—I can prove it!"

"How?"

"By showing you. If you'll come along."

Willie Pipett stared at Johnny for a moment. Then he sprang to his feet. "Lefty, you stay here and keep these folks entertained. Whitey, come along."

"Sam," said Johnny.

"No," protested Pipett. Then he shrugged. "What's the diff?"

PRECISELY fifty minutes later, Willie Pipett turned the car into the driveway of Joe Sibley's farm. As he stopped the machine, Wilbur Ganz came out of the house.

"Ah, home already?" Johnny asked.

"He got the shoe," Ganz said.

"I know; I have it. Wilbur, whose side have you been on all this time?"

Wilbur looked uneasily from Willie Pipett to Johnny Fletcher. "You ought to know," he mumbled.

"I ought to, but I don't. Lead on, Fletcher!"

Johnny started past the house. Wilbur called out hoarsely. "Wait a minute!"

Willie Pipett nodded to Whitey. The latter grinned at Wilbur.

Johnny broke into a trot and swooped down on the long stable. He tore open the door of the office, rushed to the adjoining door and whipped that open.

The door, leading into Ulysses' stall, slammed. Johnny sprang to it and attempted to push it open. Someone was holding it on the other side. Willie Pipett said, "One, two—three!" and then added his own weight to that of Johnny Fletcher.

The door burst inwards, sending a man sprawling to the floor.

"Hello, Joe," said Johnny Fletcher.

"Joe Sibley!" cried Willie Pipett.

Joe Sibley got up from the floor and began brushing straw from his trousers. "How'd you know, Johnny?"

"That tap on the beezer, last night. Nobody but you would have been able to be snooping around here in the middle of the night. It was as dark as a pocket, and Wilbur didn't play his part so good. He was much too cocky for a guy who depended on me for his bread and butter."

Willie Pipett shook his head slowly. "I don't get it at all. I thought Joe Sibley was dead. Didn't anyone see him."

"They saw a man who had been kicked to death by his horse. A man with his face all battered. Actually, the man could have been anyone."

"Who was it?"

Johnny looked at Joe Sibley. The latter

sighed. "No one. Just a peddler who came here to sell me something."

"I don't get the setup, though," said Pipett. "Why would you pull a stunt like that, Joe?"

"*You* ought to know, Willie. You lost a big bankroll on Ulysses yesterday. How do you suppose that Joe made his money?"

"You mean—on Ulysses?"

"Ulysses was set for a killing in the near future. Yesterday wasn't his day. Joe hadn't spread out his money yet. But there've been other horses in the past, I imagine.

"Uh-huh," said Joe Sibley. "Three times I've pulled it, for a million altogether. Ulysses was going to bring the biggest haul of all."

"But you had to kill a couple of people, eh?" Johnny asked.

Joe Sibley shrugged. "For a million bucks? Wouldn't you?"

"No."

Sibley looked at Pipett. "But Willie would?"

Willie Pipett growled. "Don't be too sure, Sibley."

Sibley brightened. "Well, that makes me feel better."

"For a while, Joe," said Johnny. "You're not getting away with this. The police will get you for killing the peddler —and Sonny, the jockey. Why'd you have to kill Sonny, anyway?"

"Because you made him ride Ulysses. I couldn't afford to let Ulysses win that race."

"So Wilbur loosened the horse's shoe. And Sonny, who was all broken up because he'd lost his first race, started looking around. He got hep to the loose shoe."

Willie Pipett shook his head. "I don't get the business about the judge—and the inheritance stuff?"

"Scenery," said Johnny. "Scenery and background. The judge owed you a lot of money and was therefore a fine tool for Joe to use on you."

"But the girl!"

Johnny put his tongue in his cheek and looked at Joe Sibley. The horseman smiled weakly, but Willie Pipett got red in the face.

"Playing me for a sucker, Joe!"

"The big sucker was the judge," Johnny said. "He didn't know anything about it. That's why he played a good part. He even hired Wilbur to waltz me around with that phony horseshoe gag—"

"It's the buildup," said Joe Sibley, with unjustifiable pride. "That's where most fellows slip up. They pull the same stunt the same way. Me, I got a new horse, went to a new place and took my time. I ran Ulysses twenty-three times and never let him win a race. I built up a screwy rich guy who was in love with his horse. I made a fancy will that was sure to get attention. Then I murdered myself. Nobody'd get wise. I fixed it to lay a bundle of money all around the country. I was dead sure nobody'd figure Ulysses was being primed." Joe Sibley suddenly whirled on Johnny Fletcher. "I even let you save my life, in the subway. You couldda made a good thing out of Ulysses, but no, you had to stick your nose into things—"

"Talking about noses," Sam Cragg said, suddenly. "I think I'll punch one."

Johnny Fletcher caught Sam Cragg's arm. "Sam, Sibley's fifty. You wouldn't hit an old man, would you?" Johnny touched the bruise on his own forehead and suddenly leaped at Joe Sibley. His fist landed on Sibley's nose with a satisfying crunch.

The man went over backward.

Johnny turned to Sam Cragg.

"All right, Sam," he said. "Let's get the hell away from our inheritance!"

THE END

"Kinda Sorry Now That He Hadn't Bothered to Get the Hang of Those New, Fang-dangled Repeatin' Rifles"

OLD TROOPERS DIE HARD

By THOMAS P. KELLEY

TRA-ta-da-da-da-da-dah!

"Pop" Dillon drew in his wiry little roan as the first sounds of the distant bugle reached him and the exclamation burst from his lips:

"It's Custer!"

From afar the old man and his mount might have appeared as a moving dot on the vastness of the surrounding landscape. Overhead, a June sun flared boiling rays. For a moment he tensed to rigidity, then as dust clouds appeared beyond a nearby range of hills, a smile crossed his grizzled features.

Pop Dillon—tall, spare and close on to sixty—removed his battered hat and wiped a palm across his forehead.

"Yep, must be Custer," he mused. "He's crossed the Rosebud and is probably headed for Little Big Horn Valley. Wonder if Terry is with him?" One hand patted the shoulder of the little mare he rode. "Looks like we're going to have an escort back to Fort Lincoln, Nellie." Then as the first of a line of blue-coated cavalrymen mounted the hill before him, he made out the red and blue ensign with the crossed silver sabers that one of their number carried—Custer's personal flag.

Pop Dillon shouted a loud hello, and sent his mount forward at a fast gallop.

"Corporal Dillon, sir, reporting for duty."

The yellow-haired man in the buckskin coat gazed at the horseman drawn up before him then exclaimed, "Why, Dillon! What are you doing way out here? I thought you were back east."

General George Armstrong Custer

turned to the long-legged man, mounted on a gray mule, who rode beside him. "Ought to be a story for you here, Kellog. This man served under me for years—was with me at the final charge at Appomattox Court House. A former scout and an old Indian fighter." His gaze went again to the other.

"Well, Dillon?" he asked.

An uncertainty in the old man's eyes, a brief silence followed. Then, "I had to come out here, sir. I've got to find Bad Buck." There was a slight tremor in Pop Dillon's voice as he said, "Guess you know what happened to young Dan."

The other nodded, his tone sympathetic. "Yes, I heard. Too bad. Young Dan was a fine boy, Pop. A son to be proud of. Happened about two months ago, didn't it?"

"Nine weeks today, sir. Dan wouldn't have harmed anybody. Oh, he came into the Black Hills for gold, but so did hundreds of others. No, it wasn't just his enterin' Indian country that made Bad Buck want to kill him. That black-eyed devil knew who he was and he hasn't forgotten me."

THE other nodded understandingly. Behind him some two hundred and sixty of his followers—five blue-coated companies of the Seventh Cavalry—sat upon their horses in rigid attention.

"Yes," Custer said the word slowly, then repeated it before turning to the man upon the mule. "Pop, here, has been a lifelong foe of Bad Buck, the Apache chief. Put that knife-cut on him, years ago."

The other exclaimed, "The old scar that runs from his ear to his chin—you mean that this old fellow did it?"

There was admiration in his voice. "Good for you!" he burst out. "I heard about young Dan Dillon—him and three other prospectors were killed by Indians a while back. And you're his father!" His face lighted. "Say, I'll bet you're looking for his killers—"

Custer broke in with, "But you were supposed to be back east, Pop."

"I was, sir—was living with my daughter and had just about forgotten the old life. Then when we got the letter about young Dan, well, I just had to come out here."

Custer nodded. He raised in his saddle; gazed around him before asking, "How did you find out it was Bad Buck?"

Pop Dillon said, "It wasn't hard. I half guessed it from the first. Then when I got out here, the rest was easy. Heard you were goin' into Apache country and I aimed to string along with you. Knew that would be the best way to find Bad Buck. But when I got to Fort Lincoln I heard you had left. I followed, ridin' hard and—well, here I am," he concluded.

"And lucky to still have your hair. Why this country's crawling with hostile braves. How you got this far alone is a miracle." A slow smile crossed the face of Custer. His years of army life made the other's wishes an open book. "And your being here—" he said. "It wouldn't mean that—"

"Let me ride with you. Let me be with you just once more. There was an anxiety in Pop Dillon's voice, he leaned forward in his saddle as he spoke. "Oh, I know I'm an old fellow now, but my eyes ain't bad, my aim's still good and I can ride. I know this country, too, General Custer, and I can—"

"Swing in behind, Pop. Swing in behind and save the speech. Besides, you'll be safe here anyhow."

There was a laughing resignation in Custer's voice; he held up his hand to stay the flow of thanks from the other. He spoke the next words half to himself, as the old trooper swung his horse into place, directly behind him.

"Maybe I'll have to do a lot of explaining to Terry about this. But then, I'd have to do it anyway if I was to leave him here." A tightness came to his lips. "Besides, I know how he feels."

General George Custer raised himself in his stirrups then gave the command to go forward, which sent the little company of less than three hundred galloping ahead toward the Valley of the Little Big Horn —and destruction!

THREE days earlier, Custer had held a council of war with General Terry, where the pebbly bottomed Rosebud empties into the Yellowstone River. Knowing the Sioux to be up in arms against the invasion of the whites into the Black Hills, Custer, with the advance column, had crossed the Rosebud River and was now circling westward toward the valley of the Little Horn, where the Indians were said to be located, with orders to capture and punish the Sioux chief, Sitting Bull, and his followers, for the many deaths inflicted upon the white settlers during the past twelve months.

Pop Dillon learned all this from the newspaper man, Kellogg, who rode beside him, as well as the fact that Major Reno, with three companies and all the Arikara Scouts, had been sent to attack the southern end of the Indian camp.

"But I'm staying right here with Custer," Kellog was saying presently. "If there's any real action it will be where he is, and I want to get the story for the Bismark Tribune."

An hour had passed; they were now entering the valley of the Little Big Horn —a vast nature-made arena, encompassed by ridges and rolling hills. Pop Dillon had nodded at the words of the other but made no comment, though instinct told him there was much which might have been commented upon. To begin with, Custer had not waited for the reinforcements which were to join him, two days later. "A brave act, but not a wise one," reasoned the old scout.

Again, there was no telling as to the exact number they were going against. For the past two days, now, Pop had noticed numerous smoke signals, from afar had seen vast numbers of gathering braves —Cheyennes, Comanches, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Sioux. Indeed, several times he had been forced to seek shelter, while warpainted parties rode past him and toward the south. That those tribes were not gathering for nothing, he knew.

"You were mighty lucky to get out here alone," he heard Kellog say. Pop Dillon turned to him.

"We'll all be mighty lucky, Kellog, if we get out of this alive."

The Seventh Cavalry was jogging along at little better than a walk—one of the several respites their commander had allowed. Behind him, the old scout could hear the clank and din of the others. Overhead was the flaming sun, around them a vast series of ridges and rolling hills, seemingly deserted—but were they? Pop Dillon had blurted out the words in the sudden manner that surprised Kellog.

"What do you mean?" asked Kellog.

His eyes went to the grizzled features of the old scout. Kellog had been recalling many of the almost forgotten stories he had heard of the other, since learning his identity. So this was the man whose exploits he had heard of for years; the man who had been the terror of the crooks and outlaws of the old gold rush period of nearly thirty years ago; the one-time sheriff who, single-handed, had broken up the tough Crowley gang—the same Dillon whom many old-timers declared as having "the fastest draw in the west."

Kellog saw the two big revolvers hanging from the well filled cartridge belt of Pop Dillon, as well as the rifle secured to the latter's saddle. He repeated his "What do you mean?" but to his surprise the other pushed forward, to swing his mount alongside of Custer, and Kellog heard him say:

"General Custer, sir — something's wrong!"

Custer, whose eyes had been upon the distances ahead, turned toward him,

"What are you talking about, Dillon?"

Plainly Kellog could hear the old man:

"You'll—you'll pardon me, sir, but I don't think that—"

"Yes, Dillon."

"Well, sir—I don't think we should go on. I think we should turn back—now!"

KELLOG could see the faint smile that came to Custer's lips. He heard him say, "That's strange, coming from you, Pop. Surprises me, too. Why shouldn't I go on? They're supposed to be camped down there—seven or eight hundred of them." He nodded ahead.

"Yes, I know, sir, but—"

"And it's quiet enough here."

Pop Dillon nodded. For a moment his gaze went to the rolling hills and ridges —deserted—lonely—before he answered. "That's just it, sir—it's too quiet. Something's wrong here. Don't know how I know it but I do—maybe I feel it in my bones."

There was a real intensity on his face as he added, "But it's too quiet, and we're too near their camp for that. Yes, sir—something's wrong here!"

In truth, Custer had had that same feeling for the past few minutes. Once more the column was halted, and it was plain that air of impending disaster was now being felt by the others. That was apparent by the nervous glances and tension of the Seventh Cavalry. There was nothing tangible that the eye could see, only a feeling that all was not as it should be—that some colossal danger was close at hand.

"You're right, Dillon!" came suddenly from Custer. "You're dead right! Something is wrong here and—and I don't like it." Though his voice was quiet, an anxiety was mounting in it. Then after a brief deliberation. "Pop, I want you to take ten men and—"

And then George Armstrong Custer said no more; for at the same instant appeared that which a hundred eyes beheld simultaneously, and sent a series of exclamations down the column behind him—a lone, mounted and almost naked Apache Chief, whose war-painted pony was just topping the breast of a high hill, some quarter of a mile away.

Plainly visible to all now, he came to a stop upon that elevation—so motionless he might have been as the very spirit of battle, regarding the valley before him. For a moment, as he continued his silent scrutiny, the eyes of all were upon him. Then with the war cry that came faintly to them, his right hand raised his rifle and one shot broke the stillness. Then he pushed forth his mount to dash straight toward them—and then all hell broke loose!

On all sides of that doomed little party, thousands of shrieks rose from thousands of voices — blood-curdling cries that mounted and mounted. A bedlam of wild, hostile screams, whose meaning the men of Custer instantly knew. Then from every surrounding hill and ridge came a great horde of war-painted braves, wave upon wave, urging their wiry ponies forward and down toward the blue-coated company in the valley.

Pop Dillon seized his rifle, leveled, aimed and fired it, all in the same moment. If he won no other honors he would at least have the distinction of firing the first shot at the battle of the Little Big Horn. It gave the old man no small joy to watch the oncoming charger of one of the red men plunge to its knees, while those behind swept over it. Good—he still had his aim!

In an instant Custer showed his mettle.

Wheeling in his saddle, his strong voice roared over that oncoming din of charging hoofs, "Dismount men—dismount and drop your horses!"

With a quickness that told of long practice, the order was enforced and a surrounding barrier of horse-flesh hurriedly swung into place, behind which crouched the followers of Custer. Nearly all of them experienced Indian fighters, they

might yet be able to pull through, thought Pop. Old troopers die hard!

The oncoming red men were still some distance off, when army rifles began to fire and lead split the air. The battle of the Little Big Horn was on!

POP DILLON had been quick to drop his little mare. The old trooper felt that hard lump in his throat, as he sent the bullet through the head of his mount which brought swift death. But better that way than have poor Nellie a living target for Apache bullets—some of them might not kill her outright. Again, it's hard to aim behind a moving horse.

Then, too, the old man knew they could never hope to ride through those surrounding thousands. They were hemmed in and already, several hundred yards away, the leading braves were beginning the Death Circle—a series of continuous, encompassing rides around their foes, the while they kept up a steady, deadly fire.

There was only one hope—help from Reno, who had been sent to attack the southern end of the Indian camp.

Not a dozen paces behind him, he could hear the voice of Custer, shouting hurried orders amid the din of roaring rifles. Pop turned. There, in a large circle, lying behind the protecting bodies of their mounts, were the two hundred and sixty blue-coated cavalrymen who had ridden with Custer, in the center of which, beside his personal flag, was the yellow-haired hero of Chickahoming River himself, with drawn revolver. Even as Pop watched, it was raised and flame flared from it.

Some subtle sense brought the eyes of Custer upon his own. The old scout half caught, half guessed the words: "We're in for it, Pop!"

Pop nodded and turned. His rifle followed the course of an encircling Sioux. He fired. Yes, he still had his aim! Somewhere behind him he could hear the loud blaring of a trumpet. A bullet whined past his head.

Pop dropped behind his dead mount and reloaded. "Sufferin' catfish, how those Injuns could howl!" He'd continued to use the rifle for a while—a single shot, old army weapon, he had carried serving under Hancock at Wahita River, back in sixty-eight. Time enough for the revolvers when the Death Circle got closer. Then he'd throw lead fast. With such a mob out there, you were bound to hit someone, even if you missed the one you aimed at. Pop grinned at the thought. No, there was no excuse for wastin' bullets now.

"Painted up like rainbows, ain't they?" shouted a cavalryman who lay beside him, as he raised himself from behind his horse to fire, then drop hurriedly to shelter.

By this time the Death Circle had been formed—whirling, war-painted braves, flitting past on wiry ponies in an endless stream. But already many of those ponies ran riderless in the wake of the others, with the dead and wounded being trampled by rushing hoofs. Thundering hoofs, which together with the roaring guns, war cries and groans, rose up in the terrible din almost deafening.

Now if they could just hold them off till Reno came up!

Far beyond the Death Circle, and ever joining in it, was coming the wave after wave of Sioux warriors. The surrounding hills and skyline showed the many war parties riding to the attack. Dust clouds intermingled with the rising smoke of gun powder. Pop wondered if Sitting Bull himself had joined in the attack, or was watching the battle from the safety of some hilltop. The old scout knew the Sioux chief by sight, as he did a score of others riding in the Death Circle—now a good quarter of a mile in circumference, in the center of which, lying behind their horses, were the men of Custer—a ring within a ring.

Shooting to the left of Pop Dillon was a hairless-faced fellow, scarcely more than a boy—and missing badly, too, Pop noticed. His young face white, eyes wide,

hands trembling—maybe it was his first time under fire. "You're raisin' too high, lad; keep farther down," advised the old scout, but the other appeared not to hear him. Maybe he didn't, with all that noise. Too bad; a boy like him shouldn't be here. Pop loaded again.

A bullet tore through his leather saddle, scant inches past his cheek, but the circle didn't seem to be getting any closer. Good.

That meant that for the present they were at least holding their own. His steady fingers shot a cartridge into place. Kinda sorry now that he hadn't bothered to get the hang of those "new, fangdangled repeatin' rifles." They came in handy when you were out-numbered like this. It was the loadin' and reloadin' that held a fellow up.

Hello, Red Cloud was out there, riding in the death circle—the same Red Cloud who was later to claim having killed Custer, exhibiting the latter's sabre as proof. Red Cloud, eh? Pop hadn't seen him for years, and had but that one brief glimpse of him as the Sioux chief whirled by with blazing rifle and crouched low on the far side of his horse. Just that one glimpse, but it was enough.

He'd be on the lookout for the Red Cloud the next time he came around!

It is said that the battle of the Little Big Horn lasted less than half an hour. Pop didn't have any way of knowing that; but he did realize, as time passed, that the Sioux fire was steadily increasing while that of the defenders waned. He glared around him. "Sufferin' catfish—no wonder!" A fourth of them were dead or dying; the lesser wounded numbered as many more! Custer was standing upright, his personal flag fluttering beside him, his revolver blazing flame. Then from somewhere came that heavy slug which caught the old scout in the shoulder and spun him half around as he fell.

"Get you, Old-timer?" rasped the cavalryman on the right; and dully, for the first time, Pop noticed the bleeding forehead of the other.

Dazedly he came to his knees.

"Just a scratch—just a scratch!" he heard himself gasping—but, "Judas, how it hurt!" He must—he must be gettin' old to let a shoulder wound drop him. Those years back east must have softened him up, too. Hadn't been like that the time he cleaned up the Crowley gang, and Jess Crowley had put two slugs in that same shoulder an instant before Pop's bullet tore through his brain.

Oh, well, if they got him, the buck that went for his scalp would be in for a surprise—a big surprise!

A RED trickle ran onto his rifle when he again grasped it. Somewhere from behind him came the agonized whinny of a horse.

The rifle was getting harder to handle. Then gradually he realized the pain in his shoulder was lessening to a strange numbness. All right; he'd start using his revolvers. That would give him a chance to rest his shoulder. Besides, the Death Circle was getting closer now—much closer. Didn't think he'd been in as noisy a rumpus since Gettysburg.

Pop Dillon fired carefully. He'd make every bullet count. His right hand held and pulled the trigger, his left shot back the hammer of one of his revolvers. He'd save the one in his right holster for the final rush.

Pop didn't see the steady fall of those who were behind him. Didn't know, as the moments passed, how often the blue-coated defenders were crumbling before the ceaseless fire crashing from the Death Circle. Kellog, the reporter, had fallen early in the battle. He who had written he would be with Custer, "to the death" (meaning the end of the rebellion the Ohio general had been sent to terminate) met his own end at the hands of those he sought to write off; while from a distant hill the crafty Sitting Bull watched and far away

a surrounded Major Reno was unable to bring aid, though he and his followers heard and knew the meaning of that distant, steady fire. And so the battle of the Little Big Horn began, neared, reached and passed the halfway mark; then swept on, fast, relentless, to its grim, inevitable end.

"They're getting ready to ride in on us —they're gonna close in!" It was the young fellow to the left of Pop who was suddenly screaming the words. Yes—yes they were gettin' closer all right! Pop had been shooting steadily, but he'd have to shoot and load faster now. Quick his fingers went to the bullets in his belt. If that young fool would spend more time shootin' and less yellin'—a surprised shriek came from the right. It told him the cavalryman was done. Funny, after you had heard enough of 'em, you could tell by the cry just how bad a fella had been hit.

Louder and louder the war cries. Nearer and nearer that whirling circle. Dust and gunpowder, gunpowder and dust. Thundering hoofs, screams, war-paint and flitting, mounted figures. "Judas, it was hot!" Where in hell was Reno?"

Many of the attacking braves had now slid from their mounts and were coming forward, shooting as they advanced. Pop's six-shooter roared out leaden death, and he scarcely felt the bullet that grazed his side. Funny, you killed them and killed them, but still they came on. But there didn't seem to be so many of them gettin' killed now—hardly any lead goin' that way at all. The Injuns were doin' most of the shootin'! Pop suddenly realized the end was near. Now would come the big rush. Even as he thought it, the Death Circle was suddenly halted; then, as though by prearranged signals, in a great wave the attackers came galloping forward. Their steady fire had taken toll; there wouldn't be much resistance.

Pop Dillon sprang to his feet. Luckily he had just reloaded. He transferred the weapon to his left hand, his right going to the other in his holster. It leaped out, flaring flame; dropping a paint-smeared Sioux and the scalping knife he carried. Slowly retreating, he was followed by the few firing troopers still on their feet. They'd meet their end around Custer and the flag. Too bad about that young fella—yep, there was a buck gonna scalp him now, kneeling beside him. Pop's aim was as steady as the day he killed Crowley, while he fired—it would have to be someone else who scalped the young fella!

Pop saw Custer fall!

There couldn't have been more than ten of them left—gathered together, most of them hit, some of them dying but all of them shooting—when he went down. From the tail of his eye Pop witnessed it. The yellow-haired commander had been calm throughout it all; taking a steady toll with his revolver, giving brief orders, and once setting up the slender flag-pole when it had fallen. There had been that grimness on his features—resigned, but deadly. Yes, he had led them into this trap; he'd not ask for mercy or expect miracles now. But there would be a lot of satisfaction in seeing how many of them you could take with you!

Even about the wild melee, there rose those triumphant yells as Custer went down.

There would be a hundred of 'em claim they fired the shot that killed him, thought Pop. Those Injuns didn't need any help when it came to blowin' off steam.

Over their first defences were now coming an endless wave of red men, many of them pausing to fling themselves upon the blue-coated bodies of the dead and dying, who lay where they had fallen; most of them behind their mounts, though many, sprawled in grotesque awkwardness, lay elsewhere within the little circle they had tried to defend. Amid the war cries rose the screams of those who had not known the kindness of quick death, as the scalping knives of the Sioux braves were brought into play.

And then—and then Pop Dillon saw him!

ONE gun was empty, but two shells remained in the other, when riding over the fallen dead and coming toward him, Pop behind the war-painted Bad Buck—just an instant after the latter had recognized his life-long foe. But a few troopers were standing, shrieking braves were leaping forward, when from his snow-white pony the rifle of the Sioux flared the bullet that caught the old scout squarely in the chest, to drive him backwards as he fell, bringing swift and merciful death.

But with only scant seconds left, an old trooper can be dangerous. Bad Buck learned that as he slid from his mount, to leap forward with ready knife uplifted, even as the body of the other struck the ground beneath him. Apache war cries now reigned supreme; dancing braves bloody and triumphant, exhibiting freshly severed scalp-locks. But Pop's old trigger finger did move twice before the darkness claimed him; and he even saw the startled surprise on the face of the Sioux just above him, as those two last slugs found Bad Buck's heart, while the knife fell from lifeless fingers and the latter lunged upon him —dead!

There was a peace, a smile upon his lips; a mighty satisfaction in Pop's last rasping words: "Old troopers—die hard! Die hard—hard as hell!" A final tremor shook the body and then he moved no more.

And the next moment brought the bounding form of the brave whose knife sought the coveted scalp-lock. But what caused that pause, his bewilderment, the puzzled "Ugh!" when the black hat had been torn off and the gray locks of the old scout brushed aside? Well, as Pop could have told him, had the other asked him earlier:

"Lost my scalp while scoutin' for Hancock, back in sixty-eight!"

Curioddities By Weill

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO SWALLOW? *See Curioddities next time.*

GUNS FOR PAKISTAN

A COMPLETE NOVEL

I

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE had its odd quirks. Steve Wheeler wondered what would happen if he submitted a literal and accurate report of his past week in Teheran: *"Following Linda Grayling through bazaars. missionary's daughter, green eyes, red hair, nice ankles, would look grand in black lace nightgown. Drinks brandy straight and lots of it."*

That, he told himself, would be another one of those reports he would not make. Though the girl was important, he could not yet prove it.

The only thing in Teheran, capital of

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of "Master of Dragons," etc.

"No, I'm a Patriot; It's Always the Other Fellow That's a Spy . . ." and Always There Was That Old Established Gun-Running Route from the Persian Gulf to Western India

Persia, that had not changed under the new regime was the view of Demavend, whose snow cap rose nearly nineteen thousand feet, north of Iran's capital. The city was not at all the Hollywood set he had expected, though he had been prepared for unveiled women, and men wearing hats.

The tiled Meshad Gate had been torn down, and alongside the caravan trail into Khorassan was a cement plant with a tall stack; but here, as on the road to Kazvin, some of the old Iran persisted, for motor trucks had not yet exiled the camels. Rising dust veiled the mud walls of houses and caravanserais, and the ruined fortress. Here, only a few miles east of Teheran, was Rayy, where Haroun al Raschid

had been born, and where Hassan bin Sabbah, the murderous "Old Man of the Mountains," had planned an invisible empire ruled by dagger-armed assassins.

All this had happened a thousand years ago; and now, with half the world once more ruled by assassins, Steve Wheeler was trailing a red-haired girl. Rather, on this day he was ahead of her. He dismissed his chauffeur, and set out on foot, dodging donkeys loaded with fuel, and porters carrying bales of rugs.

Dust, the reek of unwashed wool, the stench of camels and the tang of spices; these followed him into the blind alley which branched from the bazaar where men in pillbox hats offered carpets and blue pottery and splendid enamels. Steve Wheeler stooped double, stepped through the crumbling doorway of a ruined house.

In the half gloom, he picked his way through rubbish, and among poplar trunks which had once supported the rammed earth roof. A hazardous stairway led to the second floor where a narrow ledge remained. Crouching here, Wheeler could peep through the cracked parapet and watch all who went into and came from the shop of Saoud ul-Attar. Then he unlimbered his twelve power binoculars to wait for Linda Grayling.

Considering that Linda's room at the Firdausi Hotel contained only one small blue vase, it was odd that she came so often to the shops of Rayy, particularly when she could buy as well in Teheran. Though Wheeler, whatever he might have thought of Linda's green eyes and trim ankles, would scarcely have trailed the missionary's daughter had she not spent so much time dancing and drinking brandy with Asbury Howarth, who smuggled guns, and speculated in oil leases.

Howarth always had been a State Department headache; and now that the Japs were beating their way toward India, he was war department grief. It was all very simple; the composite mind of India was still in the making up, and so was the mind of Britain. After losing Singapore and most of Burma, the final disaster would be another Indian Mutiny.

Whether the Nipponese advance would solidify India into united action, or be a signal for outbreaks from the Deccan to the Punjab, that was anyone's guess; and Asbury Howarth's presence in Iran suggested that kicking all the Axis nationals out of the country had not conclusively settled matters. There was that old, well established gun running route from the Persian Gulf to western India. A few guns, and a lot of Axis propaganda could start a mutiny, since even a local uprising, little more than an over-sized riot, would convince the undecided part of Hindustan that the Japs were allies and liberators.

Howarth, like the detonator in a shell, could touch off an explosive mass.

Long shadows barred the narrow street; the sinking sun reached down through the wide spaced poplar poles which in summer supported canopies to shade the bazaar. Then he saw the red-haired girl; she was heading for Saoud's little shop.

She offered the dealer a small blue vase. Through the powerful glasses, Wheeler recognized the pattern; the identical bit he had seen in Linda's room, during her absence. Saoud set it on the narrow counter which faced the street, and the bargaining started.

That was the phoney touch. The gestures were right, but neither Linda's white face nor Saoud's greasy round features had the intensity of bazaar bargaining. As he gesticulated, he fingered the colored counters of an abacus, Iran's adding machine.

It was far from clear what all the addition was about.

It was even more puzzling why Linda should impatiently brush him aside and with a red-nailed finger start flicking the discs strung on wires, row after row.

One row represented units, the next tens, the next hundreds, and so on. Suppose you were adding 64 and 98: flick eight counters against the line; four more

made twelve, set off two in the units column, carry one to the tens column, and there set off six, which with the one carried, makes seven. Three more makes ten, carry one to the hundreds column, and slide the remaining six to the line.

There was your answer: one in the hundreds, six in the tens, two in the units, or 162. Merchants, hotel clerks, night-club cashiers, they kept those counters dancing and clicking, and they got their answers almost as quickly as they could have with a modern adding machine.

But Saoud frowned, shook his head, stared at what Linda had set off. Very slowly, he rearranged the counters. She shrugged, picked up the vase, and walked out.

No refund today; that was what the game was intended to simulate. Wheeler, however, knew otherwise. With the slow motion of the abacus, he had seen clearly enough that as arithmetic, the whole business had been nonsense! But let each number represent a letter of the alphabet, or a code, and one could transmit messages without running the risk of having any incriminating papers in one's possession.

As he came down from his perch, he amended his proposed report about the red-haired girl: ". . . look nice in almost anything . . . and isn't a bit dumb. . . ."

For tomorrow's trailing of the girl with the green eyes, he would have to borrow the Consul General's candid camera, one purchased from a deported Nazi. It was driven by clockwork, and would shoot as many as four pictures in one second, which was faster than Linda and Saoud could possibly tick their adding machine. With a picture of each setting, it would be easy for a cryptographer to get an answer. While there was the chance that Linda might block his view of the abacus, that was hardly a reason for not trying.

Nazi missionaries in New Guinea had incited the natives to revolt. It had been rather naïve of the British, Wheeler told himself, to let those pious scoundrels remain on the job just because they packed bibles. Come to think of it, Linda's father was stationed at Zaridan, on the Baluchi frontier, the smuggler's gateway to India.

Zaridan meant, *"Place where holy men gather."*

Until the recently abdicated Shah-in-Shah had renamed the town, it had been called Dozdab, which signified, *"Thieves' Water Hole."* The more Wheeler saw of Linda, the more he favored the rugged grandeur of Zaridan's original name.

THAT night, he had a table at Teheran's night spot, the Savoy Club. Red and blue and green lights festooned the blank mud wall of the front, and the long arbor which led to the *patio* where an orchestra massacred *Deep in the Heart of Texas*. On the dance floor, Iranian officers wore their pillbox caps and danced with girls from the foreign colony. There was Major Bertram Turner-Scott, glaring into a brandy snifter as he drank himself stupid; the world was loathesome to this retired tiger hunter. And the place was jammed with Russians who out-roared the orchestra and flung their liquor down in gulps that did not splash till they hit bottom.

No Nazis; they had all been deported six months previous, some to Kazvin, others to India. Oddly, those sent to British territory congratulated themselves, an ideal spot for exile. But Wheeler, skeptical as his business demanded, wondered how many had evaded deportation.

Germans had been operating the telephone, the telegraph, and the radio station, as well as the new railroads from the Caspian Sea to Bandar Shahpur on the Gulf. They were gone, along with Risa Khan Pahlavi, who liked them—but how many, equipped with forged papers, still circulated about the empire?

Then Asbury Howarth came in with Linda Grayling.

He was somewhat past middle age, and slightly bald; shrewd eyes looked out from

under shaggy brows to size up the crowd. His face was gnarled, rugged, a fighting face, and he carried himself like a field marshal. Life in Teheran was apparently one round of golf and races and a nightly whirl at the Savoy, with occasional meetings with Iranian officials needled in.

The new Shah, son of hard bitten old Riza Khan Pahlavi, had a Swiss education, and was playing ball with the British, or so he said, but with Howarth, gun runner and oil lease speculator in town, one could only doubt, and meanwhile, try to catch Howarth with the goods.

A *muezzin* called from the minaret of a nearby mosque: *"Allah is great! Allah is most great! Come to prayer! Prayer is better than sleep!"*

BUT the Savoy was Teheran's refuge for those who preferred drinking and dancing to prayer or sleep. Night after night, the same faces, the same forced relief from exile; though this would be glamor to a girl from Dozdab, that sun-baked hell on Iran's easternmost extremity.

A waiter called Howarth to the phone, leaving Linda to study her brandy. When he returned, he said, "I'm awfully sorry, but I'll have to hurry to the house, Ali Mirza is on the way out."

"Oh, why can't I go along? You won't be talking business all night!"

Howarth shook his head. "Things might drag a lot. Suppose I call a cab? I'll phone you at the Firdausi, when I'm rid of His Highness."

Linda rose, and managed to upset her glass of brandy. With a cry of exasperation, she turned from the table and hurried to the dressing room. Howarth paced the floor and chewed his cigar.

The whole thing was odd. By every rule, he should be calling on His Highness, Ali Mirza, the young Shah's secretary. This reversal of punctilio suggested a meeting important enough to be inconspicuous. Another false note was that spilled brandy; Wheeler, watching the two, was certain that Linda had helped the glass tip.

A moment later, she came out smiling. Her cape concealed whatever damage an ounce of brandy had done. Howarth followed her to the street, leaving Wheeler impatiently counting the seconds before he could head for Howarth's villa to listen in.

This was a case where papers were entirely lacking. Wheeler, having keys to the villa, had searched the place from end to end, and had found exactly nothing. Months previous, months before the old shah's abdication, munitions had come up the Indian Ocean, to disappear in the mangrove swamps north of Zanzibar; a shipment made by Howarth. There the trail ended, and the rest was guesswork.

Arab *dhows* plying between Zanzibar and the Persian Gulf must have carried the contraband the rest of the way, but Arab skippers rarely bother with bills of lading. If they are caught, it is the will of Allah; if they get through, just try to trace them.

Like Linda Grayling, Howarth carried his transactions in his head, and not on paper, which made Wheeler's days in Iran long but not especially happy.

When Wheeler reached the street, he saw Howarth's chauffeur struggling with a tire. There were two flats, which is no phenomenon, not when one drives over roads that for a thousand years have been loaded with nails from the shoes of donkey boys and camel drivers. Wheeler, however, was lucky, for his tires were still inflated, though if they had not been, he would have driven on the rims. And just as fortunately, he had given his chauffeur an evening off.

Half an hour later, he was parked off the road, and in a ruined *serai* on the route to Qum. Howarth's villa gleamed white through the tall cypress and the plane trees of the walled garden.

Though he had keys, Wheeler did not use them, for it was too early for the porter to be asleep, so he flung a well muffled

grappling hook to the crest of the wall, and went over, landing on the roof of the stable.

Looking back, he saw no headlight. Ali Mirza, naturally enough, was taking his time, and Howarth would still be cursing tacks from hobnailed shoes.

II

WHEELER darted from shadow to shadow of the formal Persian garden, skirting pools and cutting across walks. It was only a matter of moments to reach a side door, and then to enter the darkened hall from which rose a staircase to the second floor. Opening from the right was the entrance to the *salon* where Howarth received callers.

This was far too much house for one man, but prestige demanded that touch of pomp. He had to have it, whether he wanted it or not.

Howarth's game, in spite of its ramifications, was simple; he supplied munitions for revolts, and then, when the under dog was in power, he took oil or mining concessions as payment. In many ways, he had the late Sir Basil Zaharoff's knack of creating a demand. Regardless of wars, he had warehouses packed with the tools of conquest. But this time, things had moved too rapidly.

In the West, turbulent Kurdish tribesmen had been muttering, and the ill equipped army of Iran had registered discontent; Germans were taking the country over. This combination was Howarth's chance for an untapped oil lease, until the British and Russian coup, exiling Riza Khan Pahlavi and his Nazi pals with him, had changed the complexion of things. More than that, increasing tightness of Red Sea and Indian Ocean patrols had made it impossible for him to withdraw his hidden arsenals. There was only one way out—sell the stuff to the new regime. This was the best guess of Army Intelligence, and Wheeler was there to confirm or refute. And when he edged into the darkness of the *salon,* he felt that he was very close to an answer, for Ali Mirza would hardly leave his palace in Teheran except to close an important deal.

Wheeler had the room mapped; each alcove, each cabinet, each carved teak screen, each tall vase was pictured in his mind, and already, he had picked his lurking place. With heavy woolen socks drawn over his shoes, he made no sound as he advanced. Thus far, he had not used his pen-sized flashlight.

He was not sure just how he got his first warning. Though there had been no sound, he felt a presence in the gloom, and then, seconds later, he smelled the fragrance of brandy. While that in itself was hardly remarkable, the odor blended with a powder and perfume savor that stirs the pulse as much and more than a woman's beauty.

Where a brandy snifter, not quite emptied and left standing for several hours, would have spread its aroma over the entire room, this was localized. Liquor freshly spilled made him think of a red-haired girl; and that cosmetic odor reminded him of Linda's room at the Firdausi.

She was still warm from dancing and from hurry; her skin exhaled perfume and splashed brandy. Wheeler, for a moment not daring to advance or retreat, realized now that like himself, she was spying on Howarth.

He corrected himself. "No, I'm a patriot, it's only the other fellow who's a spy."

The way to play it was to edge back, duck behind the Senna *khilim* which masked the opposite alcove, hear and let her hear, then beat her to the punch. That would be easy; a tip off to Colonel White, the United States Military attaché, would take care of Linda before she spelled anything else on Saoud's abacus.

Good strategy, but for one detail. Linda, first arrived, had become accustomed to

the gloom, or perhaps Wheeler was outlined against the sky glow of a distant window. Whatever it was, his retreat was checked by a soft, metallic *snick* just in front of him, and by a voice that followed. "Stay where you are, or I'll shoot!"

Linda, no doubt about it now!

He exclaimed in Persian, *"Ya Khudaya!* Oh, God, what is this? The first thief threatens the second, and the peace upon you, lady, but did you cry 'by permission'?"

A low, rippling laugh, and she answered, "I did, and the house was empty."

"When the master returns, it will not

help either of us," he resumed. "Lady, let us share and share alike, for God is generous."

Wheeler had at least one advantage; brandy and perfume and voice identified Linda Grayling, whereas she had never heard him speak, and whatever scent of tobacco he might carry was common to all Teheran. He went on, "Shooting in the dark is not easy."

Linda sniffed. "A window behind you, O Man! You loom up as tall as Demavend, and wide as a mosque."

"The porter would hear."

"He would find you dead, and not look for me."

She spoke with the calm confidence of one who has an issue settled and disposed of; and now that Wheeler's eyes had begun to accommodate themselves to the gloom ahead of him, he could distinguish the white blur of her face, and the faint metallic luster of a pistol, the suggestion of the outthrust hand and arm.

She had him skylined. He swayed a little, ever so little, and learned that she was not bluffing. "Stand fast, O Man! Move again, and you write your own fate, and Allah is the Knower."

Her Persian was smooth, and not bookish, either; wherever she had learned it, it had not come from a conversation manual. And as the sweat began to break out on Wheeler, he wondered if his accent bore out his imposture. Whatever he did, however, he got out of this crazy encounter, he had to leave Linda with the assurance that she had bluffed a prowling native.

Back in '33, shortly after graduation, Wheeler had made the error of admitting that he had studied Persian, a statement which had gone on his first efficiency report. While there is nothing in Army Regulations which prohibits such studies, and while the term "crackpot" is not in order in making out a second lieutenant's efficiency report, while one's superior cannot even recommend observation and treatment for a subordinate who can write *naskhi* script, Wheeler nevertheless got the army's best substitutes.

He was assigned to every undesirable detail and undesirable post the service afforded. He was in a class with several older officers who had claimed that the next war would be fought by motorized armies, and that air power would settle the show. But they had not browbeaten Wheeler into resigning.

And when a colonel in disfavor for being motor minded, had said, "Steve, you'll never convince them that a man can recite Hafiz and be a soldier," Wheeler had found a native instructor and learned more Persian, as a matter of principle. And then, shortly after Pearl Harbor, the War Department discovered him.

Aviation and panzer divisions had been vindicated; and now, as an amateur burglar, Steve Wheeler faced a red-haired

girl and wondered if Persian would stand up under fire.

ALL this raced through his mind as he sidestepped, flicked up his flashlight, and exclaimed. That wordless, sharp gasp, the abrupt foot-scrape, the glare combined to upset a girl who was at least as tense as he was. There was a spurt of flame, a dry, thin *whack,* the thump of lead into a distant panel, and then Wheeler landed.

He paralyzed her wrist before she could jerk a second shot. The flashlight, dropping to the floor, played its beams across her ankles and scuffed sandals. Linda was game; she gasped, but did not scream. For a moment, he feared that she would break loose, for, instinctively, he hesitated to apply the holds that would have settled a male lurker.

Even if he had never seen her, his sense of touch would have made him hesitate. Beyond any doubt, she would be grand in a black lace gown! Then a kick in the shins and an almost successful knee gouge brought his mind back to business. He locked his forearm under her chin, neatly cut off her breath, and scooped her from her feet.

"Lady," he muttered in her ear, "it takes one, and not two to rob a house. Make no noise, Allah is generous, you can slip out later."

He knew where he was going, and he had no time to lose. Wheeler bounded to the hall, and up the stairs to the second floor. There was no chance to gag or bind his squirming captive unless he throttled her to unconsciousness, and this he considered not quite necessary. So he plopped her into a closet, slammed the door, and fumbled for a moment, selecting a key. The third trial was successful. He had the hell-cat caged; and in this remote wing, let her kick if she insisted. Whatever her game, she would have a jolly time explaining her presence to Asbury Howarth.

Already, he heard the mutter of a car, the crunch of tires. A horn bawled and brayed. While he could have hurried to the *salon,* there were points in favor of remaining on the stairway. Outside, he heard the chauffeur say, in English, "Sir, the porter is dead drunk."

"I pay him too much!" Howarth said, and then chuckled. "Here, take the keys."

Only then did Wheeler remember the flashlight which glowed on the monstrous Feraghan carpet of the *salon;* though the pistol was bad, the light was worse. He bounded down, three steps at a time, to retrieve the betrayer, and he blessed the hasheesh sodden porter.

But he barely reached the ground floor when Howarth's villa offered its next surprise. At first Wheeler thought that the porter was running amuck; then he realized that several men were yelling. There was a wrathful curse, a high-pitched screech of terror, the slam of a car door. Outside, a man battled for his life, and the sounds told that it was a grim fight and a game one.

Someone had waylaid Howarth. His chauffeur, pounding gravel, howled as he raced away to save his hide. Wheeler had no time to get Linda's gun. He dashed out the front door, and down the river toward the gate. Already, he could see three men struggling in the moonlight; one in dinner clothes, two in native dress. Howarth went down. Knives flashed. He came up slugging, weaving, trying to side-step. Just one degree removed from international crook, a gambler in lives, an inciter to revolt—all that he was, and worse, but the man had guts.

That alone would have made Wheeler scramble over the spiked iron grillework, and tear himself in his haste; but more than sporting instinct made him clear the hurdle, and land in a heap in the gateway, where the porter snored. Howarth's munitions were in a secret warehouse. Howarth had not a pen scratch to record the cache; he carried all the details in his head, and one more knife stroke would blot the record.

Wheeler's landing, a flurry of gravel, had scarcely time to register on the panting assassins. He snatched the scrawny drunkard from the sentry box, and straight-armed him, flinging him bodily against the weaving trio. They yelled, whirled on the supposed defender.

One exclamation registered: *"Gottverdammte—!"*

That was good German. And then Wheeler landed, getting in one good wallop. He took a slash on the arm, tripped an assailant, and wrenched a man's forearm; there was a howl of pain, and a curved dagger tinkled to the gravel.

Wheeler snatched the weapon. He came up, parried, made an upward rip that started below the belt and did not stop till it reached the breastbone.

When he whirled, there was no opposition. The survivor was running across the barren plain. This was prudence, not cowardice, for the job was done, and done well. Howarth lay gasping and groaning.

"Those Nazi scum!"

"Where are your keys?" Wheeler demanded, kneeling beside the mortally wounded man. "Take it easy—if I can stop that bleeding, I'll drive you to town."

Howarth twisted, sat up. Wheeler caught him before he toppled, and eased him flat to the bloody drive. When he tried to locate the wounds, Howarth muttered, "Thanks—I'm done for—you got one of them—that's nice—"

The blood coming from his mouth was frothy and bright; that was clear in the bitter brightness of Persian moonlight. Lungs riddled with steel, his number was up; he was finished as certainly as the man who writhed in the gravel, and clutched his gaping stomach. Howarth, with the clear vision of the dying, seemed to sense that one of his enemies would outlive him, for an agonized eternity of some hours, and he showed his teeth in a grin.

"Who—are you—I've seen you—seen you—"

"American, like yourself. See here, Howarth, I smelled trouble, I came out here, I bungled it. You're washed up. Give me a break, give yourself a break. You've raised the devil for forty years, but those guns, those shells, this time you can't collect. Tell me where they are, so those damned Nazis can't get them. They got you, but you still have one trick left."

"Who—are you?"

"Wheeler, Captain of Artillery, now with Army Intelligence. Man, this is war, war for more than oil, for more than millions. Do you want those guns to go to India and help the Nazi and the Jap?"

Howarth gasped, coughed. "Listen, whoever you are—"

And Wheeler listened.

III

HOWARTH lived long enough to tell Wheeler that the munitions were in a warehouse in Chahbar, on the Persian Gulf, and guarded by trusted native assistants. This information confirmed Steve Wheeler's hunch; more than that, the situation was far worse than he had anticipated, since Chahbar was at the seaward end of an overland trail which went due north across the desert, passing through Birjand, and finally reached Meshad in Khurassan, the "Land of the Sun."

For more than three hundred miles, the road skirted the no-man's land between Iran and India. There were smuggler trails which branched from it, snaking through the barren burnt hills of Baluchistan. The point of the Nazi arranged murder was now clear; by killing Howarth to keep him from selling his guns, they could move the munitions from British controlled Iran into India, where four warring native factions were more interested in independence, immediate and at any cost, than in uniting against the Axis.

No matter what accord was reached between England and India, it would blow up if an appreciable quantity of arms fell

into the hands of the tribesmen of the Northwest Frontier Province; and the result would be just as fatal if the All-India Moslem League's hotheads burned powder to back up their demands for an independent state, the proposed kingdom of Pakistan, which was to be formed by consolidating the Moslem provinces.

Almost as radical was the Hindu Mahasabha group which claimed that all-Moslem Pakistan was only the first step toward resuming Islam's raids. Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, all allies of Pakistan, would bring the grand old days of Mahmud of Ghazni, who in twenty-six years had sixteen times looted and ravaged from Gujarat to Oudh; the heroic times of Timur, who in three days butchered a hundred thousand Hindus in Delhi. India remembered the Sultan of Gulbarga, who whenever he had massacred twenty thousand infidels, would proclaim a banquet to celebrate.

THIS was what Hindustan feared as the outcome of Pakistan; whereas the Moslems were apprehensive of their fate if, united, they became the minority party under the Indian Congress.

Finally, the various groups of Hindus hated each other only a little less than they feared the Moslems; the fierce little Ghurkas of Nepal, the hard fighting Rajputs of the Punjab, what would they do to the rest of Hindustan if by any chance the united Moslems did not strike?

"All this," Wheeler muttered, as he regarded the sower of revolt, "all this, and then a warehouse of guns! *Pakistan?* Not the right name. Should be *muristan,* the madhouse."

Reporting Howarth's death was the right thing to do, but letting the authorities of Iran know the background of the case was something else. To clear himself, Wheeler would need a very convincing story, and to tell where the warehouse was would be a bad play. There was no predicting what disgruntled army officers might do if they got a hint as to the munitions in Chahbar.

If the fugitive assassin were captured and put over the hurdles, he might reveal enough to expose the cache. And some typically Iranian official might arrange to smuggle the guns into Hindustan. Finally, Ali Mirza, if he did not know the precise location, might be able, like the Nazi assassins, to make a firse rate guess, giving a sixty-four dollar answer.

WHEELER had just one sure move; get to that warehouse, get there first, and blow it up. And that excluded taking Colonel White into his confidence. No military attaché could countenance such a trick.

The colonel, indeed, would have small respect for any captain who asked questions when it was time to act.

If Wheeler succeeded, he would be supposed to report that *"an explosion of undetermined origin, possible sabotage, destroyed a considerable accumulation of munitions at the outskirts of Chahbar."* If he failed, and were caught, the diplomatic service would have to insist that Wheeler was an independent *saboteur;* in which case, he would get his citation in front of a firing squad.

So Wheeler, much as he hated to leave a dead man lying in the gravel, hurried back to his car. As for Linda, he dared not release her until he was well on his way.

The thing to do was to get out before Ali Mirza's Iranian deliberation finally brought him to the villa. Let the shah's confidential secretary explain the corpse at the gateway.

Telegraph, telephone, and radio made modern Iran's cities dangerous centers for a fugitive. Police questioned all travelers who approached the outskirts.

Back in Teheran, Wheeler found his chauffeur. The good man, making the most of an evening off, was snoring his way through a hasheesh stupor. That made

the exchange of clothes both quick and silent.

Wheeler risked a few words with Colonel White. "I'd like to have your pistol and ready cash, sir," he told the not entirely astonished attaché. "I am going on a special detail."

"Er—a bit of detached service, Captain?"

Wheeler made an airy gesture. "As a purely unofficial statement, sir, you may quote me as having said that I am going to Meshad with a camel caravan. Thank you, I have Iranian papers suitable for—"

"For a camel driver," the colonel cut in. He dug into his wallet, stripped it. Then he turned to his desk, and brought out a service automatic with three loaded clips. "Hope you won't need all these."

"These will be a drop in the bucket, compared to what I expect to find. By the way, Colonel, will you ask Asbury Howarth or his *major domo* or *bawwab* or someone to unlock a closet on the second floor of the villa, just in case a red-haired girl happens to be caged there?"

Colonel White gulped, twisted his mustache, and muttered, "Captain Wheeler, I am not one damned bit surprised at anything at all pulled by a man who graduated at the bottom of his class because of paying too much attention to Persian, and not enough to calculus." He extended his hand. "Now get the hell out of my sight, and out of town too, before I am officially involved in an outrageous mess. Good luck, Captain, and drop me a line some day."

Half an hour later, Wheeler was driving along the highway which wound southward, skirting the railway tracks.

As the false dawn began to brighten the dead expanse of a salt lake, he rolled the car well off the highway. He hoped that Colonel White, putting two and two together, would be able in some unofficial way to reimburse the owner, for it would certainly be stripped by passing traffic. So, to delay identification, Wheeler touched a match to the gas tank, and set out on foot.

With staff and hobnailed shoes, Pahlavi cap and flopping white pants and sheepskin jacket, he plodded along through the darkness that preceded the true dawn. And when the sun rose, he was tramping across glistening salt flats; for awhile, the burned brown mountains which rimmed the dead level plain had a sullen red glamor. And only a few miles ahead rose the tiled minarets and the golden dome of Fatima's shrine in the holy city of Qum. Here was water and verdure, the first in more than a hundred miles, in this place which, more than eleven hundred years ago, had been sanctified by the sister of the Eighth Imam.

A policeman wearing a coal scuttle helmet and military topcoat halted Wheeler, and with fingers half numbed by the early chill, took the identification papers, held them upside down, nodded, and gestured to the holy city. Just another grimy pilgrim, too poor to ride the motor bus.

After dallying most of the forenoon in the bazaars, buying up a haversack full of gray, iron-hard cheese, leathery sheets of bread, and equally leathery strips of that apricot paste which the Arab's aptly call *jild-al-faras*, "mare's hide," Wheeler spent an hour before he let the ticket seller convince him that one simply could not beat down the price of transportation.

Wheeler's face and eyes did not make him conspicuous among Aryan Persians and Aryan Kurds. He could have been red headed and blue eyed, instead of sun tanned and black haired.

By noon, he was jammed into a bus bound for Ardistan. Buying a through ticket would have been conspicuous. There was plenty of time, that night, to pay for the next stretch.

The mountain road to Kirman was dotted with the wrecks of buses which had failed to straighten out on the curves; and tire changes called on Wheeler's final reserves of self control. Instead of cursing and gritting his teeth, he squatted in the

shade, and gnawed tough bread, and made the best use of these intervals when he had elbow room sufficient for scratching. Along with his borrowed clothes, he had acquired a fifth column, and his traveling companions had contributed their bit.

At last he reached Kirman, a region of orchards, and of slopes where sheep grazed, sheep whose fleece was exceeded in silkiness only by those of Shiraz. There were other ranges to cross, but the backbone of the drive was broken. Finally he came to the descent through barren hills, and down to sweltering Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf.

Wheeler wondered what that corner of hell would offer in summer. He marvelled at the understatement of the gazetteer which said, *"Bandar Abbas, seaport of Persia, on the P. Gulf, very insalubrious, pop. 25,000."* Even without flies, without filth, without waterfront stench and the reek of fishing boats and pearling *dhows,* Bandar Abbas deserved fuller mention. He began to yield an ungrudged respect for the entire British race, and all for the sake of one unknown compiler of data who could dismiss Bandar Abbas as *"very insalubrious."*

"I guess," he told himself, "that's what Colonel White must be thinking of what I started in Teheran."

And even less salubrious was the sea trip that followed. Wheeler got deck passage on a *dhow* crammed with pilgrims homeward bound. Each passenger had a space just the size of a coffin's floor, say two feet by six, for sleeping and squatting, eating and praying. Women, in the interests of propriety, were jammed into the horrible suffocation of the cabin.

Four hundred miles of marine hell to Chahbar. It fell far short of Bandar Abbas in population. Wheeler, staggering ashore on legs cramped by days of enforced inaction, surveyed Chahbar, and wondered how the author of the gazetteer could describe this blot on Iran's ugliest side.

"He might say it was unpleasant," Steve Wheeler decided, as he plodded in search of a caravanserai.

Camels and donkeys far outnumbered seaman and caravan men; and there were the drivers of the smoking, steaming trucks and buses which had been sent to rattle themselves to death on the nine hundred mile inland route which reached from the sea to Khurassan, the Land of the Sun.

The town swarmed with long-haired Baluchis, lean, half-naked coastal Arabs; there were Hindu traders, Greeks who kept hotels, and of course, Armenians. But it was a rawboned Kurd with drooping mustaches who broke into the loneliness of Wheeler's thoughts.

The man's wardrobe had undoubtedly been collected from half a dozen sources, hobnailed army shoes, spiral puttees, baggy pants; a velvet jacket, and underneath it, a pique vest from some Englishman's full dress kit; a green sash, loaded with silver-hilted daggers, and then that sugar loaf felt mitre with multicolored shawls wrapped about it, turbanwise, a

towering headgear which magnified the man's height. Those knotted hands, that boney nose, they made him a caricature of a Scot. He bawled in Persian of the very worst, *"Ra Wussa!* O Thou with the Pahlavi cap!"

When not bent on banditry, a Kurd is as ready for a frolic as for a fight. Steve

Wheeler saluted him, and learned that he had the honor of addressing Ilderim Shirkuh, who quite needlessly added, "I am a Kurd from Kurdistan, O man from Shiraz!"

Being taken for a native of Shiraz gratified Wheeler, though he wondered how Shirkuh became a connoisseur of Persian accent.

And, recognizing the first approach of a shakedown, he suggested that they drink tea.

"With heart and gladness, Hussayn Agha!"

There was no getting rid of Shirkuh. He knew Chahbar well, all too well; he knew every caravanserai, every dive where *'arrak* was sold, and every bawdy house. Until Wheeler drank the man drunk, there would be no spying out the warehouses to find which one was packed to bursting with shells and grenades, small arms and cartridges, and several mountain batteries.

A man in a hurry is a man suspected of evil intent; so Wheeler had to be deliberate about his doings, lest loud-mouthed Shirkuh tell the whole district that here was a Shirazi who was in a hurry.

And Wheeler was far from pleased when, stalking from one *loqanda* to the next, he narrowly missed barging headlong into a veiled woman. A shapeless beehive of a woman, for under her figure disguising robe, she might be slender and nicely curved, as trim as Linda Grayling. Only her eyes were visible; and in spite of the antimony-blackened lids, those eyes were long, and unmistakably greenish.

Chahbar, he felt, was rapidly becoming very insalubrious.

IV

ROARING drunk, Shirkuh confessed that he was an emir in disguise. "O Hussayn," he roared, and slopped *'arrak* down his shirt front, "do not think that I drink myself drunk to mock the holy Koran! The Prophet, Allah bless him—"

Wheeler cut in wearily, "And bless his family, and his pious companions!"

"Forbade wine, but said nothing of *'arrak!"*

This was Turkish logic, this was free-thinking Persian logic; but Wheeler had no time for theological hair splitting, and Shirkuh became less and less entertaining. Working in the Kirkuk oil fields had played the devil with a sturdy mountaineer, making him a sot and a panhandler.

Finally, Wheeler found a caravanserai, where camels and donkeys shared the ground floor with bales of wool and of dried apricots; the owners of the merchandise lounged in front of their cubicles which buttressed the mud walls, while others had second floor rooms which opened on the balcony that overhung the courtyard. Shirkuh, stumbling after him, somehow managed not to break the bottle of *'arrak,* or spill the bowl of sour milk, or lose any of the cucumbers which completed the *hors d'oeuvres.*

"By God, Hussayn," the Kurd gurgled, "is it not written, a gambler is worse than a hundred drunkards?"

He blinked owlishly, sliced a cucumber with the blade of a dagger nearly as long as his forearm. Wheeler would rather have rolled dice or bet on the horses, but he had to concede Shirkuh's point.

"We are brothers, Hussayn Agha! I will guard your caravan!"

And before Shirkuh fell on his face, Wheeler was in no shape to prowl, which would not have been so bad but for the memory of those long green eyes. They might have belonged to some Circassian pet of a local dignitary; the veiled woman might have been one of the horde who walked the dingy streets of Chahbar, discreetly accosting sailors and camel men. But if that girl was Linda, she could lounge around the public bath, when it was reserved for women, and drain the town's supply of gossip.

Even if he were certain of the veiled

girl's identity, he could not make one move to accost her, for without question or delay, the town would promptly take him to pieces by hand. Her veil indicated that she was the personal property of a true believer. Short of an all-out raiding party, she was guarded against any man's approach.

Linda's attempted eavesdropping in Teheran indicated that she needed information; and if this were indeed the self-styled daughter of a missionary, she held every ace in the deck, which did not improve Wheeler's digestion as he tried to steer a straight course among the grumbling camels and the snoring merchants in the court.

An hour's painful prowling in crooked alleys, and circulating among the brush hovels which girdled the mud and masonry town did help in spotting the most likely of the warehouses. There were several which fitted equally well into the directions which the dying gun runner had given as he fought death. Breaking in, inspecting the contents, and touching off a blaze was not to be attempted without a clear getaway. Then, too, there was the Nazi clique to consider. Shirkuh the Kurd might be more than a mountain playboy.

The doors of the warehouses were massive, barred, chained fast, and secured by locks whose efficacy depended on sheer bulk rather than finesse of levers; the keys must be longer than a man's arm. Breaking in would be a problem of demolition, of noise sufficient to attract a crowd of shack dwellers. Curiosity took the place of watchmen; that oriental itch for snooping, of which Shirkuh was a prime example.

He noted several broken pieces of packing crate, trampled into the dust. They could not have lain there long, or scavengers would have salvaged them for fuel. Wheeler picked up a strip, and scrutinized it in the moonlight. The wood had circular imprints perhaps three inches in diameter. The center dot convinced him that the impression had been made by "fixed" ammunition, that is, shell case, primer, and projectile were an assembled unit. He could think of no other merchandise which would leave such marks.

Camel tracks and tire prints indicated a recent concentration of transport. Apparently the munitions had been kept aboard a *dhow,* awaiting the results of Howarth's dealings in Teheran, and had not been brought ashore until he and Ali Mirza reached a preliminary understanding. That made sense, and keeping the seeds of war aboard ship until the last minute accounted for Linda's sustained interest in Howarth, for once the stuff came ashore, she would have to get results before Ali Mirza took over. The only obscure point in the orderly pattern Wheeler deduced was the identity of Linda's employer.

She could be anything other than a Nazi agent.

WHEELER circled the warehouse. High up, small windows pierced the wall. This job required a ladder, and probably a lever to dislodge the window bars. The walls, he now noted, were masonry overlaid with stucco. This place was more substantial than the mud brick of the other storehouses, any of which could be invaded by pickaxe work.

The roof was the most vulnerable, as well as the safest, for the parapet would screen him from observation as he dug and cut through the layers of rammed earth and withes placed across the ceiling beams, which projected beyond the wall. In design, this was an overgrown version of the Mexican dobe shacks he had seen all through Arizona and southern Texas.

Though a man with a lariat could throw a loop to the projecting beam and walk himself up the wall, Wheeler had never tried either plain or fancy roping. Neither was there any adjoining house; the nearest structure was the crumbling ruin of an old

serai, whose dry well gaped from a courtyard now partly covered by the warehouse.

Then he saw a veiled woman coming from a nearby clump of shacks. He suppressed an urge to move on, and quickly, for the women who lived in this confusion of huts habitually went unveiled. Before caution overbalanced curiosity, the choice was taken from him; she lifted the visor-mask which concealed all but her eyes and said in a memory stirring voice, "O Pilgrim, is it not written, *eat not of all that is eaten?"*

Whether a threat or a warning, Steve Wheeler stood fast, and waited for the shapely oval blur to become a familiar face. This was Linda, and this was the first time she had, as far as he knew, seen him as a ragged Persian; but she must have noticed him, evening after evening in the Savoy Club of Teheran.

"Lady, this is wisdom, but who is the eater and what is eaten?"

She was near enough now for him to touch her. She glided closer as he edged toward the shadow of the warehouse, and into the shelter of a pilaster.

"There is a way to enter, an easy way. It is clear that we two walk the same path and to the same end. When I saw you come from the sea this afternoon, I knew that Allah had sent help."

It must have been her purring voice, its soothing reassurance the absolute confidence of her pale face that made Wheeler accept this impossible approach. Then, as though startled from a dream, he demanded "What could my coming ashore mean to you?"

The sudden harshness of his voice made her smile, and lay a soft hand on his arm. She said, now in English, "There is much that I cannot ever tell you so do not ask, but this much is yours. You locked me in a closet, and then—"

He interrupted, still in Persian, "What speech is this?"

She shook her head, sighed, as if reproving a stupid child. "I had keys, I let myself out, I heard you speak English to Asbury Howarth. Otherwise, how would I be here? Hussayn Agha, Steve Wheeler, you did fool me in the dark with your Shirazi dialect, but when death walked in the moonlight, I saw and I heard."

He did not ask her just how much she had witnessed that night.

"Possibly we are working together?"

Linda answered, "For the time, we are one."

"Aren't you jumping at conclusions?"

"You want to blow up this warehouse. I know how to get in, but I need help."

Whether he answered yes or no, it made no difference, for this fantastic redhead was not inquiring, she was stating and with a conviction that waited for no affirmation. "Ladders," she went on, "are conspicuous and not readily found."

"My dear, you're delicious! Up till those last few minutes, I'd rather have been Asbury Howarth than the young Shah."

"Thank you." She inclined her head, gravely, without any mockery in her lovely face.

He cocked his head, eyed her. "So I am to walk right into the warehouse, and be ready for picking?"

"I knew you'd not trust me, you'd be a fool not to suspect a surprise party. But I'm going in with you."

"You to friends, and I—oh, gorgeous! How simple."

She reached into the folds of her long gown, and brought out a pistol. "Take this. At the first sign of a trap, in that loft, finish me. Don't tell me you've not courage enough to settle a female traitor!"

"It'd be nasty, but I'd do it."

Her eyes narrowed, she looked up at him and now with curiosity. "You would, Hussayn-Wheeler. Even though you couldn't save yourself, you'd take your enemy, one of your enemies with you."

He returned the pistol. "Mine's more certain. Twice as heavy, a horrible thing to jam against a girl's back. Suppose, just suppose that there's someone in there you don't expect? You know about me, mightn't others know about you, and be close at hand?"

He hefted his own automatic, let her see the brute ugliness of a service .45. "There's still a chance to forget this, to go back to my *serai* with me."

Linda's laugh was soft, whimsical, scarcely more than a breath. "I have nicer quarters of my own, I'm not sure I'd want to go home with you, though you are interesting, you're even rather nice."

"No game. Alive or dead, you're not leaving me, not from now on. What you've said ties you to me until my job is done."

"Not even a triple divorce?" she mocked.

"You've wished yourself on me, it's too late. Shall we go home? I won't be rough, I won't be tough, but I'll be firm."

She looked up the stone wall and the pilaster. "First we'll finish this job. I'll gamble. It's eaasy—over there—"

He followed her to the third pilaster. "Give me a hand, boost me to your shoulder, there's a toe-hold up there, the rest is simple."

She parted her concealing gown, and showed him the coils of cord which circled her waist. He knelt, and in an instant, she was on his shoulder, and swaying toward the pilaster as he rose under her weight; for all her streamlining, Linda was not fragile. He heard her nails claw the masonry. All her weight was now on one foot.

The other picked the pilaster, fumbling, feeling for the hold.

"Steady now!"

He embraced the reinforcement, resisted the impulsion of her foot, and then she was up, clinging like a fly. Tiptoeing, he seized her ankles, and stood ready to catch her as she whisked the weighted cord. It flicked over the beam, and then the heavy end descended.

"Don't wait, follow me up, it'll hold us both."

He was not able to cut down her lead in the hand over hand climb. Breathless, he tumbled over the parapet after her. She retrieved the cord, wrapped it about her waist. The rest was easy, for a hatchway led into the loft.

Wheeler's flashlight picked out heap after heap of cases. He lifted one, finding it heavy as cartridges should be. There were shells, grenades, detonators, TNT for demolition, and long, coffin-shaped cases containing ten rifles apiece. Cosmoline gun lubricant, heavy though it was, had liquefied under the blasting sun, and had leaked out to the floor.

"See? And down below, too." She pointed to the stairs. "Quick, set it all afire. Now do you trust me?"

"I have to." He caught her arms. "I'm glad I can. Gorgeous, I could just about kiss you."

"Try it, you might like it," she whispered. "Even in the dark."

And she was right, quite right. He did.

V

BEFORE setting the blast, Wheeler had to consider a getaway for himself, a getaway now hampered by an ally. "Iran will be far too cramped for us," Linda said, as she snuggled into an angle of heaped cases, to make room for him. "Anything short of India would be suicide. I flew from Teheran to Bandar Abbas before Howarth's death became a police case, so I did have a head start on you."

"Smart girl! But there weren't any planes leaving Teheran—"

"No *commercial* planes. What I meant to say was, your disappearing with a car, which was burned up on the road to Qum—"

"You don't miss much!"

"They were looking for you in Bandar Abbas, really they were."

"That damned Ali Mirza!"

"So we've got to ride to India."

"What on?"

She slapped her hip. "What else, silly?"

"You'd wisecrack at a funeral! Quit it."

"Well, when I saw you with that sottish Kurd—oh, I prepared an exit the day I arrived. Camels, also an old Ford. Never can tell which would be handiest."

"I'll like traveling with a girl like you. Now listen, once this mess begins popping, it's a case of run, not walk. Are you sure?"

"If you lose me in your hurry," she retorted, "the Ford is at Manouk Garibidian's shop two doors from the mosque, and the camels are in the courtyard of the Acropolis Hotel. Ask for Ion Katras, he owns the place, and say that Tanya sent you."

"Tanya?"

"Oh, I have lots of names, my simple darling! Now get busy."

Below, he heard a bawling Kurdish voice, a foghorn of a voice. Shirkuh, otherwise known as Ilderim the Thunderer, had sobered up enough to make the night horrible with a devotional chant. As his enunciation became clearer, Linda said, "Dedicated to you."

"The Hussayn he's singing about is a Moslem saint, the prophet's grandson, Fatima's offspring, the martyr, you know."

All Iran revered Hussayn and Hassan; there was a festival when the devout slashed themselves with knives, and howled, and gyrated in the streets, mourning for treacherously murdered Hussayn and his brother. Shirkuh had his seasons confused, but he could not have been noisier than a company of Scots with bagpipes.

"One good thing, he's waking up the people in the shacks, they'll have a chance to run before the big blast cuts loose," Wheeler said. "I'm glad of that. And we'll have a crowd to mix with, the crowd that's following Shirkuh."

Horses' hoofs clattered across rocky road. Shirkuh's bawling was cut short. Linda gasped, "Oh, good God! Hear that!"

He ran to the trap, and scrambled to the roof. Below, Iranian soldiers were surrounding the magazine. Retreat was already cut off. Shirkuh, staggering drunk, had tried to warn "Hussayn."

"You believe I arranged this?" Linda asked.

He wiped the rouge from his lips. "What difference?" He dug into her cloak and took her pistol; she made no effort to stop him. "This arsenal is going up, if it's the last thing I do, which it will be. It'll go up before you can get to the bottom, before they can open the door."

As he spoke, he used his knife blade to pry the lid from a case of grenades. Linda picked up his flash and held it so that he would miss no strokes. She was passing up her opportunity to bolt for the roof, and take a chance of not being shot by mistake.

A grenade or two would scatter that ragtag platoon. Their very presence in Chahbar was unnatural, entirely out of order. One grenade, tossed wide, as a warning, might clear the way.

The top screeched loose.

"Why—just sand!" Linda gasped. "Try the next!"

"You try it, I'll bluff them!"

He handed her the heavy knife, and pulled himself up through the trap. Already, he was sick from apprehension. That case of sand, hinting at an all-out swindle, upset every theory he had thus far shaped. Perhaps Howarth had tried to trick Nazi customers, combining profit and belated patriotism, and had been knifed when they picked up the right Iranian whisper.

As for the soldiers, they could have been rushed by air from Teheran, in anticipation of more than a one-man raid.

Being caught in a warehouse, even one loaded with dummies, would be fatal. He raced toward the front, leaned over the parapet, and hailed the officer who was directing the unlocking.

"Oh, pig and son of many pigs!" he

yelled in Persian. "Back, or by the Lord of the Faithful, I'll shoot you down!"

Without waiting for an answer, he cut loose, aiming for and hitting the pill box cap. Soldiers scattered. The dismayed officer stood fast, choked, got his breath and shouted. *"Keupuk oglu!* Surrender and it will be better for you. Otherwise—"

"God, by the One God, by the One True God!" Wheeler swore, "I'll touch off the whole warehouse, I'll blow the town off the map! Send those men away."

This last was hardly necessary. They were scattering among the brush huts, whose inhabitants, hearing the uproar, were turning out. But someone did open up with a rifle, a crazy volley that snapped high overhead, except for a slug which chewed stone chips from the parapet.

One good thing about a bad situation, the soldiers apparently did not suspect that they dealt with a dummy arsenal. The captain, impressed by the loud and desperate speech, became conciliatory.

"O Friend of God, is this wise, is this well done? We are looking for an infidel. Come down, let us talk with you, by Allah, it will be well with you."

Maybe the officer was taking him for a crackbrained saint, or a dervish not entirely sane. Then again, he might be playing for time. Enough *mullahs* had been shot in Iran, during the Pahlavi regime, to make the holy man racket distinctly unserviceable, though once the pious frauds had eaten the land.

"Here I am, and here I stay, and peace to Riza Sahpur on his golden throne! Do you leave, or do I blow up the arsenal? God commands me to meditate, and what man will move me?"

The thought of a madman playing with enough explosives to load several caravans made the captain squirm. He said, "And the peace upon you, God give you illumination. We leave."

Like hell they would! The whole town was turning out, and no officer could more than pretend to back down. But Steve Wheeler played his game, accepting it as a victory won, and went back to the hatchway. Linda said, "Every case is full of sand!"

"Then I can't blow us up, or them either."

Linda, as he now saw it, could hardly be other than on the level, for dummy explosives upset his suspicion of her motives. He turned toward the stairs and nudged her, saying, "Let's look down below, you look while I barricade the door."

The captain was not risking a direct assault. Apparently he was gambling on stealth. Even a holy man or a madman finally dozes on guard. Thus, Wheeler moved cases supposed to contain shells for three-inch field guns, while Linda pried off cover after cover. The screech of nails masked the sounds of his work, and at the same time convinced the officer outside that the heap of munitions, uncrated for a splendid blast, grew higher every moment.

There was not a rifle in the house. Picking cases at random, Wheeler was soon convinced that the place had been gutted, or else that it had never contained munitions. It was not until he found cosmoline smeared paper, a broken clip, and finally, a 37-milimeter shell, that he risked a conclusion. There had been military supplies which had been smuggled out, and the crates had been filled with sand to delay exposure.

Closer examination of boxes showed that

the nails had actually been drawn, then hammered back again. Finally, he came to a place where earth had been recently excavated to furnish filler. In a word, the real stuff was in hampers, on camel back; his job now was to trace the caravan of doom.

Wheeler set to work blocking the way to the second floor, with Linda helping him. By now they conceded the futility of looking for grenades. Outside, the crowd, cheated of impending excitement, became quiet, and went back to sleep.

"Now get ready to go," he said, when he completed the barrier.

He boosted Linda through the trap, and went on, "Keep your head down, they mustn't know I have company, no proper saint has. But squat over there—that direction's the best—and there's a dry well, just in case."

He advanced toward the front. The soldiers were still on guard. Wheeler went back to the loft, got some crates, and made a first rate disturbance, tearing them apart and breaking the pieces by propping them against the parapet, then kicking them in the middle. The captain became interested.

"What now, O *Zarid?*"

"It is cold, cold as the crown of Demavend!"

He ducked, set fire to some oily paper, and heaped on the broken wood. When the blaze flared up, he rose and began spinning, dervish fashion. "Here is fire, the holy fire, the ancient fire of Iran! Do not worry, Captain, it will not burn through the roof," he howled. "Allah guards the saints!"

Spinning like a top he whirled away from the blaze, and still spinning he circled it. Though what he said was perhaps true enough, the fact remained that a bonfire had no business on the roof of a munitions warehouse. More than that, the captain had to get to the roof to extinguish the blaze. He did not know just how deep the rammed earth was, nor did he have any guarantee that embers might not drift back to the trap door.

He made reassuring gestures. His face gleamed with sweat. He was suffering behind his smile. When Wheeler seemed to ignore him, he turned toward his worried men.

Wheeler was not surprised by this. Sanctity had its limits. As he whirled, he caught the motion down below, a rifle glint in shadows pierced by fire glow.

At the spurt of flame, Wheeler dropped. He had deliberately offered himself as bait, betting that the elevation, his motion, the wavering of the blaze would trick the sniper.

Linda cried out, and darted toward him.

"Shut up, you fool! Keep your head down!"

She was beside him, ready to find a mortal wound. He looped an arm about her, held her down. "They think I'm out. He missed by this much!"

Linda was trembling violently. "Why —why'd you do that?"

Then she heard the cheering, and the captain's command. The lock groaned. The door, however, did not yield, being jammed. Linda quavered, "Oh—they think you're dead, you can't blow up the arsenal, all they have to do now is hurry and put out the blaze."

"Smart girl. Head down, get set, and pray for bum shooting."

Wheeler risked a peep over the side. A squad came running with poplar beam; a ram to force the heavy doors. Unfused shells can take a severe mauling, and haste was the essence of the captain's move.

A grunt, a crash, and the human centipede recoiled. Then another charge, and another. Wheeler waited, listening, one hand gripping Linda's arm.

The barricade toppled. Hinges screamed and men clambered over the hurdle. The captain shouted, "Clear the stairs! Pass those cases down!"

Wheeler peeped, then yanked Linda to her feet. "It's clear! The crowd's gather-

ing in front; they're all eyeing the blaze on the roof."

She dropped the doubled cord over a projecting beam. Wheeler followed her over the side. For the next few seconds it was a gamble without any defense.

VI

WHEEELR landed beside Linda, in the shadow of a pilaster. Huddled together, they crouched in the angle. Shack dwellers, still wary of the arsenal, gave it a wide berth, not realizing that if it could let go, they would still be half a mile too close. He snaked the double cord from its support.

"Let's go again."

Crouching, they darted toward the crumbled wall. Thus far, the dry well was not necessary. Yells from the arsenal and the thump of heavy crates told how the soldiers were advancing. They were on the roof now, and heading directly for the fire.

It would not be long before they decided that the supposedly wounded saint had made a getaway. Wheeler headed for the next patch of shadow, and with Linda won the shelter of the nearest brush hut. But it was a ticklish stroll back toward town.

The big peril was meeting Shirkuh, that gaunt scramble of *'arrak* and good intentions.

Wheeler followed Linda through a wicket which opened into the courtyard of the Acropolis Hotel. In a moment, she had the Greek on his feet, and then things moved faster than they possibly could have without careful preparation. Wheeler had the uncomfortable feeling of being swept along, and with no more initiative than a chip in a flood, yet he could see no advantage in striking out, blindly, in any course of his own.

The camels were first rate beasts. The water skins were full, and the saddle bags packed with rations. In a very few minutes, they were ready to mount up and ride.

"I hope," he grumbled to himself, "that redhead knows more about these animals that I do!"

She led off through the rear gate. Somewhere in the darkness and confusion of the awakened town, Shirkuh bawled a devotional chant, still bewailing the death of Hussayn the saint. And before he reached the outskirts of Chahbar, Wheeler began to envy his namesake who had perished swiftly from sword thrusts.

Camel riding was worse than he had anticipated. It was a cross between seasickness and being torn apart by wild horses. Luckily, Linda was taking the lead, and could neither see nor hear the signs of his misery. When he was not on the verge of falling off, he was prodded in the stomach by the high pommel, a piece of wood apparently designed to disembowel a novice.

And to add to the remains of the night, he had to consider the possibility, the probability that the captain, discovering a warehouse full of sand, would have to continue the pursuit and make an arrest.

Half an hour, and still in the clear: then he heard a far-off bawling and braying. Shirkuh, roaring drunk, was taking the caravan trail. Wheeler could not quite convince himself that this was entirely comedy relief.

By now he managed to keep himself from flopping too wildly in the horrible saw-buck thing called a saddle. He contrived to hang on with one hand, and prod his beast with the camel stick. Eventually, he pulled up alongside Linda.

"The first few days are gruesome," she said, before he could speak. "I'll never forget—maybe you've heard of the old trick of bending down four saplings, tying a convict to their tips, and then letting go?"

"I'd like that," he growled bitterly. "Hear that singing fool back there? He's got a racing mount, he must have."

"He is getting louder," she admitted. "But once we get on the smuggler's route—"

"You know the way, of course?"

He said that with more of a sneer than the girl's previous conduct warranted. "You'll get used to the saddle," she answered, and that shut him up.

BIT by bit, they pulled away from Shirkuh, and headed into the barren hills. The trail, pounded deep by hoofs and erosion, was easy to follow. Every hour, now that they had a lead, Linda pulled up to rest. Wheeler lit cigarettes, and asked, "Won't we stop in Dozdab to see your father?"

She laughed from the hips. "I'm Tanya Karimovna, and you might know that Russians have too much sense to waste time trying to convert a Moslem from a silly religion to one sillier!"

"I did have my suspicions, but the cut of your jib is—well—non-committal, though there's a trace of Turk in the shape of your head. So—all right, Russki, we are allies pro tem, but I still think you're no one to trust!"

"My Circassian grandma was rather a sport," she said, smiling reminiscently. "I get my red hair from her!"

"That's not all you got from her! See here, what's the game? Hell, I do not want any state secrets, but let me in on enough for me to play my hand. We're going to India for our health. You're a competent armful, what do I do?"

"I'll tell you when I know."

"So this is impromptu," he countered, sarcastically. "Having two camels ready, prowling by the arsenal just accidentally, having that rope all ready and only needing a guy my height to boost you? Oh, nuts!

"I bet that brandy you spilled at the Savoy was a gag to win time to have a stooge let the air out of Howarth's tires."

Tanya Karimovna laughed and said, "Well, yes, but I hope you don't think I arranged for those soldiers, Steve Wheeler"?

They mounted up. He shivered, drew his sheepskin jacket closer. "All this for a human stepladder! It makes no sense."

"Very well, then! You are through in Iran. After that mess in Teheran, you have to ride and ride fast. And you're very handy—how long would one red-headed female last, alone, in the Baluchi country?"

"God help the poor Baluchis."

"They're greasy, and I would not want to settle down in a mud hut. Not in Baluchistan. Now if you think it's too dangerous, pick your own trail."

"So you get a free bodyguard? Oh, well."

At the next stop, the dawn halt, she shed her full-length cloak, and made a few other changes, using odds and ends from her traveling pack. "How do I look now?"

"Like your grandmother once did."

They took perhaps four hours out, watching turn and turn about. Tanya cooked tea beside a brackish well. And then they faced the rising sun, heading eastward into the rocks and desolation of the border country.

By noon, Wheeler knew the full force of that old proverb, *"After Allah finished building hell, he used the left-overs to make Ghazni."*

"Oh, Ghazni's lovely, compared to where we're going," Tanya said. "And I do wish we had a rifle, even one little rifle."

Though the sunbaked desolation seemed unpopulated, incapable of supporting more than a few lizards and scorpions, Wheeler knew that the chances of robbery and assassination were more than rich. So, as the hills drew nearer together, and reached further into the brazen sky, the exiles decided to hide out by day, and travel by night.

"We could head for Dozdab and take the train," Tanya admitted, "but they're

awfully fussy at the frontier and we'd probably both end in a concentration camp."

"Or facing a firing squad. This Indian independence business has the viceroy worried silly. They love you Russkis, provided you stay home and strafe Hitler."

"I hope your supply of forged papers is up to standard?"

By the time they reached the first scrawny village, Wheeler and Tanya were sunbaked and grimy enough, sufficiently torn by thorns and flint to look as if they belonged. And their Persian speech, pieced out with gestures, served them well enough.

A week, and with their throats unsliced, it really had happened! Wheeler said, as they rode from the sheep-crowded hovel they had shared with a six-foot Baluchi and his two wives, "And still nobody knows anything about a caravan of guns!"

Tanya laughed. "It's gone through, all right. I saw some cartridges buried in a chink in a wall."

"Tell me more. Or are you psychic?"

"There was lots of gossip among the women in Chahbar, my dear. The phantom caravan is bound for somewhere near Peshawar."

Nor was that to be laughed off. Peshawar, at the mouth of the Khyber Pass, raided every so often by Afridi tribesmen, and in spite of the garrison of Fort Jamrud; Peshawar, trail's end for the hundred thousand nomads who came from High Asia every winter, and marched north again every spring. Nothing was impossible in Peshawar, and in the broad Punjab whose plains and hills had welcomed every conqueror, every looter since Alexander the Great had turned Hindustan inside out.

He believed Tanya simply because no other answer was half as logical; because the caravan of doom could do more damage along the Northwest Frontier than anywhere else in India, and because, as things now stood, the Russians had to team up with their one time British rivals to keep India out of Axis hands.

That appalling vision of a sudden raid, a detonator to start an explosive wave which would reach from Kashmir to Trincomali, had numbed Wheeler, so that for some moments he could not quite grasp at one false note which demanded recognition. Then it came to him, and he asked, "If you knew the munitions had headed for somewhere near Peshawar, what were you doing, trying to get into that dummy arsenal? You're lying now, or you were, that night."

"Maybe it's dangerous to believe me, and maybe it's just as dangerous to doubt me," she answered. "Or do you want to start all over?"

"I'd rather choke you!"

"Not after all these pleasant days in Baluchistan. I did not know the soldiers were on the way, really I didn't."

"That's not the point!"

"Devil take the point! Will you gamble, will you trust me to show you, take you to Lalapura, the ruined red granite city, a city ruined for a thousand years, but still big enough to hide a small army and an arsenal? You may not come out alive, but you'll have your chance, if you ride and stop wrangling."

And since he had missed his mark in Chahbar, there was nothing to do but play double or quits.

VII

FROM Karachi Wheeler and Tanya went by rail, following the Indus to Peshawar. The green of the British cantonment, several miles from the native city, was like a far-off glimpse of paradise; there, safe behind barbed wire barriers guarded by bearded Sikhs, white men and their women enjoyed electric fans and ice and baths, ate white man's food with forks, went to movies, and remembered the taste of whisky and soda.

But it was not these luxuries which took

Wheeler from the caravanserai near the coppersmith's bazaar, where the ring of metal drowned even the voices of the money lenders near the city gate; he was too much of a soldier to try a one man, grand-stand play when there was any chance of enlisting official help.

Wheeler said to Tanya, "We're here, and with throats so far unsliced. Want to sit tight while I see Potts Drummond, the district officer, or do you have to be a rugged individualist?"

She regarded him gravely. "I don't ask what you're planning, Steve. If we both went my way and failed, there'd be no second guess, and it'd be my fault. And the same if we went together for your way. Whatever I've told you is true. Was true, I mean, as nearly as I knew. Use what you can."

This was almost a left-handed farewell, and for a moment Wheeler's resolution faltered, sadness dampening his sudden vision of striking with many allies. He did not relish its contrast to Tanya's lone play, for the odds were too great for any one person.

"If you have to leave before we can meet here," he said, after a long pause, "write me sometime to that address in the States."

Going separate paths, each would endanger the other's game, and until the last card was played they could not meet again.

"I won't forget! Not the desert, not the mountains."

Neither would he; so he swallowed whatever else he might have said, and left without looking back. But he heard the choked sound, muffled by Tanya's embroidered veil, as he stepped into the dust and the confusion of Peshawar.

As a *sahib,* he could not have gone a hundred yards without an inspection of his papers and a cross examination as to his reasons for travel, but as one of India's 350,000,000 natives, he was too insignificant for notice; the C. I. D. was worked to death checking on known agitators of at least four varieties, to say nothing of unclassified fifth columnists, Communists, and Axis agents. But it was easy to get on that list of suspects.

He was dismayed for a moment, though not surprised, to see Shirkuh stalking down a street crowded with bearded Sikhs, haughty Rajputs, yellow-robed Buddhists, and dish-faced Uzbeks. The odd thing was that Shirkuh neither reeled nor sang.

Thinking back to Tanya, he said to himself, "Shirkuh may be one of her stooges, back on the job now that I'm out."

He did not like the idea at all, but he had a job to do. And the approach was easier than he had expected.

A Sikh took him into Potts Drummond's office, after searching him for weapons. Wheeler had, of course, the foresight to bury his pistol in a ruined house.

The district officer looked up from his papers, took the cheroot from his bear-trap mouth, and laid it out of the direct blast of the fan. "What is it, Hussayn Agha?"

Wheeler began, "I speak English, sir, if you prefer it to Urdu."

"The devil you do!" The granite gray eyes sparkled, narrowed with interest; the nostrils flared a little, a close-cropped gray mustache bristled. "Not Babu English, either."

"Couldn't speak that, not being a B. A. —failed."

Potts Drummond chuckled appreciatively. "I daresay you couldn't! But come out with it, this important information."

"Are we safe against listeners? Clerks, you know."

Potts Drummond frowned, jerked his thumb toward the open window. "Only break in the sound proofing! Please get it over!"

"A caravan load of grenades, small arms cartridges, rifles, at least four mountain guns, and a quantity of shells," Wheeler stated, "were smuggled out of Iran, through Baluchistan, and the destination is this corner of the Punjab."

"That's absurd!" Potts Drummond exploded, and thumped the desk. "I grant we've not checked all the leaks of guns into Afghanistan, but what you say is downright silly! See here, my man, if you want any fees as an informer, if you want a chance to work out private grudges with official protection, you'd better bring me a more convincing story!"

Wheeler controlled his temper, in spite of being worn out, aching, totally fed up, and strained to the cracking point. After all, Potts Drummond would have a routine for tricking informers out into the open, leading them on; and for tripping

up cunning lads who did try to get an unpleasant neighbor into hot water. So he said, "I am not interested in fees. I offer my services and your cooperation will pay you dividends. I have every reason to believe that there is an Axis plot to cause rioting in what you'll be the first to admit is a ticklish district."

"Never fear, there's not an Axis agent who's not either in jail or well on the way."

It was hard to buck a man's just pride of accomplishment without offering concrete facts, and Wheeler realized that; but if he fully revealed himself, he would be entangled in miles of official red tape. Perhaps Tanya was right, after all. But he went on, "I know, positively, that these munitions left Chahbar in Iran, not long after the assassination of Asbury Howarth in Teheran."

"I heard of Howarth! Good riddance, splendidly done. Well, where are the munitions?"

"I can't place my finger on them, but I have evidence worth investigating."

"See here, you're damnably well informed, Hussayn Agha!"

Suspicion now narrowed Potts Drummond's eyes; he tapped with his finger-tips on his desk blotter, and went on, "Remarkably well informed about Iran—odd, really odd, my man! That bit of news about Howarth was not released except confidentially."

Worse and worse; and Drummond was on the verge of jabbing a pushbutton to call an orderly, perhaps the guard. Wheeler took a long step forward, and demanded, "Hear me out, sir!"

Drummond would not put himself in the position of apparently calling for help in the face of a brisk advance, so he drew his hand back. "Speak up, man! Who are you?"

"Stephen Wheeler, Captain of U. S. Artillery, lately on detached service in Teheran."

That should have helped, but it was wasted. "Preposterous! Whoever heard of an American passing as a native? I shall have to look into this. Doubtless you entered India in disguise?"

Wheeler ignored the heavy irony and answered, "I did."

"I must scrutinize your papers. This is highly irregular."

"Irregular, my eye!" Wheeler fairly shouted. "I am following what I believe is a hot lead. There is a ruined red standstone city—"

"Ha! Really novel. This blasted Punjab is full of ruined cities, all red. Please, captain or otherwise, be specific, and prove your incredible story. Fancy my reporting to Delhi that a caravan crossed the border. It's quite impossible!"

"So was Pearl Harbor! So was Singapore!"

Potts Drummond could have forgiven the first, but not the second. He rose, red and choking. "Your papers, sir, at once!"

For a moment Wheeler thought that

the district officer would have a stroke of apoplexy; then he thought that that was precisely what had happened, for Potts Drummond staggered, clutched his chest, lurched across the desk.

Unhappily, more than exasperation had overcome him. Blood was soaking the white shirt and drill coat. The man was seriously, fatally wounded. A distant sniper, shooting through a window opening, had very deftly thrown a slug past Wheeler, and into Potts Drummond. Wheeler knew that he would spend the rest of a very short life explaining this business, in spite of the fact that a rifle had been used for this assassination, and that he had been searched too closely to have smuggled in even a pistol. The term "reasonable doubt," generously enough applied even in India, would have to be forgotten in times like these. The murder of an official would have to be avenged quickly, and spectacularly, lest open season be declared from Karachi to Calcutta. There was not even a single redeeming shard of glass to indicate that the shot had come from outside, for the window was raised.

Wheeler was still stupid with dismay when he saw Potts Drummond's clawed fingers close on most of the pushbuttons of the block on his desk. The man coughed, glared wrathfully, and slid to the floor, dead.

OUTSIDE, men must be moving, and from every department, though Wheeler could not hear the tramp of feet in that insulated room. He bounded from the window into a compound, landing an instant after the door of Potts Drummond's office opened. Luckily, there had been some delay, the inevitable wait for an answer to a knock. There would be no answer, but a congregation of persons answering a blanket summons would cut short the waiting.

Wheeler rounded the corner as the uproar reached down into the court. He tried the first ground floor door, and found it unlocked. A passageway led toward the front. He emerged near the gate, where two sentries stood guard.

Hell was boiling inside and above. Wheeler approached the two Sikhs, who faced each other, one at each jamb. He strolled, grinned cheerily, all the while wondering when a bullet from the building would bisect his spine. Many a time he cursed Sikh thickheadedness, but for once, he blessed it, and with each pace, prayed to all the gods of Hindustan to increase it. They frowned, hearing the hubbub. Still, a man strolling, stroking his beard, smiling amiably, must be all right.

Three paces past the gate Wheeler's knees were on the point of buckling. There were black spots dancing against the sun's afternoon glare, and he felt at least as sick as Shirkuh should have been the morning after. What pulled him together was the roaring of the six-foot sentries.

"Khare raho!"

But Wheeler was not halting, and the roar of musketry lengthened his legs. An ox cart, turning up a fine screen of red dust, temporarily blocked the fire of the Sikhs. They quit shooting, started to pursue, then remembered that they had not been authorized to leave their posts. Wheeler pointed over his shoulder and shouted to all who would listen, *"Bulwa! Bulwa!* They murdered the *sahib!"*

This drew a crowd. And when the thick-headed and heavy-bearded giants decided that murder justified leaving one's post without waiting for the officer of the day, a gathering crowd blocked them. So, for a while, Wheeler found refuge in old Peshawar.

The only man who could have identified him was dead; for the guards, clerks, and others who had passed him from station to station on his way to Potts Drummond's office would inevitably offer such contradictory descriptions that picking him up would not be such a simple business. Once picked up, on the other hand, half

the city would swear that he, and no one else had committed the crime; though they'd do just as much for almost any other suspect.

His real danger lay in the secret, the slow moving, the relentless C. I. D., just as deadly as the American F. B. I., and somewhat less fussy as to the details of getting evidence. It was not artillery, nor the bayonets of hard fighting Sikhs and Pathans, nor the heavy blades of the stocky Ghurkas that kept the Indian Empire together; thus far, the subtle threads of the C. I. D. had been the real bond, with the armed forces little more, except along the Northwest Frontier, than an outward symbol of plodding justice that had an elephant's memory.

Beggars, priests, fakirs, dancing girls in swirling striped skirts; untouchables, traffic cops, railway guards, the list of those questioned would be endless. Getting into the Punjab had been simple as pouring sand from a boot, but getting out, after this mishap! That was something else.

As he temporarily lost himself in Peshawar, a feat many actual criminals had vainly hoped to do, Wheeler had time to think it over. It was certain now that he had been under observation, almost from the start. The only open question remaining was this: had the shot been intended to kill him, or to settle Potts Drummond? The sniper, shooting from afar, and doubtless with a telescopic sight, could easily have concluded that the district officer had learned too much.

Now the sniper could very reasonably assume that Wheeler would make no further official calls!

VIII

TANYA KARIMOVNA, now discreetly veiled, had moved to an apartment in a quarter largely frequented by dancing girls, as many of the ladies were tactfully called. Having lost little time in quitting the place where Wheeler had left her, she now squatted on a balcony and stirred the contents of a small copper pot; the ingredients of her next disguise. She said to the swarthy man who watched the routine, "Saoud, he might have helped us, but he was too reckless. Now tell me about things in Teheran; who's running your shop, what happened between the time I left, and you had to follow?"

Saoud, the shopkeeper from Rayy, shook his head. "It is not so sure that Wheeler would have helped anyone but himself. He did well enough getting you into India, or should I say, he did well enough protecting you while you showed him the way?"

"Oh, who cares!" she cried, exasperated and impatient. Tanya rose, took the pot inside, where she set it back on a charcoal burner. "I still say, he's only reckless. But if he gets into trouble, they'll trace him back to a red-haired person."

Saoud sniffed the vapors of the dye pot. "Which you won't be much longer. Now, the news from Teheran—they did not catch the Nazi who escaped after killing Howarth. The one Wheeler settled had nothing to say; he lasted a few days, but his wits wandered."

"Would you know him—the other one, I mean?"

"Kessel? Possibly. A dark man with a big nose. I might have told the police, and had him interned, but letting him alone in Teheran and watching—"

"Oh, we've gone into all that!"

Saoud grinned, shrugged at her ill-humor. "You act worried. Wheeler?"

She sniffed. "Just imagine such a thing! But get to the point."

"Kessel may be in India. After his escape from that Howarth affair, he couldn't risk staying. He'd not know that his partner didn't talk, or mutter when fever set in.

"And he'd guess you'd head for India. He couldn't help but hear of that affair in Chahbar, finding a warehouse of munitions cases filled with sand. And later

there was talk of a man and a woman leaving the Acropolis Hotel."

Tanya laughed. "The town was pretty well awake! So we have to look out for Kessel?" Her glance shifted from the man's dark eyes, and to the silver haft of his dagger. "But you'll find him first."

"Better not kill the son of such a mother. Poking all through a ruined city in the desert won't be quick or easy as following Kessel."

"You're awfully sure he'll be here soon."

Saoud's round face twisted. "I think I saw him this morning. Going into the place near the money lender's bazaar. He may have that long Luger with, him, the one with the take down stock. It's almost as good as a sniper's rifle if you know how to use it. It's a lot easier to conceal, when it's broken down for carrying, and the stock makes a holster for the pistol. Suppose someone picked off the Agha Khan?"

That would make India blow up; the Agha Khan, spiritual head of India's 80,000,000 Moslems, to say nothing of the Shi'a Moslems of Iran and other parts of the world, would promptly be blamed on Hindu faction, as a preliminary protest against the proposed state of Pakistan. It was the Agha Khan's friendliness for the British that helped keep things in hand. Fantastically wealthy, ultra-modern, he had prior to the war spent much of his time on the Riviera; one of his horses had won the Derby. Though the Sunni Moslems called him an infidel lover and a heretic, his liberality was no offense to the broad-minded Shi'as.

He weighed nearly three hundred pounds, and his holiness equalled his bulk; his millions of followers gave him an annual birthday gift of gold bullion. And while few would object if he dieted a little, his death by assassination would fairly lift the roof. Tanya considered all this, then tried to shake off the threat by saying, "Picking him off isn't so simple, or it would have been done long ago. Now run along while I change my complexion."

"Maybe I could help?"

"Get out! This will be an all over job!"

Saoud sighed regretfully, and made for the door. Communism, he felt, had made women entirely too independent. Even in his native Boukhara, they were getting out of hand.

When Tanya finished the contents of the dye pot, her hair was black, and her skin was tawny. And the full skirt and head scarf of a native woman further altered her appearance. Kessel, looking for a redhead supposedly involved in the strange doings at Chahbar, could regard her face to face and then move on. She had let her eyebrows grow out fully. A jeweled button gleamed at one nostril, causing a distortion that subtly changed the expression of her features.

But it was her walk that afforded the final touch; she now moved about the room, skirt swirling, ponderous anklets tinkling. She practiced a gliding gait, holding her head high and level, balancing the small copper pot on her head. It all came back to her.

The brawling voice of Peshawar was blocked out by her thoughts; Tanya for the while was insulated from the city's change of tone. The possible, the probable arrival of the survivor of the assassins, who had finished Howarth, compelled her to speed her plans. He, Kessel, would probably know definitely where the smuggled munitions were concealed, whereas at the best, Tanya knew only the location of some long forgotten Rajput king's long-abandoned citadel.

India was a land of ruined cities. There were at least three lying below the topsoil of Peshawar, red soil which every once in a while gave up coins dropped by the soldiers of Iskandar Dhoulkarnayn, as they called Alexander the Great, speaking of him as if he had only yesterday come down from the Khyber Pass to pitch his tent, to caper about, and to end by weep-

ing for lack of worlds to conquer. Since time began, India had been the pawn of conquest, and today's breed were perhaps the most rapacious of all. So, venture into a ruin inhabited by sowers of revolt, and destroy the seeds—

Saoud came back breathless. *"Ya Khudaya!* You are born lucky," he gasped. "Getting rid of that Feringhi, just in time."

"Wheeler?"

"Wheeler. He murdered the *sahib,* Potts Drummond." Saoud stepped back, eyed Tanya from head to foot, sighed gustily. "Lady, that is well done, I did not know you; had I looked before speaking, I would not have spoken!"

"You're crazy! He couldn't—he really wouldn't! Have they caught him?"

"They say he did."

"Have they caught him?" She shook Saoud. "Answer me, you idiot!"

"Allah upon you, but what difference—no, not yet."

Tanya took three uncertain steps back and seated herself on the low *charpoy,* the room's only furniture. "Tell me more."

"He went to see the *sahib,* or so it is said. There was a shot. Potts Drummond pushed the buttons before he dropped dead. Wheeler was gone, and it was learned that he walked out past the Sikhs at the gate, calmly. They did not start shooting in time, at the moment, they did not know, they had heard no shot in the office."

"He didn't do it! You fool, he'd have no reason to. That Kessel—now that's the man! Shooting from a distance, at a man sitting at a desk."

Saoud rubbed his chin. "With a pistol?" he asked dubiously.

"You said it was a long-barreled Luger, that a rifle stock fitted it. A German trick, efficiency, two guns in one, I've seen them, they had some which they lost when they decided they'd better run from Moscow while they could, the rats! The sons of pigs!"

"By Allah! It could be. But why shoot Potts Drummond?"

"Kessel—if it was Kessel—tried to get Wheeler. It was a hard shot, and he missed, simple, isn't it? Then—"

"Then you're next. Ah—of course—" He eyed her again. "But you're safe."

"We're leaving tonight, whether we're ready or not, do you understand?"

Saoud went on, "The sky was solid with planes heading southwest, and circling, far off."

"Toward Lalapura, the Red City?"

She clasped her knees, sat there frowning. "Maybe they're going to bomb the whole place, instead of hunting for the arsenal."

Saoud looked worried at that suggestion. "Then why not wait?"

"Then wait, I'm not! If they bomb it before we get there, we can come back."

"Allah! Supposing we've just arrived, and they start?"

"You're a devil of a Moslem!" she mocked. "Haven't you always said that all things happen by Allah's command? If you really don't believe that, why are you always growling because we ran the *mullahs* out of Boukhara, they always taught that lesson in the mosque."

To cut short that logic, Saoud decided that he would go along. And that night, he was driving the *ghari* which creaked along the Kohat Road, out into the eerie glamor of the desert, where dead cities listened to the howl of jackals; devil-haunted cities, shunned because of ancient plagues and devastations attributed to the wrath of the gods, fitted into the plans of modern plotters.

IX

WHEELER realized that, for a little while at least, Peshawar was the safest place for him; travelers in any direction would be closely scrutinized in the hope of a quick arrest. He stopped in the second-hand clothes bazaar, picking up

shoes in one place, a turban cloth in another, and two hacksaw blades at still another. The undeniable risk could hardly be avoided, but he gambled on the probability that the C. I. D., like most organizations of its kind, got results by persistent footwork rather than by sudden strokes of brilliance. And, along the weary way, they made many futile detours.

Wheeler's security lay in his being a stranger; it is a fugitive's friends, intentionally or otherwise, who betray him in nine cases out of ten. If criminals did not boast to the boys, or talk big to a girl friend, crime probably would pay.

The tall, turbanned police had not a second glance for him. They were busy trying to control the traffic tangle of camels, motor cars, porters, and pedestrians apparently bent on suicide. The real menace was invisible, patient, slinking and listening to whispers.

And as Wheeler's blood pressure came down to normal, he began to size up the various flank attacks which the C.I.D. might make. There was Tanya; sooner or later, an agent would question someone

and learn that she had come to town with a tall man who spoke Persian. He had to see if Tanya had moved; or so he told himself, though the underlying truth was that he was worried by the thought that the redhead was in grave peril.

It was reasonable, he realized, for an Axis assassin who had trailed him from Teheran to kill the first official to whom he tried to make a report; but it would be more logical for him to be the target, unless the sniper had reasoned that, not knowing just how much Wheeler had said, he had best take the first shot at the listener rather than the speaker.

But now more than the law would be hunting for him; for if captured, there was no telling what he might say, thus Wheeler felt that his companion on the long road from Iran was in equal peril. So, convincing himself that it was his duty to protect himself so that he could carry on, Wheeler headed for the rooms where he and Tanya had rested from their march.

The door was unlocked. Her bundle of odds and ends was gone. There was something desolate and depressing about the dingy room. He found but did not light the twist of rag that floated in a dish of oil. He preferred to sit there in the gloom, on the *charpoy* stripped of its covering rug, and think it out.

Hunting Tanya was out of the question, unless he could make a shrewd guess as to the quarter she would select. On leaving her, that afternoon, he had decided that prudence demanded his breaking their association, once for all, so that he could not be tempted into following the half-oriental mazes of the Russian mind; he could not have anticipated that he would so soon have such an urgent reason for getting in touch with her.

In the thinnest of the shadows, he noticed a dull golden gleam. She had lost an earring, and she might return to get it. He thrust it into his sash, then decided against that, and dropped it on the floor. He stepped to the balcony, and entered the adjoining room, the one which still contained odds and ends of travel equipment, things he had decided to abandon. He scooped them up, along with the moth-eaten rug, and arranged them in Tanya's quarters. Then he retreated still further down the canopied gallery, and waited.

The presence of his belongings would perhaps trick anyone coming to trace

Tanya. They would waste time, waiting for her to return to quarters supposedly still occupied. And this was not a bad lurking place, for he could clamber to the roof, and leap across the adjoining alley, into a crazy tangle of courts within courts.

If anyone came on the prowl, Wheeler would know that things were hot. In this dark angle, he could nap as he squatted, back against the wall.

Despite his anxiety and the invisible net that must be closing about Peshawar, Wheeler did doze as the night wore on. He was shivering violently when he awakened. The penetrating chill told him that it was far too late for any chance of Tanya's return.

HE LISTENED to the *putt-putt-putt* of a motorcycle. Somewhere, the cough of a hasheesh smoker racked the murmuring night, and blotted out the distant tinkling of a *sitar,* and the nasal droning of an Afridi singer. Little pipes wailed, and there was the muted sound of hands beaten in rhythm; tall Pathans watched the pacing and posturing of a Kashmiri dancing girl. Peshawar never slept, never sheathed the dagger, never sobered up.

A creaking stair tread startled Wheeler. He straightened, leaned forward tensely when he could distinguish a shadowy form in the darkness of the gallery. Someone was approaching Tanya's vacated quarters, and as he came nearer, he moved with furtive silence. The breeze brought the odor of tobacco and camels. Whoever the goaty stranger was, he had a purpose requiring stealth. At the entrance, he paused, listening for long stretching moments.

There was no sound when he tried the door. It was not until the vague shape slowly thinned that Wheeler realized that the panel had swung inward. He crept from his corner, and hoped that he could equal the other's stealth.

A dim glow came from the window, and now that the man was satisfied that the place was empty, he was less cautious; there were muffled sounds as though of a painstaking search for clues. If that were a C.I.D. man in native dress, the thing to do was to stop him, temporarily. Wheeler inched himself along, and finally reached the jamb.

The door lacked perhaps an inch of being closed. Thus, by the reflection from the grimy whitewashed wall, Wheeler got a look at the prowler; and the face, intermittently revealed as the man moved about, stirred queries and recollections. Once before, in front of Howarth's villa, he had seen such a nose, curved and somewhat bulbous, though he was far from certain that this was the man he had faced in that frosty moonlight.

The man fingered Tanya's earring, and frowned a little, as if wondering whether to leave it, or take it. Wheeler then and there helped him make up his mind. He kicked the door open, and advanced to meet the prowler, who pivoted at the sound. The flashlight dropped; but the wall reflection was still strong enough to make it clear that his hand was darting to his belt, and coming up with a curved dagger, whipping it out point foremost.

There is no parrying or blocking such a thrust, the attack of a trained knife-fighter, and Wheeler knew better than to try. He made a half turn, which for an instant took him from the line of the thrust. His assailant would now have to swing with him, or else bend his arm, and forfeit the advantage of being protected by his outthrust blade.

Wheeler's timing was right. He took no more than a rake with the blade, and he cut loose a kick that doubled the man up. A grunt, a thump, and then the spasmodic twitching of the paralyzed assailant. It was not until Wheeler picked up the flashlight that he felt the trickle of blood down his ribs.

A closer look made him all the more certain that this was indeed one of Howarth's assailants, and a search which netted a letter with an Iranian stamp added to

his conviction. On the left wrist was a band of pallor, as though until recently, a wrist-watch strap had shaded the skin.

What else a search would have revealed came under the head of unfinished business. Heavy feet clumped up the stairs, and pounded along the balcony. Wheeler snatched the flashlight and stepped behind the door, just as the newcomer, snapping on his own light, barged in.

Shirkuh had come from Chahbar, and though he reeked of brandy, he neither sang nor staggered. He regarded the groaning prowler as though he had expected to find someone else, then, just for luck, went through the fellow's pockets. Taking more time than Wheeler, he found a money-belt. This he kept, and after a casual glimpse about the room, he turned toward the gallery.

Shirkuh's presence in Peshawar was certainly odd, and so was his coming to Tanya's quarters. Unless Wheeler admitted coincidence beyond all reason, he could only conclude that Shirkuh as well as the still disabled prowler were both interested in Tanya, and in guns for Pakistan. So he tiptoed to the gallery, intending to trail the unaccountably sober Kurd.

The stairs ceased groaning under Shirkuh's weight, and the sound of his footfalls on the flagstones of the court died out. Wheeler lengthened his stride. Reaching the ground level, he headed directly for the arch which opened to the street.

In neither direction was there a pedestrian in sight, nor were there on the opposite side any entrances into which Shirkuh could have vanished. He stepped back, puzzled. It simply made no sense. The thing to do was to go back and see what the prowler on the second floor had to say when he snapped out of the fog.

A ray of light blazed from one side. Wheeler bounded back, and avoided being blinded by the glare, before it could shift to play more directly into his eyes. He had scarcely time to wonder what devil's tangle centered in this quarter of Peshawar when a bull voice said, in what was plainly intended to be a whisper, "Hussayn Agha! *Marhabba, marhabba!* Verily, thou art a coolness to the eyes."

"Shut up, not so loud. Turn off that light."

Shirkuh snapped the catch. "By the Lord of the Faithful! They told me in Chahbar that you and a red-headed wench rode out the night a saint built a fire in a powder magazine. God is most great! Only today, in the perfumer's bazaar, I heard of a certain redhead, and I knew that you could not be far away."

"I don't live here. The girl is with relatives."

SHIRKUH chuckled, winked wisely. "The truth is, I hardly expected you to be here, though Allah is the Knower. When I heard that a tall man wearing 'Ajami dress like yours had killed a government *sahib,* I was worried. So I came to see."

This blundering fool of a Kurd had made better time than the C.I.D. Slugging Shirkuh would silence him only for a few moments, and then he'd recover enough to comb the town, and noisily, for his blood brother, Hussayn Agha. And despite his growing peril, Wheeler could not consider any stronger action, if only because the boisterous fellow had, back in Chahbar, given certain warning of the approach of troops; he meant well, at all events.

Shirkuh went on, "To be suspected of killing a *sahib* is bad, very bad. I found you, so can others. They are hunting now, certain police spies, you understand." He gestured. "In a place where they sell brandy, that is where I learned, the spies will learn also."

Outside, Wheeler heard the footfalls of heavy men trying to move without too much noise. He stepped to the arch, hugged the shadows, glanced about; Shirkuh came with him. Turbanned Sikhs were coming from both directions, two from the left, two from the right, and their gait told that they had an objective,

that they were not engaged in a routine patrol.

"By Allah!" And now Shirkuh's voice was practically a whisper. "They are on the way."

"Go and talk to them!"

As he spoke, Wheeler gave his companion a shove and a boot, sending him sprawling into the street. The Sikhs exclaimed and took up the double time. Shirkuh's yell had scarcely left his lips when Wheeler turned and bounded up the stairway. He was gambling on the distraction caused by the eruption of a tall man from a doorway. If they were actually looking for Tanya's former companion, the thick-witted Sikhs would need some moments to decide that they had the wrong person.

But he reckoned without Shirkuh. The Kurd, cat-agile, regained his feet and was darting after Wheeler, and before the Sikhs fairly collided headlong in their rush, he overtook Wheeler at the end of the gallery. Below, the native police were barging into the court, and with justifiable caution. Wheeler drew himself to the roof. Shirkuh followed him, unbelievably silent.

He bounded after Wheeler to the adjoining roof, and thence to the black maze of a court within a court. "I should have stayed to confuse them," he whispered, "then it came to me that I should go with you and help you hide. Come with me, I have a place, on my head and eyes, there is no place like it."

For a Kurd, Shirkuh's knowledge of Peshawar was miraculous. After ten minutes of weaving through impenetrable blackness, he opened a door in an odorous inner court. "Here thou art safe, O Hussayn."

He flicked his flash. "Enter, wait, now I get a bottle."

Wheeler was ready to welcome any refuge. But when, an instant later, the door slammed and a lock clicked, he was not sure that he had been wise in evading the police.

X

WHEELER, striking a match, found a lamp very much like the one in Tanya's room. The flickering, smoky flame showed him that he was thoroughly caged in a cubicle not more than eight feet square, and with a low ceiling. The window, heavily barred, was scarcely large enough to allow a man to wriggle through. All in all, this was a good deal more solid than many a provincial jail.

There was a jug of water in the corner, and on a low stand was a heap of *chupattis.* His shirt, caked with clotted blood, had staunched the grazing knife wound, and so, lacking any first aid kits, he let well enough alone. One thing he could do, and that was to look over the papers taken from the prowler in Tanya's room.

He seated himself on the stretched cords of the *charpoy,* and took the letter from the already opened envelope. It was addressed to Ghafur Agha, Peshawar, and had a Teheran postmark. The script was *naskhi,* with the vowel points done in a scholarly precision which aroused his interest almost as much as the text. Most Persian letters are written in that ghastly and almost illegible *shekesteh* hand.

"There were two mysterious disappearances in Teheran, and on the same night. This far exceeds coincidence, and though they are not known to have associated, it is possible that they were secretly in touch with each other. Tanya Karimovna may be able to furnish information."

There were the usual Persian honorifics, *fakhamat nisab,* "allied to greatness." It was signed by one 'Umar Assad. The letter was certainly noncommital unless one read between the lines, and moreover, had been on the inside track of the events that grew out of Howarth's death. Beyond any doubt, Ghafur Agha was the survivor of the two assassins, and a fellow Nazi was keeping him posted. And only a Nazi or a Persian scholar would use *naskhi* script. At least, such a conclusion made

sense, which was more than one could make of Shirkuh, whose timely assistance had its disturbing aspects.

The other paper taken from Ghafur Agha, whose real name must certainly be on the order of Heinrich Schmalz or Johann Offendorf, was not quite as simple as the letter. On the face of it, it was only a page torn from an illuminated manuscript penned in fantastically fine script, the lines alternately red and black, the borders and column divisions elaborately done in red and blue and gilt. That a man would wad up such a work of art and pocket it with tobacco, bread, apricots, and the like was not reasonable, unless that man were one of the most superstitious of natives who consider almost any paper with writing on it as a talisman or amulet, rather than something to be read.

And Ghafur Agha was literate. More than that, he was almost certainly not a native, though if questioned by the C.I.D. he claimed he kept the sheet as a talisman, his answer would be accepted as plausible. Wheeler, however, was convinced that neither piety nor superstition nor love of literature moved the so-called Ghafur Agha.

By that flickering light, the spider-leg fineness of the script was an eye torment. Wheeler could read the black lines which were odes by Hafiz. The alternate red lines were Arabic, which he could not read.

Pages from widely distributed books, such as bibles or dictionaries, had often been used by spies as an accessory to the transmission of secret messages; a series of numbers, designating page and line position of selected words were the basis of the routine. The same could be done with a classic as widely read as Hafiz; but if this were the purpose of the vellum, it was a dead loss to Wheeler.

He held the letter near the lamp flame, on the chance that the heat would bring out invisible number-sequences. That gave no result. Finally, in sheer weariness rather than with any definite intent, he held the vellum before the flame. It was only then that he noted the holes punctured with a fine needle.

The letters thus marked spelled, A FRIEND OF GOD: THE ENVOY OF LIBERTY: ADMIT HIM TO THE HIGH TEMPLE OF THE RED CITY.

So it was not the key to a code; instead, it was a passport to Lalapura, the ruined red city in the desert.

Shirkuh was taking his time about finding a bottle of brandy. The more he considered the *chupattis* and water, the more certain Wheeler was that the Kurd would not return for a day or for several days; and the hacksaw blades he had picked up in the bazaar, in anticipation of cutting through the shacklebolt of a lock guarding munitions had an unexpected use.

He set to work on the bolts which secured the hasp to the massive door.

He was occupied for at least two hours. And when he emerged with Ghafur Agha's papers, as well as the remaining *chupattis* and the goatskin water jar, he still had half the night before him.

Finding his way from the maze was not as difficult as he had expected. The town was far too hot for him to risk going to get the .45 he had hidden. If the pin-pricked manuscript failed at the high temple at Lalapura, weapons would hardly help him.

He not only got out of Peshawar, but he found an unguarded bicycle. While a motorcycle would have been better, this was certainly a lot quicker than walking.

Highway markers helped. When he was something like thirty miles out of Peshawar, he found the branch road which, according to the maps, passed within sight of the ruined city. But here the pedalling became difficult. He ended by striking out on foot.

FOR all her 350,000,000 inhabitants, India had stretches of desolation, vast reaches such as this, which would flourish with irrigation. Though one could only

guess why Lalapura should have been abandoned. Some cities, like Damascus, mocked at time and conquest, while others perished. Hulagu Khan had murdered cities in Iraq by destroying the irrigation systems, and with them, so many of the inhabitants that there could be no rebuilding. But as he tramped through the waste, Wheeler, rarely introspective, began to wonder if outright desolation would not be preferrable to Nazi and Jap regimentation.

Bats wheeled and swooped; at times the silence was broken by the screech of owls, and the howl of jackals. For the rest, there was only the crunch of his feet in sandy soil. Then he saw the dark bulk to his right, and swung from the rutted trail.

Thorn brush and outcropping rocks; later, a Moslem cemetery, whose headstones, all awry, looked like turbanned drunks leaning toward each other for support. And finally, the remains of walls and the fragments of cornices cropped up from the ground. Wind and rain moved earth from one ruin to overwhelm another.

False dawn revealed mounds of rubble, cracked walls pierced by cavernous arches, domes and minarets stripped of their tile facing. He was past the outskirts of Lalapura, the red city whose true name no man knew. And before the blackness which preceded the true dawn enveloped him, he saw that the heart of Lalapura was older than Islam: a sullen and brooding bulk above which rose steeply sloping square towers, stage upon stage of narrow terraces buttressed with sculptured columns.

Lalapura was a graveyard of pagodas, not the spindly structures of China, but square towers of masonry honeycombed with shrines and courts, cells for pilgrims, halls for ritual, and sacred pools long since drained by the sun. These were what the Moslem conquerors of Hindustan had called *but-kadas,* home of idols, and, by implication, place of abomination. And now Islam plotted in the devious depths of a city deserted by its many gods.

The true dawn threatened to reveal Wheeler, and rob him of any chance of stealthy exploration. Risking snakes and scorpions, he picked his way into the lower ruins, where, unseen, he could size up the approaches, the avenues blocked by fallen masonry. Before exploring, before trying to find the munitions, he had to determine whether Lalapura's seven or eight mile circumference was permanently occupied by a group of plotters, or whether it was only a rendezvous; whether it sheltered the nucleus of a raiding army, or whether it was a thinly held center, with no more than a few guards.

But for Potts Drummond's incredulity and sudden death, Wheeler might have arranged a raid in force; all that kept him from surrendering was the danger of red tape, interminable delays, the necessity of clearing himself before getting any hearing as to the major problem. What blocked him more than the fantastic confusion of Lalapura was the official mind, which in spite of local variations, ran true to type the world over.

So, clambering through thinning darkness, he won his way to a second floor where he was sheltered and yet could look for the flight of birds, or rising smoke from cooking fires, as well as listen for voices. But first, he needed a drink from the goatskin water jug, and a few *chupattis.* Carefully nursed, these rations would last for several days.

Planes circled high over the desert, so high that he could not hear their engines; for awhile, he had taken them for soaring vultures. Doubtless they were swinging back from the dawn patrol over the Kohat Pass and the Afghan frontier, and doubtless reporting that there were no concentrations of tribesmen.

The morning breeze, wandering among the temples, brought the smell of curry. Sometimes there were echo-distorted voices. But a thousand men, or five times that number, unless they came out into the littered streets, could not give this dead city any appearance of life until one met the first line of watchers.

Somewhere there must be a guarded area. The sheet of vellum taken from the self-styled Ghafur Agha indicated that, and clearly. But the best time to palm himself off as an accredited envoy would be after dark, when weariness, monotony, and hasheesh had dulled the tenants of the ghost city.

He smelled camels, and heard the neigh of horses, the braying of jackasses. At times there was an odor of gasoline and of oil. These signs, adding up, made Wheeler tense with anticipation; the day was a waking nightmare, for while he caught some much needed sleep, it was troubled by plans which would have to be reshaped when he made actual contact. Tanya danced through the whirl, and Shirkuh stalked into every possibility. Finally, he wondered what the disguised Nazi, Ghafur Agha would do, or try to do about his missing papers.

XI

THE odor of cooking fires guided Wheeler that evening, for there was neither smoke nor light. However, precaution against aerial observation seemed to be the only one observed, for he was not challenged as he went down an avenue less obstructed than the others.

There was still light enough to reveal tire tracks, and the prints of camels' feet. Presently he saw groups of turbanned men lounging about small fires, drinking tea. These he saluted, and his greeting was gravely returned. This indicated a population newly gathered, and large enough for a stranger to be inconspicuous.

Following the caravan track, he began to wish someone would challenge him, for questions, however put, would be informing. A strange, almost drunken exhilaration buoyed him up, and this blended with a thrill of apprehension, the unease from finding that a difficult task is unnaturally easy. He told himself that the approaches to Lalapura were barren wastes in which surprise was impossible, and that this seeming carelessness was not foolhardy. While this might be called a lax guard, it was not unnatural; that it was pointless for him to be picturing the way he would post sentries about a munitions dump.

After all, look at the way the Japs had caught disciplined garrisons off guard.

He was not surprised to hear the laughter and chatter of women as he came nearer to the heart of the red city. Camp followers were part of the scene, since no man would gather fuel or draw water or cook if there were any way of avoiding it. Tawny-skinned girls were at a well which had recently been freed of choking debris; some were veiled, others not.

As one drew a dripping jar from the shaft, Wheeler asked her for a drink. Though the water was brackish, he had tasted far worse. A girl came from the shadows and offered a tray of sweetmeats and cigarettes. He bought some of both, gave her a *rupee,* and went on.

This Asiatic version of a Red Cross Canteen had not seen anything unusual about his arrival. But he had hardly gone a dozen paces when the cigarette girl screamed, "You there, you son of a noseless mother! This *rupee's* a fake!"

She ran toward him, waving the piece of silver and calling him every name in the

Peshawar catalog. Wheeler swore that it was a good *rupee.* Then he recognized Tanya, a dusky, dark-haired Tanya. He still insisted that while the coin she thrust at him was counterfeit, it was not the one he had given her. The other girls drew closer, giggling and enjoying the rumpus.

"That's fine," she said, in a low tone, "keep it up, Steve. Meet me here later."

Tanya's gesture indicated a rubbish-blocked doorway. Wheeler threw up his hands and growled, "Here's another *rupee,* and Allah curse you! Allah curse your religion!"

"Dogs pollute your grave!" she shrieked; and then whispered, *"Why wouldn't I be here, peddling cigarettes? You're early, too."*

She turned from him, and triumphantly displayed the coin to the other ladies. Wheeler, going his way, wondered what Tanya meant by saying that he had arrived ahead of time.

The red granite of the pagodas had now become an iron purple. Their bulk, their ornate sculpture, their dusky doorways and the black depths beyond began to oppress him. Even in the rapidly failing light, the excess of adornment pained him; there were too many faces of man and god and demon staring from each of the stages which towered skyward. He could almost feel the frenzy of the mind which had conceived this monstrosity whose heart was as sullen as its façade.

One *but-kada* would have been bad enough, but this was a nest of tower-temples, a concentration symbolizing India's dark and bloody mind. This of all places would whip Moslem fury to flame. Any conspiracy shaped in the shadow of these hundred thousand graven images would end in a holy war against the idol worshipers.

For the first time, he could understand Moslem resentment against India and its natives, and this disturbed him.

He stepped toward the gate of the nearest pagoda. Far inside, by some trick of the setting sun, ruddy light picked out a shrine beyond the sacred pool where pilgrims once bathed, and the glow flooded a three-headed god. The face which eyed him was that of Shiva, Lord of Destruction, Master of Names and Forms.

Here was no litter or rubbish. All had been freshly swept. Two tall Pathans, armed with pistol and *yataghan,* came from an alcove and blocked the way. Steve Wheeler presented the sheet of vellum.

The guards did not accept it. One said, "You are early, *huzur.* The lord comes at his own time."

"I have been on the road, all the way from Suliamania, Wheeler countered. "Those who sent me said whatever I was to know would be learned here."

THE hook-nosed Pathans stroked their beards, eyed each other, regarded his stained garments. They spoke Pukhtu, and could follow his Persian only with difficulty, but since the latter was the court language of Afghanistan, Steve Wheeler's speech gave him a certain prestige with these men from the northwest frontier.

He repeated, "A man was taken to the mercy of Allah. It is not necessary for me to name him. I take his place, and without knowing to whom I should offer the *salaam."* Then, once more tendering the paper, "Read and see that I come as the friend of God."

One struck a match. Together, they regarded the ornate script.

"The peace upon you, *huzur,* but this is not for us."

He meant that he could not read. He went on, "You will not make your *salaam* until the Agha Khan arrives, and he comes when he will." The other gestured and said, "In the other *but-kada* are cells where guests sleep and eat, and Allah refresh you."

Wheeler turned to the street, elated and alarmed. This casual mention of the Agha Khan indicated that things had come to a dangerous pass. If the spiritual head of

all the Shi'a Moslems approved a holy war, then India would see a mutiny to make people quit spelling the one of 1857 with a capital letter! The Agha Khan, once a favorite at Deauville and Biarritz, the owner of Derby winners, declaring a *jihad!* It would take more than Sir Stafford Cripps to handle that.

He went to the ruin near the well to wait for Tanya. She did not arrive until several hours of darkness had silenced the camp. Low-voiced, scarcely above a whisper, she said, "I was afraid, back in Peshawar, and when Saoud told me of Potts Drummond's death, I was sure that I would not ever see you again, but we are here, Steve, though this may be the last time."

"We've been through worse," he said, choking back a premonition.

"You have your work and I have mine, no matter how this turns out. I had to let you go your way in Peshawar. You had to do as you did."

"But we'll win. And then—"

And then what? He knew the answer, but refused to admit it to himself; she would have another assignment, and he would report for orders, and meanwhile, a war would be running its long course.

"We've not yet won. Day dreamer, tend to business! I brought more than cigarettes and the like, for this camp follower game."

"Such as?"

"Some of these wafers wouldn't meet pure food specifications. But the guards at the munitions dump will eat anything to be sociable."

"With you dishing it out."

She nodded. "Drugged stupid. And we'll have to leave them where they drop. The stuff is piled up in an old *serai.* No locks, no doors, only guards."

"Let's go. You do your act, let me tend to the demolition, that's my line, there can't be any salvage."

"I'll have to wait for the moon to make me restless. It won't look right if I prowl in the dark."

"They will have to see you," he admitted.

So they waited, and neither spoke of any meeting after the completion of this mission.

"They ought to decorate you—"

"But what'd I do with a *khelat?"*

Tanya's whimsy referred to the ancient Mogul custom of conferring a robe of honor, in the throne room at Delhi. Steve Wheeler said, "Not a *khelat,* but a black lace gown."

"I've heard of them," she said wistfully.

"You'll get one," he promised. "By mail, if no other way!"

LATER, they heard footsteps, and presently, four men came up the avenue. Just enough of the low moon's rays reached into the ruin to show that the four carried a palanquin with drawn curtains.

Not a word was spoken. There was no light. It made Wheeler think of pall bearers without a procession. Though the men were tall and husky, the weight bore them down, making their stride wooden and plodding. These were fighting men, not coolies.

He heard Tanya's catch of breath, and felt the sudden tightening of her hand. The bearers, already past the guarded temple, were heading further into the ruins.

That palanquin could be loaded with more munitions, but Wheeler dismissed the thought.

Tanya whispered, "Someone goes to his grave, we have seen a doom on its way."

"The arsenal?" He had to persist in logic. "Could be shells."

"The arsenal is over there."

She gestured.

"But they couldn't bring a delegate across the desert in a palanquin," Wheeler objected.

"That is right. Some have dropped in parachutes, by night. Others came in cars.

Already, there are Moslem princes, alone and dressed no better than you are."

"But if that's the dignitary they're waiting for, why's he going that way?" Steve Wheeler rose. "I'm looking into this. Knowing who's mixed up in the show is as important as sabotage. You wait, no use both poking out our chins."

"You didn't get your gun. Take mine."

He took it to humor her, while he had the chance.

After plodding perhaps a quarter of a mile, the bearers swung left, and halted in the square entrance of a solid building. He could not hear the exchange which followed, nor see what came from the palanquin, but whatever it was, it moved by its own power. A moment later, there was a dim glow from within, and the *tick-tack* of a hammer on metal.

Then the bearers emerged, leaving the palanquin, and retraced their course. Not a word was spoken. This unnatural silence piqued Wheeler, at least as much as did the conviction that an important prisoner had been smuggled in.

A motor rumbled, raced, subsided to a throaty whisper which spoke of great power; she must be an oversized brute. To see, to recognize, to identify as many as possible of the Moslem princes in the impending meeting was even more important than a job of sabotage. His one fear was that the British would snort and say, "Really, but that's absurd!"

It was just such an attitude which had given the gory mutiny of 1857 its chance to spread when it could at one stage have been stamped out in a day.

When he reached the palanquin, there was enough moonlight to bring out the ornate carving, the gold embroidery of the curtains. The equipage was worthy of a maharaja, but the darkness beyond the doorway was not.

Wheeler crept in, and said in a low voice, *"Destoor!"*

A man answered, "Why mock me with courtesies?"

Wheeler flicked his flash. "I am not a jailer, not an enemy."

He saw now why the bearers had staggered. The man shackled to the ancient eye-bolt of the wall weighed at least three hundred pounds. Nor was he all fat; height and a large frame would leave him heavy, however he trained down. Turban and trousers and *khalat* were white. As for jewelry, he had not even the seal ring which tradition prescribed. This heavy face was familiar, though now there was not that pictured smile.

Wheeler's glance shifted to the rug on which the man sat, and to the charcoal brazier, the richly wrought ewer and long neck jug for ceremonial ablutions. Then he said, "Hussayn is one of my many names, *huzur*. Be pleased to tell me your names."

"Does it matter?"

Wheeler set the flash on the flagstones, so that its glow illuminated them equally, though indirectly. "It is written, the ransoming of captives is better than feeding the poor, and there is no commandment as great as this. Yet tonight a name does matter."

The shrewd eyes brightened. "You would of course believe that you see the Agha Khan in chains?"

"If you were free, and looked so much like the Agha Khan, I might doubt, but an impostor would not be chained."

XII

THE moon was no longer ruddy on the horizon. Though it would soon be time to go with Tanya to the arsenal, the captive's freedom was the most important. Wheeler said, "A man stripped of the outward signs of state finds it difficult to reestablish himself. But there is a car outside. If I get you free, you can go to Peshawar with me and make them believe my story, if you are the Agha Khan."

"These chains. Your knife isn't heavy enough."

Wheeler produced his hacksaw blade, and set to work on the shacklebolt. The prisoner went on, "I attended a secret meeting, without any of my staff or household. Arguing against revolt did no good. Here I am, and whatever influence I exerted for cooperation with the British against the Axis is gone."

"But they'll be looking for you, they'll miss you."

"It will be too late then. It is tonight, or not at all."

The incredibility of the situation convinced Wheeler that this must be the Agha Khan, that while the man could readily have a convincing double, there would be no point to caging such a person. And when the *coup d'état* was accomplished, the successful conspirators could release their captive, the spiritual leader of Islam's progressive half. No matter how he explained his absence, the damage would be done; it would be believed that he had disappeared to avoid taking a stand for or against the British. And thus the revolt would have his tacit consent, no matter what he might later say to block it.

The blade snapped. Wheeler's cramped fingers had betrayed him. The Agha Khan said, "We are the forgotten of Allah."

That seemed to be the case, for while the halves would cut, the work was much slower. Time was the essence; this was not a matter of taking night after night to saw one's way out of a cell. A growing murmur of voices told Wheeler that the members of the conclave were gathering.

Then he remembered the charcoal brazier, which would serve for more than making tea for a distinguished captive. He kindled a fire, and used the small bellows to fan the coals.

Sparks showered in a fine red rain. The Agha Khan caught Wheeler's wrist and whispered, "Stop! They are returning."

Someone had stumbled in the street. Someone had a lantern. Wheeler ducked for the shelter of a block of masonry which had fallen from the wall. Two tall men came in. The Agha Khan's chains rattled as he reached to pour water into a pot.

"Be pleased to join me," he invited.

Voice and smile were amiable. He pointed to the hamper which contained tea and provisions. Wheeler marveled at the convincing good fellowship of a holy man who forgives his captors, knowing that they only obeyed orders. What made his manner all the more remarkable was that he could hardly have failed to notice the cord which one of the men carried, the strangler's cord with a running noose.

THE newcomers eyed each other. Neither liked his work. After a pause one said, "We do not come as guests. We are here to do what must be done, and we ask your pardon. There is time to pray."

The Agha Khan made a gesture of resignation. "Allah does what he will do."

Instead of filling the teapot, he took water for the ceremonial ablution before prayer. Wheeler, peering around one corner, saw the big man's deliberate moves as he washed hands and feet, mouth and nostrils and ears.

"Praise be to Allah who hath sent down water for purification—" He snuffed a bit from his palm. "Make me smell the odors of paradise—" A passing of hands over his face. "Do not blacken my face on the day when thou shalt blacken the faces of my enemies."

Whether this was Moslem resignation to the will of Allah, or confidence in a lurking ally, Wheeler could not guess. He had Tanya's pistol, he could cut the executioners down, but that would surely draw a crowd. Just what could the man expect?

He must know, as surely as Wheeler knew, that this was the end of any chance to break those chains.

Now the Agha Khan was ready to pray. He smoothed out his carpet.

"I propose a prayer of five prostrations. *B'ismi'l-lahi 'l-rahmani 'l-rahim . . . el-hamdu 'l-lilahi rabbi 'l-'alameen . . . Praise*

be to God, lord of both worlds . . . king of the Day of Judgment . . . Thee we worship and to Thee we pray . . ."

Wheeler was thinking, wildly, dizzily, "Pious fraud expects me to go to bat and make it—or he's facing it like I wish I could."

The three-hundred pound saint's forehead touched the carpet. Like every Shi'a he kept his hands beside him, instead of crossing them in front. All this was clear

in the murky yellow of the lantern, and the sullen glow of the brazier.

It is not proper to look at a man who prays. Wheeler for the first time ignored this lesson. He could not help but watch, in horror and fascination and admiration also. At home, they dragged cons to the chair, rubber-legged wrecks with not a trace of brag left. This man's voice, though low, seemed to fill the room.

The executioners tiptoed up the steps. More than respect for custom had made them turn their backs on a man who prayed. It was easier to issue the order for the strangling of a holy man than to execute it. Wheeler wildly clawed at the idea of bribing them.

But this was the first step in a holy war and he would run too high a risk of bungling his mission, it would be as dangerous as trying to slug two husky Pathans without making a disturbance. Logic told him that returning to tell of the Agha Khan's assassination was the best way of fulfilling his duty. But Wheeler crept from cover. He had a melon-sized rock in his hand. The prayer was ending, the final prostration was made as he reached the angle of the stairs.

"*Amin—*" The last syllable rolled out, solemnly.

The men were stepping from the street. He knew that they would not come side by side, for neither wanted to be first; and he was right. One hung back a little.

Wheeler tripped the leader. The man pitched headlong down the short flight. Half stunned, badly jarred, he could not for a moment pick himself up. The other cursed, bounded after to give him a hand. That was when Wheeler used the melon-sized chunk af granite, smacking down on the base of the skull. He collapsed, his weight flattening the one who, still dazed, was trying to get up.

Wheeler caught that one by the beard, jerking the chin up to stretch the muscles that would otherwise protect the large arteries of the throat. The curved blade cut off any outcry.

"Perfect," the holy man said. "Did you pronounce the name of Allah when you bled your game?"

Wheeler did not relish that bitter whimsy. He turned with shaking hands to ply the bellows again, and get a link of the chain red hot. Once the iron began to shoot off fine white sparks, a knife would silently cut it, or a yank part it.

XIII

WHEELER chilled the broken chain, and bound it to the saint's leg, so that it would neither drag nor clank. When they stepped into the street, and headed for the main avenue, the mutter of many voices came louder from the pagoda. A number of big cars, including a silver-plated Rolls Royce were parked about the well.

The Agha Khan stopped short. "My limousine."

Wheeler wondered for an instant moment at this pointing with pride; then he understood. "You're being impersonated.

That explains the execution. An impostor is leading a holy war in your name."

The higher a man's station, the easier for a double to impersonate him; this conviction had been growing on Wheeler during his efforts to liberate the captive. The Agha Khan had become a symbol, an object of reverence not scrutinized as ordinary men are. Aside from a few favorite wives, a few personal servants, no one would know the difference. A stand-in who reasonably resembled the Agha Khan could step out of that silver-plated Rolls to call on the Viceroy, and no one would demand, "I say, are you *sure* you're the Agha Khan?"

You could not impersonate Fulan, the Arabic Joe Doakes, but a prince was something else, which the Agha Khan realized. He said, "I hope you are right."

"What?"

"Of course, I'll confront the impostor. Thank you for what you have done."

This man had died perhaps half an hour ago; now he was in the hand of Allah, and Wheeler could not let him down. A spokesman would help; first an audacious announcement to shake the gathering, then the man himself to offer a climax. Remembering the hesitancy of the executioners, Wheeler realized that the attempt was not utterly insane, yet he also knew that there was a splendid chance of not surviving.

"Wait, Your Highness. There is one person I trust. I'll send a message, so that whatever happens to us, the impostor will be under suspicion."

He went to the place where Tanya should be waiting. He stumbled in the shadows, but found no trace of her. There was only a rug.

And now he could not back down. He could only gamble on the saint's fate. The Agha Khan seemed to sense what went through Wheeler's mind, for he quoted, *"Hast thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with the army of the elephant? Did he not cause their stratagem to miscarry?"*

Wheeler said, *"Amin."* He had no choice but to leave it to fate, the way of Islam. So they went toward the pagoda.

The entrance was no longer guarded; the Pathans had gone to the inner court, where torches flared. The rumble of voices had ceased, and now one man set up resonant echoes in the sullen pile. He was addressing incognito princes and dignitaries in Urdu, the *lingua franca* of India.

As he went into the cavernous throat of the pagoda, and past the sacred pool, Wheeler wondered if Tanya lurked somewhere, looking for familiar faces to list in her report; getting the names of malcontent Moslem rulers must certainly be part of her work.

The metallic murmur of the chain bound to the Agha Khan's leg worried Wheeler. He should have muffled each link.

THEY seated themselves in the space before the shrine. A carpet screened the three-headed idol, so that its gaze could not contaminate a holy gathering. Steve Wheeler recognized the bearded man who stood on the steps of the shrine; despite the distance, there was no mistaking the hawk face, the tall, trim figure of Maharaja Habeeb Khan, in the traditional Mogul kaftan, which reached almost to the tops of his burnished boots.

There was beside him one who sat and waited; a bulky man in white, a three-hundred pound man who looked so like the Agha Khan that Wheeler glanced to his right to make sure that he had not lost his companion. In this tricky torchlight, the deception was perfect; and once accepted, the impostor could carry on, and far longer than necessary to blast India apart.

"For this *jihad*, for this holy war," the *maharaja* was saying, "we have more than you leaders of the future Pakistan could have expected. The Agha Khan will bless our endeavor, and assure us of his support. Today, there is neither Sunni nor Shi'a!

There is only Islam, one faith; Mohammad, the apostle of Allah, the One!"

It was magnificent, this thundering about the unity which Islam had lacked for more than thirteen centuries, and it stirred Wheeler, who had seen enough of the Moslem faith to know its worth; but he managed to fight the charm, to tell himself that this was bait, an appeal to fanaticism rather than to reason. That the unity of Islam was not the question, that whatever merits the state of Pakistan had, violent action would play into Axis hands, and rob India of what it had thus far undeniably gained.

BUT he felt the thrill that raced through the close-packed crowd. The *maharaja* was playing them like a cheer leader at a foot-ball rally. He was about to introduce the coach, the white-clad impostor, who would tell them that they could not lose!

How many Nazis were in that turbanned gathering? The presence of a Jap would be a jarring note, but never doubt that Tojo was represented. And Wheeler, nerving himself for the action that had to come, and come within seconds, looked about. At the left, close to the front, was Ilderim Shirkuh, silent and apparently sober.

It was now clear that Shirkuh's trickery, back in Peshawar, had been designed to prevent Wheeler's attendance at the meeting of dignitaries; that the sottish mountaineer had from the start been working against Wheeler and, presumably, with full understanding of the issues involved.

Wheeler was thinking, *"He didn't warn me in Chahbar with his damn singing, he was putting the finger on me!"*

Announcing the presence of the genuine Agha Khan was going to be difficult, almost certainly fatal, with Shirkuh to lead an opposition group, but it was too late for retreat.

To draw Tanya's pistol and cover the Kurd, who had a heavy revolver in his belt, was the natural thing to do, yet the wrong one, for that would surely end in an armed riot which the Agha Khan could not possibly survive. So Wheeler rose, and an instant before the impostor.

"O Men! Princes of Pakistan!" His voice filled the sanctuary and his audacity won him silence; the only sound was the stirring of the audience as they twisted about to see who dared break in. Wheeler hammered home: "That is an impostor, a fraud, he sells you to your enemy! That man is not the Agha Khan!"

Shirkuh was on his feet, revolver drawn. His amazement was exceeded only by that of the white-clad double. Wheeler steadied himself against the shot he expected, and gestured to the man who was rising from beside him. "Here is the Agha Khan! See with all your eyes! Hear with all your ears! He has come from the prison where traitors put him."

The striking similiarity shocked the group, shocked all but the few who were in on the secret. And one of them cried, "Since they look so nearly alike, what proof that this newcomer is not a fraud? How many madmen say, *lo, I am king!*"

Shirkuh had not yet fired, so there was a chance.

Wheeler knelt, slashed the rags which had bound the chains to the Agha Khan's leg. Then a pistol blazed. A second shot followed. A man was toppling over. Shirkuh, revolver leveled, shouted in his great voice, "Hear him out! Whoever shoots, that man is dead."

The Kurd had masonry behind him, and on either side, for he had sidestepped into a niche. Wheeler caught all that with a glance over his shoulder, then he turned to pick up the length of chain he had released. Rising, he displayed the links.

"Would an impostor be chained? This is the true Agha Khan. Two men came to strangle him. Would a fraud be put to death?"

There was a wrathful muttering. Steve Wheeler could see the sweat gleam on the fat face of the pretender, who had

thus far not spoken. On the further side of the hall, two other men stood in niches. Each had a submachine-gun, and both looked to Shirkuh for signals.

Wheeler went on, "I can show you the rest of this chain, and the cell where the stranglers came to kill the Agha Khan. O Men! A fraud sells you into the hands of your enemies. Revolt against the British *raj,* and the yellow men will eat you, piecemeal. Stand with the *raj,* defeat the yellow men, and then come here to speak of a Moslem state."

He rattled the heavy links. "Whoever chained this man tried to chain every Moslem by calling for revolt when it is time for India to face what comes from the east!"

The Agha Khan raised his hand. "All that has been said is true. I call for peace, that man calls for revolt. Look at us and choose between us."

Holding the chain, he walked up the aisle, slowly, heavily, links jangling with every step. Men knelt as he passed. Some bowed and kissed the tiles on which he had stepped. The impostor already saw his finish, and here and there, some of his clique were trying to edge from the hall. But Shirkuh made a signal, and a warning burst of shots chewed the masonry.

That broken chain had started the landslide. There was no longer any doubt as to the decision when the Agha Khan faced judgment. The choice, however, was not voiced. A vast rumbling blotted out every other sound. The floor shuddered, a concussion wave compressed the air. Individual blasts pointed the prolonged roaring. And now the reek of nitrocellulose and T.N.T. penetrated the pagoda. The arsenal had exploded.

XIV

THE Agha Khan stood fast, arms folded, as Shirkuh and his two gunners went to join him. And Wheeler, knowing that his work was done, bucked the stampede which blocked his race toward the street. He knew now why Tanya had been missing; he was certain that she had touched off the explosion without waiting for him to meet her.

Wheeler was tasting panic, for demolition is more than a matter of lighting a fuse. And Tanya, if she had escaped the blast, might be dangerously close, stunned, unable to get away from the continuous explosion.

Madness roared through Lalapura. Guards and campfollowers bolted for the open desert. Black smoke obscured the moon, oily black fumes laced by tongues of red reached higher than the tower temples; shells burst, scattering screaming fragments, grenades popped, small arms cartridges crackled. Demolition explosives, unconfined, burned with a fierce flame, while other parcels, touched off by the detonation wave of nearby shells, shook the earth and brought tons of masonry crashing down.

There must have been voices, but these were lost, though Wheeler, seeing the white of teeth and staring eyes, knew that this howling pack had no thought for whoever had touched off the blast. Those who were trampled in the rush, wedged into angles, stunned by falling over debris heightened his apprehension.

Then he ploughed through the final wave, and into the billowing fumes and gusts of scorching air, which came to meet him as he turned the corner. Flame lashed out, flame reached up from the mountain of rubble which had been a pagoda. He did not know, and could not guess how much explosive still remained, nor whether it would go up in one devastating blast or continue its intermittent rumbling and crackling.

In the glare he saw several men sprawled near the ruin adjoining the demolished pagoda. One lay across his rifle. Another, a yard from his weapon, had been crushed by a piece of masonry which had landed in the entrance where he had

fallen. There was no help for these guards. Their clothes and their gun stocks had begun to burn. Debris, the first concussion, and the rush of poisonous fumes must have finished them.

One still squatted in a doorway, apparently unperturbed. His rifle was across his knees, his head drooping to his chest. For a moment, the shift of the flames made it clear that he had been drugged. Near him were sweetmeats and cigarettes, which reminded Wheeler of Tanya's hint.

Then, as he backed away, half choked and hoping that she had escaped, he heard a yell, and saw someone struggling in a passageway which opened from the approach to the pagoda. A man was clawing at a tangle of beams and masonry. Wheeler ran toward him.

The round, sweat gleaming face was familiar, in spite of the terror which distorted it. This was Saoud, the shopkeeper from Rayy, at the outskirts of Teheran. "Help me, *huzur!*" he croaked.

Somewhat sheltered from the direct glare, there was a chance. Already, Steve Wheeler was sure of the worst, and as he got to work with a broken beam to lever the key to the debris, he found confirmation. Tanya had been pinned down while making her escape.

She was conscious, though still too numbed from the shock to be aware of pain or danger. "Saoud and I couldn't wait for you," she said, "we did our best —but—things worked—too fast."

He could not tell her, now or ever, that he had been as well employed as she; that the riddle of the palanquin had proved to be as important as the demolition job. After all, this explosion had been the climax of terror to cap the amazement produced by the Agha Khan's appearance.

"No use moving me," Tanya went on. "I'm not made of iron—that weight—we'll all be trapped—"

"Shut up!" Wheeler muttered. "You're getting out of this. You'll be decorated. You've done a grand job."

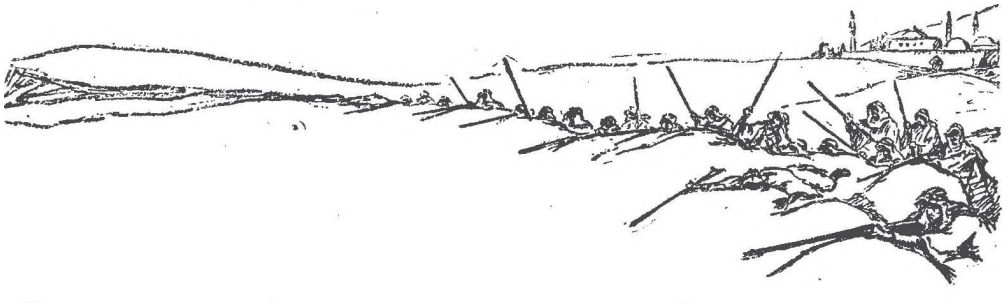
But he knew she was right, and lost all hope when he pried away the final length of timber. He took Saoud's *khalat* to spread out like a blanket, to serve as an improvised stretcher. But when he tried to move Tanya, she caught him with both arms, and drew him to her, since she was too crushed to attempt to sit up.

"Wait a minute," she gasped, "and it won't hurt a bit." Her pain-twisted face shocked him less than did the easy smile, the gay little smile which followed, a moment later. *"Night and the desert and the horses know us—"*

Tanya had completed her work, but she could not finish the verse that was to mock the moment, and carry back to their flight from Chahbar. When her embrace relaxed, he was sure that he could move her without any pain, except to himself.

He followed Saoud toward the well. A silver-plated Rolls Royce still waited, and one other car. Several men came from the *but-kada.* Otherwise, Lalapura was once more a city of the dead.

As Shirkuh approached with the Agha Khan and the machine-gunners, Wheeler



said, "This girl was badly hurt, we can't leave her here."

Shirkuh stared, exclaimed, then said in English, "Of course not. I'm sure His Highness won't mind if I go with you."

He did not air any guesses as to who had touched off the explosion. But as they drove across the desert, Shirkuh went on, "I dare say you suspect I'm not a Kurd, I've had my suspicions of you. Truth of it is, I hated to bottle you up in Peshawar, but I didn't want you at large, there was too much chance of—er—free lance efforts playing the devil with my work."

"I understand," Wheeler said, dully. "Enough, but not all."

Moments later, Shirkuh resumed, "That explosion—whoever set it off—it had a powerful moral effect, you know. Very timely, prevented reaction which could have happened in spite of my two gunners.

"We've suspected Lalapura for some time. Aerial photos, footprints, *et cetera,* registering on the desert's dusty face, as they put it, the conspirators never suspected the dead giveaway."

Wheeler demanded, "Now get to the point! Arrest me or—"

"Arrest you?"

"That Potts Drummond business. Damn it, he wouldn't listen to me, but I'd certainly not have shot him. How do I stand?"

The self-styled Shirkuh answered, "The police did want you, for awhile. However, I did not want you in custody. News of your arrest would have driven Axis conspirators to cover. I had this place surrounded by agents, I hope the blast hasn't hampered them too much."

"You didn't want me arrested? Who the devil are you?"

SHIRKUH shook his head. "I'm anonymous. Well, before the old hue and cry had fairly developed, we learned that a shot had been fired from a housetop. We didn't get the man, but we found an ejected Luger cartridge. And concluded that someone objected to your report to Potts Drummond.

"When I traced you, I wanted you out of circulation until tonight's show was over. The Sikhs who alarmed you were of course under my command, though you tricked them and me, very neatly, booting me out under their very noses and then running while they gaped. And then the Sikhs caught the chap you'd knocked out, the bright fellow who'd apparently come to settle Tanya Karimovna."

He glanced back at the form stretched out on the seat. "Tough luck, really tragic."

"Tanya Karimovna—you don't miss much."

"That battered prowler happened to be the man who settled Potts Drummond. We found the weapon. He'll be attended to, directly, I assure you."

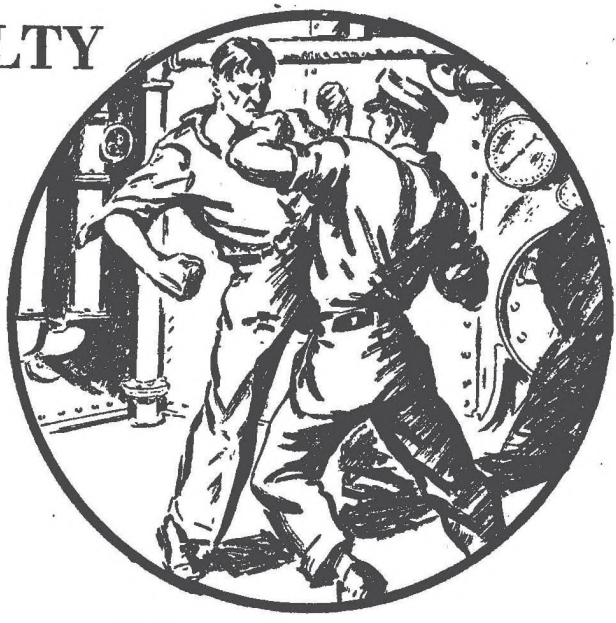
A long silence. Finally Shirkuh asked, "There'll be a frightful mess of official doings tomorrow, I'll help you in every way I can. May I ask what your plans are, now that this mission is over?"

Wheeler at last said, "I'm flying to Delhi, if necessary—or any other place—to get a black lace gown—for our ally—*our* ally, do you understand? Though when I promised it to her, I didn't know it'd serve as a shroud."

"Er—to be sure—a decoration. I understand, perfectly."

Wheeler wanted to retort, "I'm damned sure you don't and never will," but he made no answer; Shirkuh meant well, and there was a war to win.

LOYALTY AFT



First Rate Engineers Never Should Monkey With Office Politics Ashore

By B. E. COOK

Author of Many Stories of the Sea

DO NOT blame Curly Couzens. He had not been gunning for Chief Urban's job. Certainly he wanted to use his license as a chief engineer, but not at Urban's expense. The quick tempered old veteran and expert had made Curly—and earned his everlasting loyalty. Their mutual respect was what had led Chief Urban to bring him aboard the blasted, disreputable *Hamadan*.

Yet you have to admit it, it looked suspicious. When a company official offers a second assistant engineer his own chief's position without a hint of it to the chief himself, some wise guy is playing 'em close to his vest. And that man was "the duke," the first assistant, the always begloved article with the uncle or something on the board of directors for Overseas, Inc.

Nobody knew this better than Curly Couzens, nobody believed it less than Chief Urban. Good ole Urban long had concentrated on rating as an engine-room expert, on becoming a widely known trouble-shooter for marine steam plants. Company politics simply bounced off his one-track mind; it was too picayune, a mere abstraction. Besides, Urban was ageing and he had a certain secret difficulty; he was hoping that his hard won rep would keep him in circulation where payrolls are.

Curly Couzens had to think of all these things and think fast. You see, he was standing in Captain Merritt's cabin. The skipper was seconding every utterance of that "little big pompous Mr. Comey" from the main office ashore. And Curly was on the hottest spot in his young life.

"Well," Comey prompts, "what say? Make up your mind."

"Me displace my own chief? Him?" Curly turned to the skipper. "Listen,

Cap'n, Chief Urban knows more about steam and power in one minute than I or anybody else—this ship is twenty-one years old, been dead up a river for years, always been a jonah. If Chief can't fathom what ails her aft, how could I? Or anybody?"

Mr. Comey shook into his expensive coat impatiently. "Nothing is impossible," he snapped. "So you're afraid to tackle it?"

"Afraid hell," Curley rejoined, "but we engineers under him have seen his efforts to whangle her into taking wide open throttle; we know what he knows. Maybe some outsider—"

"Nuts. He and you came over from the Colpitts Line that built her and sold her to us. You've been here because you should know what to do to her. Chief Urban has had five round trips to Rio in her and he's failed us. You came at his instigation, I know; but you're younger, more flexible, more open to new ideas. He has got to the point where he lays everything to faulty steam lines." Comey paused to puff fast on a new cigar. "Now, do you take this job or don't you?"

"If ever a chief's ticket wanted to go chief again after hard times, that's me," Curley confessed, "but not by cut-throating my own—why, Urban made me, sir."

"He didn't make the first assistant and he's got his chief's papers, too."

"He claims to be an expert on vacuum," Captain Merritt inserted with peculiar inference.

"What? That four-flushing—!" Curly caught himself; this Comey was secretary of the board; he'd know the duke's relative; he, like the duke, might carry tales.

"Very well," Comey snapped, "Duke Hutchins gets the—"

"Wait!" Curly shouted. The duke oust Chief Urban? And not a day's warning to the Chief about this axe falling on him and his carefully nurtured reputation? It would break the old man's heart. Curly said so.

"This is a revival of shipping," Comey said, talking down as to an irritating child. "Lend-lease business is sprouting huge charters and we're not at war—not yet. It'll pay us millions. We've got to get power out of this ship while that European brawl is hot and we supply 'em. We can't wait for your Urban to put the *Hamadan* to rights. Get it?"

Curly did. "Considered a new power plant for her yet, sir?"

Comey exploded a cloud and cursed unprintably. "We've given Urban new steam lines, new condenser installed before he came, new lots of things. Now you talk of junking it all!" He rapped an important finger on Curly's greasy shirt to challenge: "Do you go chief or does Hutchins?"

Couzens could have pitched him into the skipper's shower, he was that mad. "Give me time," was all he could voice.

Comey turned briskly, almost triumphantly to Captain Merritt. The latter took the cue and said, "Give him twenty-four hours, we sail day after tomorrow."

"Good. And you decide this matter, Captain; I've got to be in New York at Bush Terminal tomorrow. Lots to do. Too much," Comey spluttered, and he dusted his hands eloquently, looking down over his expensive clothes.

That concluded the parley, Couzens would come to terms.

THE *Hamadan's* second assistant engineer went aft in a mental whirlwind. So much of this situation had been sprung on him, so much more had been merely hinted. But Comey had little suspected how much Couzens knew. Mainly about Duke Hutchins. Curly had done some ferreting about that despicable schemer, just to protect himself—and the one-track-minded Chief. Hutchins was not a man to get dirty if it could be avoided, yet Curly had observed him, unseen, messing around the new condenser and elsewhere away below there in the early morning

watch when Urban and the other two engineers were asleep—or should be.

Curly went onto the poop with the suspicion that the hidden hand of Hutchins or his influential relative was working to get rid of good ole Chief Urban. Duke Hutchins, the immaculate, the best dressed man aboard ship, the engineer in gloves—that false alarm disgrace and displace the Chief? "Like hell he will!"

But the alternative was worse. Urban was to go; either Curly or the duke would take over. It turned Curly's stomach. And now he was returning to what? To putter and figure and measure some more with the Chief; it seemed so futile, this late morning, all to no avail.

He passed the bunker hatch. Out from behind the stack appeared Duke Luscomb Hutchins, trim as a new vacuum gauge. "So-o-o," he sneered, "you and the big shots together up for'd! Nice to have one of us aft on the inside."

Curly elected to by-pass the innuendo. He viewed his greasy grime and said, "Yeah, ain't it the truth? In these dirty clothes, at that."

The duke turned menacing. "That two-time stuff isn't going to be popular back here, Second. We're no fools."

Couzens's fingers itched for a wrench, or even a gooey gob of waste to plug the rat's mouth. "Remember that when you play with a big shot on the board of directors," he retorted. "I'm onto you, First."

He went on. Behind him Hutchins called, "Hey, who said I play the big shots? Who told you——"

Curly closed the passageway door behind him, went on to the engine-room with the rankling regret that maybe he had given away too much too soon to the wrong person. Yes, the duke was behind this maneuver, Curly felt more certain than ever. The sly devil had thought nobody else was familiar with matters on the inside—until now.

And Chief Urban's white head and long nose could be seen far below, through the iron gratings. Curly found him measuring the curves in the eccentric rods and more than at any other time it looked futile. How would the Chief take the sudden discharge? The ship would sail within two days. Within one, either the Chief's own First or his Second, both armed with chief's papers, would come to light as a supplanter of him, a double-crosser.

Curly felt sick over it, standing close behind Urban for orders to help in this pointless hunt for reluctant power, for some hidden fault which made the engine fail to take advantage of a wide open throttle.

WITHOUT turning his white head, the Chief squinted earnestly at his calipers and said softly, "So one of us is in special favor with the 'little great Comey' of Overseas, Incorp'rated." Sarcasm? Tons of it.

Then the duke had relayed the gossip of a meeting up forward. With nasty insinuations, too, by the tone of the Chief's voice. What could Curly say? To protest would only multiply the Chief's misgivings and Curly could not tolerate such a thing. He owed this veteran about everything he had attained thus far; he must have good, sound discharge papers from him for future success.

"Perhaps my second assistant has the solution to our problem aboard here. In which case the 'little big' Comey rubs out the deadwood. Right?" Urban's sarcasm was thinly veiled anxiety for himself. Had the duke guessed ahead of time what was impending? If so, why hadn't his wire-pulling given him the call instead of Curly getting it? After all, Hutchins was first assistant, Couzens only the second—it was a vicious muddle, it was getting no better fast.

Forthright Couzens could endure it no longer. He tapped the Chief's shoulder and jerked his head upward. A forced grin widened Urban's mouth but his gray eyes lighted up for a quarrel. They left

the oiler up above for the duration and headed for the Chief's room.

Before he had the door locked, the Chief spat out in accumulated fury, "Now you spill it. By cripes, I made you. I—"

Curly raised a protesting hand. He had already planned this jam session, he must handle the Chief expertly. "Chief, it's me or the duke in your job. Twenty-four hours to settle which. I'm on the inside track."

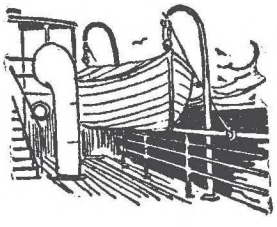
Urban's eyes blazed, then his sharp features froze and stayed so. The dent in his pointed chin looked deeper, the brows bushier, the mop of white hair whiter. It had hurt him hard. Yet he must have seen it coming, his sarcasm had suggested at least that much to Couzens now studying him. Curly had dreaded this moment, had planned it carefully. Just now he was setting up the old man for another, different blow. He could wait.

Finally, from the cornered Chief came a low-voiced, "I dunno. Y'build up young men, y' make a rep. One kills the other in an hour."

"What? Me kill your rep? Nobody can do that. Aw, no."

"Your rep," Urban switched over deftly. "No, you wouldn't fathom it, Couzens. You know what I know, some of it anyway. You try to go on where I leave off—you're licked at the start."

"Yeah? Then why did that Comey offer it to me?" Curly argued.



Urban exploded. "Wants something impossible prob'ly, another engineer to mow down. I dunno, this company intrigue's beyond me, I'm an expert engineer, that's all," came the Chief's dejected reply.

Good. Now Curly could talk to him and be heard. He launched forth. "Chief, I've been boring into company affairs while you've kept your nose to the steam lines below."

"Ahr," disgustedly, "you hate the duke too much."

"Maybe you should too. Listen. He has —we'll say an uncle—on the board of Overseas, Inc. That uncle holds considerable preferred stock and he has influence over some of the common."

"To hell with him and stock!" Urban jumped up impulsively.

"Wait, Chief, sit down. You've got to give me a hearing. You're hot and you're not fair to me."

Urban gaped—but he sat, too.

"That guy Langley is the one who got the rest of the board to buy this ship—at a cut rate figure per ton. Because of her old-time reputation, he got a corking good figure on her."

"Why? I'll bite," sarcastically. "Cut the long story."

"To make a chief's job for his protégé, Duke Hutchins."

"Then why'm I here?" Urban shot in.

"To correct all troubles, so four-flushing Hutchins, with three picked assistants, can gold-braid it as her chief, the stuffed shirt!"

"But I haven't corrected things—not yet—and I'm fired tomorrow."

"Sure, so I'm put in chief for a few runs to Rio."

Urban peered at him. "You dam' fool! Why's that?"

"You're only one man, I'll make two of us who came over from her former owners and can't make her take an open throttle. That uncle figures that if I can't fix her, he'll corral votes enough to lay out the price of a new power plant aboard here. If I can, of course, the duke gets a corrected, thoroughly checked power plant as good as new that even dumb, superficial he can get by with. If two of us fail, he'll get a brand new, flawless plant. It's all a set-up for Duke Hutchins. As for

myself, I can get back into a Colpitt's ship."

"Hutchins must have some hold on that—"

"Langley? He has. Langley's daughter is—well, not pretty."

"Oh, I see. Where'd you learn so much gossip? Own cousins marrying? Ahr—"

"Chief, I trailed the duke ashore. I tipped a certain person in the office, too, and the duke was overheard in conversations with Langley—who roars when he raves."

"And you're s'posed to be serving as my assistant aboard the ship!" Urban complained. "You do better to give the job your talents."

"I owed it to you, Chief. You have to sign any references I ever want; I've always been under you. You've done a lot for myself, I've got a lot wrapped up in you and your reputation, don't forget."

"Blarney!" the Chief had kept annoying his eyes until by now they were bloodshot. Curly had studied those eyes painstakingly.

"Chief, tell me this—just why have you been so careful to build yourself a reputation as a trouble-shooter?"

URBAN'S hands went again to his eyes. "Never mind that, we're parting company tomorrow, you say."

"No. I did not say. You're going to say. I've told you the big story—most of it, for now—so you tell me. Shall I accept your job in the skipper's cabin in the morning, or do you prefer to let it go to the duke by my refusal?"

"Wa-ait a minute. 'Most of it' means what?" Urban checked him.

"Means the duke has been taking a certain advantage of you below decks. But we don't agree on that, so skip it. I still remember that he installed the new condenser in drydock before we came aboard."

"Yeah? So I'm letting that fop double-cross me? You flatter him. He takes orders, he does what I lay out for him. Even now he's correcting the angles in the eccentric rods in the lathe-room aft. He'll do it right, too, for he's a good man that way. And no more o' your slurs on that condenser job. It's okay. Simply remember that Hutchins lacks initiative; no originality. You overrate Duke Hutchins, Couzens."

"Okay, Chief. We agree to disagree on him—leave your eyes alone, won't you? There's grease in your hands."

Urban snorted at him. "Pretty cocky, aren't you, kid? Told me a big story, now bossing my eyes. Well, it's my turn at last. Listen. You'll neither of you displace me as chief o' the *Hamadan.*"

"Well! What do you decide! I've left it to you, Chief."

"I've decided it before leaving the engine. Those corrected, lengthened rods will make her valves open up top for more steam and I'll get the credit and I happen to know the Overseas port chief. When he wants a man for a job, directors nor preferred stock nor common shares—nothing cuts in on him because his decisions have always spelled dividends. So-o-o, smart boy! Kid, you're wise in some ways, but you're limited."

"Who'll spill this discovery—the eccentrics correction?"

Urban rose triumphantly. "I return your favor; I'll let you do it to the skipper tomorrow."

CAPTAIN MERRITT closed his door, saying, "I can guess your answer, er, Chief Couzens. Congratulations." He was a diplomatic man.

Curly disabused him promptly. "Give the Chief this one trip more, Cap'n. He's got something, he's sure of it."

They talked at length. Curly learned that Comey was not in favor of the duke, that Comey really wanted the present outfit below aft retained, that Overseas needed all available money to secure and insure lend-lease charters.

"Then the Chief gets this one chance

more, Cap'n," Curly prompted respectfully.

"It's up to me. He does. But for gawd-sake, Couzens, make it a success before we get back to Boston!"

THE *Hamadan* stood well to the eastward of Frying Pan Shoal on the run down to Rio. Her engine behaved, possibly, a trifle better; not yet had occasion come to require full throttle, not yet a real test of the Chief's presumed cure.

Eight strokes of resounding spanner blows ended Curly Couzens's middle watch and started the duke's morning watch. They stood between throttle and blackboard, mutually suspicious, sullen.

"Okay, chief's flunkie; my watch. Clear out," Hutchins growled.

Couzens ignored it. "I saw the job you did on the eccentric rods," he said.

"Not bad, if I do say so."

"Except the installing job."

Hutchins almost checked a startled expression. "Meaning what, Second?"

"Neat patch on the strap to number one.

Did you shorten the rod to allow for the thickness of your patch iron?"

Hutchins' mouth opened at one end. "You, what the hell d'you think you are, the Chief? He inspected everything, he's not kicking."

"Of course, not; you know why, too. Known it all along, haven't you? Wait. I'm talking now. Our vacuum's been slightly low all my watch so I'm asking you, Duke, got any more of your mistakes covered up around here?"

The duke leered closer to snarl, "Whadda y'inferring, Second?"

"You cracked that strap down its center, you patched it without reporting or logging it. You're a born tool-dropper. So I ask you, any more patchwork? How about the condenser? You installed that, you boast."

"That'll be enough—" Hutchins began.

Curly pointed toward the vacuum gauge.

"Second"—one of the duke's new service gloves came up as a threatening fist—"if I ever catch you monkeying round that condenser, I'll drop something heavy."

"I don't scare, Duke. Good morning."

Outside in the windy passageway, Curly Couzens asked himself one question: Should he call a halt on himself? Already he had incurred the wrath of both men rated above him and as yet could prove nothing to warrant it. Was his concern for the Chief, after all, worth inviting more of the latter's scorn? Had Urban truly believed he had solved the low vacuum and feed problem or was this just a bid for the extra trip in which to further hunt for it, further fight for his good name?

But the Chief had allowed the duke to reinstall the rods, had passed on the job—and it was not what Curly rated a complete success. True, the carefully measured bunker consumption and as carefully logged r.p.m.-distance figures did show some improvement. But the *Hamadan* was on schedule. What would she do at making up time after a head wind? After crossing currents?

Curly had no faith in longer eccentrics, they only extended the feed opening farther up by taking as much off below on the down stroke. Sure the valve had been perhaps a trifle down the valve chest but—

should he quit the fight and leave the Chief to fight his own battle? And eventually discover Duke Hutchins for what he was?

Despite the hour—4:25 a.m.—he went on aft. The Chief's door was shut. He tried the knob. The door was locked. He went outside and saw the Chief's forward porthole open and a light inside. He looked in and gasped. Chief Urban was feeling his way from his door, along by his bed, coming, coming, to the porthole. He fumbled for the thumbscrew. Curly was looking into his eyes and those eyes were not seeing him.

Abruptly the Chief left the port open, got to his bed, lay down and moaned, "O, God, it's caught up to me at last. God, I can't see a thing. I've got to see. She's still faulty somewhere—somewhere I can't see——"

Curly sheered away, his own eyes moist. He saw again his Chief at work throughout his watch only yesterday afternoon. Alone and tempery, hovering over the condenser, squinting at indicator cards, fondling the indicator he himself had made years ago and still swore by. He had long been hard on his eyes; Curly had seen it, had seen the Chief when the latter must have been covering up fits of bad vision. This early morning Curly's long secret suspicions were verified; the duke, too, had known this and had taken advantage of it. The duke knew the Chief wouldn't see his clever patch on the strap—or on any other blundered break.

BUT the Chief had turned to the condenser when, no doubt, he'd realized only partial success at the eccentrics, when he'd found even yet a lower than normal vacuum. To the condenser, exactly where Curly had tried to direct him in port—and the Chief hadn't seen a flaw. He couldn't see details then—and the duke was now warning Curly to keep away from that condenser!

Curly went inside, vowing he'd catch Duke Hutchins and expose him to the port engineer, regardless of the Chief's objections and the duke's threats. For he suspected the duke of deliberate mistakes, of doing things hidden, of ridding the *Hamadan* of Chief Urban and the second assistant the Chief had brought with him.

First, however, he had a talk with the Steward about the Chief's condition and enjoined him to secrecy. Thus it was that the Chief's meals went to his room for a day or two and a mess boy got a fat tip—until the eyes became better; enough better for the Chief to come and go, artfully feeling, carefully spending his limited vision. Only Curly actually knew how badly off the old veteran was; only Curly knew how deeply the man worried and how near the duke was to devilish success.

No doubt remained after the ship bucked a head wind below the Line. When the skipper called for full feed to make up some, at least, of the lost time, the *Hamadan* found only an extra quarter knot. The duke chuckled, the Chief cursed in his room, the skipper regretted his decision on one more trip. Curly Couzens studied plans and fittings of the new condenser the duke had installed like a demon preparing a potion. Curly would work below in Rio!

RIO'S docks were plugged with freighters. Rio's waterfront was freight piled high. Delay was the word of the hour and the *Hamadan* was perforce at anchor. How long here? Days. Mañana, mañana.

Couzens saw the skipper leave the Chief's room, solemn, worried. He caught sight of the second assistant. They talked. "Yes, yes, Cap'n," Curly responded after a courteous wait, "but this round trip is not done yet. We've the return run north in which to spot the trouble."

"Return—what in thunder could be discovered that hasn't already been? The ship is not fit to step faster than a moderate, routine jog— U-boats. You've

heard? They're reported in the Caribbean and off this coast. Our best speed is not much better'n theirs; I couldn't outdistance one, couldn't even ram one 'fore he'd crash dive. As for zig-zagging!" He threw up his hands.

"Give us the rest of the time we agreed on, Cap'n," Curly pleaded.

Captain Merritt demurred. Then: 'Couzens, he's almost blind. Did you realize that?"

"Yes," reluctantly, "but it's worry and I believe the oil—I'm doing what's being done hereafter. Give me a chance, same as though I'd accepted his job. That's only reasonable, Cap'n."

"Yeah, but that Hutchins—he's rating above you, next to Urban. Once he catches on how bad the eyes are, at times, he'll come for'd demanding complete charge aft."

"I'll manage that guy, sir, in my own way."

"No violence, Second, no fighting on my ship—well, listen. I'm going ashore. I planned to bring aboard a chief in Urban's place, an outsider to clear the air. As 'tis, I'll confer with the agent here, might have to cable Boston. Anyway, we'll try your scheme—you work for a cure, for speed and power on a full throttle when it's needed. Urban stays chief the rest of the voyage. But you're out of luck, mister. You can't do much at this late hour. I'm only living up to our agreement in Boston."

"Thanks, Cap'n," Curly responded.

Fortunately for Curly it was his own watch below. He went directly to his big, long-time hunch, the condenser. He improvised a temporary jet condenser, it was okay for the present circumstances. He and his two oilers and a water tender worked fast. They overhauled and cleaned and scrutinized the tubes, the packing, the water space, the water chests. Manhole covers came out, went back. Grease and sediment vanished. A slight sag was removed from one tube probably bent when heavy-handed Hutchins had let it go in that way.

But Curly put his own effort on pumps. The circulator's shaft, pipe joints, air cocks. He intimately examined rods and nuts and cover bolts—and discovered nothing that could have lowered vacuum.

Now the all-important air pump. His hands almost trembled as they dissembled this vital link; for if it did not do all its appointed task, back pressure resulted in the big low-compression cylinder. Rods, pins, studs, the amount of slack if any, the—abruptly he stood up. This pump had been installed new in the fairly recent drydocking, new from its manufacturers. Yet it had been taken apart since. Obviously so, for the piston had been cracked and patched and the patching job was a clumsy strap-iron affair that leaked. Across the head with a badly fitted strap —"Hell! He—"

Before he could say more to give it away to his men, before he could expose the workmanship, a loud voice came from the top landing. "Second, you're wanted for'd!"

Curly looked up. The duke was there and he was furious, half-dolled to go ashore but yanking off a beautiful necktie.

"Who says so?" Curly retorted suspiciously.

"The skipper. Who else?"

That was a lie; the skipper was ashore. It was a ruse to get him out of here, away from this discovery. The duke came running down when Curly ignored further yelling and Curly was sure now of that dirty double-crosser's purpose. He aimed to take over and cover up his devilry, to replace everything himself while Curly went out on a futile hunt for the captain.

HUTCHINS was white on arrival below. He called Couzens away from the others to say, "I warned you to keep away from that condenser."

"And the skipper is ashore," Curly threw in.

"I'll finish up here; you're Second, I'm First and the Chief is—"

"Not able to come below to check you or see your devilry. Duke, why'd you take a new pump apart?"

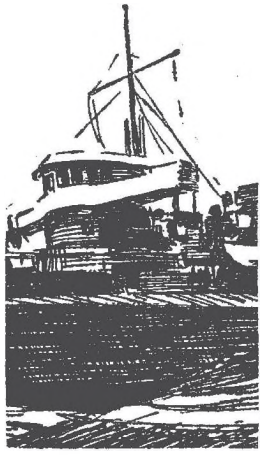
"I came dissembled."

"I doubt it. It didn't come with a cracked piston or you'd have sent it ashore for a good one. So you crack it. And the crack's so leaky you apply one of your patch jobs like the one on the eccentric rod. They told me you claim to be a steam expert, in Boston."

Hutchins came closer. "Listen, you chief's errand boy, what good does cracked pistons do me—or anybody else? Cut the bedtime."

Curly glanced toward a 16-inch wrench. "Plenty of good," he replied. "I know your plans for yourself aboard this ship. Your board of directors' friend talks too loud to you in that conference room in Boston."

"You want chief of the *Hamadan*. But



you've got to have a brand new power plant. You're afraid to try it with this one. You can't forget this ship's old reputation for lagging on open throttle, you fall for a hoodoo. So you attempt in drydock to make her baffle even Chief Urban. It does, maybe, but your friend can't get the other directors to lay out so much money on the ship when it's needed for charters and insurance. Yeah, so I am to be chief long enough to convince the other directors for your big friend. Two of us fail, it must be incurable. Urban goes, I go, you get in and a new engine and steam system is installed. Huh, Smooth, Duke, Too smooth."

The duke started for him. Curly swept up the wrench. "The skipper forbade fighting before he went ashore," he warned. "I'll obey orders, I'll not slug you. But I'll plant this in your belly at sixty miles per before you get close enough to slug. I mean it."

Hutchins was cornered. Couldn't risk crossing a skipper who disapproved of him and stood with that little Comey. Couldn't stop the wrench and have enough left in him.

THE *Hamadan* stood well up the North Atlantic. Thirteen days out of Rio, deep in coffee. One day more to Boston. Her master paced her bridge and for the nth time repeated, "I never see anything beat this for weather. Not a breeze in forty-eight hundred mile and none in prospect."

"Humph, how'll y' know whether to keep the Chief or not?" He sez he's solved that power situation and you ain't proved or disproved it," the mate on watch chuckled.

"He solved it?" Captain Merritt checked himself, it was the second assistant. But the skipper went on with, "Well, I've been saving it. Emergency, maybe. If we had to run from attack, no good showing the whole crew we're still slow—not before we have to admit it."

The mate gave him a quick glance. He, too, had heard the U-boat story, had searched the horizon for one till his eyes were weary. Now he watched the skipper more intently, watched him study the sea and especially the blurring horizon, with eyes which had not closed for more than an hour at a time in three days of this double alert. It moved the mate to mur-

mur sullenly, "We ain't a *Reuben James* and we ain't Halifax bound."

Chief Urban bathed his eyes as he talked to Curly in his room aft. "She's not right yet and she never will be, Second," he complained angrily. "I was a proper fool to walk into this and tow you along. Well, we'll be out of her tomorrow. Maybe the Colpitts outfit'll take us back. Y' can't bet they wouldn't"—he wheeled on Couzens impulsively—"can you?"

Curly's mind was on the condenser air pump, not Colpitts. His and this Chief's future hung on the success or failure of the work he had done on that thing. Yet the skipper refused to sanction a trial run on open throttle, even though the vacuum already showed decided improvement. And the trip was within a day of docking. Was it a determined, final policy to rid the ship and payroll of two men from the Colpitts Line? Were he and Urban licked anyway? He heard the Chief vaguely, gazing out into the twilight through a porthole, too solemn for words.

Aye, he could get another ship, but the Chief— Worry, uncertainty, defeat would surely bring back that horrible, total blindness. One of these attacks might easily become permanent. Whether Chief approved or not, some good specialist should have a look at his eyes right away. Eyes, experiments, trip ending, defeat—

He could endure the suspense no longer. Too much was at stake. He left the porthole abruptly, his mind made up. "Damn it, I'm going to the skipper myself!"

"Now, now—" Urban cautioned. "We have nothing to offer, no new hunch."

"Yeah?" for the Chief still did not know about that condenser incident in Rio.

"Couzens, come back here — back, I say!"

The door slammed. Simultaneously the First emerged from the engine room into the passageway farther aft and strutted toward his room like the prospective winner which he certainly was. Curly headed forward to argue for a test run. The very sight of that Hutchins ducking it down the passageway had doubled his will to have a showdown here outside, tonight, at sea, while he and the Chief were aboard the ship.

HE DID not see or sense the eyes of the duke behind him all the way over the main deck to the bridge. He found the captain in the starboard wing, peering far away into the growing dusk, peering intently at one indefinable spot. He broke the silence. Again he addressed the skipper and the latter remained an intent unity of massive torso, raised arms, hat tilted and binoculars a part of the face. But Curly refused to be ignored tonight; he had made up his mind, he could hang to his purpose indefinitely. "I say, Cap'n! This is our last night at sea. It's only fair to the Chief to test—"

Captain Merritt, still statuesque, still concentrated in his binoculars, said evenly, "Young man, that is a U-boat or I'm a lobsterman. Been trailing us for hours, waiting for dark to— There, it *is!* It's still too far away for a good shot at us." He faced Couzens, binoculars down, eyes blazing their intensity. "Your third assistant is on watch. Take over. Get every fathom of speed you can out of this ship. Try anything; anything. Tell the Chief——"

Curly burst into the Chief's room. 'Twas empty. He ran on into the engine room. Between himself and the throttle valve stood, not only the third assistant but three men. Chief Urban, white with shock and intensity, gripped the piperail and stared at the engine with unseeing eyes. The third assistant, nursing a bruised chin, was faltering backward beneath the blackboard. Duke Hutchins, half dressed but wearing those characteristic, priceless gloves of his, slowly turned the valve, eyes wide, mouth slack and scared green.

Curly had his orders from the skipper, he stepped in. "Cap'n's orders, I take over. Emergency."

The duke refused to move. "I heard

'em," he retorted without turning his head. "I've got the Chief here, stone blind. That makes me chief. Stand clear."

"Stand hell!" Curly gripped the duke's left arm, it was shaking with fear. The man was drenching wet with sweat, the sweat of terror. He expected a torpedo—Curly raised his own left arm and swung down across those gloves like a drop forge. The gloves left the throttle wheel. Curly bowled the duke toward the Third. The duke's heels caught in the gratings, he clattered down at the Third's feet. While Couzens opened the feed more, still more.

"Third, vacuum reading!" he shouted above the increasing roar of mounting power.

The Third hurried, read the gauge, the highest gauge the *Hamadan* had ever logged. The First cried, "I'm acting chief, I get the credit if—if we make it. Stand clear, you."

Couzens ignored the man, he sounded like a kid; he was a strange mixture, in fact—stark fear of a torpedo streaking into sight below and unwarranted greed for the credit. But Curly had corrected that air pump, not he. He fed more steam, the old *Hamadan* vibrated, her engine sang a wild song of escaping steam under cylinders and clupping cranks and crossheads slipping over guides.

The phone rang. "Take it, Third!" He came headlong, panted, "Vacuum reads—"

"Phone!"

The skipper was howling for more speed, the ship was changing course.

"O my God!" the duke cried out in redouble anxiety. "Lemme take her."

"You stand by your boilers," Curly retorted, "if you want to win this race. A quarter turn on those safeties. Run, man, run!"

The duke half slid down the first flight, stumbled to the second landing, limped on. He was away below, now, where he'd greet first whatever came through her hull. He was too frightened to argue. The grand diapason of power drowned his cries to men in the fire room, the safety valves were to be turned down swiftly.

By then the throttle was wide open. Couzens became conscious again of the Chief and looked at him. Urban was gripping the same rail as though frozen there. Curly cried, "Look, Chief. You've got it. She's taking all we've got."

Urban's head turned slowly, the eyes were unfocussed.

"Give us the steam gauge, Third," Curly shouted.

"Two seventy-two."

"Good enough. Now pass it to the intermediate. Then to the big baby."

CURLY watched the Chief's face until the Third reported direct feed to all three cylinders. Then he went close to Urban. "Steady, Chief, we're winners. You've cured this old *Hamadan*. You're vindicated."

Urban's eyes changed, the pupils shrank perceptibly.

Curly could have yelled for joy. Instead, he said, "The trouble was in that new condenser, in the air pump."

"I inspected the condenser," Urban said slowly, unbelievingly. "I saw no—"

Into his ear, Curly said, "Hush, Chief. *We* saw a cracked piston that was leaking back pressure to the low compression cylinder and keeping vacuum down just about enough to wash out the speed and power on an open throttle. She's an old model, remember. But we've cured her, Chief. Breeze up, man, you win—"

As he talked, he almost forgot the life-and-death race outside. The savage roar of rods and heads and cranks and auxiliaries became a blending confirmation of his comforting words. Until Chief Urban's grips on the piperail relaxed and he rubbed his eyes. Now he sniffed expertly at the escaping steam and the pallor left his face as he broke into perspiration. He could see again.

The time soon came when Curly saw him step confidently to the throttle and

take over. And there he remained, in complete control of the situation until, was it one bell? Two? Curly had lost track of minutes, let alone bells.

The phone rang again. The Chief gave Couzens the nod and answered it. The race was won. At the first word of it uttered by the Chief, the Third let out a yell the like of which is only to be heard on the islands off the Maine coast. Curly heard an oiler away below, however, echo it. Firemen came streaking into the lower level to stare up hopefully. "Okay, okay," Couzens assured them. "Where's the First?"

Presently the duke appeared, besooted, bedevilled. He looked above just as the Chief took over again and shouted down, "Set your safety valves back to norm." He beckoned to the Third to close bypass valves, he chalked up the changes on the board while Couzens stood by the throttle.

When the Chief came back, Curly pointed down. There stood the duke, still besooted and bedevilled — and now bedamned. His highly complicated scheme to provide himself a chief's rating suited to his peculiar liking had collapsed all around him within an hour and a half. Chief Urban was indisputable master here now. Only when the Chief shouted, "Go turn in, Hutchins, it's all over and we win," did the First come out of his funk. He ordered the water tender handy to set the safety valves, yanked off those splendid gloves, hove them at the condenser on the far side and departed. The fanfare above and below had made his defeat stunning.

LITTLE big Mr. Comey chewed his panatella this time. His gray eyes beamed mutual understanding toward the captain. A very professional stranger to the *Hamadan* set a leather case on the captain's bed and watched Comey's cigar. "Remember, do not light that one," he reminded.

Chief Urban came forward to argue, to defend himself against impending discharge, to prove and establish himself with Comey as an expert. He entered the cabin, grim and dignified and determined. However, the professional stranger was examining his gray eyes before he could launch a word.

Talk began, impersonal talk, pleasant and easy and reassuring. The eyes were closely watched, then further examined. Curly Couzens entered quietly and then grinned at Urban, making him feel even better. All of which registered, especially with the doctor.

"Well?" the impatient Comey prompted as the doctor closed his case.

"Rest him a month, then he'll be fit for—for your plan."

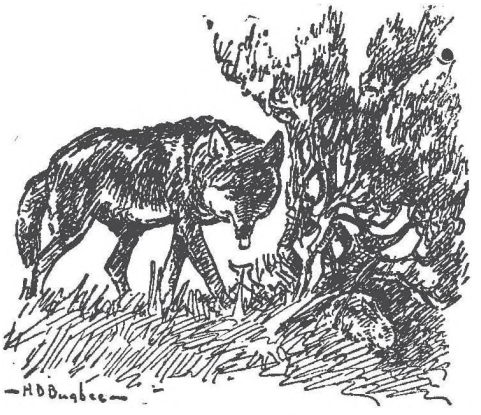
"Fine. Fine enough."

Then, somehow, silently, the cabin cleared. That is, only three men remained. Said Comey, "There have been wheels within wheels, men. You have settled more pulling and hauling and pressure than you realize. As a result, our port engineer has been moved upward and we want Chief Urban to go port engineer with access to the laboratory in the Excel Marine Engines, Incorporated, plant."

Shake! Shake on it, Chief!" Curly exploded.

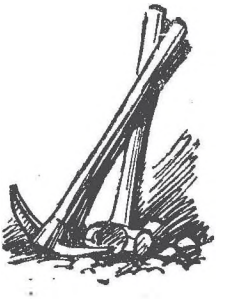
"Shake what?" Comey snapped. "A port engineer does not get that familiar with the chief of the *Hamadan* or any other ship's engineers—or does he?"

Curly Couzens gripped the old man's hand.



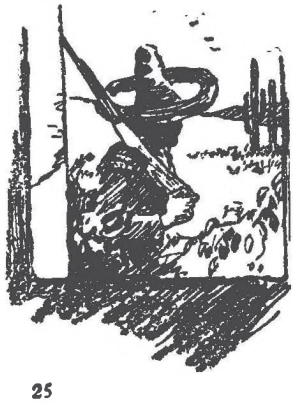
WHO SPILLED THOSE BEANS?

. . . Once More Let Me Repeat —Gold Is Where You Find It. Or Not, as the Case May Be



By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Born to Battle," etc.



LET some big he-coyote pull down a fawn in a far, timber-hidden canyon with apparently not a wing in the sky, and in two minutes here are the ravens flapping heavily from tree-top to tree-top, cawing impatiently for their turn at the kill.

Hardly had Mariano Luján lit down from his rawboned roan and stepped into the little Tejón City Bank just across Picacho Street from the sheriff's office than the minions of that highly abdominal dignitary began to flock around. Not only was it routine for the High Shereef's many deputies to keep a wary eye on El Señor Coyote whenever and wherever he might turn up, but this time, in Mariano's brief passage from hitch-rack to bank door, they had seen that he carried a buckskin bag, small, but plainly very heavy. Furthermore, the slim vaquero's manner had been as stealthy as that of a coyote sneaking for cover with a stolen hen in its mouth.

By the time Mariano reached the cashier's window inside, the High Shereef himself was nonchalantly indenting his paunch against the railing nearby. So close, in fact, that even though the voices of both Cashier McTeague and Mariano Luján were lowered almost to a whisper, the sheriff's ears distinctly caught the words—*"puro oro"*—"pure gold."

With pretended casualness, despite the avid gleam in his piggy little black eyes, Don Eufracio Gallegos, High Shereef of Tejón County, cleared his throat.

"Hallo, *chivo!*" he greeted. "What you breeng in the leetle sack, my fr'an?"

Without answering, El Señor Coyote tried to sidle past him toward the bank's safety box vaults, a key in one hand, the buckskin sack sagging in the other. But Don Eufracio's paunchy bulk blocked his way.

"Hallo, Shereef!" Mariano's lean brown face looked dismayed. He jerked the buckskin sack swiftly around behind him. 'In the sack?" he stammered, then lowered his voice to a worried whisper. "Leesten, Señor Shereef—joost betwinn ourself a secret, eh? Because if they find out that Mariano

Luján hides in a safe box one leetle sack of beans, first thing you don't know, ever'-body theenk I am crazy on the head. But the risson I breeng the sack of beans, it is because—"

"Frijoles—fah!" Don Eufracio's snort blew the tobacco right out of the dead brown paper cigarette stuck to his heavy lower lip. "Don't I joost hear you said 'pure gold' to the cashier? *Frijoles de oro,* eh? Beans of pure gold! Nuggets! Where you get them, *chivo?"*

"Thass joost what I gonna told you!" Mariano protested. "I get them from the old man Enrique Suazo, you know heem —sometime a leetle crazy on the head—up on the Rito Escabroso. 'Look, Mari, *hijo,'* he say to me, 'every year I peeck out the very best beans to make good seed for next year planting, but maybe somebody esteal them, maybe I'm got hongry an' eat them myself'." Mariano paused to shrug in a characteristic Spanish gesture. "So thees time Don Enrique ask me to keep for heem his beans, an' I joost breeng to the bank so I don't forgot an' eat them myself! Maybe leetle *loco* the old man, but long time she's my fr'and, thass why I'm take care hees beans. Because, like you joost now hear me told Meest' McTeague, the friendsheep, she ees pure gold!"

"Leche de burro!" grunted Don Eufracio—which is a Spanish way of saying "horse feathers." "If not gold in the sack, for why you don't let me see for heem-self?"

"Because," grinned Mariano Luján suavely, "always you put some nose in the beezness, *panzón!"*

Agile as a cat, the lean *vaquero* side-stepped the sheriff's gun-bristling bulk and started sidling away toward the vault. Then, as Don Eufracio started after him the sole of a swift raised boot met the bulge of his middle right at the belt line.

"Ooomph!" said the High Shereef, and sat on the floor. "Tomás! Chato! Arcadio! Queeck!" he bellowed, and suddenly the place was full of deputies. But as they swarmed toward him, Mariano vanished into the open vault. Before they could follow, Cashier McTeague swung the massive door shut and twirled the bolt. The face with which he met the sheriff's demands to open it again looked dourly exasperated.

"Go milk a duck," he said shortly, and returned to his wicket.

"But Señor, thees *chivo* makes assaults on the high shereef! Thees—"

"Our policy, Mr. Sheriff," broke in McTeague dryly, "is never to disturb a customer while making use of his safety box. Good day to you, gentlemen."

"But—but thees *chivo!* Leesten, Señor MocTigg—what he have in the sack? *Por dios,* where he get those many *chispas de oro,* you theenk?"

"Yes," said Barney McTeague. "I don't. Maybe he found him a gold mine. In any case, he's in the vault, there's plenty of air in there for some time. When you buzzards buzz off I'll let him out—but not before."

"But leesten! I am the High Shereef! In the name of the law—"

"Goose milk," said McTeague. "Where is your warrant?"

"You theenk, eh?" Don Eufracio shook a pudgy fist. But he looked baffled, and presently, after a muttered conference, he waddled pompously out, followed by his deputies. McTeague watched them cross the street, evidently headed for the office to prepare a warrant, then stepped quickly to the vault and opened it.

"They've gone to swear out a warrant, Mister Kiote," he grinned. "You better be rollin' your tail!"

"Thank you too much, my fr'an!" Mariano bowed politely, and headed for the door, pocketing the safety box key. 'Sometimes I retorn you the favor, eh?"

"Yeah—you might even tell me where you find that sack of nuggets, or—"

But already Mariano was gone. From outside, as he swung swiftly to the saddle, came the shrill, long-drawn quaver of a

coyote's howl followed presently by shouts, curses and the drum of galloping hoofs as Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos and his half dozen deputies sped after El Señor Coyote's long-legged roan in hot but futile pursuit.

STRANGELY enough the report that El Señor Coyote had loped in from the mountains to deposit a sack of pure gold nuggets in the bank vault did not spread very far. Close mouthed by nature, Barney McTeague was not in the habit of blabbing his customer's affairs; and at a secret council of the various kinsmen who served him as deputies and political henchmen, Sheriff Gallegos laid down the law.

"Don't told nobody something," he ordered. "If thees *chivo* Luján has find a gold mine, more better we win it from heem on secret."

To Chato, Tomás, Juan, Arcadio and the rest of his *primos* Don Eufracio did not need to explain what he meant by "win it." It was a long established custom in Tejón County for the Gallegoses to take what they wanted—legally, of course—if they could get their hands on it. Right now, with considerable opposition developing against Don Eufracio's re-election as sheriff in the coming election, a gold mine would come in mighty handy. For the business of buying votes, however camouflaged, costs money. Furthermore, with the new District Judge frowning on too much flagrant graft, pickings in the sheriff's office had begun to get a little lean. So lean, in fact, that numerous political supporters of the High Shereef in the last election were grumbling about his failure to come through with all the *ayuda* he had promised them.

Now the word *"ayuda"* means, simply, "help." But in New Mexico politics it often means something like this: when approached by a candidate for office for the favor of his support, the patriarch of a family numbering half a dozen to two dozen votes, including in-laws and cousins, is likely to say, *"Sí, sí, Don Eufracio*—yes, yes, you are the man for the office, and I want my *gente* to vote for you; but as you see I am a poor man—sometimes, alas, I find I need a little help. Right now, for instance, on the cows of the husband of my granddaughter there is a mortgage. If it is foreclosed——"

Whereupon the candidate generously pays—or promises to pay—off the mortgage—whether there was one or not, thus sewing up a fair block of votes. Maybe

he buys the mortgage himself, magnanimously refraining from foreclosing it—as long as the family concerned continues to vote right.

In short to be elected calls for votes, votes call for *ayuda, ayuda* costs money, and Don Eufracio's black-mustached mouth fairly watered at the thought of a gold mine. If, while acquiring it, he could also twist the tail of El Señor Coyote, so much the more better for heem.

"Leesten me, *compadres!*" he exhorted his henchmen deputies. "By wheeskers of the burro, thees time we gonna make monkey from the Coyote for sure! Already Chato breeng the horses! What am I waiting for? *Vamos!*"

THE Rito Escabroso, as its name implies, is a rough, craggy little creek with narrow, barren side draws and ridges not unlike the brown, weathered wrinkles on old Enrique Suazo's face.

In the lamplit kitchen of his little *choza* old Enrique paused between swigs of sallow, tepid coffee to listen. Through the

stillness of gray dawn came the thump and clatter of a horse's hoofs on the rocky track that served as a road up the narrow canyon to his hut. The old Mexican set down his battered tin coffee cup and picked up the rifle leaning within arm's reach against the wall. Stooped with age and labor as he was, the heavy octagon barrel of the ancient weapon looked longer than the little *viejito* was tall. Gnarled though they were, there was both strength and familiarity in the grip of his fingers upon the well worn stock and forearm. Once Don Enrique Suazo had been a mighty hunter. Now it was a long time since he had fired a shot at game or anything else. Something like six years ago, however, he had loaded the rifle—an old style single shot—and set it ready to hand. That was because he was afraid; and because he was also old and poor and alone and maybe a little crazy to boot, in all those years he had never removed nor changed the load.

Now, as always on those rare occasions when he heard someone coming, he thumbed back the hammer, swung open the creaky door and stood waiting, easing the gun's rusty hammer down to half-cock again when a sharp yap-yap like that of a coyote told him who his visitor was.

"Ah! Señor Coyote!" He greeted Mariano with all the polite courtliness of a Spanish prince. "Welcome, *amigo!* It is a long time since you have entered my humble door!"

"But no, *viejito,*" said Mariano, dismounting. "Was it not yesterday you gave me the bag of beans to keep safe for you?"

"Beans?" The old man looked puzzled. "I gave you no beans yesterday or any other day, *hijo!*"

"Thass fonny!" Mariano winked. "Because when the High Shereef gonna ask you, thass what you gonna tell him; 'sure for Mike I geeve Mariano the beans'!"

"Is it a joke you make, *hijo,* because an old man is a little *loco?*"

"If you are crazy, *viejito,*" said Mariano, laying an arm about the old man's shoulder, "I am the burro's oncle! Now, when the *panzón* Shereef comes here today, what you gonna told heem?"

"To that grandfather of the goats, I speak nothing!" There was a hard gleam in his watery eyes as he picked up the battered old musket again. "Nothing—except bullets!"

"No, *viejito,*" said Mariano quietly. "I know well enough how you hate heem, and with justice, for forcing your *gente* to disown you, to throw you out because six years ago you advised them not to vote for heem for High Shereef. With mortgages held over their heads the fat one and his *políticos* brought you to ruin. But—"

"Fifty dollars he borrowed from me for the campaign—and not one cent has he repaid! No, Mariano, if the Gallegos come here, I speak them notheeng! I shoot!"

"Leesten!" Mariano cocked an ear toward the door. "Already they come! Do not tell them I have been here this morning! Tell them—" he paused at the door —"joost the one word: beans!"

Like a long, lean wraith in the growing daylight, Mariano ran to his horse, swung up and was gone.

At the loud halloo of horsemen a few minutes later Don Enrique Suazo reluctantly hid his ancient musket under the bed, swung wide the door and stood waiting, a bent, stooped figure peering out from under shaggy brows below a disheveled tangle of wispy gray hair. If Mariano wanted him to act the *loco,* then so be it.

The bulky figure of Don Eufracio Gallegos, flanked by two stocky deputies and backed by three more, advanced to the door.

"Ah, Don Enrique, *compadre!*" he put out his pudgy hand in a show of cordiality. "God give you good morning, my friend of other years!"

The old man ignored the hand.

"*Frijoles,*" he said in strangely sepulchral tones. "Beans."

"It has come to our ears," Don Eufracio

restrained his rage, "that there is a gold mine in these hills."

"Beans," said Don Enrique.

"When gold is found in the county of Tejón *viejito,* it is the business of the High Shereef to know where it is located in order that he may guard the owner against thieves and robbers."

"Beans," said Don Enrique.

"*Puro loco!*" growled the gooseberry-nosed deputy called Chato, crossing himself. "The *viejito* is possessed of a devil! Let us not molest him!"

But Don Eufracio suffered from no such superstitious qualms.

"By the life of ten sacred he-goats!" he burst out angrily. His paunch quivered with wrath like a bowl of jelly in an earthquake. Ungently he poked the barrel of a huge pearl handled .45 with an inch of Don Enrique Suazo's thin, slightly drippy nose. "Now you gonna told me—where is that *chivo* Mariano? Where is hees gold mine? Where—"

"Beans." The old man's voice quavered a little, but he stood fast without flinching. "Beans—beans—beans—"

After ten minutes of threats and abuse that included a little judicious slapping about, Don Eufracio gave it up in disgust. Either the old man really was crazy, he decided, or else he knew nothing about Mariano's gold mine.

EARLY as it was, the sheriff's cavalcade had already visited Mariano's cabin near Santo Niño once, but had found the Coyote's den unoccupied. Now they returned, to find Mariano diligently pretending to shoe a horse. But at their approach they had caught a glimpse of the wary *vaquero* hastily slinging a heavy looking gunny-sack and a sledge hammer into the nearby shed. This time the sheriff wasted no time with questions. Without so much as a "by your leave," they headed in full force for the door of the shed. Instantly El Señor Coyote sprang ahead of them, hammer in hand, only to find himself facing the snouts of half a dozen menacing six-guns.

"But leesten, Shereef!" For once El Coyote's voice was humble and pleading. "The calf skeen in the shed—I did not esteal heem! By the oncle of my aunt, I buy heem from—"

"Calf-skeen—*fah!*" chortled Don Eufracio and shoved open the door. From the hastily hidden gunny sack he poured out about half a peck of freshly broken quartz rocks. Even Tomás, dumbest of the sheriff's *cabezudo* deputies, knew that veins of gold are not infrequently found in quartz, and in the dust of this hammer-crushed stone a glint of yellow particles caught the sun.

"Hah! *Frijoles,*" eh?" gloated Don Eufracio. "From where you breeng thees gold, *chivo?*"

"Thees rock, Shereef," Mariano explained lamely, "I'm smash heem up to make greet for the chickens. Thees sand around here, she's too soft for the gizzard. The yellow ees not gold—joost mica!"

"Geezard of a burro! From where you breeng thees?"

"That, Senor Shereef," Mariano shrugged, "more better you find out for heemself!"

"From the Rito Escabroso, *chivo?*"

"Ah!" Mariano looked dismayed. "Even El Señor Coyote leave some tracks, eh? *Bueno,* Shereef, now you got me ketch where the hair are short, more better I'm gonna show you the place myself, eh?"

Crestfallen, Mariano saddled a thick-chested *mojino* and led out. All morning they rode, up one hill and down another, through sunny parks and dark spruce woods, across flinty ridges and deep, rocky canyons. Ahead of the others, El Señor Coyote rode, slumped dejectedly in the saddle. Then, along toward noon, topping a steep, narrow ridge, suddenly he put spurs to his horse and disappeared over the crest. Behind him rang out a swift

trio of shots, oaths and shouts—all too late to stop him. When the leg-weary horses of Don Eufracio and his *primos* topped the ridge, El Señor Coyote, like the shifty gray shadow that was his namesake, had simply vanished.

That night at midnight El Señor or Coyote held council with Don Enrique Suazo and left the old man chuckling for the first time in a good many years. The next day found the *viejito* of Escabroso Creek gouging with pick and bar on a quartzy ridgetop with a vigor that belied the stoop of age in his shoulders. Meantime, in the nearby hills El Señor Coyote played hide and seek with the High Shereef.

When a little pile of rock had accumulated from his digging, old Enrique sacked it, hid it in a nearby scrub oak thicket and dug out some more. When the hole was about big enough to bury a pig, he moved on to another quartzy ridge to repeat the process. Despite his promise to Mariano not to shoot anybody, the old man kept his musket handy at his side, and there was a wary, watchful look in his eyes.

He was working on his fourth such hole when Don Eufracio and his men, weary of chasing the elusive Señor Coyote, heard the clank of pick and crowbar. Stealthily they dismounted and crept up on the old man. Don Enrique seemed to be taken by surprise.

"Hah, *loco!*" Don Eufracio announced himself gloatingly. This time he made no pretense of politeness. "So thees the gold mine, eh!"

Don Enrique stared at him blankly, then a wild gleam came into his eyes. He reached for the long barreled musket leaning against a nearby juniper, but Chato's thick, hairy arm caught him by the shirttail and yanked him back.

Immediately his owlish old eyes became crafty.

Señor Shereef, once we were friends. You knew me as a man of honor. I have not changed. I will not lie to you. In this mine I find no gold. Here I am just prospecting. But in the others—" he started to point, then checked himself, but already Don Eufracio's eyes had followed to other signs of fresh digging on nearby ridges.

"Others, eh!" Don Eufracio's paunch fairly quivered with greed. "Chato! Tomás! Queeck, breeng the teen cans, breeng the papers! One mine, two mine, three mine—what make the deefer? Put claims to all of heem on the name of Eufracio Gallegos!"

From his saddlebag Chato brought out several tin cans. Within half an hour three of them, with claim-stake notices inside, were securely anchored in little piles of rock, one at each of three holes old Enrique had dug. It was a detail of claim staking that Don Enrique had evidently neglected.

"Now by wheeskers from the burro!" gloated Don Eufracio. "Queeck we make regeester of thees on the county clerk an' take thees *loco* to jail for reseest of the officer! Ever'theeng feex! To me belong the gold!"

"Unless," Don Enrique spoke dryly, "El Señor Coyote get there ahead of you. Of course, the notices are in my name, but it is Mariano that has already gone to file them at the courthouse! If he get there first—"

"Chato! Tomás! Queeck!" Don Eufracio reached for his horse. "Thees *chivo* Coyote, we gotta ketch heem before—"

"For why you don't ketch me now?" From behind a ledge of rock stepped the lean figure of El Coyote himself, old Enrique's long rifle cocked in his hands.

"Chato—queeck—" began the High Shereef, but this time there was no need. Suddenly appearing around the ledge behind Mariano, the deputy named Arcadio sprang upon El Coyote like a mountain lion upon a deer. For once El Coyote did not put up a fight. They had him, and that was that. Not so old Enrique. Grabbing the dropped musket, he leveled the ancient weapon at the sheriff's middle—

and pulled the trigger. The result was a harmless snap. Dismayed, he yanked open the breech. The gun he had so carefully loaded nearly six years ago was empty. He squinted into the barrel and turned with an odd, questioning look on his face.

"I am sorry, *viejito,*" Mariano said. "I was afraid some time that old gun blow up an' keel you. I myself took out the load. *Caramba,* Shereef! What you do—try to teeckle me the reebs?"

It was obvious what the sheriff was doing: searching Mariano for the filing papers he was supposed to carry.

Old Enrique stared disconsolately at his musket, which nobody had bothered to take away from him.

Suddenly his eyes lighted hopefully.

"But Mariano, *hijo,* maybe—maybe already you have been to the courthouse to file the papers! Maybe—"

Mariano shook his head.

"Thaas why I'm come back, *viejito,*" he looked whipped. "The mine papers—must be I lose heem!"

"Hoh! You loose heem, eh?" Don Eufracio's paunch quivered with triumph. "Tomás! Chato! To the jail weeth them! Thees time, *chivo*—" he gave Mariano's long thin nose a vigorous twist by way of illustration—"we gonna twees the Coyote hees tail!"

THE high shereef's arrivel with his prisoners in Tejón City was a march of triumph. Across his saddle the sheriff himself carried Don Enrique's musket, which he had brought along as evidence to support his charge of resisting an officer.

Inside the jail office little old Enrique Suazo balked. He drew himself up proudly.

"Wait, Señor Shereef," he said. "Thees Mariano Luján wheech I theenk wass my fr'and, he has betray me. I am an old man, I am a *caballero*—I don't wish to go to jail. Now I gonna told you sometheeng. Look at thess!"

From his pocket he drew out a chunk of ore in which the free gold gleamed.

"The sack thees Mariano hide in the bank also belong to me, Shereef! For joost one hunder' dollars an' turn me loose from the jail I geeve you exact locations of the place from where he breeng the contents of those sack! Because in thees other holes it is no gold, Shereef! Mariano make me deeg them to make fool of you!"

"By the wheeskers of the burro!" Don Eufracio reached reluctanly for his pocketbook. "One hunder' dollars ees too much! Feefty!"

Sadly Don Enrique pocketed the fifty dollars, called for a sheet of paper and wrote on it: 200 varas east of forked *coahuila* tree on Rito Escabroso, in northwest-quarter of the southeast-quarter of the southwest-quarter of Section 10. Township 18, Range 14 East."

"It ees only one tree there, Shereef. First you regeester your claim on thees place by discreeption, then you find heem, easy!"

"Chato! Tomás! Guard thees *chivo* Coyote! Juan! Arcadio! Queeck! We go to the county clerk office to make regeester of the gold mine!" Hastily he leaned the cumbersome musket against the wall.

Brushing aside old Enrique's proffered hand, out he rushed. Apologetically the old man turned to the deputy named Chato.

"For the troubles I have make you," he said, "forgeeve me."

Magnanimously Chato took the proffered hand—and instantly wished that he hadn't. The grip of Don Enrique's gnarled fingers upon his was like iron. The jerk was as sudden and strong as a mule kick, yanking Chato to the floor on his face, where he lay squirming with the old man's foot on his neck. At the same instant the heavy barrel of the old musket, swiftly seized by Mariano Luján, struck hard across the back of the other deputy's stocky shoulders, felling him like an axed hog.

"Queeck, *viejito!*" Mariano commanded sharply. "Climb the horse an' ride! Thees gold mine beezness, I feex heem myself!"

"But if you lost the papers—"

"Go, *viejito!* El Coyote loose notheeng! Horry!"

By the time Chato and Tomás could scramble up, the door of the jail office slammed shut in their faces. Outside Mariano shot the heavy iron bolt. With Don Enrique's big musket in one hand and Chato's pistol in the other, nobody tried to stop him. To stop by the bank for his bag of beans took but a jiffy.

In the county clerk's office Don Eufracia looked up in surprise from gloatingly watching the clerk record his gold mine claims. With Chato's pistol still in one hand and old Enrique's rifle in the other, Mariano Luján advanced warily.

"Chivo!" snorted the sheriff. "Juan! Arcadio! Seledón! Queeck! Arrest heem!"

The three deputies eyed El Coyote's shooting equipment and tried to look unconcerned.

"What makes the deefer, Shereef?" Arcadio shrugged. "Already the gold mines claims are regeestered! The mines are yours—El Coyote can do notheeng now because—*fah!* He is too late!"

EL COYOTE nevertheless continued to grin. One-handed, he opened the musket's breech, then stuck the end of the barrel in his mouth and blew—hard, still keeping his eyes and gun hand ready for action. Into the breech from the musket's barrel slipped a little roll of white paper. Mariano spread it on the clerk's desk.

"On behalfs of Don Enrique Suazo, wheech have signed thees paper," he said, "please to make regeester of claim to one gold mine 200 varas *west* of forked *coahuila* tree, Rito Escabroso, in northwest quarter of southeast quarter of southwest quarter een Section10, Townsheep—"

"Fah!" broke in Don Eufracio. "First came, first serve, *chivo!* Already for thees mine I have filed the claim. Already—"

"Already, *panzón,"* broke in Mariano with a shrug, "you have filed on a bean patch belonging to Enrique Suazo 200 varas *east* of thees *coahuila* tree! The real gold mine ees 200 varas west on poblic land! First come, first serve—you regeester this for me, Meester Clerk?"

With a gulp the clerk got busy. When he had received his certificate of filing, Mariano unbuttoned the front of his jacket and hauled out a heavy-looking buckskin bag. With a flourish he set it before the sheriff.

"Fah!" snorted Don Eufracio feebly. "What thees? Notheeng but joke?"

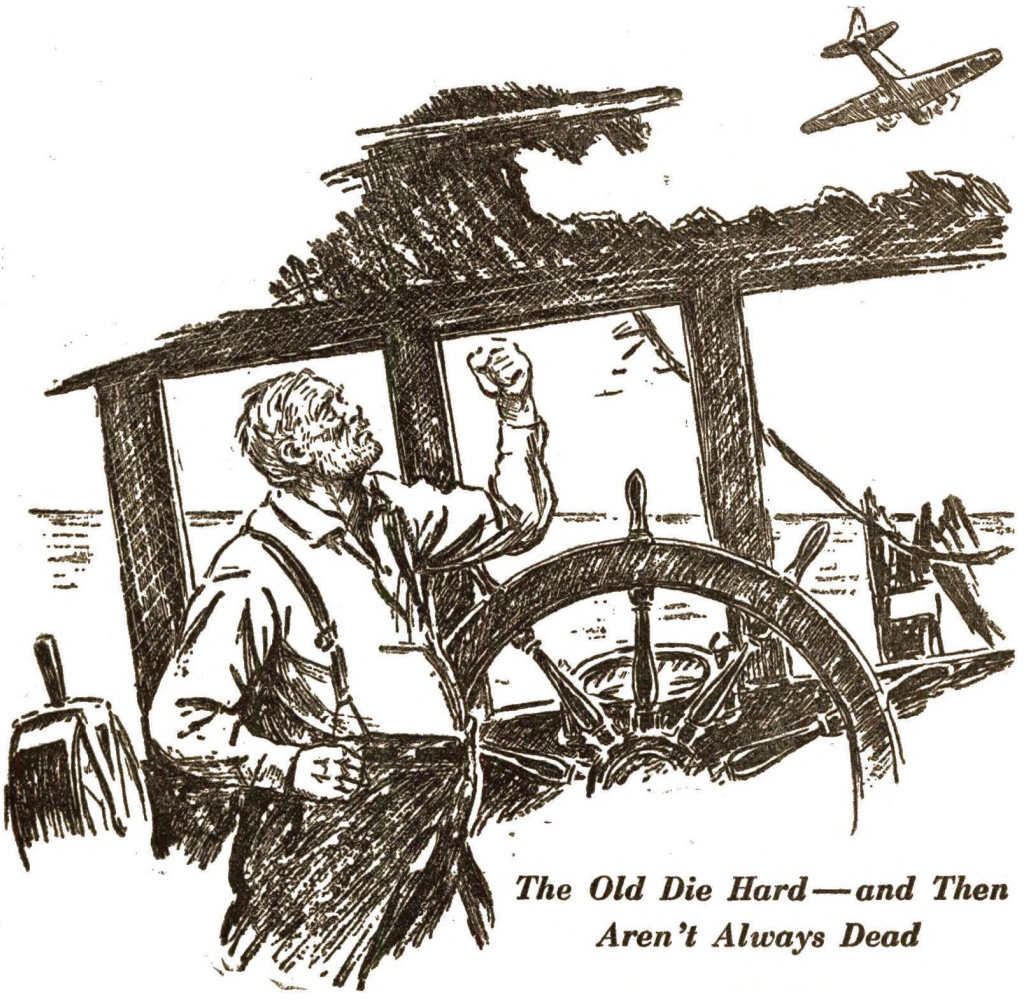
"You theenk, eh?" Mariano shrugged and began backing toward the door. "Thass what I was theenkin' myself at first—a joke to help Don Enrique make even weeth you. But when he was deegin' around to make mines for fooling you, Shereef, by wheeskers of the burro, Don Enrique find a leetle gold for sure—but *not* in the holes on wheech you regeester the claim. And now, *amigos—adiós!"*

Swiftly Mariano stepped through the door, ran down the poorly lighted inside steps and out to the street where Don Enrique Suazo, despite orders to run for it, waited with horses. Inside, the High Shereef and three deputies, rushing out in pursuit, suddenly tumbled headlong over an ancient, long-barreled musket placed about shin-high across the stairs, its ends lodged neatly in the ornate curlicues of iron-work so common to old New Mexico courthouses.

From the now open mouth of the bag Don Eufracio had dropped as he fell—the same buckskin bag that had started him gold hunting—over one edge of the stairway dribbled a little trickle of beans, the gentle click of their falling unheard above a flood of fluent Spanish cusswords.

From the street outside, above the rapidly fading clatter of galloping hoofs came faintly a high soprano howl, remarkably like that of a coyote.

Ex-Pie Merchant



The Old Die Hard—and Then Aren't Always Dead

By ALFRED BATSON

Author of "The Bite of the Swimming Pig," etc.

WHEN Albert Oates opened his eyes the sea was a mill-pond with no land in sight anywhere, the intense blue above stretched to infinity and the tropic heat was stifling.

His head felt as if a bomb had exploded inside; an arm dripped crimson and a leg was twisted grotesquely under him. Then he discovered he was wedged between the stern bitts.

It was an effort to wriggle free for he was a man of sixty-nine and aching in every joint.

"Am I dead," he muttered as his attention focussed up the deck but no sense came from what he saw, "and is this hell?"

The sight resembled his idea of hell, for all that remained of the *Van Wijk's* funnel was a jagged stump of steel. The passage was a shambles of smashed gear, porthole glass and the tangled wires of the radio antenna. There was a yawning emptiness in the housing where the cook-

shack had been; blood and oil-grime spread in blotches everywhere.

But a five-hundred-ton tug built of teak by Dutch builders to last forever has the nine lives of a cat, and this cat was still alive—albeit sorely wounded.

The gray-thatched, pot bellied oldster disengaged himself from between the bitts, struggled erect and was startled at the apparition that lay alongside.

Her bow said *Naigpur Prince* and she hung there at the end of the slack towline close against the *Van Wijk's* stern. She was listing slightly to starboard; boarding nets hung over her rail and a huge red cross against a white background marked her waist. There was something stately and proud in her even as she bumped against the tug. Both ships were drifting, which only added to Albert's confusion as he ran a hand across his smarting eyes and looked again. She wasn't an apparition, he saw now, she was real. But he didn't get it, not a bit of it.

Yet he knew where the answer was, and he hobbled painfully up the *Van Wijk's* deck to learn the straight of the mess.

But there was no one to give him the straight of the mess when he reached the wheelhouse, though the appalling scene that confronted him was like the sun breaking through the muddled clouds inside his throbbing head.

Saunders, the captain, lay in a corner with a grim smile at his frothy lips. Ali Singh, the mate, was an armless horror in a crimson pool, and a navy rating was face down under his bandolier of bullets. H.M.S. *Exeter,* the ribbon in his cap read.

The whole sickening picture came back to Albert Oates in a revealing flash that firmed his jaws and forced the blood hot and angry through his veins. He forgot his wrenched leg, the searing hole where a needle had sped through his arm. He forgot everything at sight of the carnage underfoot. Then he looked aloft through the mesh of bullet holes in the ceiling, shook a freckled fist and growled, "Ye dirty monkey swine. Ye rotten, filthy murderers with no sense of fair play."

Suddenly the wheel slatted around and the compass clicked. That brought the realization that the *Van Wijk* had been without a helmsman since God-knew-when. There was why the ships drifted aimlessly. There was why—

ALBERT OATES bustled on deck and shouted down the shot-out skylight to the engine room where he had been a helper. "Ching, come up, man. I needs yer advice. Come up."

But Ching didn't come up. Albert's voice grew hoarse before he hit on the reason—Ching wasn't aboard. A cold, mounting suspicion began crowding the troubled mind of Albert Oates.

Then he called up to the *Naigpur Prince,* but received no reply. Grasping the boarding net nearest him he started aloft.

"Ahoy," he yelled, not knowing the proper address for the skipper of a late mine layer hastily converted to an emergency Red Cross vessel. "Ahoy, doctor-captain. Where are ye?" Again there was no answer.

He lifted himself wearily over the rail and his heart hung suspended, for what had happened to the *Van Wijk* was as nothing compared to the devastation wrought on her ward. The bridge was sheared off clean as if by a giant scythe. Davits and liferafts were tangled snarls of debris. Bits of uniform, crutches, bandages, stateroom doors and splintered cots littered what remained of the passages. A hole opened down through her amidships with the aft mast resting in it and a lifeless fire hose told how a blaze had been doused.

When he had picked his way to the stern he saw that her rudder was missing, and with it a good twenty feet of after-structure. Yet the bulkhead held inside and a covey of small fish found coolness

in the shade of the overhang. The stench of death melted with the cloying heaviness of fuel oil—but she wasn't done so long as she floated.

He returned to the bow, glanced back arms akimbo and summed up the whole desolate situation in a sentence—"I'm the only ruddy soul alive on both ships."

Albert Oates climbed down the boarding net to the *Van Wijk's* deck and spent a worried moment in intense concentration. He saw what he should do—cut her free and save himself. The *Naigpur Prince* was a shell beyond repair, now that the Singapore navy yard was under fire, and to risk the *Van Wijk* in salvaging her would only be throwing good money after bad, to say nothing of risking his life in the process.

Yet when he glanced back at the listing shambles he knew his course of action, despite that he'd been a sailor but three short days. It wasn't in him to leave her to her doom, and he could figure no means of sinking her if he'd had the heart. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know anything about position finding, and he couldn't have made much use of a chart had one been available. The sea around him was as empty as the sky overhead, but he was a cockney with a trace of Scots blood somewhere not too far back in his dim past.

"The Scotch in me might be unwasteful," he growled, "and we need scrap more than the Japs do, but the cockney is loyal to old friends—and yer the vessel wot brought me out from London over forty years ago. Ye were a proud beauty then and to me yer a proud beauty now, rip yer middle out and rebuild yer time and again though they did. Yet inspire me, yer does."

He plugged his arm with a piece of cotton waste then hurried below and started the *Van Wijk's* engines. The oil tank gauges showed full and his heart lightened. When he returned he pointed her south southeast, for he'd heard that course mentioned before hell had struck in the pitch blackness of the night before.

"We'll head for Palembang in Sumatra with her," Saunders had said. "The navy'll straighten us out come daylight, if anything happens."

Well, Albert mused, plenty had happened—but the compass had emerged unscathed, which he took as a good omen. And if he missed Palemberg he must bring up somewhere in the long chain of Dutch isles, where he'd get succor for himself and a friendly haven for his ships.

His pulse pounded as the towline grew taut and the *Naigpur Prince* wallowed slowly around. Then he cut two lengths of rope and made the wheel fast to the stanchions that once had supported the roof. That done, he stepped on deck, looked astern and a smile broke through his weathered face. "A bonny, tough lad yer are, *Naigpur Prince,*" he muttered to nobody in particular. "The old die hard and we're not dead yet, either of us."

Finally he could no longer put aside the most disagreeable task, and with a long sigh he began slipping the bodies overboard into the cool depths of the Java Sea as he mouthed the fragments he recalled of the Lord's prayer.

So engrossed was he that he did not catch a menacing cough in the sky until the plane roared low and opened with a machine-gun. Albert dove for the wheelhouse and found shelter behind Saunders' bunk. The Navy-O fighter ran over once, then again—and it was in this second assault that the compass shattered into a thousand fragments.

"Ye bloody heathen swine," he yelled. "Ye tailless monkeys claiming to be humans. Ain't yer done enough already?"

Albert Oates was too incensed to hear the motor splutter, falter, then still. Nor did he see the plane crash on the horizon far ahead in a welter of spray.

All he knew was that though the compass was gone the lines holding the wheel

were not, wherefore he reasoned that if the *Van Wijk* had been pointing south southeast before the fury had struck there was nothing now that could deflect her. So while the loss of the compass was bad, his position wasn't hopeless.

When he stepped on deck eventually and could not find the plane in the sky he began tidying up, and as he worked his mind sped back over the panorama of a life he'd always considered dull.

FOR forty odd years he'd eked out a living as "Albert Oates, Pork Pies" in Sittag Street, Singapore. The only break was in World War I when he'd gone off with the Straits Settlement Rifles, been wounded at Mons and gassed at Ypres. Then he'd returned, knowing no more of the sea than when he'd embarked, for he'd been deathly sick both ways. The pork pie business had resumed—not much, but enough to keep body and soul together. He never married. Then World War II broke, Malaya was overrun and the Japs began creeping down the peninsula. He was an old man by that time, creaky in his joints and wheezy in his lungs, which the doctors quickly learned when he insisted he was forty-one. So he tried the navy, with similar results.

But he couldn't give up, not with a Scots and cockney background. The best that offered was the *Van Wijk,* sent over from Sumatra to aid in any way she could. Saunders gave him a job when his below-decks native helper skipped, and for two days they'd berthed convoys. By that time Albert knew something of the tug's engines.

Then came the night of nights, the first Jap air attack in force and the S.O.S. from the *Naigpur Prince,* three hours out and overloaded with wounded. The *Van Wijk* tore to her rescue and found her being shot at like a sitting duck. Yet Saunders got a line aboard and was pulling her from under a canopy of flares when the *Exeter* roared in out of the nowhere with her a.a. guns spitting defiance, her boarding party ready and her captain smiling on the bridge.

Albert remembered that like a bad, crazy dream. The *Exeter,* for his money, stood as much chance as a mouse confronted by a hundred fanatical tigers. But she was game, took everything the Japs had to offer for an endless hour of hurtling hell, near misses and full hits, and got the wounded off. Then as she was readying to pull away something hit him with the force of a sledgehammer.

He had been in the *Van Wijk's* bow at the time, but when he regained consciousness he was prone in the stern. Singapore was out of sight and the day was well along under a brilliant sky on a tranquil sea. The *Exeter* had left him because her duty was to the living, and he felt no anger because she'd thought him dead.

Actually, now, he was warmly alive. In a way he was a very important man, and he'd never been important before in his life, with two ships in his charge. "Captain Oates, no Admiral Oates," he smiled wryly. "Aye, an admiral—only without a gun, not even a pistol. The navy left nothing."

That fact might have distressed lesser or more cautious men, but not the recent pie merchant of Sittag Street. For he reasoned that the Java Sea was huge, the action all behind him at Singapore, and

the plane that had gone over had not bothered to drop bombs because the pilot had taken the two ships for helpless wrecks.

Thus by a trick of fate the absence of any means of defending himself or announcing his presence was a blessing—or so he thought.

It was an hour later that he spotted the faint blob of yellow on the infinite expanse of blue up ahead. And it was an hour after that before he could lean over the side and help aboard the most bedraggled Jap he'd ever seen. This one was a far call from the strutting, grinning, brazen apes, who'd been swarming through Singapore for months.

Both arms shot above his head when he'd made the deck. Tears coursed down his brown face and his bandy legs shook miserably as he whined: "I surrender. I surrender. Don't kill me."

Albert had no idea of killing him. You couldn't kill a fear-paralyzed, yellow termite with nothing more the matter with him than that he'd been floating around in a rubber boat. He didn't look hungry; he didn't even need a shave, and from the balloon trousers gathered at his ankles to the weird yellow hat on his head he was well dressed. But he was certainly the most abject, scared man Albert Oates had ever seen, despite that he was around twenty and spoke good English. He was squat, but a couple of inches over Albert at that and with hulking shoulders on a powerful frame.

"Wot were ye doing out there?" Albert asked in all honesty. "Where did ye come from?"

The The Jap ceased wailing long enough to look up with evident surprise in his beady eyes. He coughed and looked again. It was almost as if he couldn't believe what he had heard. But he had a ready tongue, and a hand readily thrust out. Meanwhile he studied Albert from head to toe.

"I'm Joe Tanara," he said finally. "I fell off a merchant ship last night and they threw me that boat. But they couldn't find me in the darkness."

"Where'd you learn English so well?"

"Oregon State University," Tanara continued. "I was a student there, until the war office ordered me home or they'd lock up my family. I came by way of South Africa."

"Ever been around Singapore?"

"Not me, pal. How many guys are with you on this packet?"

ALBERT didn't like it. It was too pat, too well rehearsed. He didn't like Tanara's shift from tears to easy familiarity, though the latter was understandable if he'd been educated in America. Sometimes Albert hadn't understood the breeziness of Americans, but he understod this Tanara less. "He might even be," Albert thought, "one of the animals wot's machine-gunned people on Sittag Street. I wouldn't know for I never saw a Jap flier on the hoof and I know nothing about their gear. But I'll play safe."

All this time Tanara had been on his knees with his hands clasped before him as if praying. But when Albert helped him erect he took occasion to slip a hand around those balloon trousers and the leather jacket. There was no gun.

"How many guys are with you on this packet?"

"I'm by meself here," Albert said. "But there's twenty-odd Royal Marines on the big 'un back there."

Tanara looked at the big 'un and his lips began to quiver. Then the tears broke out afresh and he began whining for mercy. Albert-knew he had him then, and because he had him he found a pot in the wreckage of the cookshack, a dented blowtorch in the engine room and a tin of coffee rolling in a gutter. When he returned to the bow Tanara was eyeing the ropes on the wheel.

"Who's your navigator?"

"I am," Albert countered. "Royal Ma-

rines can't navigate—but they can shoot like hell. Here, I'll make us some java."

It was while he was making the java that his prisoner asked, "Where are you bound?"

"Palembang," Albert said. "But we'll be picked up long before we sight land for those Dutch subs and destroyers are all around here."

He waited for more questions while the coffee was being drunk, but he was surprised when they didn't come. He was more surprised when Tanara curled up outside the wheelhouse and dropped off to sleep.

"All to the good," Albert thought. "He's swallowed my story hook, line and sinker. When he wakes up I'll be so much nearer help."

Then he glanced around at the wallowing, lumbering *Naigpur Prince* and smiled for the first time since Tanara had come aboard. "Albert Oates, *Admiral* Albert Oates reporting, sir," he mouthed, "with one prisoner—all there wuz."

TANARA slept through the afternoon and the two ships held to their steady course. When he suggested food Albert brought out the coffee pot again and on finishing that the Jap brazenly suggested that his host go aboard the *Naigpur Prince* for something more substantial. But Albert pleaded his wrenched leg, looked over the sea and wondered how he could ever get through the night unless help came before the sun set. Tanara was not so dull he'd miss the glaring flaw in Albert's story, but Albert had meant it only as a stop gap until reinforcements could arrive.

When he saw Tanara eyeing him and a grim smile playing at the corners of his tight cut of mouth over snaggle teeth Albert took the bull by the horns.

"You go up on the big 'un," he said as casually as he could. "You ain't hurt. You can skin up the towline."

The Jap glanced at the towline and shook his head. "I ain't hungry," he said. "I'll wait."

The late pork pie dealer found some work to occupy him about the *Van Wijk*, and shortly after turned in on what was left of Saunders' bunk. Tanara was ranging the brief deck humming softly to himself. That looked very bad, as though he were planning some deviltry under cover of darkness.

But Albert had an ace in the hole. He was a very light sleeper and the slightest hesitation in the steady pounding of the tug's screws would awaken him. There was his strength, for he thought it doubtful that Tanara could start those engines again should he close them down.

And if he did they'd be milling around aimlessly again. So where was his advantage—nowhere.

Albert went to sleep and when he awakened the dawn was breaking. Tanara was on the deck outside the wheelhouse, a pile of rope for a pillow and his lips bubbling as he snored. Albert inspected the lines on the wheel and found nothing wrong. Then he tiptoed below and decided Tanara hadn't bothered with the engine room even to oil a bearing or wipe a shaft.

The tug looked exactly as she had the night before and Albert breathed easier. The *Naigpur Prince* wallowed and dipped behind on a slight swell; the sky was cloudless and the horizon empty. Then Tanara got up and they found more coffee. They also found a can of mangoes in the shambles and the remains of several dried fish belonging to the erstwhile native crew.

The Jap was in high fettle, laughing, joking, slapping Albert on the back and recounting how lucky he was to have fallen off the merchant ship. Now he would be put down as lost at sea and his people would not be molested.

Why, he had a lot of information he could give the Dutch at Palembang—about the unpreparedness of the United

States to fight a war. Americans weren't realists and most of their good scrap steel they'd sold to Japan. So why should the Dutch or anybody else count on Uncle Sam's help?

Albert was an amateur at politics, as he was at so many things outside the realm of his bakeshop, but he didn't like Tanara's kind of talk. The day before he'd said he was educated in the United States, and now he was running that country down. It was ungrateful.

"He's a dirty traitor," Albert mused, "like all his kind. But I can't shut him up until I see help coming."

He didn't see any help coming through the remainder of the day. Once he got quietly excited about something in the sky —but it was a bird. Again he thought he spotted a sail—which proved to be a cloud far ahead. He was worried plenty as he dropped off to sleep that night, for though they were drawing nearer to Palembang with each thrashing of the screws, yet once or twice he'd caught Tanara watching him when he'd thought his back was turned. He was also doing much fumbling with his balloon trousers.

"Wot ails yer?" Albert sought casually.

Tanara was thrown off for a moment. His smile vanished and his black eyes smoked hot. But he recovered quickly. "My leg," he said finally. "I hurt it in the boat, pal."

"But you ain't been limping," Albert's mind ran.

Tanara was grinning by that time, the same sickly, slimy grin that revealed nothing but hinted at volumes. It had a worse effect on Albert than if his guest had boasted of having a pistol. But he didn't have a pistol, or a knife, Albert knew because he'd frisked him good.

Early on the third morning while Tanara was sleeping, Albert went over the tug again from stem to stern—and met the same result as before. Nothing was interfered with, nothing had been touched. He'd even gone so far as to tie the wheel up with a trick knot, and the knot was undisturbed. The oil gauges were running down at a reasonable rate and the 10,000-ton tow was no nearer or farther than she should have been. Nor was the absence of Royal Marines on the *Naigpur Prince* responsible for the tenseness in the air. Tanara talked about them as though they existed—which convinced Albert that he knew they did not. Albert had used that bluff originally to gain time until help should come. Well, help hadn't come but the bluff hadn't boomeranged because the *Van Wijk* held to her course.

Yet that snaggle toothed Jap grin widened with each passing hour, and Albert couldn't understand it. There was something in the air, something big and sinister and dangerous. But for the life of him Albert couldn't tell what it was though its presence was felt like a knife at his ribs.

HE STARTED over the whole situation again as he pretended to be busy with a smashed grating. The tug held to her course south southeast—

South southeast!

Albert's pulse began to pound. He wracked his brain and came up with the only thing he knew that affected navigation—"The sun rises in the east and sets in the west!"

"The sun rises in the east," he repeated laboriously. "The sun—"

There it was! If the sun rose in the east they weren't heading at a close angle south because that morning the sun had come up like a blazing ball straight ahead. That meant they were heading *east, full east* not south southeast.

Albert dropped the grating like a hot potato, hobbled into the bow and found Tanara fumbling with his leg again.

"Say, you," Albert grunted, "look here—"

The Jap straightened and for a split second his small eyes seemed to spit hatred. Then a smile broke over his swarthy face and he thrust a hand out.

"Now pal," he said smoothly, "don't let's have any trouble. Shake kid."

Albert was caught off guard and grasped the hand. As he did he briefly caught a flash of the other hand like the whiplash of a cobra. It nailed him beside the temple; something sank into his pot-belly like a pile-driver and he collapsed in a heap. Then everything went black.

WHEN Albert Oates came around the sun was setting behind him in the limitless expanse of ocean. But up ahead in the bow stood Tanara with a club in his hand—and over Tanara's shoulder loomed a panorama of dense, tree clad cliffs. There was no sight of human habitations anywhere, but the land spelled safety.

"Well," Albert said before he could straighten it all in his mind, "we're here."

Tanara wheeled, grinned again. "You said it. "We're here, kid. It's Tebong, Borneo."

"But that's Sumatra—"

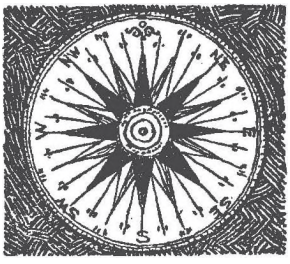
"Sumatra nothing," Tanara cut him off. "It's Borneo. We've been running dead east, pal. Tebong is in those hills, the best navy anchorage in a thousand miles of coast. We've been in Borneo three days, taken the whole coast, and we need scrap bad, that's why I brought these tubs here—"

Albert saw the whole picture then in clear perspective. But as he listened he was recalling a Malay saying he'd heard over a chess board in the back of his pork pie emporium, "The wise man learns from Lady Cobra how to fight Lady Cobra." He'd never quite understood that before because he was a slow-thinking man, but he understood it now.

Tanara's laugh cut in on him as he rolled over and sat up.

"You British are decadent—" Albert didn't know what "decadent" meant, but he didn't like its sound. "So are the Americans. You're asleep at the switch, kid. But Nippon is not; we haven't been. You swallowed my falling off a tramp ship hook, line and sinker. You were too dumb to know I was a flyer; the rubber boat and my yellow headpiece to make spotting easy from the air meant nothing to you. Anybody with brains would have killed me without thinking twice. That's the way to fight a war. Then I came aboard and headed this junk straight east when you were asleep."

"How did you know where the east was?" Albert interrupted.



"The sun, you dope. It rises in the east."

"But how did you get us here, this Tebong place?"

"Chart, you dope. All Jap flyers have a chart strapped under this zipper on their legs. You thought you were foxy feeling over me for a gun, but you missed the chart because it was flat. I should have shoved you over the moment I came aboard, but I needed you to run the engines. So I undid that dizzy knot you made in the line holding the wheel, then swung us around when you slept and retied it. You never caught on."

Tanara was enjoying himself and Albert let him go on as he struggled to his feet. His head pounded unmercifully, and he'd wrenched his leg again in falling, but he managed a weak smile.

"I guess I'm done," he got out from between puffed lips. "I surrender. I'm an old man, and, after all, I saved your life."

Tanara began to strut at that. His chest shot out and his apelike arms dropped to his side. But his smile held a tinge of malice and brooding danger. "Old man or

not, you're British. I can't say what the crowd ashore will do with you, probably sweeten you up with a little fuel oil from this tub, then let you simmer under a match. That's the way to fight a war, an enemy's an enemy and one less is one less. You Americans and British are too stupid to realize it—"

He interrupted himself because Albert was crying. Tears ran unashamedly down his cheeks and off his stubble of white beard, but Tanara was adamant. "I'll get a bonus for bringing this bunch of scrap in," he gloated. "We need every pound for shrapnel. In the old days we bought it from you, but now we take it."

"Please say a word for me ashore," Albert whined. "I'm not a fighting man, I'm too old. They won't gain anything by torturing me. Please, Mr. Tanara."

As if to further demean himself in Tanara's eyes Albert hobbled to the stern and came back with the blow-torch and coffee pot arrangement. Then he worked furiously to make something hot for them, for Tanara, for his captor. Meanwhile, he had seen that the land was nearer, and through a small channel that broke suddenly in the solid wall of green cliffs he caught a fleeting glimpse of a landlocked bay. Several hulking gray shapes were in there at anchor—but what made his heart leap into his throat was a recollection of what the proud old *Naigpur Prince* had been before her conversion to a Red Cross vessel. Blood rushed into his face and he found it difficult to contain himself as he bent over the blow-torch. He saw all that and he knew what to do about it, let come what may.

But all Tanara saw was a Britisher turning yellow and trying to curry favor. It disgusted him, and to show his disgust he kicked the old man and sent him sprawling.

The old man made no outcry. Instead he asked for a match when he'd clambered upright. The sun was almost gone then and Tanara hesitated. But when the *Van Wijk's* bow began lumbering and wallowing into the narrow opening between perpendicular walls of rock surmounted by bush and trees he gave in. Albert was too late for help from outside, and the blaze of a match would give a fine picture of a white man slaving for a doughty Nipponese warrior.

"Eight or ten thousand tons of scrap," his mind ran. "I'll get a swell check from the war office. I'll get leave and have a hell of a time with the Tokyo girls—"

He got no farther for the match blazed, the blow-torch flared white against the black background and simultaneously a voice of warning screamed from inside in Japanese.

It was in that split second that Tanara felt a searing flame against the hand that held the club. He dropped the club and the flame moved along his sleeve. His jacket started going and his frenzied yells cut the night like a knife.

THEN something entirely unlooked for happened—the stupid Britisher let him alone when he began fighting the flames that enveloped him. Let him alone and floundered into the wheelhouse. Occupied as he was, Tanara got the gist. The crazy dope was trying to swing the tug around. He *was* swinging her around and he was making the wheel fast with the two lines Tanara had so artfully untied and tied again.

At that moment the Jap navy inside the anchorage began firing with small guns. They'd been caught flatfooted off guard and they were firing high, but they'd get the aim in time.

Time? Time was precious to Tanara with his jacket ablaze. Once the tug was hit oil would spread and there'd be a fire. To anticipate it and be out of danger Tanara sprang for the rail. To hell with the old man gone nuts.

The Jap never reached the rail for a pot belly under a gray thatch of hair came out of the wheelhouse shambles like an

enraged bull, set the blowtorch down carefully and smashed a soft fist into a grimacing face. Knuckles broke and teeth broke with them; the old man screamed when his fist was burned. But he swung it again, then closed, swarmed over his adversary and belly-butted him to the deck.

Tanara was fighting the fire, the old man and the imminence of death when the tug was hit. He lashed out with a foot and caught the Britisher in the groin; his thumbs sank into the old man's flabby neck and he pressed.

Then teeth sank into his fingers. He smelled burned hair and from one of them he caught the sickening stench of burned flesh.

Meanwhile, his nose had collapsed in a crimson flood; an eye was collapsing and a rib was sticking some place where it didn't belong. For a split second he was lifted off the deck with a crushing blow brought up from nowhere, and when he descended he was doubled by another. He thought an ear was torn off and he could see out of only one eye. Then that was blotted out by a flying comet, or it felt as if it had been a comet.

He fought back plenty; the oldster took it and came on for more. Clothes were ripped and bodies were bared but the *Van Wijk* was swinging and pulling the *Naigpur Prince* after her. Lead crunched into the tug, but her ironlike teak absorbed all that was offered. A small fire had been started aboard the tow and as she turned her high waist was a target that couldn't be missed.

Tanara got all that. He had fleeting glimpses of the old man on his feet then on the deck, similarly he went down but got up. Then a fist smacked his jaw with the kick of a horse, came down and smacked his middle and caught him over the ear as he fell.

The next thing he knew he was being booted off the deck like the crummiest of yellow scum and the last he heard before oblivion wafted him to the Nipponese valhalla for warrior dead was: "Wot the hell do 'decadent' mean?"

Albert broke for the remains of the wheelhouse then. It was a scramble to get over the shambles of roof and Saunder's bunk. But he did it, saw that the *Van Wijk* was heading straight out the entrance and tied the wheel. Another scramble and he had snatched up the blowtorch and hobbled aft.

He'd made the towline fast in a series of safety-first twinings that would have taken Tanara a half hour to undo if he'd ever thought of undoing them—but the blow-torch cut the line in a matter of seconds.

"So long, proud old *Naigpur Prince,*" Albert whispered as the vessel fell back. "Ye'll block up the channel, maybe. And maybe more, if I'm guessing right."

The *Van Wijk* leaped forward like an unbroken colt set free. She surged through the opening and headed for the open sea, but she hadn't gone a half mile when the entire world behind her erupted in a crimson-scarlet flash of hell let loose. Then another and another. Debris rained down around her and a tidal wave tossed her like a cork—but she shrugged through like a thoroughbred and her engines resumed their steady purring.

Albert looked back when he'd collected himself and by the glow of a huge fire saw that the perpendicular cliffs were no more. They'd been blasted to eternity and he made a good guess that the mouth of the opening was sealed.

"I figgered it right," he growled. "Back in Singapore they converted the old beauty from a mine-layer to a rescue ship so fast they forgot some of the mines in her bottom. When she swung around stern-in the Jap shells broke through the bulkheads in what was left of her rear and touched 'em off. Yer gone, *Naigpur Prince,* but the old die hard and it was a bonny death."

An hour later under a brilliant moon Albert was wondering where he was go-

ing, when he caught a rumbling in the sky and a huge bird settled gently beside him. He saw a star painted on her side and a small boat putting off from under her wings. At that he relighted the blowtorch and got set for further battle, but the boat held a trio of clean-cut young whites.

"What's cookin', son?" the leader said. "What are you doing around here?"

"You must be Americans," Albert countered. "I had a late friend from some American college who talked like that." Then he began to laugh, unmindful of his aches and bruises, until the leader shook him into sanity.

Albert told them what he was doing around there, where he'd been and what had happened. He gave the name Tebong and the leader consulted a map. "That must be a newly established hidden base. Did you see much inside?"

"I didn't have time, but what I saw looked kind of big."

The American called across the water to a chap in the plane with earphones on. Then the party jumped in the small boat and left. A moment later they were roaring away.

Some time after that Albert saw a glow on the horizon aft and heard the heavy clump of bombs, plenty of bombs. Flares were all over the place and he guessed it was lighted up like a Christmas tree.

Dawn had just broken the next morning when the plane dropped down on him again and the same crowd piled aboard, wreathed in smiles.

"Kind of big was right," the leader laughed, "an aircraft carrier, three heavy cruisers and a flock of destroyers. You had 'em bottled in and it was like shooting sitting ducks."

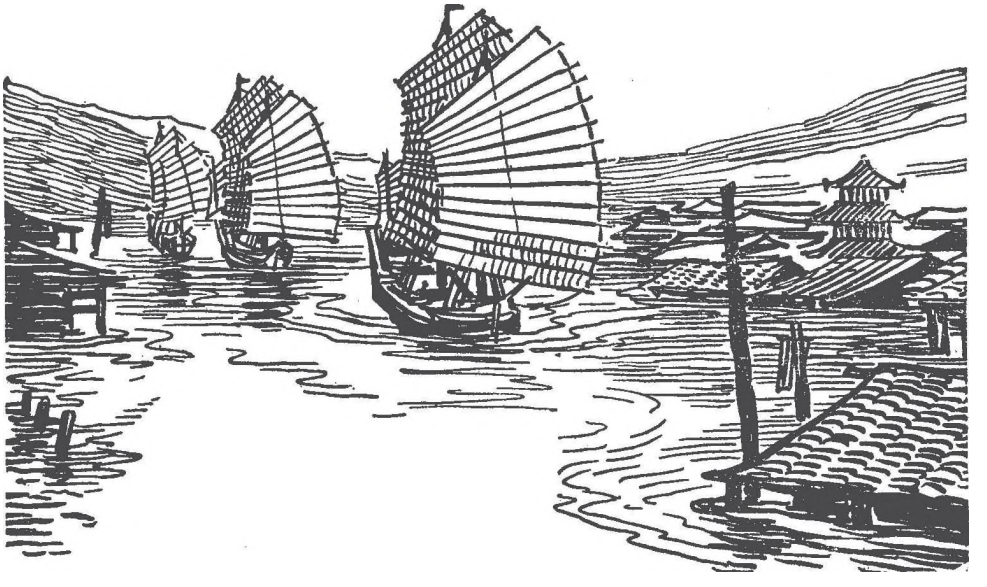
"Did yer do it all yerself?"

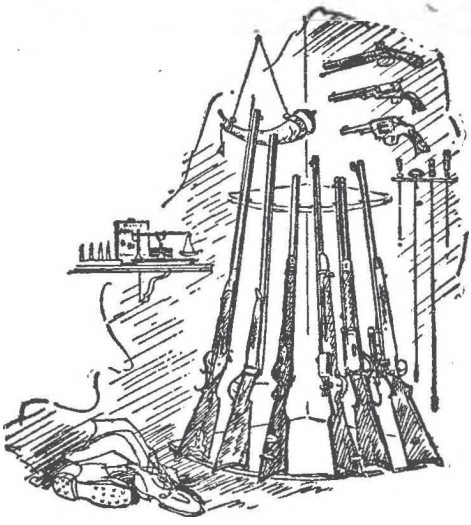
"Hell, no, old-timer. We'd radioed back for a bunch of Flying Fortresses. But you gave us the tip. Now let's sink this baby and you come aboard with us."

"Sink nothing," Albert bristled. "I got enough oil aboard to go any place around here without a tow. I don't know where I'm taking her, but she's not being sunk."

The leader shook his head and looked at the shambles that had been the *Van Wijk*. Then he said, "Okay, I'll put a man aboard with a compass. He'll get you to Darwin."

He did. On the way Albert learned what "decadent" meant.





THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

This and That

QUESTION: "I read a recent description in your 'corner' pertaining to gun barrels and I would like to make a study of the various operations.

"Can you advise me where I might purchase a book or books describing in detail the manufacture of gun barrels, especially the chambering operations, along with the tools needed and how they are made and kept in condition? H. B. Conn."

Answer: A good work on gunsmithing is "The Modern Gunsmith" by James V. Howe. It is in two volumes containing around 800 pages, and is more complete than any gun book that I know about. It lists at $15.00.

For $4.00 you can get W. F. Vickery's "Advanced Gunsmithing." This book contains 432 pages of gun dope. It covers various metal working operations concerning barrel-making, chambering, reboring, remodeling, head-spacing, action work, etc. Mr. Vickery's words are for the experienced gunsmith.

For the amateur, "Elementary Gunsmithing" by Perry D. Frazer at $2.00, or "The Amateur Gun Craftsman" by James V. Howe at $4.00 are good. These two books cover odd jobs and remodeling of old or military rifles.

"Modern Gunsmithing" by Baker at $4.50 is a most useful book for the average gun-crank. It covers most all minor jobs that confront the ordinary shooter who likes to do his own work without specialized tools. This book has been the tinkerer's "Bible" for years.

You can get any of these books from Stoeger Arms Corp., 507 Fifth Avenue, New York.

Question: "There is something that has puzzled me for some time. Just how is commercial blueing done?

"There are several methods that I know of. One a solution applied after the gun has been heated in a hot water bath, reheated in the bath, polished with steel wool, etc. The other, by immersing in a bath composed of two parts lye and one part potassium nitrate until a good blue appears. The latter process, the lye, nitrate and water, does not do a satisfactory job and the process is quite dangerous as the solution is very caustic.

"The first mentioned process sometimes does a fair job, but the result is sometimes brownish and it only blues the surface of the pieces—small pieces such as screws, etc., are almost impossible to blue in this manner and the interior of breeches, magazines, etc., just can not be done.

"When a gun comes from the factory, every part is blued, sometimes the interior of the barrel is blued.

"I would appreciate any information you could give me on just how factories ac-

All in the next issue — SHORT STORIES Sept. 10th

The yacht "Privateer" is chartered out of Miami by some Hollywood folks; they *say* they are looking for locations. But the youthful skipper of the yacht soon smells a Ratzi. How to outwit it?

PART I

DEATH CHARTER

Eustace L. Adams

In a showdown, it doesn't matter a tinker's dam how scared you are so long as you play out your hand!

"The Timid Guy" **WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE**

Who ever heard of a stuffed horse playing a part in a baffling murder mystery? . . . . . Well, it happened.

"The Horse Called Charley"—A Mystery Novelette

THOMAS W. DUNCAN

King Strang and his Mormon colony played a part in "This Country of Ours"

"Red Fox"

H. BEDFORD-JONES

The best known confidence man in the East helps forge . . . .

"Bullets for Peace"

ALFRED BATSON

The Air-Force wanted to know if the studio ship had any particular sentimental attachment for the machine-gun bullet holes in its elevators and stabilizer.

"MISSING — 10,000 JAPS"

A Swell Novelette—A. A. Caffrey

Stories of action all over the world
Men in all the Services will enjoy it
Men at home will enjoy it

It's Their Magazine ⤷ ⤷ **It's Meant for Them**

complish this blueing process. E. B. G., Pa.

"P. S. Keep up the good work in your 'Shooters' Corner.' I have been reading SHORT STORIES for the past twelve years and yours is the best article I have seen yet."

Answer: I'm surprised that you didn't get good results with the lye, water, nitrate method of blueing. I have used it for the past couple of years for small part blueing, and have gotten excellent results. In fact, I reblued an old single action Army Colt

about two years ago and got a fine blue. This gun has seen a lot of use and still doesn't show much wear. Incidentally, I use the common soda nitre as used on the farm for fertilizing.

In using the "hot water" method I find it is most important to keep the parts being blued free from grease.

To get to your question about commercial blueing—the Colt method is very interesting, but out of the question for use by the unequipped home gunsmith. The entire gun is blued, inside and out, by a complicated heat process which I will try to describe.

It takes about five hours to do the job, so the blueing run generally starts the first thing in the morning.

A mixture of charred bone and a primer, which is bone soaked in pure petroleum oil, is put into a furnace and heated to 500 degrees or more to evaporate all moisture.

Racks holding the gun parts are then put into the blueing furnaces. Pyrometers control the heat as the furnace slowly revolves. Readings are taken every fifteen minutes during the five hours and top heat is 650 degrees. The heat being furnished by gas burners.

The charge used in the blueing process is ground animal bone charred to chemical purity in a pot placed into a white hot furnace at 1400 degrees. About two hundred pounds of bone are charred at a time burning away all foreign matter.

The oil used in the primer is boiled to remove moisture and foreign matter.

Free oxygen is kept away from the pieces being blued by the smoke given off by the primer.

The actual blueing is a combination of carbonizing and oxidizing that by heat brings inherent carbon of the steel through the open pores to the surface. It is interesting to note that no particle of bone ever touches the parts being blued. The smoke given off by the primer expels free oxygen from the drum (furnace) leaving only sufficient to allow combustion. The primer and the charge control the composition of gas in the furnace, the heavy carbon dioxide shielding the parts from contact with the oxygen. All this calls for expert knowledge and experience in mixing the proper proportions of the primer and charge not only to obtain the proper color, but to create a smoke that shall be free from moisture. Otherwise though blued, the pieces would be spotted.

Most every one is familiar with the blue of the Colt gun. It not only looks good but tends to resist rust and is lasting.

Thanks for the P. S. My face is still red!

Question: "I am a member of a Civilian Defense organization and use a lever action rifle chambered for the .38-55 cartridge. I live here on the Pacific Coast, and in case we are invaded do you think this gun all right to use as a guerrilla fighter. V. N., California."

Answer: I doubt very much if you can get ammunition loaded with a full metal patch bullet in the .38-55 caliber. The use of soft-point (dum-dum) ammunition is prohibited in civilized warfare.

Question: "Are you in a position to ad-

vise me where I could get in touch with someone who owns a Colt 44 magazine saddle gun, patent No. 278,324, May 29, 1883, and also patent No. 285,020, September 13, 1883.

"Have the blueprints of the original patent, but of course they are not to scale and there are a couple of parts missing which I would like to have replaced so as to put the gun in working order.

"If you cannot advise as to the above could you recommend a first-class gunsmith who is responsible, one who promises he can do the work and will do it, not like some that I have had experience with, who make all kinds of promises and do nothing.

"Any information you are able to give me will be greatly appreciated. W. V. B., Texas."

Answer: Your rifle is the old Colt's Lightning and is fairly common. I would suggest you get in touch with Kimball Arms Company, Woburn, Mass. They deal in old and new guns, and have an excellent repair department.

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

The Dangerous Northwest Frontier

ONE of the great scenes for romantic adventure—fact and fiction—for generations has been India's Northwest Frontier. Of course in a country as vast as India with

a population of close to 400,000,000 (for comparison remember, for instance, that the population of the United States is some 130,000,000) there is always possibility of trouble in one place or another. Internal discord has prevented settlement of many Indian difficulties; Axis agents at the present time are active everywhere to stir up trouble which in turn would react against England. And one of the places their activity is greatest is that very Northwest Frontier, the roof of the world about the Khyber Pass where fanatic tribesmen would be only too glad to take advantage of any trouble in India for an attack on the frontier settlements.

Whether a Japanese advance into India would solidify all India into united action, or be a signal for outbreaks from the Deccan to the Punjab is anyone's guess; E. Hoffmann Price's guess was that he could write a good story out of it. His hunch was that someone—say an arms magnate—could make the Northwest Frontier act like the detonator in a shell and blow up any sort of an explosion—and there was the plot for his exciting novel in this issue—*Guns for Pakistan.*

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB

Paging Amateur Radio Operators

Dear Secretary:

I wish to become a member of your club and gain pen-pals from far and near.

I shall be looking forward to receiving my membership card. My home is on a small island where my Dad is lightkeeper. I can tell you interesting stories of my life on an island.

My hobbies are many, my main ones are collecting stamps, snaps, postmarks and radio.

I am very interested in radio and would

especially like to hear from amateur radio operators.

My hair is brown and curly, my eyes are brown, too; height, 5 feet 4 inches, and weight, 150 pounds. Plump, eh?

I thank our editor for a grand magazine with every hope for luck.

I sign off with best wishes to all members everywhere.

Sincerely yours,
Ardath Crooks.

Country Island,
via Drum Head,
Guys Co., Nova Scotia, Canada.

Welcome

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of your Ends of the Earth Club.

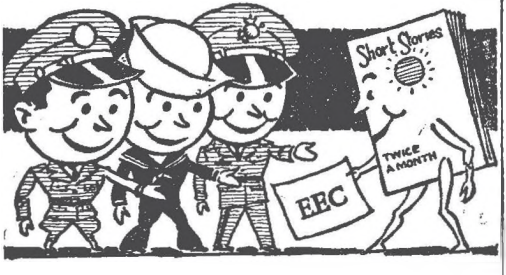
I am eighteen years of age, have black hair and brown eyes, stand five feet, three inches tall. Was born and reared in Toronto, Ontario. Am fond of dancing and swimming.

Sincerely,
J. Donnelly.

5 Lansdowne Ave.,
Toronto, Ont., Canada.

Ends of the Earth Club

United Services Department



Asks for Plenty of Mail While on the Mend

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member in the Ends of the Earth Club. I am a lonesome soldier, twenty years of age, hoping to

make new friends throughout the country. I am now laid up in the hospital, which gives me plenty of time to answer all letters.

My civilian residence is on Long Island, New York. I promise to answer all letters promptly and cheerfully. Please help me to while away my lonely hours while on the inactive list.

Cordially yours,
Pvt. Robert J. Gaffney.
Station Hospital, Ward 7
Camp Croft, S. C., U. S. Army.

Wants to Hear from Latin America

Dear Secretary:

Would appreciate it if you would enroll me in your Ends of the Earth Club.

I would like to hear from anyone in South America or Africa. I will be expecting letters real soon and they will be immediately answered.

Here are my heartiest thanks and best wishes. Thank you.

Robert Lee Dinsmore.
Co. D, 1st Med. Bn.,
A. P. O. No. 1,
Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania.

From a Soldier Who Gets About

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of your club. I am 35 years old, and have just completed 19 years of military service, during which I have visited twenty-five states of the U. S., and twenty-five foreign countries. I would especially like to hear from feminine members of the club. My hobby is photography. At present I am in command of the garrison of this small island—a very lonely spot.

Thanking you, I am
Sincerely,
Lawrence L. Minego.
Warrant Officer, A. U. S.,
c/o 28th Air Base Squadron,
MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida,
(Mullet Kay Island).

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

Joseph B. Abasi, c/o Central School District, via Nembe, S. Nigeria, W. Africa
Fred Amador, 1561 Graymont Ave., Birmingham, Ala.
L. Carol Askin, R.R. 1, Oakville, Ont., Can.
Cpl. Mitchell Beard, A. S. No. 20384669, 121st Obs. Sq. A C., Langley Field, Va.
Leo Bourque, U. S. M. S., Hoffman Island, N. Y., Sec. 43
Pvt. Wallace E. Brumfield, Hq. Ind. Station No. 1783, Ft. Des Moines, Ia.
Robert Bullock, No. 1078843, 31 G. R. S., R. A. F., Charlottetown, P. E. G., Can.
A. Cannon, Roseville, Calif.
Lac J. H. Carey, No. 119065, No. 10, S. F. T. S., R C A F, Dauphin, Man., Canada
John S. Clark, 1010 Laurel Ave., Bridgeport, Conn.
Pfc. Samuel W. Couch, Hq. & Hq. Sqdrn., 8th A. F., 1407 E. Henry St., Savannah, Ga.
Leonard F. Crocker, 2104 Horbert, Memphis, Tenn.
Ardath Crooks, Country Island, via Drum Head, Guys Co., N. S., Canada
Albert Crowe, Route 1, Ash Grove, Mo.
Thomas De Rose, 1626 W. York St., Philadelphia, Pa.
A. J. Dominick, Pfc., C. A. S. C., 1902, Med. Det., Fort Douglas, Utah
M. Donovan, 91-23 80th Drive, Woodhaven, N. Y.
Pfc. Jerry Douvela, 241st C. A., Battery K, Fort Andrews, Mass.
Pvt. John E. Dunn, Co. C, 759th Tank Bn., U. S. Army Camp Bowie, Texas
John Ellison, 6236 S. Mozart St., Chicago, Ill.
Robert Forman, 639 Miller Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Lecil T. Gaines, Box 655, Quayaquil, Ecuador, S. A.
Philip E. Green, 3104 Bergen St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Otto Genoni, 108 Leonard St., Jersey City, N. J.
Frances Gillis, 5246 Xerxes Ave. S., Minnesota, Minn., c/o Wm. Haslett
Pvt. Harold R. Ginsberg, No. 19028699, Rtry. A, 423rd C. A., Army P. O. 856, c/o P.M., N. Y. City
Harry W. Gordon, 215 Herr St., Harrisburg, Pa.
Geo. W. Greenkop, c/o Harbor Mostu, Jr. U. S. Coast Guard, Balboa, Calif.
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Pvt. John Hayder, Hq. Co., 706th M. P. Battalion, Camp Edwards, Mass.
Robert K. Hendricks, Weapons Troop, 3rd Cavalry Brigade, Camp Papago, Phoenix, Ariz.
D. Hills, 78-17 81st St., Glendale, N. Y.
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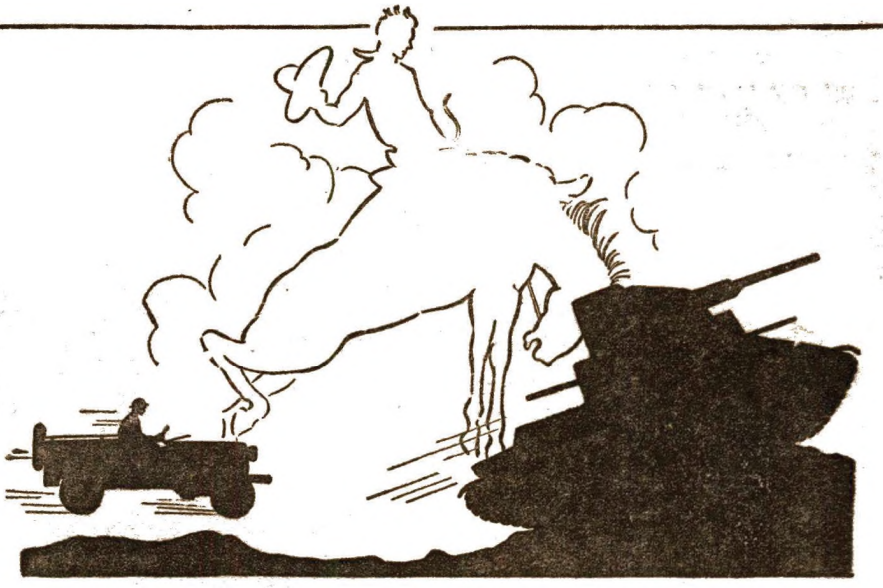
Donald Johnson, 31 Quintard Ave., South Norwalk, Conn.



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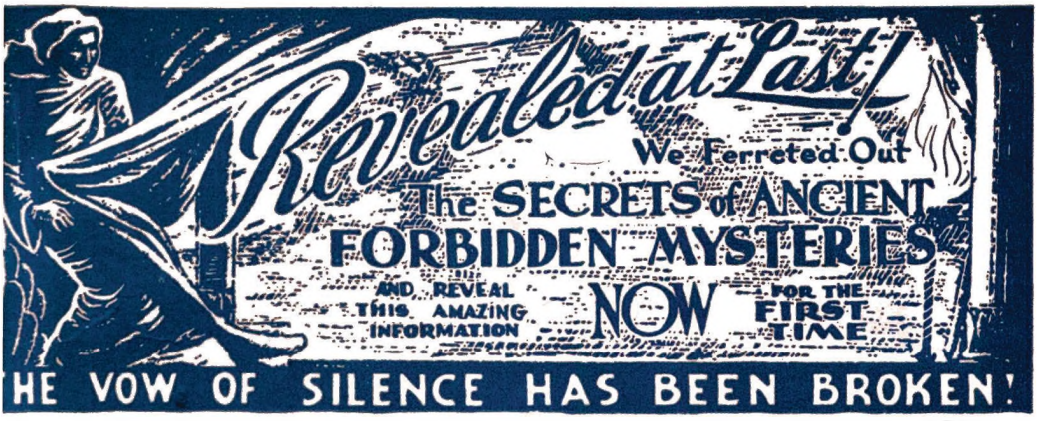

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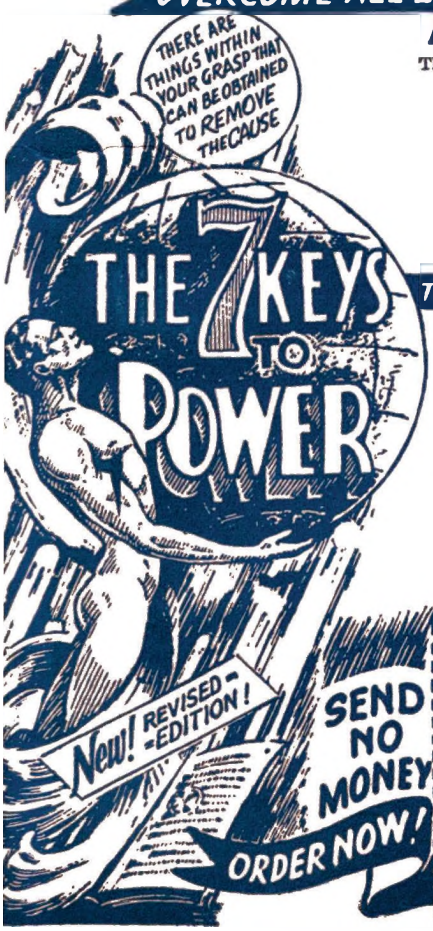

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