"Six-Gun Gamble" — WARD PARRISH WARE
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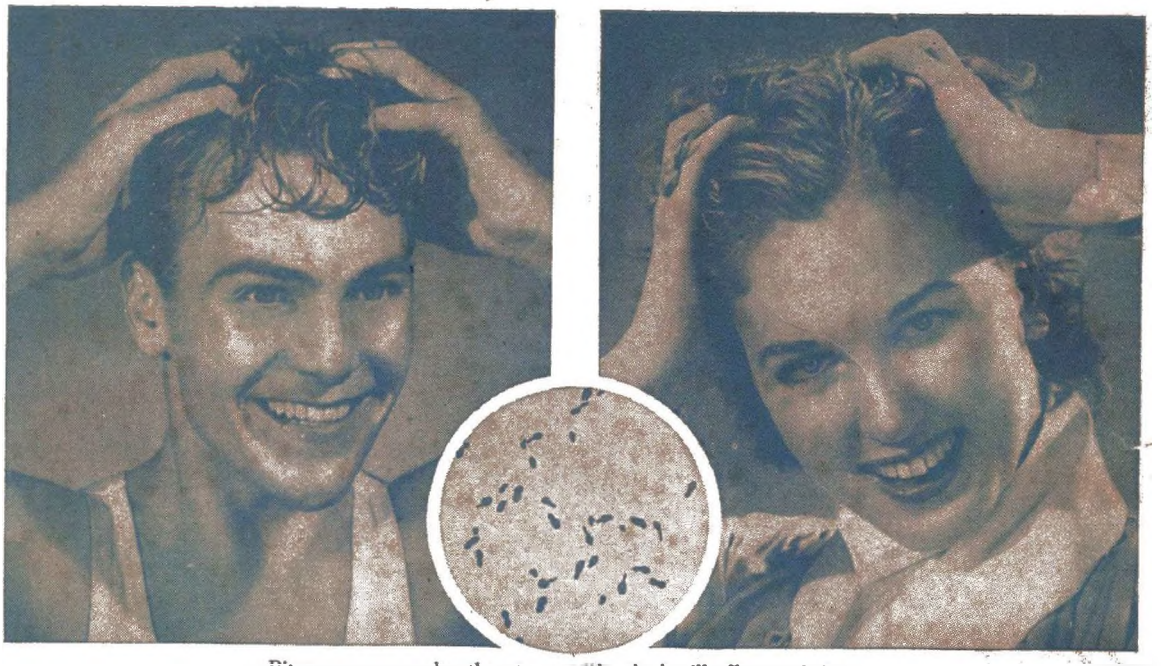
Short Stories

Twice A Month — December 25th

25c

"NO SHIRT SANTA CLAUS" — Frank Richardson Pierce

WALTER C. BROWN — W. TOWNEND
H. BEDFORD-JONES — JIM HENDRYX



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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* S. A. FRAZER, *Secretary.* D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

December 25th, 1942

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COVER—Ralph Smith

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

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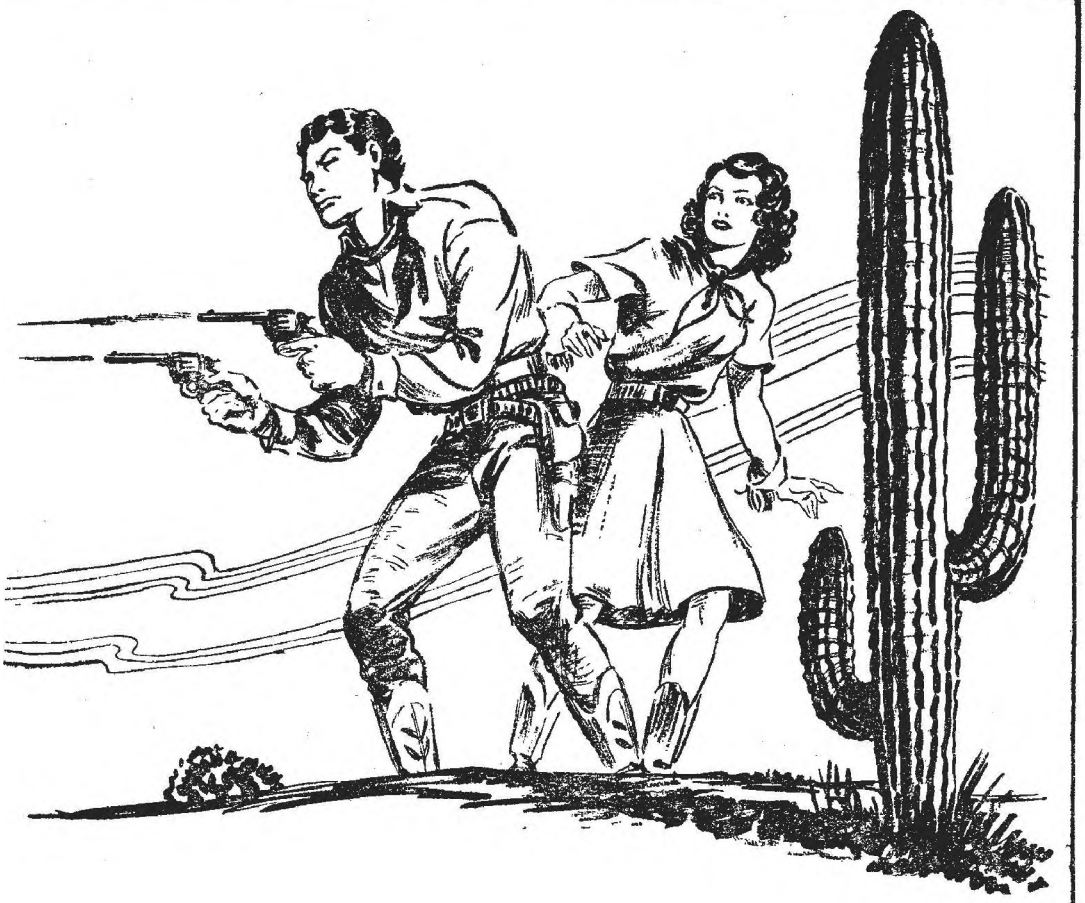

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Welcome to the Circle

DON SNOW is a newcomer to SHORT STORIES—and he came in person to see us, which doesn't always happen. Now we are glad to pass along this letter from him to our readers:

WHEN I was a kid, my father would occasionally take me to the Indian ceremonies out along the Washita River below Anadarko, Oklahoma. Here the Plains Indians gathered for festivities, and I'd get glimpses of the wild way of life which belonged to a century past.

I watched the Gourd Dance of the Caddos, the Harvest Dance of the Delawares, and the Ghost Dance of the Kiowas. But it was the quiet faces, the sad retrospect in the eyes of the older Indians that sent a thrill through my childish mind. And I'd fancy myself riding pell-mell with them back through the roaring days of Fort Cobb, of General Custer's battle of the Washita, and of the meeting of the Wichitas with General Sam Houston.

Later, while reading a volume of Indian tribal history, I noticed a bit of descripiton of the Dragoon Regiments. It told how they dressed themselves in bright uniforms, and rode large, spirited stallions, sorrels, bays, blacks, creams, roams, whites, chestnuts—with each company mounted on horses all the same color. These soldiers had a purpose in making such a display. They had to continually impress the Indians with their strength and power.

Well, you guessed it. Right off, my mind began to stew around over the possibility of an adventure yarn on the Dragoon Regiments. But I had to find out all about them, which, as it turned out, was not so easy. At last, however, I located three volumes about them in the Treasury Room of the University of Oklahoma library. These books were all out of print, the latest publication date being around 1860.

From these pages I learned that the Dragoon Regiments were only in existence about forty or fifty years; one regiment was completely annihilated by an epidemic of Asiatic Cholera.

It was suggested somewhere that these soldiers "were recruited from all parts of the naton, so as to keep down sectional feeling." However, after prying through records of their court martial proceedings, I decided that these men were probably placed in the Dragoon Regiments to "get them out of the way"—that they were army outcasts who were hard to control.

One court-martial case in particular stuck in my mind. It was of a half-breed soldier who had been convicted of desertion, which wasn't uncommon since they were paid only five dollars per month. It being his first offense, however, they merely sentenced him to fifty lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails. The metal burrs on those nine long leather thongs practically pulverized his flesh.

Then they rubbed salt into the little man's back, and made him walk guard duty all day in the hot sun, with heavy weights tied to his arms.

To me, that characterized the type of men they were: hard men, fighting men, born and bred of adventurous blood, who lived only to fight and to die in battle.

Well, that's how Peter Magoto was born. I don't say that Andy Jackson ever received such a letter. And I doubt if there was ever such a crusty person as Major Thorne. But I'll gamble that in every army post, in every garrison of United States troops, there was a character who was Peter Magoto. *Don Snow.*

Jungle Landing

"*HAVING done considerable flying in various parts of the world, and also quite a lot of jungle prowling, the idea of*

(*Continued on page* 173)

Curioddities By Weill

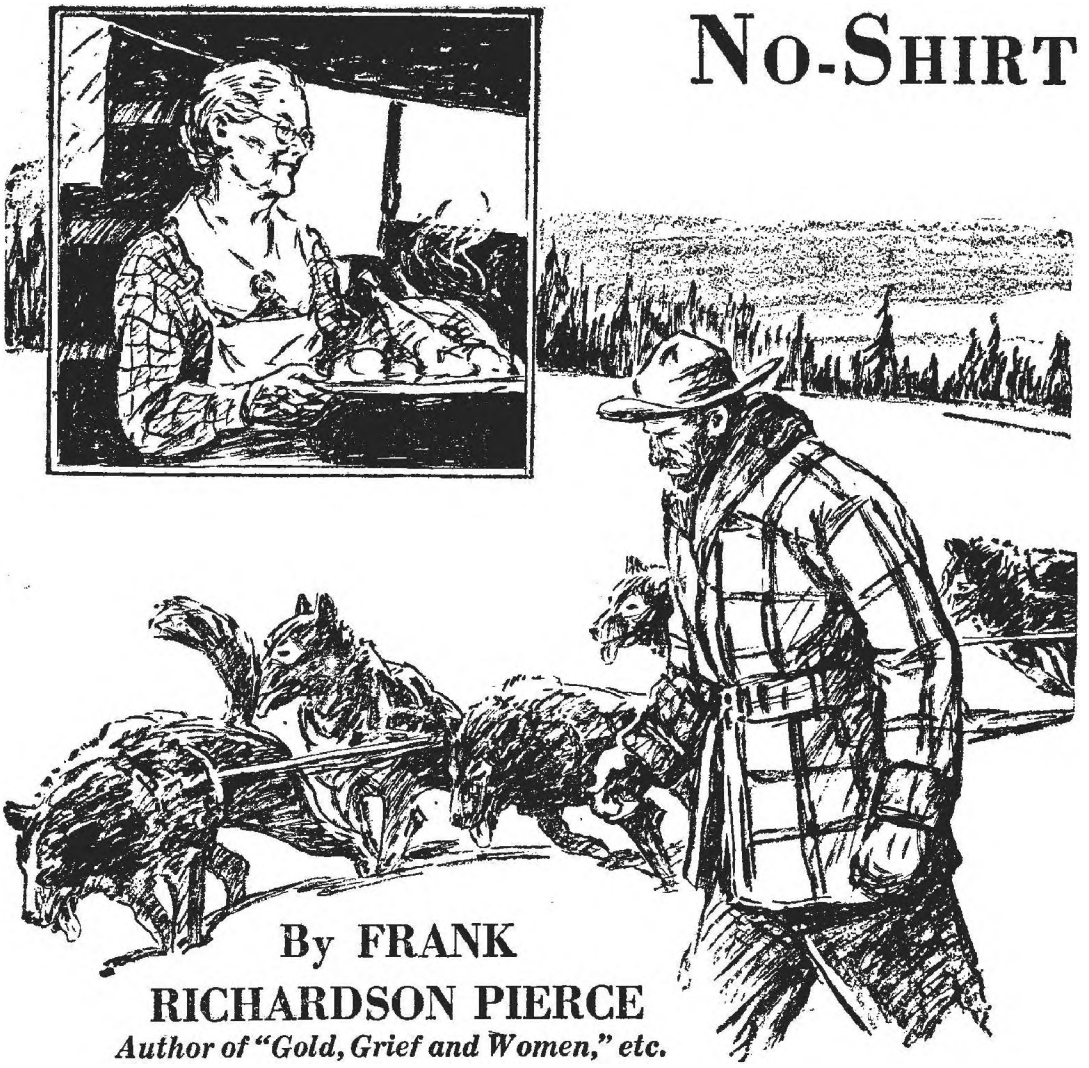
THE CHRISTMAS CARD WAS FIRST USED IN 1846 AND IS REALLY A MODIFICATION OF THE NEW YEAR'S CARD, *WHICH DATES BACK TO THE* **EARLY ROMANS**

THE WORD "TIP" COMES FROM THE INITIALS OF THE WORDS, "TO INSURE PROMPTNESS"

THE **SALMON**, A SALT WATER FISH, TRAVELS UP FRESH WATER RIVERS TO LAY ITS EGGS BECAUSE AT SPAWNING TIME THE FEMALE SALMON'S WEIGHT IS SO INCREASED *THAT SHE HAS DIFFICULTY IN REMAINING UNDER THE SURFACE OF SALT WATER* **BECAUSE OF ITS BUOYANCY**

25 DO SKUNKS HELP IN THE MANUFACTURE OF PERFUME? *See Curioddities next time.* 9

No-Shirt



By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Gold, Grief and Women," etc.

Chapter I

A SOLEMN RESOLUTION

LISTEN, No-Shirt," Bulldozer Craig says. "It'll soon be Christmas and me and you are goin' to make a solemn resolution coverin' the season of good will on earth and peace to men."

"Well, what is it?" I ask. As temporary United States marshal I've been too busy to think about Christmas.

"It's this," he says. "You've got everything under control here. The bucks who beat their squaws are in jail. The cuss who poisoned foxes because he wasn't smart enough to trap 'em, is locked up. One miner who missed too many boats and is slightly off his noodle is bein' cared for. All that's left is Moose Foster. His folks Outside want you to hunt him out and make sure he's safe. But he'll show up. He's just mined a little longer than usual. That's all."

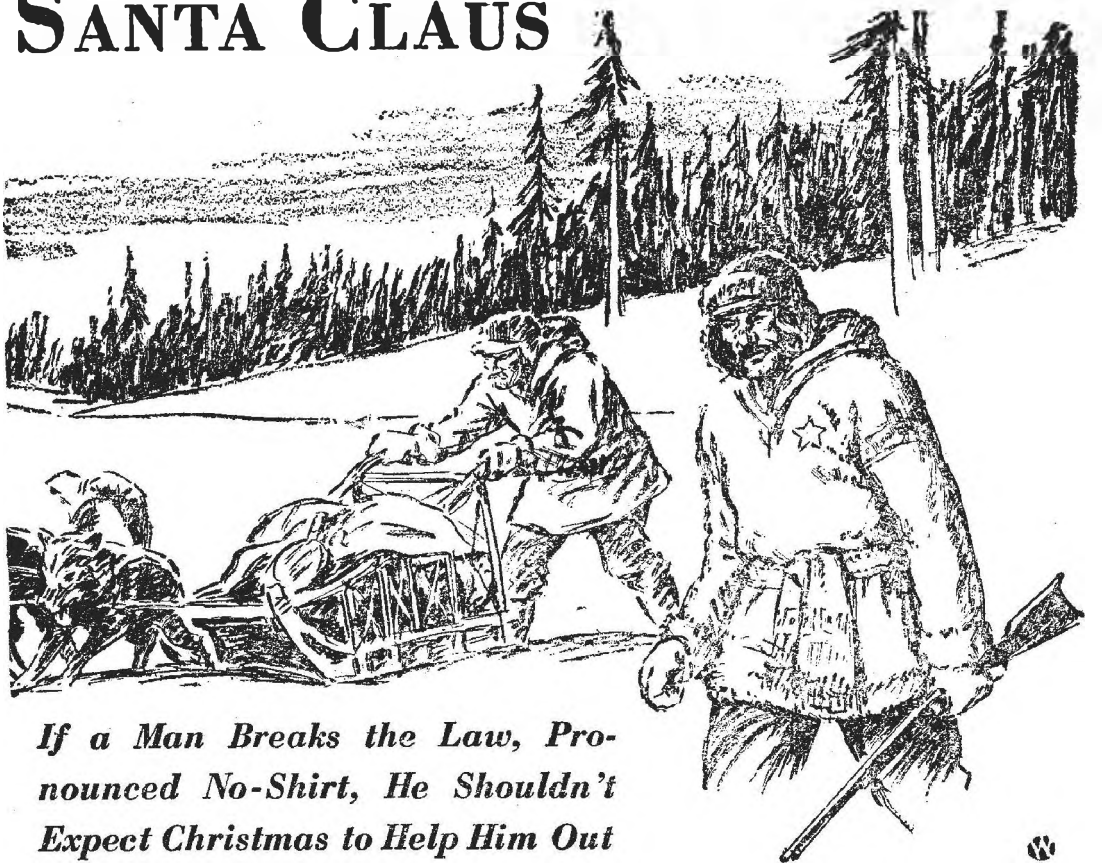
"What're you drivin' at?" I ask Bulldozer.

"Just this. With business wound up there's no reason why we can't have a real Christmas for a change instead of what we've been havin'."

"I have to admit we've had some tough ones, Bulldozer," I answer. "We haven't sat down to a table Christmas day in four years. Mostly Christmas dinner come from a campfire beside the trail."

"With the wind moanin' and the snow

SANTA CLAUS



If a Man Breaks the Law, Pronounced No-Shirt, He Shouldn't Expect Christmas to Help Him Out

flyin'," Bulldozer says. "I'm supposed to be a tough mugg."

"You are!"

"No sentiment, and all that," Bulldozer goes on. "My mother died when I was a young sprout, but I haven't forgotten her on Christmas day. My idear is to spot some place that has a mother runnin' things in the home. A place where there's room for a couple of tin-horns like us."

"I second that motion," I tell him.

"Yeah, but I want you to do more than second it," Bulldozer argues. "I want you to promise you won't go high-tailin' it away in the line of what you called duty. If some buck's beat his squaw you can wait a couple of days before arrestin' him. If a man pinches a few ounces of dust from somebody's poke, you don't have to drop everything and do a little pinchin' yourself. He'll keep. Arrest him *after* Christmas. Did you ever stop to think it's a hell of a note to arrest a man a few days *before* Christmas."

"You're right," I agree.

"Then it's a promise—none of this arm-of-the-law stuff a few days before Christmas," he says, "nor on Christmas day."

"That's a promise," I answer.

"Another thing. You have the habit of gettin' soft around Christmas time, and givin' your dough to some cuss that don't deserve it."

"You never objected," I tell him.

"I know it. I'm a sucker, too, Christmas time," he says. "Now, I'm practical. I see things in their true light. And so, we don't fall for any hard luck story, nor any sad, not-a-dry-eye-in-the-house situations."

"Right-o," I agree. "It's somethin' I learned in England."

"Shake on it."

WE SHAKE. And that should have settled it beyond any argument. But a couple of days later, when me and Bulldozer are gum-shoein' around tryin' to find a home with a mother and two empty places at the table an Indian yells at me.

"Don't pay no attention to him," Bulldozer warns. "Some buck's workin' over his squaw. Squaws are tough and Christmas is around the corner."

The buck tries to tell me somethin' in English and I don't get it, so he switches to dialect and it happens I understand his lingo. As he finishes Bulldozer says, "Tell the squaw to kick the buck on the shins, or work him over with her elbows and knees. That'll sober him up."

"It ain't nothin' like that, Bulldozer," I answer. "Somebody's comin' down the river on a raft."

"Then they'll get here," he predicts.

"I'm not so sure," I tell him. "This is the latest season this part of the country's had. Rivers are usually froze tight. The native says this man's raft is caught in an ice jam and seems to have froze there. It's only ten miles upriver."

"White man?" he asks.

"Yeah," I answer.

"Then what the hell are we waitin' for?" he snaps. "Let's get goin'!"

We hook up a dog team and drive up the river. Ice has formed out from each bank, but it ain't met in the middle yet. Slush ice, driftin' down, forms little jams which freeze, but pretty soon they break up and the stream's open again. When it gets a little colder they'll stick, then she'll freeze from bank to bank.

Mixed up with this slush ice is a raft. A man's sprawled on it and one leg is submerged and covered with ice. His body's faced downward, the arms sprawled out, and the mitted fingers clutchin' the center logs of the raft.

"Hell," Bulldozer growls, "it's on the other side of the river. It's Foster. Or anyway, Foster's parka is on him." We go along the bank, find three small, slim trees, fifty feet long and cut 'em down. We drag 'em onto the ice, lash 'em together and thrust the result slowly forward until the water's spanned.

The question is, will the ice hold the weight of the span and a man, or will it break off as soon as the man's in the middle. Bulldozer crawls across and stands up. Any minute I'm expectin' him to break through. In places the ice bends under him, and he runs before it can break. He keeps runnin' until he's close to the raft, then he makes a flyin' leap and lands on it.

Smart boy! His weight, hittin' the edge, breaks it loose. That's fine, except it starts sinkin'. To take off some of the load, he goes overboard and starts swimmin' with his feet and pushin' with his hands.

I get the idear. He'll land on my side a couple of hundred yards below. I'm on hand with a rope as soon as he's close enough. I toss the rope, he grabs the end and makes fast. I heave and pull the raft up snug. Bulldozer knocks off the ice hangin' to Foster's leg, picks him up and stumbles to solid ground. I get a fire goin' a few minutes later and start dryin' 'em out. Foster's alive, but he's in bad shape.

I ask him a couple of questions, but his eyelids only flutter a second or two, then close. I can see he's due to spend Christmas in the hospital.

It takes three hours to dry him out and by that time he can mutter, "Caught Scurvy Hooper robbin' my gold cache. Knocked me on the head. It give me terrible headaches. Figgered I was goin' crazy and come down on the raft."

"Scurvy Hooper," Bulldozer growls. "I've heard of that buzzard. Helps hisself to food caches; spent last winter in a native village; and makes a buff at prospectin'. I suppose we'd better start gunnin' for him right after Christmas."

"When a man robs another," I answer, "you don't wait until after Christmas to run him down. You start right away quick."

We load Foster into the sled, wrap him in everything we've got and put hot rocks around him, but still he is full of chills. We make the run back in a couple of hours and pop him into the hospital. "We're hittin' the trail first thing in the mornin'," I tell Doc, "but we'll look in and see how Foster's gettin' along."

"Can't we even wait for the Christmas mail?" Bulldozer asks. "It'll be here in three, four days. I might get a present from one of my old girls. Somethin' that'd come in handy on the manhunt."

"A hell of a lot of good a silk necktie will do you," I snap. "We wait for no mail. We spend merry Christmas on the trail. And don't look so glum; I feel just as bad about it as you do. No fine dinner, no mother at the table. No nothin', but beans and moose meat, plus sourdough bread, McGee style, washed down by tea."

We stop at the hospital the next mornin'. The dogs are rarin' to go, the sled's loaded with grub, sleepin' bags, a couple of good .30-30 rifles and plenty of ammunition. Nobody has any respect for Scurvy Hooper, but it's been my experience some of these no-good punks can fight like hell when they're cornered.

I expect to find only the nurse on the job when I go to Foster's room, but Doc is there, too. "He's in bad shape, No-Shirt," he says. "May not pull through. Went to pieces during the night, temperature jumped and pulse raced. Listen to that breathing. Bad! You'd better stay and be ready to take down any statement he may make. If he dies, Scurvy Hooper can deny the robbery and you'll have a tough time getting a conviction unsupported by a death-bed statement made in the presence of witnesses."

"I guess you're right," I admit. "There are plenty of others in the Ptarmigan Creek country who could've done it. But didn't." I go downstairs. "Take the dogs back and unharness 'em. We're stayin' until Foster gets better or worse."

Bulldozer grins. "I get a break at last. Listen, No-Shirt, I'm goin' to put in the day findin' a mother who'll have two empty places at the table Christmas day. When a Craig decides to eat Christmas dinner in style, all hell can't stop him."

THREE days later the camp goes wild. The mild weather has hung on and the steamer we figgered would never make it, comes up the bay. Young ice is spillin' away from her bows like moist sod falls away from a plow. Her gear is ready to unload freight. In fact I can see the first sling load—mail—on deck.

By the time she's dropped anchor a mile from shore, a tug has drug a barge out. A half hour later the tug's back again with passengers and first class mail. The heavier stuff that would have had to've been flew in, or brought in by dog team,

is aboard, too. "It comes next," the tug skipper says. "Ice is gettin' pretty bad and we may have to clear out before unloading the heavy freight. Never seen such a late season."

Me and Bulldozer go over to the post office—like most of the others—and stand opposite our box ready to grab the mail as it's put in.

I've just took the third mail order advertisement out of the box and Bulldozer's just got a letter from the seventh girl when somebody says, "No-Shirt, an old lady who ought to be in some quiet home instead of up here is waitin' for you at the office.

She come in on the boat. She claims she's got a son up here and she brought fifty pounds of Christmas presents, a twenty-pound tom turkey and all the fixin's for a Christmas dinner."

"A twenty-pound turkey?" Bulldozer asks, droolin'. "Oh my gawd!"

I go over to the office and there's the sweetest little old lady I've seen in years. I'd say she was around seventy and she's wearin' a old-style hat, because it looks nice on her, and she's got white hair and a gentle smile.

"I am Mrs. Delaney," she says, "and they told me you could probably help me. I am looking for my son, Jeff Delaney. He is a miner and he is camped on some creek emptying into the river that empties into this bay."

Now I know about every prospector on the river and creeks. If I don't know 'em personally, I've heard their name and where they're campin'. I ain't met up with any Jeff Delaney. If Mrs. Delaney was a hard-boiled man I'd've said, "Sometimes men change their names. What does he look like?" Instead I say, "I'm the temporary marshal. Ain't been here long enough to know everybody, what's your boy like."

"He's thirty-five," she says, "so I don't suppose he's really a boy. But he's my youngest and you know how mothers are." And she gives me a smile that would have melted the heart of a stone lion. "Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, you being the marshal and perhaps dubious about wayward boys going straight, but he made—his mistakes."

Right then I commence to feel funny inside. "Yeah," I say lightly, "we all make mistakes when we're young."

"Jeff's mistakes were of the head and not of the heart," she says. "We talked it all over, and he decided to go to Alaska where he wasn't known and make a new start. I gave him a thousand-dollar grubstake, as he called it."

"Yeah, that's what we call 'em up here," I tell her. Somehow the more she talks the less comfortable I feel. It's like when you read a story you know's goin' to turn out wrong.

"He had trouble finding good ground at first," she continues. "Hungry ground, he called it. Then he wrote me he'd struck it. He said he wouldn't take out a fortune, but there would be a steady yield year after year. Mr. McGee, when I learned that I almost cried. I felt it was an act of God, because a lot of money all at once would have started Jeff drinking too much again. But a little, year after year, would encourage him and as the years passed his character would go stronger. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do," I answer. At the same time I'm goin' over the list of punks in the region, tryin' to recall one that might be Jeff Delaney.

"Christmas has always meant so much to me," she goes on to say. "And when one is getting along we picture the children as they were years ago opening their presents Christmas morning. Perhaps you can't understand, but children grow up so rapidly, and we foolish mothers try and recapture and hold the old days."

"Yes," I mutter.

"Well, I suddenly decided I'd take Christmas to Jeff," she explains. "I knew he couldn't come to me, and I was afraid that before another Christmas came I might—well, not be here. They told me that I would have to fly here, but I couldn't afford that. Then I was told there was a chance in a hundred of the steamer getting through. I'm not a gambling woman, Mr. McGee, but I thought if my boy was willing to gamble his life to make good, then I might properly do a little gambling to be with him again."

"Right," I tell her.

"And—here I am." She smiles brightly.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mrs. Delaney," I say. "First we'll get you a comfortable place to stay." I've got a hunch

she ain't in the money, so the place must be reasonable. "Then we'll find your boy and bring him in."

"You are so good," she says.

"Glad to do it," I tell her.

"I'll cook the dinner," she says, "and if you will join us my boy and I will be delighted."

"My pardner—" I start to say.

"Bring him too," she interrupts.

"My pardner and I have to go on a man hunt," I tell her.

"You have to arrest a man during the Christmas season?" she asks, and her voice is kinda shocked. "How terrible."

"It's the law," I tell her. "If a man breaks it, he can't expect Christmas to help him out."

CHAPTER II

EVIDENCE

ME AND Bulldozer get Mrs. Delaney all fixed up, then we hang around to see how Foster turns out. He has three bad days, then the doctor announces he's out of danger, though a mighty sick man. "Arrest Scurvy Hooper," he says, "and Foster will be ready to testify against him."

Accordin' to Foster, Hooper's got about fifteen hundred dollars worth of nuggets. If we can catch the cuss with the nuggets on his person, that'll cinch the case. All Foster will have to do is to identify 'em.

I take the trail at once, with Bulldozer grumblin' about eatin' a Christmas dinner of beans, sourdough bread and bacon. "Tea instead of Tom 'n Jerry," he mutters.

The big cuss gets the idear we may be able to arrest Hooper and get back in time for Christmas. He sets a pace that danged near kills me off and puts an abused expression in the dogs' eyes. We hit Ptarmigan Creek in record time and stop at the first cabin. It's empty. The owner's gone to town for Christmas. We try a couple more with the same result.

"Luck's again' us," Bulldozer moans. "Why couldn't these bums stay at home and give us information."

"Situations like this should sharpen your wits," I tell him, so as to shut him up. "You should be able to figger out a way of trappin' Hooper."

He don't say a word the rest of the day, and I can tell by the way he rolls around he don't sleep well that night. The next mornin' he says, "I got a idear."

"Go ahead with it," I tell him.

That night he camps on a high ridge. It's cold enough to freeze a brass monkey and the wind's howlin' down from the Arctic. He builds a roarin' fire while I'm lookin' around for signs of Hooper. "You danged chump," I roar, "what's the idear? Don't you know that fire will advertise our presence to Hooper. How're we goin' to sneak up on him?"

"We can't sneak up on him until we find him," he answers.

When I wake up the next mornin' Bulldozer's gone. I'm gettin' breakfast when he shows up. He's kinda out of breath. "Well, No-Shirt," he announces, "I've found his trail."

"You lucky stiff!" I yell.

"Lucky nothin'," he snaps. "Brains! I figgered if I was a outlaw and somebody come into the country I'd want to know who it was so I could act accordin'. Well, I advertised somebody was in the country when I built the fire. Sure enough, somebody snuk up last night to look us over. Now, I reason if the party was honest he'd have dropped in for a visit. These trappers and miners are starved for news. This man came close enough for a look, then cleared out. It's got to be Scurvy Hooper."

"Bulldozer," I tell him, "you're showin' faint signs of intelligence at last." I chuckle. It was a smart trick. All Bulldozer had to do was to circle camp and look for tracks.

We leave the dogs tied up, throw plenty of fuel on the fire to make smoke for Hooper to see, then we pick up the trail. The tracks cross a deep gulch and continue

over a bench. Suddenly Bulldozer grabs my arm. "Stop!" he whispers. "He must be ahead. I smell wood smoke."

Bulldozer follows his nose a half mile before we spot the camp. "There it is!" he whispers, then bellows, "Duck!"

I don't duck, I dive. A bullet moans where I just was, and I'm down on the snow lookin' for a hole. If I can find one I'll go down it and pull it in after me. "You hit, Bulldozer?" I ask.

"If I am," he answers from a drift, "the bullet paralyzed what it hit. I can't feel nothin'."

We squirm to thicker timber and hold a consultation of war. "My bright idear backfired," he says. "Buildin' that fire drew him to us, but he identified us."

"I still claim it was a good idear," I argue. "He thought we was careless. He didn't dream it was a trick or he'd have covered his tracks better. He figgered we'd just drift on."

"And we figgered to catch him off guard, which makes us both wrong on the last two counts," he says. "He's got a place that's a cinch to defend. It'd take a army to get him out. His idear is to hold us off until a blizzard hits, then make a getaway. He knows every inch of the country and we don't, so chances are in his favor."

"We got to get him before snow flies again," I answer. I take binoculars and inch through the brush until I spot his hideout. It's a regular fort. He's ringed by a mass of boulders and all he has to do is set there and yell, "Come and get me."

There's a steep bank behind him, a hundred feet high. It's too steep to climb, so I turn the glasses above it, with the idear of comin' in from the rear and shootin' down. Then I notice there's a overhang that'll protect him from shootin' down.

All this time Scurvy Hooper has kept his head down. I get occasional flashes of the top of his head, but never enough to make a target. Suddenly he lifts his head a little higher to get a better look and I see his face. It's bearded, but the eyes and forehead are mighty familiar. "I've seen that cuss somewhere," I tell Bulldozer. "No, I ain't either. I've seen his mother."

"You have?" Bulldozer asks.

"I have," I answer, "everything's goin' to hell on a hand-car. Scurvy Hooper is Mrs. Delaney's son, Jeff."

"Naw! Naw!" Bulldozer protests. "You have gone off half cocked. She couldn't have a son like that."

But I can see he's whistlin' in the dark. He's rememberin' Jeff got into trouble Outside and she'd sent him north to make a new start. "First thing to do is capture him," he says after awhile. "Then we'll have to keep him under cover until she leaves the country. You know that, No-Shirt," he says, givin' me a dirty look. "We can't bring him in Christmas time."

"Am I arguin' the point," I snap. "We'll hole up in some cabin until after the holidays, then one of us will sneak down and find out if she's gone back home. If she has, we'll bring him in. Even if she reads Scurvy Hooper's been arrested, she won't connect it up with her son."

"But she'll write to you for information," he suggests.

"Why do you keep thinkin' things like that?" I growl. "I'll tell her he's prob'ly gone into the back country. And if Foster dies and he's hung I'll make up a yarn about him dyin' a hero's death."

"What next?" Bulldozer asks.

"You stay here, and don't let him make a break. I think I've got a trick with a hole in it," I tell him. "Somethin' like it worked once down in Arizona. We used sand instead of snow."

I crawl several hundred yards west, then I go north twice as far, and I'm on the side of the mountain. I can look down, but I can't see Bulldozer nor Scurvy. I now start crawlin' east and pretty soon I'm above Scurvy's fort. There's no place to hide—just a steep slope covered with snow. And if he should suddenly pop out he can pick me off. I feel practically naked.

Now, I can see Bulldozer. He's got

clenched fists above his head and he's actin' like he's sufferin' from anguish. I know he's callin' me several kinds of a damned fool.

I take the butt of the .30-30 and commence diggin' away the snow. I move a little bit at a time and sorta scatter it over the slope below so it won't roll down into the fort and get Scurvy curious.

In a half hour's time I've got a trench three feet deep, runnin' crossways of the slope. I widen the trench and when I get down to frozen ground I commence jumpin' up and down. Nothin' happens. I keep at it until I'm winded and blue in the face, then suddenly the snow higher up starts movin'.

I head for safety with the roar of the slide fillin' my ears. I don't know whether I'm dizzy, or it's the snow ahead that's movin'. But snow that should be solid seems to be shiftin'. I take a flyin' leap, and it's like landin' in foam on a river. I go out of sight. I lose my rifle and commence clawin' with my hands and gaspin' for breath. My moccasins find solid snow, only to have my weight start it slippin'. My nose fills with fine stuff and breathin' becomes harder. Now I'm movin'—goin' end over end with the slide. The roar grows louder and louder. My ribs are slammed again' hard stuff knockin' the wind out of me, then there's a slam on the head and things slowly grow black.

WHEN I wake up Bulldozer's standin' there with a anxious look on his face. As soon as he sees I recognize him, the look disappears and one of disgust comes. "Until now," he says, "the world's biggest damned fool was the guy who sat on a limb and sawed it off."

"I didn't figger to get caught," I answer, then cough quite awhile. "My idear was to drive out Scurvy."

"Scurvy didn't have a chance to be drove out," Bulldozer sneers. "I found him before I found you. I saw your body disappear into the fort just as he jumped to make a run for it, then snow covered everything."

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know. I'm a curious cuss, by nature, so I wondered if you was dead," he says. "So I've just been settin' here while you made up your mind to live or die. Well, what's your decision?"

"I'll live, you horse's south end," I snap. "And it's a good thing for you. If I'd've died I'd've haunted you."

He shakes life into Scurvy and the first thing the cuss says is, "I guess you've got me."

"We got you," Bulldozer says. "I searched your clothes. You had a six-gun, knife and fifteen hundred dollars worth of Foster's gold on you."

I get slowly to my feet and start walkin' to see if I'm in gear all over. I am. Then Scurvy gets up. Right now he seems okay, but he's goin' to be plenty stiff tomorrow. I figger it's a good time to let him have both barrels. "Come on, Jeff, let's get goin'."

He jerks like he was shot. "What'd you call me Jeff for?" he asks. "My name's Ed Hooper."

"Jeff Delaney is all of it," I snap. Again I can see I've hit the nail on the head. Or maybe I've hit the heel.

"You're all snarled up," he says. "Jeff Delaney is up in the Reindeer River country. He's got a little trap line up there. He expects to make a stake so he can prospect next summer."

"Then you're just the man I'm looking for," I said. "For awhile we'll forget you robbed Foster and maybe killed him. He was in the hospital when we left."

"That's a lie!" he snarls. "I never hit Foster nor took his gold. What kind of a frame-up is this?"

"I'll forget that, I snap. "You are the man who knows where Jeff Delaney hangs out. We're goin' to town, pick up his mother who's come north to spend Christmas with him, and mush out there."

That cracks him!

"She's—Mrs. Delaney—my mother is up north?" he asks.

"Yeah. She brought Christmas presents and a twenty-pound turkey to give you an old-fashioned Christmas," I tell him.

"It'll kill her," he says. "She's the kind who goes along on her nerve, then cracks and has to go to bed awhile. But this—this'll kill her."

"You know who the guilty party is," I tell him.

"Sure, I know," he answers. "I am. I've always been. I'm one of these men who'll promise to do the right thing, and mean it. Then something sidetracks me. I'm a no-good bum. I wrote her I was doing fine, and I was wintering with natives. Then this last season I went prospecting. I didn't hit it. I knew I had to send her some gold to prove I was making good."

"No, you didn't have to send her any gold to prove that," I interrupt. "An account of the cabin you'd built and the dump you'd made while huntin' for gold would have been enough for her, Delaney. She wasn't so much interested in what was in the bottom of the pan as she was in the diggin' of gravel."

"I figgered she'd need money. I know she would," he says. "It was my idea to clean out Foster's cache. Next year I thought I'd strike it, and I could slip the amount back—drop it into his sluice box or something. Well, he caught me and I let him have it."

"I've heard of boys who work in banks taking a little money with the idea of putting it back," I tell him. "The motive behind it is the same whether you're in a bank or on a creek. The payoff is the same, too. They get a prison term, but the wrong party serves the real sentence."

"Do anything you want to with me afterwards, but don't let her know it," he says. "I'll plead guilty—anything."

"The man with the good intentions talking again, eh?" I suggest.

"I suppose so," he admits. "But if it's in your hands I'll have to toe the mark."

"We'll see what we can do, eh, Bulldozer?" I answer.

"Yeah," he says, "we'll see. But you'd better not make one false move, because I've figgered out she'll be better off if you're dead. And should I have to bump you off to make her happy, I would feel more like a boy scout helpin' a blind man across the street than a murderer. And I never thought I'd get that viewpoint and be cheerful about it."

CHAPTER III

BULLDOZER'S CHRISTMAS DINNER

WE MAKE it back to the dogs without anything happenin', and after a square meal we all turn in, with the prisoner handcuffed.

The moanin' and groanin' you hear the next mornin' is U. S. Marshal McGee gettin' his aged bones and muscles to workin'. Jeff Delaney is younger, but he's stiffer'n a board, too.

"What are your plans?" he asks.

"They don't include my kind of a Christmas dinner," Bulldozer growls. "I've knowed right along somethin' would happen to prevent my dream comin' true. It never fails to work out wrong."

"I'm turnin' a plot over in my mind," I tell the prisoner. "It's somethin' along the line I talked over with you, Bulldozer."

We hit the trail that mornin' but a howlin' blizzard catches us at noon. "Where's the nearest cabin?" I ask Jeff. "You know this country better'n I do, and we can't stay out in this."

"Parker's cabin," he answers. "It's over the ridge to a creek, then downstream to the river. The cabin's a couple of hundred yards from the river, and a hundred feet back from the creek. If we miss it, we'll hit the river and turn back."

"Break trail," I tell him.

And he does. It's a tough trek and he gets lost a couple of times on the ridge. Late in the afternoon he finds the creek and at eleven o'clock that night we pull up in front of the cabin. It's dark. "Where's Parker?" I ask.

"He planned to spend the winter Outside," Jeff Delaney answers.

THE door's unlocked. There's a pile of shavings on the stove, a tin can with matches, and plenty of kindling. A cord of wood has been stacked against one wall. That's the way a cabin should be left.

I build a fire, while Bulldozer clears the dog kennels of snow and puts up the team. The cabin has a fair stock of grub in it, but they haven't got around to puttin' up Christmas dinners in cans, so the future didn't look good for Bulldozer.

"We'll be here several days," I told him when he comes stampin' in. "Blizzards like this one hang on."

"Yeah. Another Christmas beside the trail," he says. "I brought in everything off'n the sled. Fed each dog a frozen salmon. What'll we have for supper?" He pokes through the grub sack and comes to a package. "What's this?"

"Somethin' special."

"Let's have it now," he says. "There'll never be a more special time."

"No," I answer, then as he's disappointed, I add, "It's for Christmas mornin'."

He grins. "It couldn't be the makin's of a Tom and Jerry could it?" he asks.

"You talk too blasted much. Gimme that frozen mulligan." He hands me a block as hard as iron and I put it over the stove to thaw and, later, simmer. Then I start a pot of baked beans goin'. We'll let 'em cook a couple of days and they'll be ready for Christmas.

We eat and turn in. I handcuff Jeff Delaney's wrists to a bunk post as a matter of safety. With the storm ragin' there ain't much likelihood of his escapin', but I don't take no chances. A man with a stretch in prison ahead of him is liable to do most anything.

He's the first one to go to sleep. Bulldozer's next, and I'm just dozin' off when I hear what sounds like a man cryin' out. I get up on one elbow and listen. I ain't sure if I'm right or not. In such cases you make sure. A yell may be a man's last. I put on moccasins, pull parka over my head and slip out of the cabin. I yell, and it's answered.

I head down toward the river. Every few seconds I yell and get a answer. "I'm down here," the voice says. I walks a few yards more and there's a man settin' humped up on a log. "I'm Les Ewing," he says. "Hell, you're No-Shirt McGee."

"Yeah. What're you doin' up here?" I ask. "I left you in town."

"That Mrs. Delaney hired me to take her upriver," he answers. "She figgered her son would be in one of the cabins, or else someone would know where he was. I told her I'd never heard of any Jeff Delaney, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. My business is haulin' freight and passengers by dog team, and, the weather bein' good, we started out. Then this storm hit. Worst one I've ever seen. I figgered that Parker's cabin was our best chance. It's the only one in a long stretch of river. Thought I'd missed it, so left the team and began huntin' for landmarks.

The cold began to get me and I yelled, thinkin' others might be huntin' for the cabin, or that I was close enough to be heard."

Well it's a fine mess, any way you look at it. When he tells me Mrs. Delaney is along I'm too astonished to think of anything to say. For a minute or two my brain don't spark. First, I help Les Ewing into the cabin. I give him a shot of whiskey and get him warmed up. All this helps. After awhile he notices the man in the lower bunk. "Scurvy Hooper," he says softly. "You nabbed him, eh?"

"Wrong!" I answer. "That's Jeff Delaney. Get it? Jeff Delaney. And another thing—" I give him a long, serious talk. "Now let's find your dogs."

We go down to the river and stumble along, keepin' close to the bank. The wind is howlin' worse'n ever. At times we can lean again' it. Les is smart. He's got the team tied to a tree and a rope stretched between two other trees so we'll stumble into it. It hits me across the chest and I stop. At first I can't see a thing. Then here and there I spot a dog's nose stickin' out of a drift. A big drift marks the sled.

"Wake up, Mrs. Delaney," Les yells. "Are you all right?"

"I'm as snug as a bug in a rug," she answers. "Did you find the Parker cabin?"

"Yes," he answers, "I found—a cabin. No-Shirt McGee, the marshal, has holed in there with his pardner Bulldozer Craig. It ain't far."

We drive back to the cabin, and it's a two-man job, pullin' dogs and sled through the drifts. "Help her out of them robes," I tell Les, "and I'll go inside."

The first thing I do is unlock Jeff Delaney's handcuffs and hide 'em. "Listen, you," I tell him, "your mother's out there."

"What?" he exclaims. "She wouldn't start looking for me——" He breaks off as he thinks it over, and he knows doggoned well she would do just that. People living on borrowed time take chances when there's a goal.

"I've talked it over with her driver, and he'll keep his mouth shut on your past. So will me and Bulldozer," I explain. "Here's the play. She'll be told this ain't the Parker cabin, but Jeff Delaney's cabin. This is your place, and we're all stopping here until the storm's over. We'll let her have her visit out, then we'll take her to the airport and send her south by plane. Understand?"

"Yeah, I get it," he says. "Sure there won't be any slip?"

"If there is," I snap, "it'll be your fault. All we have to do is to think a second before we answer any questions."

Him and Bulldozer get into their clothes, we slick up the cabin a bit and light all the candles in the place. It looks right cheerful when she comes in.

SHE stares at Jeff as if she expects us to introduce him. He ain't much, but he's in good physical shape. He's got meat on his bones and color in his eyes. The beard fools her, then she takes a step forward, and suddenly the cabin rings with her glad little cry. "It *is* Jeff."

He opens his arms and she pops into 'em. He swings her off her feet, kisses her several times, then puts her in a chair. Now I can see her face is flushed with excitement. But the flush don't hide the lines of exhaustion. She's so tired she can drop.

"The trip from town was exciting," she says, "and Les Ewing was so kind. He did all the work, and when he had to go ahead to find the cabin—he said it was to save the dogs—he left me nice and warm."

Me and Bulldozer exchange looks. We know that when Les left her, he figgered he mightn't come back and he'd done the best he could for her.

We let 'em talk a half hour, then I suggest us men had better sneak into a back room until she's undressed and in bed. It don't take her long. When everybody's in for what's left of the night I blow out the candles.

IT'S almost noon when we wake up. Jeff leans over, grins down at his ma and they talk back and forth. Us men clear out again, dress in the cold, and come troopin' back when she's ready. She's got a little house dress on and you'd have thought she was in her kitchen back home instead of in a lonely cabin at the jumpin' off place in Alaska.

She insists on cookin' breakfast and Bulldozer sides in with her when I offer to do the job.

It's a hour later that me and Bulldozer have a word to ourselves.

"You could've knocked me down with a feather when Scurvy Hooper's ma come in last night," he says. "So far you've managed it okay, but when it's all over somebody's goin' to be short changed. I hope it won't be her. Danged if I can see how Marshal McGee, the law, Scurvy and her can all come out on top."

"Better call him Jeff. She heard down in town we was goin' after Scurvy Hooper," I warn him. "I've wised Les up, and he won't make no slips, him bein' a kind of a silent cuss anyway."

That evenin' we're havin' dinner—roast mountain sheep — when she smiles across the table and says, "Mr. McGee, you didn't find your Scurvy Hooper person, and I'm glad. It would be terrible to arrest a man, even a bad one, at Christmas time. Honest now, aren't you glad he got away."

"Just so he don't get away for good," I tell her. "A man must pay for his crimes, you know."

"I suppose so," she agrees, then she looks at Jeff. "When I think how close he came to trouble, real trouble at different times, it makes me cold all over. You see, at home, no one trusted him. It is a handicap."

"Sure is," Bulldozer mutters. "It don't give a feller a chance."

"Up here," she goes on to say, while the rest of us are squirmin' inside, "people accepted Jeff at face value. He was trusted and he made good. I am proud of you, Jeff."

"I haven't done as well as I might," he says.

"But you've built a cabin, developed a mine, and found gold," she says.

"Sure! Sure!" he agrees.

"Can I see it?" she asks.

He starts to look at me, then gets hold of hisself. "Sure! You had it last, McGee. What'd you do with it?"

I'm thinkin' that gold is government Exhibit A at the trial, but I get it. "Fifteen hundred dollars worth," I tell her.

"It's yours, Mother," he says. "Take it along when you go."

Bulldozer's eyes plainly ask, "How're you goin' to get that evidence back unless you spill everything?"

"Mine," she is saying. "Fifteen hundred dollars worth. That will pay back the grubstake I gave you, and my expenses besides."

"You'd better figger to catch the plane that leaves town January second," I tell her. "There might not be another for a long time. Weather is uncertain up here."

"Yes, of course," she says. Then she turns to her son. "When will you come out home for good? Or at least a visit?"

Jeff Delaney looks at me. "How long should it take to clean-up around here?"

I SCRATCH my head, and wonder how hard the judge will soak him for the robbery. "It depends on what you do," I answer. "If you work along faithfully you might be out in five years." There're two ways he can take that word *out*. He takes it the right way. "If you don't handle things right, it'll take longer."

"I'll make it a point to handle things right," he says. I can hear Bulldozer's sigh of relief. He almost breaks his neck to turn the talk into other channels.

"Five years is a long time when you're my age," Mrs. Delaney says. Then she brightens. "But now that I've seen how fine and stable you are, I'll manage."

CHRISTMAS mornin' I sneak out to the wood shed and open the little package I'd brought from town. It takes me quite awhile, but the result is worth it—as fine a Tom and Jerry as a man ever built.

I head for the cabin, carryin' everything on a board because I don't have no tray. "Open up!" I yell. "Here comes Santa Claus!"

"Man! Man! Look at that!" Bulldozer says. "Somebody kick me. I want to be sure I ain't dreamin'."

"How about you, Mrs. Delaney," I ask, "a little one for the stomach's sake?"

She thinks hard a long time. "I don't suppose the ladies back home would approve, but—yes they do look tempting. Make me a little one. Is that what they call it?"

"An old booze hound like No-Shirt McGee would call it a short one," Bulldozer says. "Here you are, Mrs. Delaney. You'll feel like you had a new spring outfit two months ahead of all your friends." He hands her one and turns to Jeff and I remember one time in his life strong drink had got him down. "How about it, Jeff?"

"Go ahead, Jeff," Mrs. Delaney says, "if you want one. If a man has really mastered his weakness, one little drink won't hurt him."

"I guess you're right."

He has a couple, I have three. Les takes four and Bulldozer empties the bowl. "And now," Mrs. Delaney says, "if you'll all take a long walk I'll see if I can scrape up a Christmas dinner. I don't want you under foot."

It's quit snowin' and the wind's died down, but it won't do to get too far away from the cabin. Them clouds overhead are likely to let loose any time. Bulldozer leads the way, breakin' trail, and I bring up the rear. Mrs. Delaney says it'll take four hours to cook the dinner and we make several round trips to the river and climb halfway up a mountain.

Four hours later we return to the cabin. "Hold everything!" Bulldozer yells. "What's that smell comin' out of the key hole?"

We sniff. It's turkey fresh out of the oven.

We can hardly believe our eyes when we go inside. She's thought of everything—even a table cloth. "That's your favorite spread," Jeff says. "Brought out only on state occasions. And you lugged it clear up here."

"I wanted it as homelike as possible," she says. "Now which one of you boys is the best carver?"

"No-Shirt should be," Bulldozer says. "He spent his younger days carvin' up tough boys in alley brawls."

"Shut up!" I growl.

"Mr. McGee will carve," she says.

And Mr. McGee did carve. A couple of times the bird almost slipped off'n the platter. No two slices was the same thickness but I got 'em off.

"Looks like a beaver'd been workin' on that bird," Bulldozer says.

He leans back and gets serious all of a sudden. I think he's just realized that the Christmas dinner he's dreamed about has come when he least expected it.

There's a mother at the end of the table, sure enough. And every man present is happy for the moment. All of us are tryin' not to think it's got to end, maybe on a sour note.

"I move we knock off the turkey now," I tell them, "so we can pick at it the rest of the day. You know, sneak in and lift a slice of white meat that's cold."

"I second that motion," Bulldozer says, "eyein' the mince and pun'kin pie. And I want to say this is the first time, in quite a few years, I sat down to Christmas dinner with a mother at the table. When I wasn't eatin' beside the trail, I was perched on some high stool in a beanery. This, Mrs. Delaney, is the swellest Christmas dinner I've had since my mother died."

"Why bless your heart," she says, "I'm doubly glad I came."

"I want you to know," Bulldozer concludes, "that I'll never forget it."

Me and Les say, "Amen." And Jeff says quiet like, "You brought the old days back to me."

CHAPTER IV

THE PAYOFF

AFTER dinner Mrs. Delaney hands each of us outsiders a small package and gives the rest of the things that she brought to Jeff. Our gifts are handkerchiefs and such that she's took from things intended for her son. It makes it pretty fine.

"It's too bad," I say, "we didn't know you'd be here. We might have trapped enough fur to make you a coat."

"Jeff's nuggets are Christmas enough for me," she answers. And that was all that was said about Christmas. We spend the evenin' singin' carols and it's late when we turn in.

There's a kind of a let-down the next day, but not enough for Mrs. Delaney to notice.

She has a good time right up to the night before we leave. We managed to take walks so she and Jeff will have a lot of time to theirselves, and we give 'em a hour before we start in the mornin'.

"Now," Bulldozer says, "comes the payoff. If we leave him here he'll clear out. If we leave somebody with him, she's liable to smell a rat."

"And if we take him to town with us, somebody will notice they're mother and son and she'll hear the truth," I argue. "No, we'll have to leave him here—alone."

"And catch him all over again," Bulldozer growls.

"I don't think so," I argue. "I'm goin' to gamble on him shootin' square with us because we gave him and his mother a square deal."

We go back to the cabin and I do the talkin'. I shove my hand out and say, "S'long, Jeff. Sorry you can't go in with us."

"S'long," he says. "I'd like to go. But I explained to mother if I left the claim somebody might jump my ground."

"Somebody like this Scurvy Hooper," Mrs. Delaney says. "Mr. McGee, when I think how hard Jeff has worked here, and that someone might jump his ground, well —now that Christmas is over, perhaps you should arrest him."

"I'm sure he'll be in jail in a week's time," I tell her.

Ten minutes later we're on the trail. The day's clear and cold. Jeff goes with us for several miles, then stands on a boulder in the center of the river and waves as long as the sled is in sight.

We drive straight to the airport. A ten passenger job, with twin motors is all warmed up. The passengers are still arrivin' from town and the pilots are walkin' around checkin' over the plane.

"This will be my first plane ride," she says, "I hope it doesn't come down."

"It won't, but if it does," I tell her, "don't worry. Alaska planes carry tent, sleeping bags, rifle, ammunition, axe and all the other items needed to live off the country. Say, while I think of it, send Jeff's letters to me. It sometimes happens when a man is in the back country, the marshal hears of some fellow going into his part of the country, and letters can be sent along. And I'll have Jeff send his letters to me, too."

"Mr. McGee, I won't put you to all that trouble," she protests.

"No trouble at all. You'll do it, won't you?"

"Of course," she agrees. We see her get into the plane, take a seat forward and set down. The co-pilot straps her in. We stand there while the plane goes up the field, turns around and roars back for the take-off. As it streaks by we can see her face against the window. She's smilin' and wavin' her hand.

"There she goes," Bulldozer says. "If

we keep on bein' the good liars we have the past few days, she'll live to see her boy come *out* five years from now. If—he ever goes *in*."

We go to the office, check up on the business that's unfinished and find the arrest of Scurvy Hooper is the only item. We turn in and catch up on our sleep. The next day we ask Doc how Foster's gettin' along.

"He's fine. He'll be ready to testify," Doc answers.

"Tell him he won't be needed," I say. "Hooper is goin' to confess. Tell him to take a trip Outside."

"He can't. Hooper has most of his money," Doc explains.

"We'll do somethin' about that," I promise.

"Bulldozer says nothin' until we are back at the office, then he asks, "What? Mrs. Delaney's got the poke—proof her boy's made good."

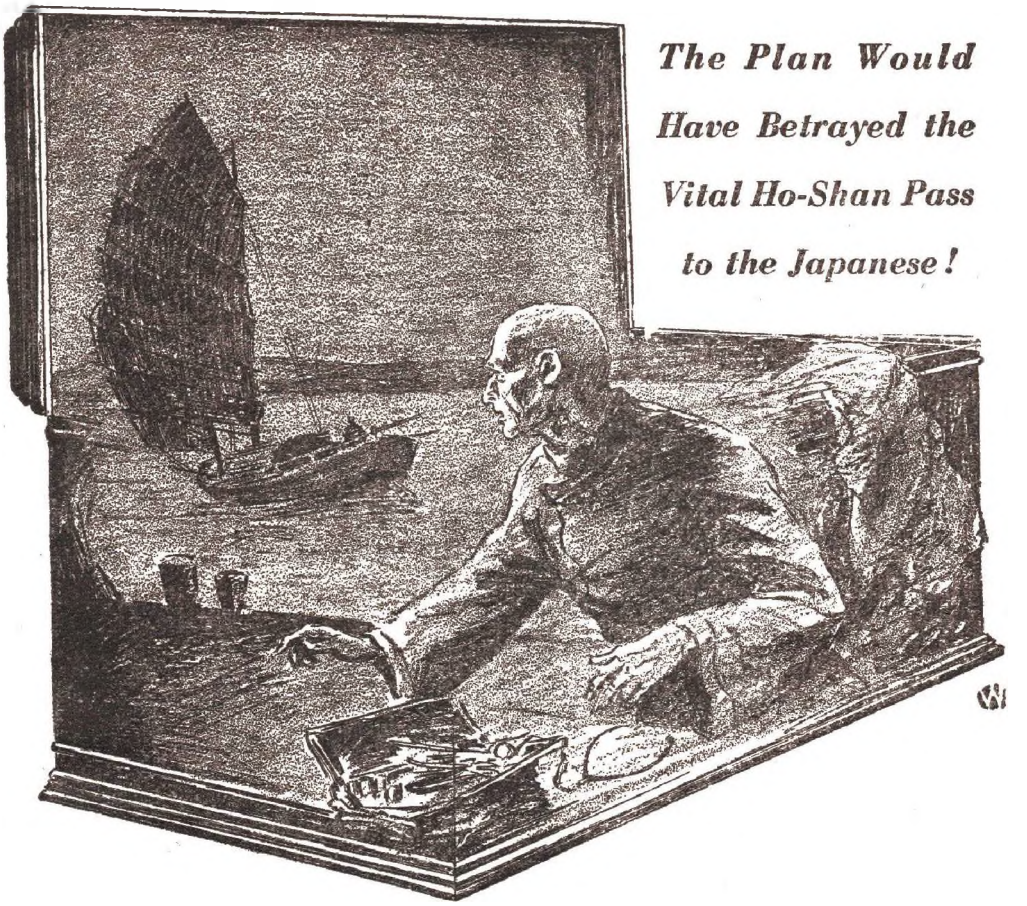
We didn't give Christmas presents this year," I tell Bulldozer, "How about diggin' into the pardnership poke for fifteen hundred. Who knows, it may be paid back some day. But if not—what the hell? We had the Christmas dinner we wanted."

"Okay," he says. "Shhh! Not so loud. Somebody's comin'."

The door opens and in walks Jeff Delaney. "Hello, Scurvy," I say. "I've been expectin' you."

"I thought you would be," he answers, "that's why I came. You're the first man I've ever met who believed I had any honor. It's a rather pleasant surprise to find that I have. How're you booking me for the trial?"

I scrawl somethin' on the book recordin' the arrests, then turn the book around so he can see what's written. He reads: " 'Scurvy Hooper—claim robbery—gave himself up and will plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court'." He looks up and smiles, then says, "Thanks—Santa Claus."



The Plan Would Have Betrayed the Vital Ho-Shan Pass to the Japanese!

THE CAMPHORWOOD CHEST

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "Blood-Red Jade of Kublai Khan," "Deepwater Man," etc.

IT IS rumored in Chungking's official circles that the coveted Order of the Brilliant Jade will soon be issued in the name of Dr. Thomas David Crandall, whose strange but fateful exploit saved the vital Ho-Shan Pass from the Japanese and averted a military catastrophe which an entire army of Marshal Chiang's best troops could not have been able to repair.

While it was the New York war correspondent, Steve Orcutt, who discovered the traitorous negotiations between the Chinese General Tchun Tai and Colonel Matsugama, the notorious Japanese secret agent, Orcutt had the misfortune to fall into General Tchun's cunning trap, and had it not been for Dr. Crandall's heroism, both Orcutt and his priceless secret would have been buried forever in some carefully unmarked grave.

Chungking is well aware of the deadly danger to China's cause that lay in General Tchun's treacherous plan to surrender the famous Ho-Shan Pass to the Japanese. A fatal gap would have been opened deep into the Chinese flank—the capital itself placed in direct peril of assault.

But at first the mere mention of Dr. Crandall's name raised hesitation and doubt in Chinese official quarters, because even in far-off Chungking the unsavory

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life story of Dr. Crandall was well known.

A certain Oriental phrase was firmly linked with Dr. Crandall's name—a phrase spoken with utter contempt by both white men and yellow: *Fan-tee*—"gone native."

Not that there was any slant-eyed China-girl in the background—Dr. Crandall's transgressions were of things less easily forgiven and forgotten.

This was the same Dr. Thomas David Crandall, once of exclusive Bubbling Well Road in fashionable Shanghai—once a man of worldwide fame in his profession; a man whose books on Asiatic cholera and pellagra became medical classics, bringing him medals and ribbons and honorary degrees from the universities of three continents.

Then tragedy had come to Dr. Crandall — deep, personal tragedy that led to those long renegade years of aimless wandering, which brought him at last to General Tchun's *yamen* at ancient Ho-Shan; a gaunt, fever-eyed man wearing a soiled Chinese *shaam* and coolie slippers; a weary, broken man who paid for bed and board by enduring the scorn and mockery of his slant-eyed host.

Worst of all, Dr. Crandall had become a *samshu* drinker. *Samshu,* which means literally "triple fire"—the vilest and most corroding of all the world's hell-brews.

In all fairness, Chungking may readily be excused for hesitating to proclaim this shabby and furtive outcast an official national hero—the more so since Steve Orcutt's account of the Ho-Shan affair was challenged by those four other white refugees who had been forced to share Orcutt's captivity in General Tchun's evil *yamen.*

They were Anton Berkofer, an Austrian oil-man; Leif Larsen of the Swedish-American Mission; his young wife, Anitra; and their three-year-old daughter Christina. They admitted they all owed their lives to Dr. Crandall's heroism, yet they disagreed violently as to the motive behind the doctor's deed.

So, puzzled by this diversity of opinion, Chungking sent a special emissary to gather the facts—a polite and smiling Oriental who called himself simply Mr. Wong, and gave no hint of his real mission in investigating their strange and dramatic escape from Ho-Shan.

STEVE ORCUTT himself was most vehement in Dr. Crandall's defense. Granted, all those old stories about Crandall may be true," Orcutt insisted. "Granted, he'd sunk about as low as any man can sink, even in the Orient. But after all, he proved himself one of us—a white man! Blood is still thicker than water."

But Orcutt's theory of the power of race and blood was scorned by the Austrian oil-man, Berkofer. "Orcutt reads too much Kipling," he sneered. "When a white man goes *fan-tee,* he stays *fan-tee.* Crandall didn't give a damn about the color of our skins. He saved our lives only because he had an old score of his own to settle with General Tchun."

Then Berkofer added, with his thin-lipped smile, "Just the same, I don't suppose it hurt our chances any that young Mrs. Larsen happened to be a pretty, blue-eyer blonde."

Larsen the missionary was more kindly in his judgment. "Dr. Crandall was a strange man who strayed along dark paths," he said. "But he could not stand aside and see innocent blood spilled wantonly."

But young Mrs. Larsen shuddered whenever Dr. Crandall's name was spoken, remembering her first frightened glimpse of the tall, haggard man in the soiled *shaam*—unkempt, glassy-eyed, reeking of *samshu.*

"I don't know!" she said distractedly. "Yes, he saved our lives, but I think his mind had given way. He moved like a man in a dream. And his eyes—those deep, dull eyes of his—always fixed on something far off."

So, of these five Dr. Crandall had res-

cued from certain doom, only little three-year-old Christina Larsen offered no opinion to polite Mr. Wong from Chungking.

"A thousand thanks for your words of enlightenment!" Mr. Wong said as he took his leave of them with a Number One bow. He then journeyed quietly to Ho-Shan itself, to the *yamen* of the notorious General Tchun Tai, where they had been imprisoned, feeling that the real mystery of Dr. Crandall had not yet been touched.

There Mr. Wong sent for a Ho-Shan fisherman named Wei Kim, and a Lieutenant Yuan who was brought from his prison cell. Mr. Wong questioned them both in the *yamen* room where Dr. Crandall had lived.

Nothing in that room had been disturbed since Crandall's departure. The doctor's big camphorwood chest still stood open, almost completely emptied, its contents strewn upon the floor.

Mr. Wong asked many questions about that camphorwood chest. He wanted most particularly to know why Dr. Crandall had emptied it so hurriedly on that fateful night of escape. In this Mr. Wong proved himself a man of shrewd wisdom—for the answer to that question was the key to the inmost soul of Dr. Thomas David Crandall.

IN THE courtyard of General Tchun Tai's high-walled *yamen* outside the ancient towered gates of Ho-Shan, the quivering crash of a great brass gong announced the return of Tchun's river junk —that sinister, black-hulled prison ship gliding back without lights from its stealthy, secret errand.

Dr. Crandall shivered as he listened to the echoing sound—shivered and winced as though a raw nerve had suddenly been touched. He heard the junk's wooden hull grating against the stone landing, and the heavy water-gate of the *yamen* clash open.

With thin, trembling fingers Dr. Crandall lifted the familiar blue-glazed jar of *samshu* to his lips. He let the thickish, pale green liquor trickle slowly down his throat, then moved with fumbling, unsteady gait toward the courtyard.

At first his dimmed eyes were dazzled by the flare of the pine torches set in the ancient iron brackets of walls studded with tiles of Manchu red, Ming yellow, peacock blue, jade green—glittering in the fitful light like a jeweled tapestry.

Dr. Crandall slowly fastened his dull gaze on the black opening of the water-gate, where the prisoners would enter as they disembarked from the unlighted junk. He already knew about those five white prisoners, who they were and why they were being brought so secretly to General Tchun's *yamen*.

The courtyard was suddenly alive with General Tchun's picked bodyguards—reckless, half-savage *tao pings* who had served Tchun Tai since the days when he had been a mere hill-bandit.

"Hai, tu-chun, hai!" they hailed noisily as General Tchun himself appeared. Smiling grimly, Tchun whispered something into the ear of Colonel Matsugama, who stood beside him. The Japanese agent still wore his Ho-Shan disguise—the cheap yellow cotton robe of a Chinese pilgrim.

At a barking command from Lieutenant Yuan, a tall, straight-eyed Manchu officer, the soldiers lined up in a double file stretching from the water-gate to the yawning, iron-studded door of the *yamen's* prison chamber.

Steve Orcutt, the American war correspondent, was the first of the five prisoners to enter through the gate. He was bruised and disheveled, his left forearm wrapped clumsily in a blood-soaked rag; apparently he had not submitted to capture without a struggle.

Then Orcutt caught sight of General Tchun and the Japanese secret agent. "You filthy yellow devils!" he shouted. "You'll pay for this!"

General Tchun's only reply was a sharp command to the guards. A bayonet prodded Orcutt forward and a succession of

rough yellow hands pushed him along the armed lane toward the iron-studded door. Dr. Crandall's vague glance wandered back to the dark water-gate.

The Larsens appeared next—Lief, the missionary, tall, bare-headed, with the rugged features of a Viking, but gentle-eyed. He had one arm protectingly about his blond wife, young and pretty Anitra, who held the three-year-old Christina in her arms.

The little girl's curly head moved unceasingly as she wailed with the heart-breaking cry of a terrified child. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glistened like wet blue glass. One shoe came loose and dropped from a tiny pink foot—

With a sudden motion Dr. Crandall left his shadowed doorway, picked up the shoe and moved after them. Mrs. Larsen shrank aside from his approach with a gasp of fear, holding the child even tighter.

"Go away!" she cried out in the hill dialect, misled by Crandall's blue *shaam* and close-shaven head into thinking him a native.

The missionary swung around. "Anitra—look! He's a white man!" Larsen exclaimed, then raised his voice. "Can you help us, sir? We're being held prisoners. They've made a terrible mistake—"

Dr. Crandall looked at him with a vacant stare, blinking and swaying unsteadily on his feet. While his tongue fumbled for unaccustomed speech, a bitter laugh came from behind them. It was the fifth prisoner—Berkofer.

"Save your breath, Larsen," Berkofer snapped. "That's only old Doc Crandall. Half white, half yellow—and altogether worthless. He'd sign away his soul for a bottle of *samshu*. That broken-down derelict couldn't help anybody."

"Crandall—oh!" Larsen echoed, the sudden hope draining from his voice. Even in his far-off hill mission he had heard stories of Ho-Shan's *kuan kwei*—the Devil Doctor. Larsen's arm tightened about his wife and child as they moved on through the line of grinning, gesticulating soldiers.

Berkofer, pausing to light a cigarette, moved his lips in a fierce, swift whisper from behind cupped hands shielding the match. "Crandall, if you've got a single drop of white blood left, send word about us to Ho-Chung, or anywhere up-river! If you don't, we'll all be killed—"

"*Hai*—no talkee!" a slant-eyed soldier yelped, pushing Berkofer along, while another gave Dr. Crandall a rough shove.

As Berkofer moved on, a yellow guard reached out and snatched the cigarette from his lips. It was Berkofer's last cigarette, and the hot-headed Austrian lashed out with a savage blow that sent the thieving *tao ping* head over heels.

"*Yang kwei tzu!*" the soldiers screamed, and there was an instant melee. The enraged Berkofer dropped two more of Tchun Tai's men before he was borne down by sheer weight of numbers. Using hands and feet, he struggled with tigerish fury until Lieutenant Yuan, striding forward, hit him behind the ear with the steel butt of his pistol.

Berkofer sagged to his knees, at the very feet of the motionless Dr. Crandall. For an instant the Austrian's contorted face glared up in utter contempt for the renegade white man. "*Fan-tee!*" he spat out, then Yuan's pistol butt crashed down on him again.

Blank-eyed, Dr. Crandall watched them drag the unconscious Austrian along by the heels and tumble him into the prison chamber as though he were a sack of rice. Then the iron-studded door clanged shut, the thick wooden outside bar slammed into place, and a slant-eyed sentry took up his post beside it.

General Tchun and the Japanese Colonel turned away as the soldiers broke ranks. A ragged figure darted forward, jabbering to the General in a high-pitched whine. Crandall recognized the man as old Wei Kim, the fisherman, whose son

had been killed by a stone wine bottle thrown by General Tchun in one of his rages. Wei Kim had been haunting the *yamen* for days, pressing his lawful claim for "blood money."

"Tomorrow!" General Tchun said carelessly, waving him aside. "You will be paid tomorrow.

"*Ai-yee,* but tomorrow never comes, *tu-chun!*" Wei Kim whined. "You have already promised a dozen tomorrows!"

Furious at the old man's persistence, General Tchun snarled an order to the nearest guard, who disposed of Wei Kim in short order by dropping a rifle butt on the bare toes of the old fisherman.

"*Ai-yee-ai!*" Wei Kim howled, writhing on the ground, hugging his bruised foot. General Tchun and the Japanese agent laughed and disappeared—the water-gate swung shut with a ponderous boom-boom —the shadowy hulk of the black junk warped out into the river channel and melted away into the darkness.

In the deserted courtyard the tall pine torches flickered redly. Old Wei Kim still groaned and cursed, nursing his bleeding foot. A pale yellow light flickered across the oiled paper panel of the prison window, protected with thick iron bars. Dr. Crandall visualized the prisoners huddled around the feeble glow of a stinking oil-lamp, the men talking in low voices, whispering—the young woman desperately trying to soothe the terrified child.

Dr. Crandall knew well that death awaited those five. Steve Orcutt, of course, was the real prize. He it was who had recognized Colonel Matsugama despite his disguise of shaven head and pilgrim's robe and staff. The American correspondent had realized instantly that Matsugama's presence at Tchun's *yamen* could mean only one thing—a traitorous bargain for the surrender of Ho-Shan Pass, the priceless keyhole to China's interior provinces.

Not daring to trust such a message to the wires at Ho-Shan, Orcutt had determined to go up-river to Ho-Chung, beyond the military zone controlled by General Tchun, and send his warning message from there.

Somehow, General Tchun learned that Orcutt had discovered his proposed treachery, but the general was much too crafty to move openly against him. If the American correspondent met death in Ho-Shan, no matter how plausible the "accident," there would be suspicion, investigation by special agents from Chungking, and perilous delay for Tchun's plans.

So Orcutt was politely granted a river *hu-chao* and allowed to depart on a trading junk, but a band of General Tchun's choicest cut-throats went aboard in coolie garb. At a specified point well away from Tchun's district they seized control of the ship in a ruthless coup, slaughtered the small native crew and burned the ship, after transferring the five white passengers to the black junk for a stealthy voyage back to General Tchun's *yamen.*

Anton Berkofer and the Larsens were guilty of nothing except having been fellow passengers of Orcutt's on the river boat, but because of this they would certainly share the correspondent's fate. General Tchun dared not assume that Orcutt had kept his secret to himself. The General's brain worked with cold-blooded Oriental logic, and murder was his favorite solution for all annoying obstacles.

So Dr. Crandall knew that all five prisoners were doomed to die—as so many others had died in that dread *yamen.* They would die, but swiftly and silently, since General Tchun had a deep personal dislike for the sight of spilled blood. The prisoners would simply be served with some of General Tchun's famous tea—steaming cups of fragrant *lung ching* tea—with a certain blue powder added to make it as deadly as the wine of the Borgias.

Meanwhile, General Tchun would hold them prisoners until his deal with the Japanese colonel was safely completed. There was no hurry, since Ho-Shan would not even be mentioned in the official report,

which would list the five white prisoners as burned to death in a "pirate" attack on the river boat.

As Dr. Crandall stumbled along toward the privacy of his own quarters he suddenly became aware that he still held in his hand little Christina Larsen's lost shoe. He looked at it vaguely for a moment, then carelessly tossed it aside as he continued through the crooked corridors of the *yamen.*

His dull-eyed stare went slowly over his familiar room, as if he had never seen it before. His lodgings were as sparsely furnished as a monk's cell. Bare stone walls —rice straw matting on the stone floor— a bamboo sleeping *k'ang*—an oil lamp—a stool—a camphorwood chest. Everything in the room except the camphor-wood chest belonged to General Tchun.

His trembling fingers fumbled across the grayish stubble on his chin. He had caught a sudden frightening glimpse of his own face on the burnished surface of the brass gong hanging above the chest. As if hypnotized by the sight, he slowly lifted the oil lamp, staring at his reflection —the gaunt cheeks, hollow eyes, shaven head. His eyes traveled downward to the filthy blue *shaam,* the broken coolie slippers.

Would anyone who had known the famous Dr. Thomas David Crandall of Shanghai recognize him now in that hideous caricature of a man? Or would they shudder and draw back with a look of revulsion, like that young mission wife who would not let him even touch her child's foot—him, the world-renowned Dr. Crandall!

He took a hasty sip of *samshu* from the blue jar. But even the numbing jolt of *samshu* could not quite blot out hideous memories that followed him like the black hounds of the Buddhist hell.

As in a waking nightmare he again saw himself taking flight from his tragedy-haunted house on Bubbling Well Road—saw the long years of aimless wandering. Westward, ever westward, he had fled, as if in desperate pursuit of a setting sun. And in that long search for oblivion the white man's pride of race had shredded away, and finally he had abandoned even the white man's garb.

He had stayed so long at ancient Ho-Shan because there were no white faces to stare upon his shame, no white voices to strike like daggers through the gray curtain of *samshu* that hung between him and the outer world. But now, here were these five white prisoners of General Tchun's—

With sudden resolution Dr. Crandall spread out a coolie "bundle-cloth" on the *k'ang.* Into one corner of the cheap cotton cloth he knotted such *cash* as he possessed —in another his supply of Chinese tobacco —his bamboo pipe in a third. In the center folds he fastened the blue jar of *samshu,* then slung the whole affair across one shoulder, like a pilgrim's scrip.

Turning out the light, he groped his way through the twisting corridors, making for the *yamen* gate.

"*Chan-choh!* Halt!" the sentry cried, alert and threatening.

"Open!" Dr. Crandall mumbled.

"No can do," the sentry replied curtly. "General Tchun has given strict orders—no one may leave the *yamen* tonight. No one!"

"But I go only to Ho-Shan—to the Laughing Dragon Tea House by the North Gate," Dr. Crandall explained.

"I have orders, *kuan.* Stand back—*chop-chop!*" the sentry ordered sharply, swinging the point of his bayonet into position.

Dr. Crandall retreated before the threatening steel, stirred by dull, smoldering anger. Across the courtyard the great round moon-window of General Tchun's private chamber glowed like an enormous yellow gong.

Two shadows were silhouetted from within—the General and Colonel Matsugama, busy over their maps of the Ho-Shan Pass, arguing, bargaining over the

cash price of dishonor and betrayal.

Dr. Crandall lurched jerkily toward the lighted moon-window, but before he had taken a dozen steps, slant-eyed guards appeared out of the shadows, with their curt *"Chan-choh!"*

"I must speak to General Tchun," Dr. Crandell declared. "It is a Number One matter."

"The *tu-chun* is busy tonight. He sees no one," the guards replied, pushing him back. "Go away, *kuan,* and do not return before morning, or it will be the worse for you."

"Tomorrow—tomorrow!" Dr. Crandall mumbled angrily as he retraced his steps across the silent courtyard. From behind the dimly lit prison window came the constant crying of little Christina Larsen.

BACK in his room, Dr. Crandall was slowly unknotting the bundle-cloth when footsteps came briskly along the corridor and his door was flung wide without ceremony. It was Lieutenant Yuan.

"I bring orders from General Tchun, *kuan,"* the Manchu officer said. "The white child in the prison room cries too much. The *tu-chun* is annoyed by the sound. She must remain silent."

"The child is frightened," Dr. Crandall replied vaguely.

"She must stop!" Lieutenant Yuan repeated haughtily. "I will go with you to the prison room. If you cannot silence her —I will!"

Dr. Crandall moved shakily toward the camphorwood chest. He flung open the lid and burrowed among the litter inside—medical books, loose leaves of faded manscripts, a broken stethoscope, odds and ends of clothing—all the haphazard salvage that remained from his dead past.

His groping hand finally closed on a worn leather case, holding parallel rows of glass phials. But the various medicines they held had aged into unsightly relics, grown mouldy or caked into flinty masses.

Dr. Crandall's uncertain fingers lifted one of the phials—a sedative—but the gray powder was now a solid lump, utterly impotent after the lapse of years.

Shaking his head, Dr. Crandall peered at the faded labels on the other phials. There was nothing else that would serve. Then his wandering eye fell upon the blue *samshu* jar. For a moment he hesitated, then took an empty phial and filled it with the pale green liquor.

"I am ready!" Dr. Crandall announced.

Clutching the phial, he moved like a rickety ghost behind the briskly striding Lieutenant Yuan through the tangle of corridors to the torchlit courtyard. The sentry on duty at the prison chamber saluted and hastened to unbar the iron-studded door.

The five prisoners were seated in a circle around the ill-smelling oil lamp. Mrs. Larsen still held the crying child in her arms.

"Madame," Dr. Crandall stammered thickly, "your child must stop crying. It is General Tchun's order."

Mrs. Larsen shrank back tensely as Dr. Crandall approached, and the little girl burst into even louder crying, frightened anew by the gaunt, hollow-eyed face peering down at her, by the touch of cold, bony fingers.

"She has a fever!" Dr. Crandall muttered. He uncorked the phial and measured a little *samshu* into a horn spoon.

"What is that?" Mrs. Larsen demanded in sudden suspicion.

"Samshu," Dr. Crandall replied.

"Samshu!" Mrs. Larsen cried out, horrified. "You'd give *samshu* to a little child! That vile stuff—worse than opium!"

"I have nothing else to quiet her," Dr. Crandall replied. "The child must stop crying. If she does not, they will take her away from you."

Larsen reached out and touched his wife's arm as Dr. Crandall leaned down and gently held the spoon to the child's lips. The little girl swallowed the greenish liquor.

"She will fall asleep now," Dr. Cran-

dall said, and handed the phial to the missionary. "If she cries again, give her a little more. Remember—General Tchun does not give his orders twice!"

Lieutenant Yuan was standing outside the doorway, talking to the slant-eyed guard. Steve Orcutt glanced in that direction and then spoke in a hurried whisper.

"Crandall—for God's sake—do something to help us! Don't you realize what's going on? General Tchun and that Jap spy Matsugama are scheming to deliver the Ho-Shan Pass to the enemy. Are you going to stand up for a man who'd sell out his own country?"

Dr. Crandall was silent, his eyes fixed on little Christina's face, his finger still on her pulse.

"Crandall! Don't you hear me?" Orcutt went on tensely. "If you won't help *me*—how about these innocent people—the Larsens, Berkofer? They had no part in this. They were just unlucky enough to be on the same boat with me. Can you watch innocent people—white people—murdered in cold blood?"

Dr. Crandall looked at him blankly. "I can do nothing," he said slowly. "I also am a prisoner in this *yamen.*"

Anton Berkofer gave his bitter laugh. "Yes, a prisoner of the *samshu* bottle! Don't worry, Crandall, if you'll get us out of this, we'll buy you enough *samshu* to swim in!"

"I am a prisoner here," Dr. Crandall repeated dully.

"You're nothing but a damned liar!" Berkofer snapped angrily. "You've been hand in glove with General Tchun for years, you filthy *fan-tee!*"

Dr. Crandall jerked himself upright. For a moment his sunken eyes blazed to meet the Austrian's bitter glare, then he shrugged and turned toward the door with shuffling gait.

"You fix the little *tai yan?*" Lieutenant Yuan demanded, outside.

"*Wah!*" Dr Crandall replied. "She will sleep."

The iron-studded door banged shut, the heavy bar dropped into place, and Dr. Crandall returned to his monkish cell—and the blue *samshu* jar. That the five prisoners were of his own race and kindred blood meant little to Dr. Crandall's muddled mind, for in his *samshu*-soaked world there was neither white man nor yellow, but only vague gray shadows moving aimlessly to and fro.

AND the further fact that these five were doomed to die left him equally unmoved, for a man who holds his own life as utterly worthless deems death a mere abstraction, the precise hour of its coming a matter of no particular consequence.

Time and again Dr. Crandall lifted the blue jar to his lips, and the numbing gray tide of *samshu* blotted out all distracting thoughts. What did it matter to him if General Tchun betrayed China's cause—if Orcutt died tomorrow, and those others with him? What was the value of any human life? Every single day thousands died—other thousands were born.

The black night passed, and the morning sun rose in a silent explosion of gaudy colors, but Dr. Thomas David Crandall slept on, stretched out on his bamboo *k'ang* like a dead man. It was late afternoon before he roused from that drugged sleep.

Yawning heavily, he struck three times upon the gong, and a *mafoo* appeared, bringing him a pot of scalding green tea and a platter of rice cakes. While he was eating, he heard voices in the courtyard and shuffled over to his window, pushing open the oiled paper panels.

The five white prisoners were being given a half hour's exercise from their cramped prison quarters, under the watchful eyes of a dozen *tao ping* guards.

Larsen, the missionary, carried little Christina in his arms, her head snuggled against his shoulder, as if she were still under the influence of the *samshu.* Mrs. Larsen's pale face was drawn and strained,

as though she had spent a sleepless night.

Steve Orcutt and Berkofer walked a little apart, and Dr. Crandall noticed something furtive and tense in the way they kept glancing at the guards. They seemed to be whispering to each other.

Suddenly Berkofer stepped close to the high wall of the compound, bracing himself, holding waist-high his tightly locked hands. Instantly Orcutt placed one foot into this improvised stirrup, scrambled up onto Berkofer's shoulders and leaped upward to catch the top of the wall.

"Hai! Hai!" the yellow soldiers cried, caught napping by the swift precision of Orcutt's attempted escape. The American correspondent had one leg over the wall before the rifles began to crack.

Then Orcutt gave a gasping cry as his hold loosened—he made a desperate clawing attempt to regain his balance, then slumped sideways and came tumbling down inertly.

Dr. Crandall left his window and hurried into the courtyard. But before he reached the scene Lieutenant Yuan was barking out swift orders. The Larsens and Berkofer were hustled back to their prison chamber. Orcutt's body lay sprawled where it had fallen.

Dr. Crandall knelt down beside Orcutt's limp figure, making a quick examination, his bony fingers moving with a flash of his old-time skill. A bullet had furrowed across the correspondent's shoulder, lodging finally in the neck.

"Is he dead?" Lieutenant Yuan demanded.

Dr. Crandall shook his head. "No—not yet. But he will die unless the bullet is removed."

"Wah!" Yuan said brutally. "That will serve as a warning to the others." He beckoned briskly to the slant-eyed men. "Take this white dog back to his stone kennel."

Dr. Crandall stood motionless as the *tao pings* lifted Orcutt and carried him across to the prison chamber, dropping him unceremoniously inside the iron-studded door. Dr. Crandell turned away and shuffled back to his bare lodgings. He sat down heavily on the creaking *k'ang,* staring with blind eyes at the blank wall.

One thought repeated itself over and over in his mind—Orcutt would surely die unless that lump of lethal metal were removed from his flesh. The bullet had lodged between the third and fourth cervical vertebrae. At best it would be a race between infection and spinal pressure—

Moving like a man in a trance, Dr. Crandall crossed the room to the camphorwood chest. And this time he burrowed even deeper into its jumbled contents—dug down until his hand found what it sought—his old case of surgical instruments.

He opened the case and stood staring at the contents. The green plush lining of the case was mildewed—the instruments themselves grown spotted and dull from neglect and disuse.

There they were, his old familiar tools, in orderly rows—probes, forceps, lancets, scalpels. But there was one empty slot—a slot where a scalpel had once rested, and in that empty space Dr. Crandall saw the whole tragedy of his life.

Dr. Jardine, once his friend, had taken away that missing scalpel—had snatched it furiously from his shaking hand while a dead man lay stark in the glare of operation lights. Dr. Crandall could still hear the shocked anger in Jardine's voice:

"You killed this man, Crandall! You're no better than a murderer! This

poor devil died because your hand slipped —and your hand slipped because you're half drunk! Died from a whiskey tremor, that's what I ought to write on this man's death certificate. You're through, Crandall! A chronic drunkard has no place in the medical profession. I won't expose you publicly, that would be bad for the profession. But I'll see to it that you never take another scalpel in your hand—not as long as you live!"

Dr. Crandall wiped his damp forehead and reached for the blue jar. Steve Orcutt was dying—a fellow man was dying for lack of medical attention while a skilled surgeon sat cowering no more than a hundred paces away, brooding over the time-stained weapons of his departed glory.

But Dr. Crandall looked down at his shaking, quivering hands, and the breath choked in his throat. What right had he to repeat that same tragic blunder? Murderer, Dr. Jardine had called him. That other time it had been merely whiskey. Now it was worse—*samshu,* years and years of *samshu.*

And in that bare little room where the twilight was gathering, Thomas David Crandall heard voices—the furious voice of Dr. Jardine, forbidding forever the use of the scalpel—and against him the voice of that bearded man of old Athens, speaking across twenty-three centuries of time in the solemn words of the Hippocratic Oath.

Perhaps it was only that Dr. Crandall saw a last chance to balance that old account with his past. A life taken—a life saved—

Darkness had settled upon the *yamen* when Dr. Crandall took a final sip of *samshu,* tucked the worn old surgical kit under his arm, and tried to firm his step as he started for the prison chamber.

In the courtyard, the pine torches threw whipping shadows across the ancient stones. The compound was deserted by all save the posted sentries—and old Wei Kim the fisherman, huddled still in a shadowy corner, waiting for General Tchun to pay him his lawful "blood money."

"Chan-choh!" came the brisk challenge of the prison-room guard.

"Open the prison door," Dr. Crandall directed. "I must remove the bullet from the wounded white man."

"No can do," the sentry replied. "No one may enter the prison room. Indeed, *kuan,* Lieutenant Yuan mentioned you specially by name in giving his orders."

"But the white man will die!" Dr. Crandall answered. "The bullet must be removed."

"Death comes to all men, *kuan,"* the sentry replied, with a snickering laugh for his own wit. "Now go away, or I will give you a taste of cold steel."

Shivering with helpless anger, Dr. Crandall drew back before the lowered bayonet, with the past and the present grinding him between them like two enormous millstones.

"Hearken, soldier," Dr. Crandall said. "I seek only to do my sworn duty as the white man's *kuan.* Allow me to enter the prison-room and I will give you this valuable jade ring. Look at it closely, soldier —it is set with rare moon-jade. When you sell it, you will be lord of the Flower Boats for a full week."

Dr. Crandall held out his hand. The soldier bent over to examine the ring, tempted by the offer.

"Tsai! You lie to me, *kuan!* The ring is worthless!" the sentry growled, straightening up.

"Not so!" Dr. Crandall replied angrily. "It is real moon-jade."

"Away with you—*chop-chop!"* the sentry hissed, and gave Dr. Crandall a quick shove that sent him sprawling. The surgical kit flew open, and the instruments scattered over the flagstones.

Slowly and painfully Dr. Crandall began to gather them again, when the sentry caught the gleam of steel from a lancet Crandall had just picked up.

"Hoya! You have knife!" the yellow man snarled, and his fist smashed full into Crandall's face. As Dr. Crandall threw up his hands in feeble defense, the enraged sentry, hurling himself forward, literally impaled himself on the upraised instrument.

For a moment the slant-eyed soldier still held him in an iron grip, then suddenly all the strength seemed to drain out of the yellow man's arms.

And Dr. Crandall's horrified eyes beheld the narrow-bladed lancet buried deep in the yellow throat. Slowly the soldier dropped to his knees, as if in prayer. Then with a bubbling moan he slumped forward, face down.

Panting and trembling, Dr. Crandall glanced fearfully around the deserted courtyard. The night wind was rising, and there was a stealthy whispering from the ailanthus trees. But no one had seen—

He pulled the sentry's body into deepest shadow before he wrestled with the heavy wooden bar of the prison door. At last it slid out of its iron hasps, and he clawed open the door and lurched in upon the huddled captives.

"Orcutt—is he alive?" he gasped hoarsely, and something in his strangled tone and wild, staring eyes brought the little group to their feet.

Dr. Crandall crouched down beside the unconscious correspondent, feeling his heart beat, his pulse, pulling down his eyelids. Then he opened the surgical kit. "Water!" he ordered, as he began to tear strips of cotton cloth.

"You're going to operate, Crandall—*you?*" Berkofer's voice flared. "Look at your hands! You're shaking like a leaf!"

Dr. Crandall flinched under the harsh, accusing tone. He lifted haunted eyes to the Austrian. "There is no choice," he replied. "If I do not operate, Orcutt will die—very soon. There is a pressure from the bullet on his spinal cord. You can help, Berkofer," he added in a firmer voice, thrusting the cotton strips into the Austrian's hands and motioning to Larsen to bring the oil-lamp nearer.

Lacking antiseptic, Dr. Crandall passed the blade of his scalpel to and fro in the living flame of the lamp in a make-shift attempt at sterilization. Then he leaned down, his heart thudding as his eyes picked out the exact line for the first swift stroke.

A ticklish job, that, for a trembling hand—the slow, slow probing with the forceps, then the quick, clean withdrawal.

Gasping with relief, Dr. Crandall sank back on his heels. "Good! Good!" he muttered. "I think he will live!"

"Yes—and what good will it do him?" Berkofer jeered. "Orcutt will live—until General Tchun is ready to kill him! Do you think Orcutt will thank you for *that?*"

"General Tchun!" Dr. Crandall repeated in a vague tone, as if he had never heard the name before. He looked down at Steve Orcutt, then at the little circle of strained white faces watching him.

"Wait—I will return!" Dr. Crandall said, and went out. With a stealthy glance around the compound, he crossed to the shadowy angle where old Wei Kim sat brooding and muttering.

"Hearken, Wei Kim!" Dr. Crandall whispered, then crouching down beside him in the shadows, he talked long and earnestly to the old fisherman, in guarded tones.

"Wah! Can do, *kuan!"* said Wei Kim at last, a gleam in his black eyes as he arose. Dr. Crandall watched until the limping fisherman had safely passed the sentries on guard at the main gate of the *yamen.*

Then he returned silently to the prison chamber. He stood looking down at Steve Orcutt with a peculiar glow of pride in his haggard eyes. "I have done all I could, but he must have further treatment of the wound—sterile dressings, above all. I have nothing like that here. There is a hospital at Ho-Chung—a good hospital."

"Ho-Chung!" Berkofer gave a cynical laugh. "I suppose your good friend

General Tchun will kindly send his private sampan to fetch one of their doctors, eh?"

"No," Dr. Crandall replied slowly, "but *you* will take Orcutt to Ho-Chung! I have tried to arrange for your—escape. In a few minutes a fishing boat will be waiting at the water-gate. It will take you up-river—

"Please! Silence!" Dr. Crandall begged, lifting his hands against the sudden clamor of excited tongues. "There is no time for talk."

"But what about the *yamen* sentries?" Berkofer demanded.

"There is only one sentry outside, between this room and the water-gate," Dr. Crandall replied. "I have already arranged matters with him. He will see nothing, hear nothing."

"You've bribed him?" Larsen asked.

"I offered him a valuable ring," Dr. Crandall replied simply, and turned to the trembling Mrs. Larsen.

"It is imperative that the little one is silent during the escape," he warned. "If she cries before you are well past Ho-Shan, give her a little more of the *samshu* quickly, or the boat may be stopped and searched."

"But aren't you coming with us, Dr. Crandall?" Larsen broke in.

"No," said Dr. Crandall. "Someone must stay behind to lock the water-gate again. Otherwise your escape would be discovered at once."

"But General Tchun!" the missionary exclaimed. "When he finds out what you have done—"

"I assure you I am quite safe here," Dr. Crandall answered brusquely. "I have nothing to fear from General Tchun. Now I must prepare Orcutt for the journey."

Dr. Crandall had scarcely finished an emergency dressing for Orcutt's wound than a whistling call like a night-bird's came from the river. Five seconds later it was repeated.

"That is Wei Kim's signal!" Dr. Crandall said. "The boat is waiting. Are you all ready?"

He pushed open the iron-studded door and pointed silently to the dark water-gate. Larsen and Berkofer filed out first, carefully carrying the wounded Orcutt. Then Mrs. Larsen followed, with little Christina in her arms. Dr. Crandell came last, carefully closing the prison door behind him.

Silently they crept around the rim of the courtyard, keeping in the shadow of the tiled walls. Silently they lifted the massive wooden bar from the water-gate.

"Be careful—the gate creaks!" Dr. Crandall warned.

Inch by inch they eased back the heavy gate, until Wei Kim's fishing sampan stood revealed in shadowy silhouette against the night sky.

Orcutt was lifted aboard. Mrs. Larsen turned at the last moment, her slim white hand touching Dr. Crandall's. "Thank you, Dr. Crandall—thank you!" she whispered in a choked voice.

Dr. Crandall gave her a vague look. "You must hurry!" he whispered.

Larsen helped his wife and child aboard, then put his hands on Dr. Crandall's shoulders. "God keep you!" he breathed fervently.

Wei Kim's whisper came out of the darkness. *"Kuan,* if we get a two-hour start, there is no boat here at Ho-Shan swift enough to catch us."

"Then go quickly, Wei Kim," Dr. Crandall urged. *"Choy!"*

"Choy, kuan!" the fisherman replied.

Anton Berkofer leaned over the shadowy rail. "Better come along with us, Dr. Crandall! You're crazy to take a chance with General Tchun!"

"No," Dr. Crandall said. "No!"

Silently Wei Kim's long bamboo pole fended the bobbing little boat from the stone landing. The sampan's slatted sails rattled like dry bones as the river breeze caught hold, sweeping it into the dark channel.

The wind was still rising—the ailanthus trees clashing and rattling with a sound like foaming water. The heavy gate swung forward on its hinges, and Dr. Crandall needed every ounce of his strength to prevent it from banging shut with a resounding crash.

PRESSING his weight against the gate, he tried to lift the wooden bar back into place, but he found he had not the strength. He rested a few minutes, breathing heavily, then tried again, but he was not equal to the task. Yet if he left the gate unbarred, it would instantly start banging in the wind and the *yamen* guards would come running.

Then Dr. Crandall thrust his arm through the iron staples, holding the gate closed and silent against the gusty wind, now constantly rising. He shivered in the chill night air, and his arm soon grew cramped and numb, but he clung to his post with grim determination. Kei Kim had asked for a two-hour start.

Time became an agonizing infinity, each minute a separate hour of torture. Dr. Crandall's teeth clenched, his knees sagged and his whole body quivered—but he held fast. He knew the dead guard would not be discovered until after the Hour of the Fox—midnight—when the *yamen* sentries would be changed. Until then, he must hold on.

Slowly Dr. Crandall dropped his head against the massive gate. His weary, aching body did not matter now, for at last—at long last there was deep peace and silence in his soul. Silence—timeless, blessed silence! Surely his long and tragic account with the past was closed now—balanced.

After an eternity footsteps rang out crisply at the far end of the courtyard, at the main gate. The changing of the guard! Lieutenant Yuan's voice sounded in brisk command, and the steps halted. Rifle butts grated against the ancient flagstones.

Dr. Crandall roused from his half-dreaming reverie. Slowly and painfully he withdrew his numbed arm from the cold iron staples. By now Wei Kim's sampan was well on its way to Ho-Chung, quite safe from pursuit by General Tchun's men.

Taking advantage of the first lull in the gusty wind, Dr. Crandall stumbled away in hurried flight toward the safety of the *yamen's* dark corridors. But almost instantly the silence of the courtyard was shattered by the first thunderous banging of the open gate in the wind. Shrill cries of alarm followed—the sound of running footsteps.

And presently came the barbaric clamor of the great brass gong, stirring the whole *yamen* into yelping wakefulness as Dr. Crandall reached his quarters and dropped, exhausted, on the bamboo *k'ang*.

But listening to the ever-increasing uproar from the courtyard, he began to tremble. His lancet! His tell-tale lancet—still buried in the dead sentry's throat!

DR. CRANDALL lifted himself to his feet and moved with tottering steps to the window. Pushing the paper panel aside he peered out into the courtyard. A shining black limousine came whirling into the compound—General Tchun's private car.

A moment later the glowing moon-window of the General's quarters slid open, and General Tchun and his notorious guest, Colonel Matsugama, appeared. They walked hastily toward the waiting car, but it was only the Japanese who got inside.

General Tchun bowed in farewell, slamming the car door, and stood smiling and polite as the limousine sped out through the main gate at a breakneck speed. With the American correspondent's escape, Colonel Matsugama's treacherous "pilgrimage" had come to an abrupt end.

Crandall saw Lieutenant Yuan come running across the compound to General Tchun, gesturing excitedly as he talked. Tchun snarled out quick orders, then he turned and stalked back through the moon-

window. The great round panels slid shut again, and General Tchun Tai became only a vague shadow.

Dr. Crandall realized suddenly that General Tchun's own fate was sealed now. Once Orcutt's warning message was on the wires from Ho-Chung, Tchun Tai's power was broken. The vast bulk of the Ho-Shan troops were fanatically loyal to Marshal Chiang. At the first whisper of treachery, General Tchun and his *tao ping* guards would be torn limb from limb. Nothing remained now for General Tchun Tai save a red silk suicide rope—or a cup of his own bitter tea.

And for Dr. Crandall—what remained? With the inevitable discovery of the lancet, General Tchun's vengeance would strike—swift and merciless.

An ominous silence reigned throughout the *yamen*—the intolerable hush of a time-bomb silently ticking toward the fateful instant of explosion.

Dr. Crandall turned toward the camphorwood chest. He flung open the lid and stood looking down at the jumbled contents. Then he began emptying it hastily, tossing everything heedlessly aside in his search.

From the corridor came the dreaded sound—the echoing trample of footsteps! Lurching to the door, he succeeded in dropping the bar into place just as a fist hammered heavily and Lieutenant Yuan's voice cried out "Open! Open—or we will smash the door!"

Dr. Crandall made no reply to the angry summons. His trembling fingers were digging deeply into the camphorwood chest, down, down to the very bottom—to pull out at last the thing he sought—his ancient broadcloth dress suit.

With feverish haste he stripped off the soiled and greasy *shaam* and flung it away, putting on its place the crushed and wrinkled suit of rusty black cloth, creased by the years but still intact, though the silk lapels were cracked and broken.

Unheeding of the furious battering at the door, he threw aside his felt-soled coolie slippers, for the depths of the chest had yielded a forgotten pair of leather shoes—white man's shoes, no matter how warped and dull with time.

The door buckled and bent under the growing assault from outside. Dr. Crandall held up the oil lamp so that he might see himself in the polished face of the gong. The dress suit hung in ludicrous folds on his now gaunt frame, but Dr. Crandall was satisfied. It was the true and proper garb of his race, his blood and his breeding, and he had earned the right to wear it once more—this one last time.

His shaking fingers had just finished struggling with a yellowed strip of cloth which had once been a white silk bow tie when the battered door finally gave way with a wrenching crash and Lieutenant Yuan, pistol in hand, came striding in over the debris.

"*Kuan*—this is your doctor-knife?" the Manchu officer accused fiercely, flinging the blood-stained lancet upon the *k'ang*.

"Yes!" Dr. Crandall replied steadily. "It is mine."

"*Wah!*" hissed Lieutenant Yuan. "*Kuan,* you are invited to have a cup of tea with General Tchun Tai!" Then his yellow teeth bared in a sudden snarl. "*Bitter tea, kuan!*"

Dr. Thomas David Crandall's thin hands gave a final touch to his time-worn tie; he shrugged the ancient dress coat into smoother lines.

"I am ready!" he said quietly. As he walked toward the door, his hand reached up mechanically to straighten a faded bit of flame-colored ribbon that still decorated his lapel. And Dr. Crandall was surprised to see that his fingers had lost their trembling.

A Nazi, of the Race Destined to Rule the World—
Could It Be Possible He Felt Fear?

THE DEATH SHIP

By W. TOWNEND

"IF MY guess is correct," said the Captain, "that ship is the *Bluestone* of Newcastle-on-Tyne." He raised his binoculars to his eyes once more. "But why are her engines stopped."

"They'd not dare keep the way on her, sir, after they saw our signal to heave-to," said the first lieutenant.

"Her engines were stopped long before we signaled."

There was a period of silence on the raider's bridge. The distance between the two ships slowly diminished.

"Knowing what British tramp steamers are, I'd say she had an engine-room breakdown," said the Captain. "The question that worries me is Tarnow on board?"

"Tarnow isn't likely to be on board a ten-knot tramp, sir," said the first lieutenant presently.

"And why not? A few days more or less

will make very little difference to Tarnow now."

"He's come a long way since he escaped from our army in Poland, sir."

"Tenacious devils, those Poles. He reached Russia through Rumania, we know, and then our agents lost sight of him till he turned up in Shanghai nearly a year later."

"Peiping, wasn't it, sir?"

"Shanghai. Apparently he'd been badly wounded in Russia. He got away from Shanghai before our people could take steps and he reached Java. He was in Sourabaya for a time, living with a Polish family. Then quite suddenly he vanished. All we know is he's on his way to England to make trouble for the Reich. Our best hope is that the Gestapo will get him in London."

"I'd like to put a bullet into the swine," said the first lieutenant.

"You'd get into trouble if you did," said the Captain. The distance between the two ships had narrowed to six hundred metres. "Stop the engines," he ordered. The engine-room telegraph clanged. The ship lost way and stopped. "Boat's crew ready?"

"Yes, sir."

A big, red-faced young officer, armed with an automatic pistol, clicked his heels and saluted.

"Lieutenant Schultz, have you the bombs in the launch?"

"Yes, sir," said Schultz. "Everything is as you ordered."

"You know what you have to do. You will go on board the *Bluestone,* examine the manifest and bills of lading and the log book. You will then order the crew to take to their boats and row across to us. Tell them they can bring blankets and one suitcase each. Nothing more." The Captain paused, frowning. "And what else must you do, Lieutenant Schultz?"

"If I can find any whiskey, sir—"

"Don't be a damned fool!"

"Find Tarnow, sir, if he's on board."

"Yes. Find Tarnow. It isn't likely he'll be there, but we can't be sure. And whatever you do, don't kill him. Bring him back alive. Those are the *Fuehrer's* orders."

THE raider's launch was very near the *Bluestone.* Schultz, standing in the stern sheets, peered with eyes half-shut against the glare of the sun at the superstructure and decks and bridge. No heads lined the bulwarks. No sign of life was visible. A pilot ladder hung from the bridge deck abaft the deck-house. No smoke came from the black and red funnel.

Schultz was puzzled. Was it a trap, this strange silence?

He gave a word of command. The throb of the motor ceased.

"Be ready in case they play tricks with us," he said. "You, Zapp, and Wulf, you, and you, Muller, and Hoffmeister, you, you'll come on board with me. The others will wait here."

The bow man caught hold of the rope ladder with his boathook.

"Shall we take the bombs with us, sir?" said old Zapp, the petty officer.

"I give the orders, not you. Leave the bombs here. Be prepared to fight."

Grasping the ladder firmly Schultz began to climb. When his left hand caught hold of the top of the bulwarks he took his automatic pistol out of its holster and swiftly levered himself up. Seated astride the bulwarks, he glanced fiercely from left to right.

Two of the strangest-looking men he had ever seen sat on the hatch between the saloon deck-house and the fiddley.

They stared at Schultz and Schultz stared at them. They neither moved nor spoke.

There was no one in sight but these two strange Englanders. One was elderly, a man of perhaps sixty, lean, disreputable in appearance, a man with narrow, faded eyes, a big nose, a lined, weather-beaten face, a slack-lipped mouth lacking teeth.

He wore a dirty white shirt and a pair of dirty white duck trousers and slippers. On his head was a dirty white uniform cap. His skinny arms were folded across his chest.

The other man, age perhaps forty, fat, white-faced, red-eyed, sullen, sat with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and at intervals moaned faintly. He wore a greasy black cap pulled down over his forehead, and a dirty, oil-smeared boiler suit.

Were they sane? Schultz asked himself. What in hell was wrong with them? Why didn't they show surprise or fear or anger now that Nazi sailors had boarded their unspeakable ship?

Schultz advanced, pointing his automatic first at one man, then at the other.

"You two," he said in English, "what's the game?"

There was no reply.

"Where's the Captain? Speak up."

"I'm the Captain," said the elderly man. "Name of Stump. Adrian Stump." He clutched at his short collar and shivered. "Seeing things you know perfectly well aren't there gets you down."

The fat man said:

"I feel like hell, Captain. Me head's spinnin' roon'."

"Stop that nonsense," said Schultz roughly. "Captain, why is your ship not under way?"

"How could it be under way with that signal of yours?"

"Your engines were stopped when we sighted you."

"Ah! Yours would have been stopped, too, if you were like we are. They'd been stopped four-and-twenty hours when you came along. You won't start any shooting, will you? It wouldn't do any good. I've not got long now, and—"

"What the devil's the matter with you?" said Schultz, blustering. "Where is the rest of your crew?"

"The rest of my crew!" Captain Stump blinked at him and then opened his faded eyes to their full extent. His mouth opened as well and showed toothless gums. He looked, Schultz thought, half-witted. "The rest of my crew!" he repeated. "You want to see them! Well, why not? You shall."

Schultz, determined to have respect shown him, dragged him off the hatch by one arm and shook him. He collapsed, whimpering, clinging to Schultz' ankles.

"Get up, damn you!" Schultz said. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol against his neck. "Get up, or I'll shoot you."

Captain Stump got to his feet, groaning.

"You'd not murder a poor sick man, would you!" he said.

THE fat man with the round, white face and the red eyes whispered, "He'll be deid soon and I'll be deid, too, and I'll thank God for it! I canna stand much mair torment."

"Don't you pay any heed to him, sir," said Captain Stump, cringing. "He's my chief engineer and not himself."

"Pay attention," said Schultz, "and speak the truth. Have you a man called Tarnow on board?"

"Tarnow!" said Captain Stump. "I never heard the name in my life."

"He's a Pole."

"There are no Poles on board this ship. Why should there be?" He spoke in a petulant tone. "If you knew what I felt you'd not be worrying me." A tear trickled down his seamed cheek.

"Show me the rest of your crew."

"This way, if you please. You won't be afraid, will you?"

"Afraid!" said Schultz. "Don't be stupid." He followed him toward the port side saloon alley-way. At the entrance he said gruffly, "Muller and Hoffmeister, come with me. Zapp and Wulf, wait here. Shoot, if you have to."

The elderly, shabby man who looked less a captain than even an English tramp steamer captain usually did look led the

way into the alley-way. He paused at an open door.

"This is the second mate," he said. "Look at him."

In the small, hot room, lying in the bunk, was a thin, red-headed young man with a swollen face. He groaned and his head moved from side to side. His eyes were shut. His heavy lips were drawn back from his teeth, revealing blue gums.

"What's wrong with him?" said Schultz.

The man in the bunk uttered a thin, piping cry and clawed at his throat. He arched his back and froth came to his lips.

Captain Stump recoiled, shuddering.

"There's nowt we can do," he said. He moved on a few paces and once again halted. "Look in there, will you!"

Schultz found himself at the door of the saloon. Here, lying on mattresses on the deck, were four men. Two more lay on the settees. Only one of these six men stirred. He, like the second mate, kept uttering faint moans and moving his head restlessly from side to side. The others lay quite still: their eyes open, their lips parted. Some had bandages around their jaws. In the light from the curtained ports their faces were blue and swollen, their eyes were bloodshot and full of fear. They looked like men whose last hour has come, whose last hope has gone.

The saloon stank of disinfectant and stale, hot, sick humanity and disease and death.

"Let's get out of here," said Schultz.

In the fresh air he breathed deeply. He was not afraid, by Heaven, but he was not happy. He glanced at Muller and Hoffmeister; their stolid, brown countenances showed they, too, felt as he felt.

"Pull yourself together, you two!" Schultz said. He spoke in English to Captain Stump. "Where in hell is the rest of your crew? What's the game? Where are they?"

"Dead," said Captain Stump.

"Dead!" said Schultz. "Dead!" He did not believe it. "Isn't there anyone in those other rooms there?" He pointed to the starboard alley-way.

"No. All dead, dead or dying. You've seen them that are dying. You've seen the chief engineer and me."

"Zapp, search all the rooms in that alley-way. Muller, up with you to the top bridge. Be sure the chart-room and wheel-house are empty. And you, Wulf, have a look in the Captain's quarters and wireless-room on the lower bridge." Schultz turned to Captain Stump again. "Is your wireless in working order?"

"What difference would it make if it was? The radio officer is dead. I'm alive but I've not got much longer." He staggered to the hatch and seated himself once more.

The stout, white-faced chief engineer now lay on his side, his hands clasped to his stomach, his knees drawn up. His eyes were shut. He seemed not to be breathing. Captain Stump said, "Are you all right, Chief?"

He answered faintly, "Aye. I'm a' richt. Let me dee."

ZAPP came out of the starboard alley-way. "There's no one in any of the rooms, sir." Wulf came down the ladder from the lower-bridge. "There's no one up there, sir." Muller followed. "No one in the chart-room or wheel-house, sir."

"I'm going to search the ship," Schultz said to Captain Stump. "I don't like it. There's some damn' mystery here."

"Listen," said Captain Stump in a tired voice. "I've buried four-and-thirty men in three days. I hadn't the strength to read a service over the last ten. They died and we put them over the side. There are men in the saloon now, dead since we saw them. And that's how it goes."

"But what in hell is it?" said Schultz.

"Something bad."

"Let me see your papers, Captain."

Captain Stump seemed to have sunk into a doze. He sat, bent forward, staring at

his slippered feet, his face sagging in folds.

"Wake up, you old dummy! Do you want a beating? Where are your papers?"

"My head's splitting. I can't think. There was young Sturt. He said, 'There's nothing the matter with me, Captain,' and then he fell flat on his face, dead. By God! It was awful. Brady died, raving mad. We had to tie him down. His face was awful—by God! As awful as—" He broke off, terror in his gaze.

Schultz wheeled swiftly, gun ready.

A gaunt, broad-shouldered, long-armed man, a gorilla of a man, his face blackened and swollen, his eyes two narrow slits, his jaw bandaged, stood in the entrance to the port side alley-way. He wore crumpled pajamas and rope-soled slippers. He whimpered and made mewing noises and then moved stumblingly toward Schultz.

Schultz raised his gun and aimed at his heart.

"Stop where you are!" he ordered.

The man with the blackened face sank to the deck and clutched at his stomach and retched.

"Who the devil is this fellow?" said Schultz.

"He is my chief officer," said Captain Stump. "He is a dying man. You missed his room. He was there, lying down Look at that face of his. He hasn't spoken for two days. He's a fighter. Heckmondwike is his name."

"What's the matter with his face?"

"I daren't tell you. It's like death to think of it."

Schultz' throat was dry. He was not afraid even now, but he wished that he was back in his own ship.

"I'm going to search the engine-room and boiler-room and the crew's accommodation," he said. "While I'm gone, get the manifest and the bills of lading and the log-book. If you tamper with them, I'll shoot you. Zapp, stay here on guard. Wulf, you and Hoffmeister, take the port 'midships alley-way. Muller, you and I will take the starboard.

He turned and strode toward the engine-room, bearing in mind that he was a Nazi and an officer in the *Fuehrer's* Navy.

Room after room was empty. He would fling open the door or draw the curtains aside and look in and find no one.

Beds were unmade, clothes lay about on decks and settees. Everything was in disorder, as though the occupants of the rooms had disappeared in the midst of whatever they were doing. At one moment they might be writing, or smoking, or reading, at another they were somewhere else; sick, perhaps, or dying, or dead.

THE one living creature that Schultz found, in a room with *Second Engineer* painted on the door, was a large, sandy cat asleep on the settee. The cat opened one eye and looked at Schultz cynically, so it seemed, and fell asleep again.

Hoffmeister and Wulf were waiting when he and Muller reached the end of the alley-way. There was no one in any of the rooms in the port alley-way, they told him.

Schultz, the sweat pouring down his face and chest, his tongue swollen with the heat, a pain at the back of his eyes, climbed down the long steel ladders into the silent engine-room.

Here, too, was no sign of life.

"Hoffmeister," he said, "you and Wulf will search the boiler-room and bunkers."

"There is no light, sir," said Hoffmeister. "The dynamo is not running."

"Get lamps from the storeroom. Make haste, blast you! Get one for me, too; I'm going up the tunnel."

Schultz waited impatiently till Hoffmeister brought the lamps and lit them. Then, a lamp in one hand, his automatic in the other, he made his way up the shaft tunnel to the stern gland, followed by Muller. No one was in the tunnel.

"We'd better have a look at the after

part of the ship now," Schultz said. "Make haste." He was no lover of ships' engine-rooms. The confined space of the tunnel seemed to be pressing him in. The heat was suffocating. He turned. "Let's get out of here quick," he said.

In the engine-room once more he set the lamp down on the vise bench, blew out the flame and began to climb the ladder. Before he reached the middle grating he stopped, astounded. A man was climbing down the ladder from the top grating and the cylinder tops, very slowly, groping with his feet, as though uncertain of his eyesight or his balance or strength, or all three. Schultz stared at him, without moving, clinging to the hand rails and then with a shock, almost of nausea, he recognized the black, swollen face of Mr. Heckmondwike, the chief officer.

What in hell is he doing here, he thought and once more climbed.

They met on the middle grating.

"What do you want here?" Schultz said, prodding him in the stomach with his gun. "Out of my way, rat."

Heckmondwike—what a horrible name, by God!—made the same mewing, beast-like noises he had made when he had emerged from the saloon alley-way, a horrible noise for a grown man to make, and his mouth puckered and was wet with spittle. He caught hold of Schultz to save himself from falling. perhaps, and Schultz, in a spasm of fear, fear at last, shook him off and struck him with his clenched fist on the chin. He put all the force he possessed into the blow. Heckmondwike lost his balance, uttered a strangled scream, clutched at the hand rails and fell headlong down the ladder to the front platform where he lay sprawling helplessly, making no effort to rise.

Overcoming an inclination to be sick, Schultz hurried up the ladder to the doorway in the engine-room casing and without waiting for Hoffmeister and Wulf, with Muller trotting at his heels, he walked briskly along the after deck toward the poop. As he went he kept shuddering. God Almighty! That man Heckmondwike! He had been afraid of him. Why? Why should he have been afraid of a man with a black and swollen face and not of shell fire?

The rooms in the poop accommodation were all empty. The men had gone, leaving their belongings thrown around as men do throw things around when they think they will be picking them up again just in one moment. On the table in one of the rooms was a cheap writing block. Someone had been writing a letter. Schultz read:

> Dear Mabel: I do not feel very well today. There is sickness on board the ship. Five men are dead. I think that I am—

That was as far as the writer had got. The letter was dated two days ago.

"Let's go, Muller," Schultz said.

Hoffmeister and Wulf met them as they climbed the ladder at the break of the bridge deck. Their faces and white uniforms were black with coal dust.

"There was nobody in the boiler-room, sir, and nobody in the bunkers," said Hoffmeister.

Old Zapp stood guard still over Captain Stump and the stout chief engineer who lay dying on the hatch. One of the motorboat's crew had climbed the ladder and sat on the bulwarks, his rifle across his thigh.

Schultz, angry with Zapp for having allowed Heckmondwike out of his sight, more angry with Haack, yelled at him:

"Damnation! Did I give you permission to leave the boat, Haack?"

"No, sir, but—" Haack was about to descend the ladder but Schultz stopped him. "Come here," he ordered.

Haack obeyed, his face distorted with apprehension. "Sir," he said.

"Shut up," Schultz shouted. He spoke

to Captain Stump. "Where's that log-book?"

"Here, sir," said Zapp.

Today was the fifth of the month. If they had spoken the truth the trouble had started on the third. Schultz turned the pages until he reached the page he sought. Then he read:

> At breakfast the second mate reported that three men were sick. When I saw them they seemed very bad. At ten o'clock four more men were sick. I asked Dr. Johnson to have a look at them. When he had examined all seven he told me that they had bubonic plague in its most virulent form.

Bubonic plague! Schultz swallowed. His stomach heaved.

"Who was this Dr. Johnson?" he asked.

Captain Stump whimpered:

"He was a retired doctor, going home from Australia. He said the man had what it says in the log."

Schultz read on:

> —bubonic plague in its most virulent form: Petersen, Traill, Ives, Bradden, Teventon, Malthus and Goad. Peterson and Traill died in the afternoon watch. At five o'clock it was reported to me that the second engineer, Mr. Haselmere, was sick. The radio officer, Mr. Lushington, did not report sick, but when I went to the wireless room to speak to him I found him dead. By midnight Malthus and Bradden were dead, too. Teventon and Ives and Goad lingered on. Smith, the donkey-man, and the cook, Henry Dumbleton, and MacOstrich were taken with the plague in the first watch.

Zapp broke in on the reading.

"Sir, the ship is signalling what is keeping you?"

Schultz roused himself. "Semaphore that there's something very wrong. I must think." He closed the book and stood staring forlornly at the empty sea and sky, his thoughts bitter.

"This Dr. Johnson, are you sure that he knew?" he asked.

Captain Stump raised his head.

"He told me it was plague. He could do nothing. He died yesterday morning. He said it was more catching than cholera and that anyone who came in contact with it would die."

Schultz choked. Would he, too, die?

"I've got it," said Captain Stump in a whisper. "I know I've got it." His faded eyes rolled, showing bloodshot whites. Sweat poured down his seamed, weather-beaten face. He gasped for breath. "In a short time now I'll turn black, black and swollen like poor Heckmondwike and the others. I'm not scared but I'll go. I know I'll go." He flung out his arms, losing all control of himself, and then screamed, "I've got the plague. I'm dying."

"He says he's got the plague," said Zapp. "Almighty!"

"Keep your mouth shut, damn you!" Schultz said to him. He had forgotten that Zapp could speak English.

"Let's get away, quick," said Hoffmeister. "We can't stay in a ship where there's plague."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," said Schultz. "You understand!" He hailed the men in the boat. "Schmidt, go back to the ship. Tell the Captain there's bubonic plague on board; thirty-four men are dead, only ten are alive and they're all sick. Tell the Captain I'm waiting for instructions. Tell him they had a doctor passenger who said it was plague."

The motorboat went chugging toward the raider.

SCHULTZ sat on the hatch in the sun. Never before had he felt the heat but now he could not endure it. All the heat in the Indian Ocean seemed to be concentrated on this tramp steamer's open deck. Never before had he felt the heat. Never

before had he been afraid. He was afraid now.

He was a Nazi, one of the race destined to rule the world, and he was as much afraid as these decadent English.

Haack collapsed suddenly and slid to the deck. No one moved.

"Attend to him, can't you!" said Schultz. "Pick him up."

Zapp and Wulf carried him into the shade.

"He's got it," said Captain Stump. "Look at the color of his face. See how it's swollen. It's turning black."

Hoffmeister had a bottle of whiskey. He put it to his lips.

"Where did you get that?" said Schultz angrily.

"Found it."

"Give it to me at once."

"Why should I?"

"You'll get into trouble for this," Schultz said. "Wait till we get back to the ship." He snatched the bottle from Hoffmeister and flung it into the sea.

"We won't get back to the ship," said Hoffmeister.

"What in hell do you mean?"

"You know as well as I do."

And that was the truth! He did know. No captain in his right mind would take them into a ship crowded with men; his own crew who might any day now have to fight, and the English prisoners, ninety-four of them, the crews of the ships they had sunk.

"Here comes the boat," said Zapp.

Schultz went to the bulwarks. The motorboat came alongside the ship. The first lieutenant was on board. He called up:

"Karl, is this true?"

"Yes, sir. Bubonic plague. Thirty-four men are dead, ten are dying."

"Karl," said the first lieutenant, "the Captain says he can't risk taking you back. That's why he's not sent the doctor."

"Why don't we sink the ship, sir? It is our duty."

"And what would bceome of you, Karl, and your men?"

"We could take to a lifeboat."

"No, Karl. The glass is falling. We shall have heavy weather before dawn. There are other ships we can sink."

Captain Stump staggered to the side of the ship.

"I've got the plague," he said. "Isn't there a doctor with you? It's your duty to send one." He broke into wild, babbling incoherencies, and tore at his lean, stringy throat with his fingers.

The men in the boat turned scared faces upward.

"Captain Stump," said the stout, white-faced chief engineer, "a doctor cud dae nae guid the noo. We're gaun to dee."

"Well," said Schultz to the first lieutenant, "if you take the plague and die, you will be dying for our *Fuehrer* as surely as though you died by the guns of the English."

"Heil Hitler!" Schultz shouted.

"Heil Hitler!" the first lieutenant replied. "Good-by, Karl, and good luck. It is the fortune of war. Karl, Tarnow was not on board, no?"

"No," said Schultz, "Tarnow is not on board."

Everything went blurred before his eyes; sea, sky, ship, launch, faces. His dreams had come to nothing. Gone was his hope of one day having a command. Gone was his hope that soon he would be in battle against the despicable English. Gone was his courage.

Haack lay in the shade, moaning.

"Haack," said Schultz sternly.

"Sir," said Haack, without opening his eyes. "I am a sick man. I cannot stand when the officer speaks. I am dying."

"You're a Nazi on board an English ship. If you die, you die for the *Fuehrer.*"

"I die for the *Fuehrer,*" said Haack. *"Heil Hitler!"*

"The hell with the *Fuehrer,*" someone muttered.

Schultz could scarcely believe his ears.

"Who said that?"

"Said what, sir?" said Hoffmeister.

"No one spoke, sir," said Muller.

Could he have been mistaken? Schultz wondered. He must have been. No Nazi would ever have said a thing like that.

The faint sound of a ship's siren reached his ears.

His friends were leaving him to his death. He waved his hand. "Good-by!" he shouted, knowing that his voice could never carry the distance between the two vessels. "Good-by. *Heil Hitler!*" In seeing his ship depart he was saying good-by to Germany.

He turned and looked at his men: old Zapp, the petty officer, Wulf, Hoffmeister, Muller, Haack. He forced a smile and said:

"We have taken an English ship, at least."

"The damned English!" said Wulf.

"The English are cowards," said Muller.

"I have fought them," said old Zapp, "in the last war and in this. I would like to fight them again but I shall die—as these carrion crows are dying."

Heckmondwike, the *Bluestone's* chief officer, came slowly along the deck from the direction of the engine-room, his black, swollen face rendered more horrible now by the dried blood on his mouth and chin.

He was unsteady on his feet, he groped with his hands. There was blood and oil on his pajama jacket.

Schultz eyed him with contempt.

"Hoffmeister," said Wulf, "where did you pinch that whiskey from? I would get drunk if I had a bottle."

"Don't talk like that," said Schultz. "If there was someone here who could understand German I would be ashamed."

Captain Stump who sat shivering on the hatch now spoke.

"It was the rats that brought the plague," he said.

"If it was a German ship there would be no rats," said Zapp. "Rats make me sick."

"It was a crime to leave us on this hell ship!" said Wulf.

"The Captain should have sent the doctor," said Muller.

"The Captain is a swine-dog," said Wulf.

"All officers are swine-dogs," said Hoffmeister.

"How dare you say that?" said Schultz. "Do you want me to punish you?"

"And who are you to talk of punishing?" said Wulf.

"You think because you are an officer," said Hoffmeister, "that you can treat us like dogs?"

"Do you know what we think of you?" said Muller. "We laugh at Lieutenant Schultz always. He is a conceited puppy with a big belly. He is a rat."

"Like the *Fuehrer,*" said Wulf.

"The *Fuehrer* is a bigger rat than Schultz," said Hoffmeister. "We are killed so that he may live."

Schultz kept his temper by an effort. He said:

"You do not know what you are saying. Listen, men, we have a duty as Nazis. We must show these Englanders that the Nazi spirit is unconquerable."

CAPTAIN STUMP slid from the hatch. He said briskly:

"Rubbish, it isn't. Hull down, Chief. We win."

"Good. I couldn't have stood much more of it."

"What the devil do you mean?" said Schultz.

Captain Stump, no longer a shambling, shuddering, stupid cretin, but alert, vigorous, fierce, cupped his hands and shouted:

"All hands on deck. Lively now."

Schultz whipped out his automatic. He was too late.

Heckmondwike, the *Bluestone's* chief officer with the swollen, blackened face, miraculously restored to strength, tore the

gun out of his hand and flung himself at him. His fingers gripped him by the throat. He forced him backward slowly.

Schultz hitting him in the body with both fists, fighting to keep his feet, terrified that his spine would crack, saw out of the corner of his eye Hoffmeister grab his rifle from the hatch. The sound of a shot reached his ears as he sank to the deck with Heckmondwike on top of him, throttling him, showing his yellow teeth in a grin of rage.

Schultz caught hold of his wrists and tried to shout.

"Don't kill him," someone said. "Better let go now."

Heckmondwike relaxed his grip on his throat and stood up.

Schultz lay for a moment without moving, sick and exhausted. Then very slowly, his back and arms aching, he raised himself to a sitting position. "I do not understand," he said in English.

All power of speech left him.

On the deck near him Hoffmeister lay, dead. Zapp, Wulf and Muller stood with their hands raised above their heads in token of surrender. Facing them was the chief engineer, holding a rifle, ready to shoot. With the chief engineer were men, stripped to the waist, the red-headed second mate who had lain in his bunk, sick unto death, and the six plague-stricken scarecrows from the saloon.

As Schultz, dazed and shaken, gazed at them, other men from different parts of the ship, fierce, red-faced, angry, sweating men, appeared and came crowding about him, pointing and exclaiming and asking questions. He rose to his feet, helping himself up by grasping the top of the bulwarks. Even now he could scarcely swallow, so sore was his throat. "I do not understand," he said again.

"You said the Nazi spirit was unconquerable," said Captain Stump. "You're wrong."

"You speak German?" said Schultz morosely.

"I speak German, yes. I'd probably not be speaking it now if your men had kept hold of their rifles, all the same."

"I speak it, too," said Heckmondwike in German. "I speak it seldom." He spoke with an Austrian accent. "It is the language of brute beasts, of lust, or torture, or murder, or hate."

Why should an Englishman tell lies, thought Schultz. Where was the sense or justice? He turned to Captain Stump.

"You told me thirty-four of your men were dead. We looked everywhere I thought men could hide before I believed you."

There was a shout of derisive laughter from the Englishmen.

"Man alive," said the fat chief engineer, "there were men hidden in places you'd never have imagined possible, places you could never have broken into if they wudna let ye."

"We had bombs to sink the ship with. They might have died."

"What if they had?" said Captain Stump. "Men do die in time of war, don't they? You might have died of the plague."

"But there was no plague."

"Of course there was no plague."

"Those men in the saloon looked like men dying."

"In every ship you'll find men with white faces and gray and spotty and swollen faces and men with hollow cheeks and eyes too large and men with false teeth they can take out to make their mouths fall in. See!" Captain Stump grinned and Schultz saw that the gap in his front teeth had gone.

"Some had foam on their lips."

"Soap. It made us feel sick — which helped," said the red-headed second mate.

"But when it came to putting pepper on our eyelids," said the chief engineer, "that was going a shade too far."

"It reddened your eyes, Chief, and mine, too."

"I have made a big mistake," said Schultz.

"If you'd looked at the pressure gauges in the engine-room and stokehold," said Captain Stump, "you'd have seen that the engines couldn't have been stopped for four-and-twenty hours, as I said."

"An hour and a half, that's a'," said the chief engineer. "We'd stopped for a hot bearing before we sighted you. I thocht afterward that four-and-twenty hours was a panic decision."

"Where is your doctor?" said Schultz. "His name was in the log-book."

"That doesn't say there was a doctor, does it? As soon as we knew what ship you were I wrote an account of the plague. The entries in the scrap log hadn't been copied into the official log for three days, so it was easy. We had to have a doctor on board to throw you off the scent. And we had one. Where is Dr. Johnson, by the way?"

A BOY stepped forward, carrying in his arms the sandy cat.

"This is Dr. Johnson," said Captain Stump.

"Then there was no one called Johnson!"

"There was and there wasn't," said Captain Stump. He broke off, frowning. "What's that fellow sitting on the deck for? You"—he spoke in German—"you, what's wrong with you?"

"Answer the English Captain, Haack," said Schultz. Haack lifted his head. He put his hand to his stomach.

"I have a pain," he said.

"He's saying he's got the belly-ache," said an English sailor. Everyone laughed.

Schultz no longer cared. The English were laughing, were they! Well, let them laugh! They had reason to laugh.

"Get up, Haack," he said. "There's nothing wrong with you. Haack got up, an awed expression on his face.

"No, there is nothing wrong with me."

The crowd had thinned. Schultz, hating the English for laughing, hating his own men for their indiscipline and disloyalty, hating himself for his fear, turned to Captain Stump.

"I am your prisoner, sir," he said, clicking his heels. "I shall never again my head hold up. I am disgraced."

"You are," said Captain Stump. "But you're lucky, too. Your ship will shortly be sunk. I'm sending out a message by radio, in code, naturally, calling all British patrol ships, giving your ship's position and probable course. Your people won't dream it's the *Bluestone* sending the message and we save our cargo. No harm will come to you and your men, so long as you give no trouble. If you do give trouble, it'll be just too bad! Understand?"

"I understand, sir, yes," said Schultz.

"Chief," said Captain Stump, "now that that raider is well away, we'll be pushing on. Mr. Heckmondwike—"

"Sir," answered a brown-faced young man in a white duck uniform.

"What about this dead Nazi?"

"Your name is not Heckmondwike," said Schultz.

"Isn't it? What is it then?"

"If so, then who is this?" said Schultz, looking at the gaunt, broad, long-armed man with the blackened, swollen face.

"He's the man we entered on the list of the crew as Dr. Johnson," said Captain Stump. "We never imagined the question of his being a real doctor would ever come up, of course. It was his plan to pretend that we had the plague. He said once you Nazis put some of your own men on board to search the ship and learned what was wrong you'd not have them back and we'd be safe. He was right. I thought, mind you, he was a bit reckless when you went off to the engine-room and he followed. I couldn't stop him, though, because of the man you'd left on guard. He thought he was going off to die, maybe."

"I do not understand why he should pretend to be your chief officer," said Schultz. "It was dangerous, yes."

"No more dangerous than pretending to

be a doctor who was down in the log as having died."

"Why was he on deck? Why did he not hide?"

"He said if there was any killing he wanted to be in on it. That's why. He said, too, it was a pity to waste his face. Mr. Heckmondwike was good enough to let him pretend to be chief officer instead of him. He didn't have to say a word, really."

"Who are you?" said Schultz. "Are you English?"

"I am a Pole," said the man with the blackened face. "The Nazis take me prisoner and they try to kill me. I escape to Russia. The Russians try to kill me. I escape to China. The Japanese try to kill me and I am left for dead. For four days I lie in the sun on my back. I cannot move. I cannot turn my head. Look at my face. Do you see, Nazi! It is burnt like this. It will be burnt like this always. I do not care. I go to England to fight the Nazis. You are the dregs of the earth. The scum. You are vermin that must exterminate be. Poland will live. And you, you are a Nazi heel, so you hit me, and for all you know I am dying. If Captain Stump would permit I would kill you now as you Nazis kill my wife and little child."

A dreadful thought had crept into Schultz's mind.

"Are you Tarnow?" he asked in a stifled voice.

"I am Tarnow, yes," said the man with the blackened, swollen face. "General Tarnow of the Polish Army."

Black Bob Murdock Held to the Theory That Strangers Do Not Make It a Habit to Start Gunning Up Another Stranger—Just for Sport

SIX-GUN GAMBLE

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

I

THE belly of the paint-hoss lay close to the ground, the rider's long body flat over his withers. The range was too great for a six-gun, and rifle shooting from the back of a bronc going hell-bent away from the target is just a waste of powder.

"Black" Bob Murdock knew that, but he tugged at the rifle in his saddle-boot regardless. The first sizeable boulder he came to would see him forted up and talking turkey to the three rannies back yonder!

Only the long range had saved him so far, he figured. And that was all he could figure. Who was doing the shooting and why, was something he knew nothing

about. He knew only that three strange rannies had opened up on him without arguing the matter, and, the odds being a trifle too heavy for Black Bob Murdock to stack against, he had made a run for it.

The rough ground over which the paint-hoss was running was spotted with boulders, greasewood and scrub. Murdock saw ahead of him just the boulder he wanted—and wanted in a hurry.

The rifles back yonder were getting the range. Any shot might hit him, or his bronc—

The paint-hoss, foot in a gopher hole, went end over end. Murdock, clearing wood instinctively, sprawled through the air and landed flat about ten feet beyond the bronc. He had got his rifle free, and still held on to it. Winded, stunned, he lay there long enough to get a good breath, then sprinted to cover back of the boulder.

The paint-hoss got up and went limping off into a clump of brush. Limping like he'd strained a tendon.

Spang—spat! Bark of rifle and thud of lead against the boulder. Then more lead doing the same.

Murdock exposed his head cautiously, just enough to sight on a man in the distance. He fired. A clean miss. Again he fired—then dropped, swearing savagely.

What was going on, anyhow? As if three men were not enough for one to handle, another had opened up in the rear. Lead had chipped the boulder close to Murdock's head, and gone off in a whining ricochet.

The tall puncher did not waste time lying there and wondering. He snaked around to the south side of the boulder. It was not the best protection in the world, but it would have to do.

Spang—clink!

The rifle which had driven him from the east side of the boulder cracked again, and another chunk of rock flew from the top.

Murdock, sweeping the terrain to the east with his eyes, spotted the location of the new menace. A sniper was concealed in the bushy top of an oak not more than fifty yards away. A wisp of smoke betrayed him.

The rifles on the west were still snarling, and when a lull came Murdock took a quick shot in that direction.

"Got you, damn you!" he muttered savagely, as one of the riflemen pitched out of his saddle.

The tall puncher, feeling that three had been plenty and four entirely too damned many, was seeing red by then. He fired again—and somebody's hat went into the air. Again—and, with the shot puncher across the back of a bronc, the rifle shooters took out. As they covered in a clump of greasewood, Murdock got in another shot, but couldn't see how that one made out.

Again the sniper in the tree got busy. Only a small part of Murdock's person could have been visible from the sniper's position—but a slug of lead burned that. It was his left side over his ribs. He turned the boulder quickly, laid his rifle across the top and shouted:

"One chance to drop that gun and come down—just one. No have some, I start prowling that tree-top with lead—and I've got plenty lead. *Muy pronto*, fella—I'm not waiting!"

As emphasis to his remarks, the tall puncher sent a slug through the top plume of the scrub, then waited. He didn't want to kill the bird up there right then. Wanted to have a little palaver with him first. Strangers do not make it a habit to start gunning up another stranger just for sport. There had been a reason in this instance, and Murdock craved very much to know that reason.

He watched the tree, and saw a short-barreled rifle slide out of the foliage to the ground. He waited. The brush shivered. The sniper, himself vulnerable while the puncher was pretty well forted by the boulder, was showing good sense. A leg came into view.

Black Bob got his breath in a short gasp, and his gray eyes opened their widest. No man of his knowledge had a leg like that one. Not in a thousand years! The half-boot in view was trim and dainty, and the Levi's certainly did not hide the lines—

THE girl dropped to earth, backed against the tree and, with a hand on the butt of a holstered revolver, looked angrily ahead of her. Her face was flushed and defiant.

"Good gosh!" came explosively from back of the boulder.

"All right, you range-grabbing, dry-gulching, cow-stealing scum — crack down!" the girl invited. "I'm the last Loving—the only one your crooked outfit has left. Just as well get me and have it over with. But—I'll bet you haven't got what it takes to come out from behind that boulder and give me an even break!"

"Well, now," Murdock drawled, "I'm covering that bet—but I'm hoping you won't start smoking me up. I won't shoot it out, and that's final. You wouldn't knock over a jasper that ain't having any, would you?"

"That trick won't work! Just show enough of yourself—and see what I'll do," the girl hurled back.

"Huh!" the tall puncher grunted. "Not so good! What the hell do I do now?"

The girl's lips parted to answer. Her comment would undoubtedly have been scathing—only at that instant Bob Murdock fired.

The girl screamed—then stared in amazement as a man came tumbling from a fringe of brush forty feet away on her right. The man ceased tumbling, straightened out—and lay there.

"Down!" Murdock yelled at her. "Get down!"

The girl dropped flat. Flame flared yellowly in the brush farther off, and lead nicked the trunk of the tree against which she had been standing. Then a chunk of rock flew from the boulder covering the tall puncher. One man up there—but he was levering his rifle for fair!

Murdock crouched low and waited. There came a lull—and his rifle, slapped across the boulder's top, blazed sixty to the minute. Nothing could have stayed in that particular clump of brush and lived.

Abandoning his empty rifle for a six-gun, Murdock ran zig-zagging across the open ground between the boulder and the fringe of brush. Nothing happened. He got to cover, then slipped Apache-like through the brush—and came upon another man who would have no further use for his rifle.

He stared down at the face of the man who, almost a matter of seconds ago, had been alive as he himself then was—and wondered who he had been and what his game. Then he remembered the girl, and started back to her.

To his surprise, she was still there by the tree. Her small, pert face looked puzzled. Her eyes, big, brown and a little frightened, watched warily the tall puncher's approach. It was as though she asked herself: Is this man friend or foe?

"Reckon our side wins!" Murdock exclaimed, a grin lighting his dark, rugged face. "Score: Three to nothing—"

"Who are you? What are you doing on my range?" the girl interrupted, her eyes fiery again.

"Name of Murdock. From down Texas way," the tall puncher told her obligingly. "About your range—well, what brand does it run, and who ramrods it, and—"

"Stop that!" the girl commanded imperiously. "You know very well that three men just couldn't shoot so many times at a man—and not hit. All that shooting was a fake—just so you could make yourself solid on the Bridle Bit, or what's left of it. Plain as the nose on your face—and," witheringly, "yours is certainly an eye-full!"

Black Bob, questioning the offending member with a finger, was trying to figure it out. She was certainly prettier than any

girl he had ever seen—either in Texas far away or in Arizona, right where he then was.

Brown curly hair, bobbed just enough. Complexion like gold-leaf with a lot of pink and red showing through. Eyes entirely too big and wide for just one small person—and lips, well, plumb nice lips. Red like haws in the autumn—and, yeah, they might be kissable, but he'd never know for sure.

"I knocked one of these side-kicks of mine out of his saddle," he pointed out, "and tumbled another out of the brush. There's still another farther up. Anything phony about that—or would you have an opinion on the subject?"

"You needn't be sarcastic!" she railed at him. "I was getting around to that—only you interrupted!" While Black Bob wondered just when he had done that, she went on: "I was telling you what I thought at first. When I saw you shoot the one off his horse, I thought maybe I could be wrong. But I wasn't taking chances.

"I know, now, that I was wrong—but that doesn't mean that I'd trust you as far as I could—could—"

"Throw me—with two hands tied behind you and both eyes shut," he finished for her obligingly. "Though what difference your eyes being shut would make is plumb puzzling to—"

"Quit talking to me like you would to a child!" the girl blazed, her cheeks red. "I'm fully grown—"

"I wish you'd act it!" Murdock snapped, face a trifle white. "Why in hell don't you?"

Black Bob's sudden flare-up had a curious effect upon the girl. She gave a little half-gasp, her lower lip quivered, and tears filmed her eyes. Murdock felt guilty of something. Exactly what, he was uncertain about. It was just like he'd somehow forgot and slapped a child.

"Don't mind me," he said humbly. "I'm just a rough-speaking hombre that oughta bite his tongue. Out of a rough sorta family, too. Pap is a plumb hellion that way. Don't know until now how he's managed to out-live four wives, like he has—"

"Oh, shut up!" the girl exclaimed, subduing what might have become a smile. "Didn't I tell you that I'm grown up? Don't you remember me telling you that?"

THE tall puncher chuckled. "That's another habit Pap had," he said, happily reminiscent. "He just wouldn't allow us boys had growed up. So one day Percy, that's my hare-lipped brother, up and flang him in the creek. Every time Pap would poke his red bean outa the water, Percy would bounce a rock off it. Pap like to have drowned—"

"You would have drowned," the girl declared with conviction. "Keeping your mouth wide open is, I suspect, a habit you've had from birth. You'd have strangled sure. So—if you've done with your foolishness—wasted on me, by the way—wouldn't it be a good idea to search those two dead punchers and see if they can be identified? I think they're two of Craig Hamlin's buckaroos, but we ought to make sure. Suppose you do it?"

Black Bob, not unaware of that "we," and tickled over it, went to where the dead rannie lay outside the fringe of brush. He bent over the body for as long as a minute, then faced the girl abruptly.

"Hell!" he ejaculated. "This one was no buckaroo. He was a duly commissioned and acting deputy sheriff!"

II

THE girl broke what threatened to be a prolonged silence.

"Maybe—maybe we'd better not stay here?" she suggested.

"Maybe you're plumb right there," the Texan agreed promptly. "The sheriff may not take kindly to me plugging so many of his men on the same day. I'll see can

I catch up my paint-hoss, then we'll mozey from here."

He came back within a few minutes, leading his bronc. The animal limped in his left foreleg, but there appeared to be no great damage done. The Texan said:

"I'll lead poor old Flapjacks, while you ride—or did you arrive footback?"

"My bronc is over yonder a piece," she told him, starting off toward the east. "What did you say your bronc's name is?"

"Name of Flapjacks," the tall puncher answered. "He's been known to surround forty at one helping, with plenty blackstrap on 'em. If you don't believe that, just furnish the makings, and I'll prove it."

"I'd believe anything of a bronc. But I just can't see that gluttonous one of yours hogging my flour—what there is of it." She shut her lips tightly, as though she had made an admission she had not intended making.

Black Bob saw, and refrained from asking questions. They walked on in silence for a while.

"Speaking of flapjacks," he began. "Pap's third wife—I believe it was Amanda, the cross-eyed one, but can't be sure—was the best hand with—"

"Just let your Pap rest in his grave," she interrupted. "Or—is he?"

"Pap?" he exclaimed, then laughed heartily. "I'll say not! Why, that rowdy old redhead, after burying his fourth wife a while back, is getting ready to take on a fifth. Has by now, I make no doubt. Real young one, this time, with hair as red as Pap's—"

"You didn't color after him," she observed.

"Nope. Pap's as red as an Arizona sunset. I'm as black—well, you can see for yourself how black I am, if you care to look."

"I *have* looked—and you *are* black," positively.

"Sure. Black Bob. Pap is Red Bob—and will be for a long time, the good God willing!"

"Do you know, Black Bob Murdock," the girl asked as they came from a clump of brush with her bronc trailing, "that there is a very serious situation coming up?"

"I do," gravely. "I'm wondering about it. Maybe if I knew something of the set-up here, Miss—well, whatever-your-name-is—"

"I'm Jane Loving," she told him. "So used to being Jane Loving I forgot that you couldn't know it. And as for the set-up, that's quite a story. Anyhow, I'd like to know something about you. What brought you here, for instance?"

"I was pointed for a spread called the Boxed O," the Texan told her. "Man by the name of Oldham owns it, and wants to sell. I'm looking to buy—if I can buy worth the money. I've got four punchers from my Texas spread with me. Camped up on Little Stranger Creek. Dozen miles east. Aim to leave them on the Boxed O, or whatever spread I buy, while I go back and sell out in Texas. That, Miss Jane Loving, is all about me."

"The Boxed O lies ten miles east of my Bridle Bit," Jane told him. "Only six sections of owned range now. Was bigger. Twenty-four sections, until Old Generosity parted with three-fourths—"

"Old what-did-you-call-him?"

The girl laughed. "Old Generosity," she repeated. "Otherwise, Jesse Oldham. Ever read about King Lear?"

BLACK BOB grinned. "They made me —down Austin way," he admitted. "Didn't of my own free-will. What's the gag?"

"He gave his kingdom away. Mr. Oldham didn't do quite that bad—but bad enough. He gave Craig Hamlin, his stepson, six sections, his daughter Mable, six, and his daughter Fanny, six. He kept six, and had his range well stocked—but his stepson and the husbands of the two daughters have rustled the old man calfpore, and now he wants to sell. That, Mr.

Black Bob from Texas, is what you'll be up against—if you buy."

"We know what to do with rustlers—down in Texas," Murdock said briefly. "Now—reckon those jaspers that tried to gun me up were put out to stop a man known to be riding over to look at the Boxed O? Say that this thieving outfit doesn't want the old man to sell?"

The girl shook her head. "More likely that Craig Hamlin saw you on my range, figured you were a puncher come to work for me—and tried to scare you off, like he has every puncher I've had for the past three months. That would account for them missing so many shots."

"Maybe. Hamlin been giving you some trouble?"

"My father was dry-gulched on his own range, a year ago," she said fiercely. "My only brother got the same three months later. Hamlin beat me to the lease on five sections of government range a month later—because I, away in school, didn't know our lease was expiring. He says he intends to get my ten owned sections—by marriage or purchase. Marriage preferred. He can't get them either way—so he has tried other methods. Running my punchers off. Burning me out, and other kinds of hell like that. Now, Mr. Texan—would you call that making trouble?"

The Texan was silent for a time. Finally he said:

"One of those deputies tried to gun you back yonder. Plugged the tree where you had been standing. You got down just in time. Now—would Hamlin favor such as that?"

"Did—did the bullets actually hit that tree?" she asked, gasping a little. "Did they?"

He nodded. "I saw the glint of the first rannie's rifle-barrel," he said. "He was aiming at me. The fellow farther up in the brush might not have been able to see clearly, and maybe mistook you for me. That could account for his shots into the tree. But all that aside, would Hamlin be able to wangle deputies' commissions for his ranahans?"

"Bid Mullins, the sheriff, might do that, seeing that Craig Hamlin controls a lot of votes, but I doubt it. Bid bears the reputation of being fairly decent. Dumbness is his great handicap. He's tough and game—but has a mind that plods."

THE wagon trail which they had been following climbed up to a broad, rock-strewn mesa, and Murdock stopped, eyes widening in surprise on something in the distance which had attracted him. At first he took what he saw to be a strange kind of mirage, but decided against that. It, whatever it was, looked real enough.

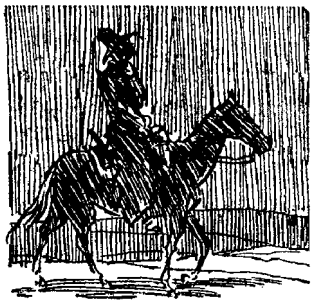
In a haze of yellow, nearly a mile across the mesa and reflecting the sun's rays like he'd seen huge dust-devils do, lay a vast pile of something the exact nature of which puzzled him. He continued to look until the girl's amused laugh recalled him.

"Calculated to startle any stranger getting a first sight of it," she said, her eyes twinkling. "It's been right there a long, long time. Over three hundred years. Not to make a mystery of it," she said laughingly, "you are now seeing *La Casa Viejo*—at least, the Spanish folks call it that. The Old House. This range was included in a Spanish land grant to Don Ramon de Pasco, a grandee of Spain of the first water. The direct line of the family died out, we are told, and the place came upon evil days. It is now only a vast heap of rock and debris, covering several acres of otherwise good grass. My grass, by-the-way. Las Casa Viejo is another one of the useless things I own."

"At least you are sole proprietor of a lot of romance and ancient history," Black Bob told her humorously. "What did the old dons do with the grant—ranch cattle on it?"

"Yes. And sheep. But the main enterprise was mining gold. The old mine-workings are there back of the casa," she explained, "and it must have been some

mine—judging by the extensive shafts and tunnels one may yet see. But don't go and get ideas," she warned amusedly. "No gold has been taken out of the mine for over a hundred years—and none ever will be again. It has long been hopelessly flooded. Big Sandy Creek took care of that. Big Sandy is all but dry now—the water going down and into the mine, spreading in all directions. Experts in our own time have examined it in the hope of draining it and drying it out—but the thing is hope-



less. And now, Mr. Murdock, that's enough about that."

"The mine," whimsically, "is also just so much sundust, like the yellow devils dancing jigs on top of La Casa Viejo—and as unsubstantial. Come to think of it, there is a heap of that sundust floating around—and we are always grabbing for a handful of it, refusing to believe that anything so beautiful could lack a body. Beauty—but unpossessable, and therefore worthless—"

He broke off, glanced quickly at the girl and laughed apologetically. Her eyes had plainly been studying him—trying, perhaps, to assay him.

"I'm not that way, honestly," he grinned sheepishly. "I don't see visions, and all my dreams are nightmares. But that heap of rock out yonder sorta got to me—such a lot of interesting romance got covered up when the casa fell."

"I have felt exactly the same way—about the evanescent quality of what you call sundust," she told him. "It's common enough in Arizona. As a child, I used to chase it like most kids chase butterflies—and I never caught so much as a flake of it. Anyhow—the ruins of La Casa are substantial enough. And," she laughed, "if you buy the Boxed O, Mr. Murdock, maybe I could be prevailed upon to part with the lay-out—romance and history thrown in."

MURDOCK, however, had gone serious. "I wonder," he said, "if the old flooded mine could have some special interest for this Hamlin chap who wants your spread so badly?"

"Positivley not," she answered very promptly. "The best mining brains in the country have sifted the possibilities—and it can't be done. Reclaimed, I mean. So the mine, Mr. Black Bob from Texas, is definitely out."

They walked on in silence for fifteen or twenty minutes, then the girl stopped, pointed, and said bitterly:

"There's my home-ranch layout. What's left of it!"

The Texan's eyes narrowed and his lips tightened, as he surveyed with a fellow-rancher's sympathy and understanding what lay before him. Devastation could hardly have been more complete.

The fence of peeled mesquite poles which had surrounded the ranchhouse lay wrecked upon the ground, and the log house, once roomy and substantial, had been badly burned on the east end. Heaps of ashes marked the places where two hay-stacks had stood, and only a stable and corral remained intact. Firebugs had played hell with the home layout, and no mistake!

"You figure this Hamlin lad did that—with his little box of matches?" Black Bob asked grimly.

The girl nodded. "Had it done, at least." Her voice was bleak, and her lips twisted.

"Seems he has a sorta fondness for fire," the Texan commented. "Maybe he'd like it less—coming from the business-end of a six-gun. I've known fellas that just completely didn't like it."

"Craig Hamlin is known to be game,"

Jane hastened to head off a possible wrong conception. "And he's fast and deadly with a six-gun. His mind is mean and his heart is evil—and I hate him with everything I've got!" she finished explosively.

The Texan's half-lidded eyes narrowed still more. He stood for a moment in silence. Then:

"Maybe I'll stick around for awhile—and help you hate him," he said, his voice coldly decisive. "Meantime, how about feeding this stock? Any grain for 'em?"

She nodded. "A little. There's two more broncs on pasture—if they haven't run them off since this morning. Grass enough to carry them, though. If you'll feed the broncs, I'll see what I can rustle up for us."

She swung down with a boyish litheness wholly pleasing to the watching Texan. Arizona, he was thinking, didn't have just sunshine that was plumb nice.

He led the broncs to the stable, grained them, found a bottle of liniment and gave his paint-hoss' leg a rub. When he rounded the east corner of the house a few minutes later, he found Jane standing on the gallery, looking off along the trail to the south. He stopped and looked off in that direction too.

Half a dozen riders were fogging dust in their direction.

III

WHEN the riders had come within hailing distance of the house, Black Bob hitched up his crossed gunbelts, looked at the girl and said quietly:

"I'm riding for your spread. Don't forget that—and make it stick."

Jane nodded. Standing erect and self-contained on the gallery of what was left of her ranchhouse, she waited for the riders. If she was afraid, she showed no sign of it.

The riders jumped the wrecked fence and pulled up in the yard. A long, thin, gray-haired man took off his hat and spoke.

"Howdy, Janie," he greeted the girl.

"Howdy, Bid," the girl returned. "Quite a posse backing you. Looking for somebody?"

A heavy-set, black-eyed man shoved his bronc forward. He sported a forty-dollar, dove-colored Stetson, and the rest of his personal rigging was in keeping with the hat. He had dazzlingly white teeth under a short, black mustache which drooped somewhat at the ends.

"Yuh can bet Bid's looking for somebody—and he's found him!" the sporty rider exclaimed. "And yuh're aiding and abetting a killer, yore ownself—or did yuh know that?"

"Is Craig Hamlin," nodding contemptuously at the speaker, "running your office now, Bid?" Jane asked quietly.

"Nope. Runnin' my office my ownself, Janie—like as usual," Sheriff Mullins assured her. "An' yuh can keep yore trap shut, Craig," he admonished the sporty rider.

"Yuh're a heap too easy-going, Bid!" Hamlin declared heatedly. "There's yore man," pointing a quirt-end at the Texan who was leaning against a post of the gallery. "Why don't yuh put the iron on him?"

"Maybe—I say just maybe," Black Bob drawled, "you'd admire to undertake that job your ownself? Just a suggestion, and you don't hafta try it—in case you don't feel quite up to it."

"What does he mean—aiding and abetting a killer?" Jane demanded of the sheriff. "Are you going to state your business, Bid—or just sit there in your saddle forever?"

The sheriff swung down before answering. Then, "Three hombres all shotten up while ago, Janie," he told her. "One of 'em had been deppitized by me—"

"At whose request?" the girl cut in quickly.

"Mine—seeing yuh wanta know!" snarled Hamlin, swinging down in his turn.

"A bodyguard for you—maybe?" contemptuously.

"Hell—I don't need no bodyguard!" Hamlin fumed angrily. "Who says I do?"

"Nobody," came quietly from the Texan. "What you need is a keeper. Likewise, somebody to teach you company manners—and a heap more things I can think of without getting a headache."

THE sheriff spoke before Hamlin could get words out of his mouth. "S'posin' yuh keep quiet, stranger?" he suggested pointedly. "Two men done been kilt out-and-out, an' another one shotten up right bad. Yuh are knowed to of done this here blastin'. Save yore gab fur later—an' jest yuh do th' same, Hamlin. I'm holdin' palaver with Janie.

"Janie," he went on, "whut happened over in that there scrub-oak pasture of your'n today? Tell me straight all about it. Then I'll know more'n I do right now. Yuh doin' any talkin'?"

"I am. Glad to have a chance to talk," the girl answered promptly. "No need to remind you that I've asked you to do something about Craig Hamlin and his gun-slicks and fire-bugs ruining me—"

"She's libeling me, Sheriff!" Hamlin cried protestingly. "Libeling me right in the face of the law!"

"I told yuh to shut up, Craig," Mullins said in a voice now hard. "I'm listenin' to Janie. Go ahead," he requested the girl.

"I was riding the scrub-oak pasture just after dinner-time today," Jane told him. "Hoping I might find a few head of stock that Craig Hamlin and his rustlers had overlooked.

"I heard rifle-shooting far off, in some brush and took to a tree.

"Bob Murdock, riding for me," she continued, indicating the Texan with a nod, "was combing the upper end of the range. From the tree I saw Bob riding hell-for-leather, while three of Hamlin's gun-slicks cut down on him with rifles. Bob's bronc hit a gopher-hole and went down—and Bob got cover back of a boulder.

"The gun-slicks kept on blasting, spattering the boulder but not doing any damage. Finally Bob knocked one of them out of his saddle, the hat off another—and the yellow rats couldn't stomach any more. They took out. Then I came down out of the tree and, a few minutes later, while I stood talking with Bob, a gun-slick tried for him from the brush. Bob got him.

"Another drygulcher, hidden farther up in the brush, then took two shots at me—"

"No!" Mullins ejaculated, startled.

"Plumb wrong, Bid!" Hamlin cried. "He didn't—I mean, no man would shoot at a woman."

"No *man* would," Jane agreed. "But this owl-hoot of yours did. I dropped a split-second before his rifle cracked—and his lead is there in the tree to show for it. But that's not important right now. The important thing is that Bob smoked up that one, too—and Craig Hamlin lost another of his buckaroos. Now—was my rider defending himself and me, and the spread whose salt he eats, or wasn't he?"

"Oh, you competent little liar!" Black Bob was thinking approvingly. "May the good God bless—and forgive you!"

"Now—lissen to me, Bid!" Hamlin demanded, claiming the sheriff's attention. "That's the girl's story—and it don't jibe with Sol Bender's. Not by a long chalk! Sol rode in, all shotten up, like I've told yuh. Abe Harris and Dud Baker rode to head off this killer—yeah," aiming a forefinger at the Texan, "that killer right there! And when they tried to take him for shooting up Sol—he blowed 'em both down. Pore Baker, he got up in the brush—and danged if this bloodthirsty jasper didn't go in after him and shoot him down! My boys never fired a shot."

"Who started the shootin' in th' fust place?" the sheriff asked.

"This killer done it," Hamlin declared. "My three punchers was riding peaceably

over on Jane Loving's range, looking for strays—and this jasper opened on 'em. Got Sol the first crack. Naturally, my men done what they could to pertect themselves, but this killer is a hellion with his irons—and they taken out, carrying Sol acrost his bronc. The rest happened like I just told yuh!"

"You say your men didn't fire a shot, in our final get-together?" came calmly from the Texan.

"I shore do—and I can prove it!"

Black Bob stepped away from the post, indicated his bullet-cut shirt and the blood which had by then soaked through, and asked:

"Howcome me shot up, then? Didn't do it myself, you can bet. Who did it? Well, that hombre I shot out of the brush. He burned me before I could get him—and this wound of mine proves it!"

"Just another lie," Hamlin started.

"Hold on, Craig," the sheriff ordered. "Now—Sol Bender was so bad shotten up, when I happened along yore way right after he'd rid in, that I misdoubt he done much talkin'. Misdoubt it a heap. So I ain't creditin' that end of yore story a lot. Onderstand, I'm not sidin' with anybody. Don't aim to. But I got jest this to say.

"Yore rannies, Craig, was in one hullva place to git theirselves killed in. Right on Janie's own range. Fuddermore, they was rodded up plumb to hell and gone—an' Baker's rifle was empty. He didn't go huntin' this here killer with no empty rifle—an' that's that.

"Fuddermore an' ag'in," he continued, "I've knowed Janie since she wasn't no more'n head-high to a wagon-hub—an' I don't figger her to be a liar. So—unless some better evidence comes along to prove me wrong, I'm lettin' things ride. You," to the Texan, "will stick aroun', I take it?"

"I'm working here," Black Bob told him. "Aim to stay."

"All right. I ain't pullin' nobody in—yet," the sheriff finished, reaching for his saddle-horn. "But if yuh folks jest kain't settle yor diffrunces without outside assistance—then I promises assistance. Good-by, Janie. So-long, stranger," he bade them, mounting. "Let's git goin', fellers."

HAMLIN, red with rage and disappointment, swung into his kak. He leveled his black eyes upon the Texan—and the Texan closed one of his in a manner suggesting a man sighting along a rifle-barrel.

"Damn yuh!" Hamlin bleated, beside himself with rage. "Yuh got a killin' coming to yuh!"

He slapped a gun from leather with a barely noticeable flip of his right hand—but the Texan was a mite ahead. His six-gun cracked — and Hamlin's weapon jumped from his hand just as if he had thrown it away.

"Hold it!"

Jane's voice was sharp and menacing. Two of Hamlin's riders had spurred forward, dropping hand to gun. The girl, back to the wall, had them covered—and her eyes told them plenty.

Both jerked their broncs to their haunches—and dropped their hands from their weapons.

The Texan, a smoking gun in one hand and the other hand also filled, had eyes that seemed to see everywhere at once. He said nothing—only waited.

"Git the damned saddle-bum!" Hamlin bleated savagely. His lips were white and his gun-arm numb to the shoulder. "Git him, damn yuh rannies—what the hell yuh drawing pay for?"

Sheriff Mullins spurred his bronc between Hamlin and Murdock, and said with deadly emphasis:

"Any more gun-play aroun' here—I'm declarin' in on it. Now, all yuh rannies—ride!"

Hamlin, nursing his aching hand in the bosom of his shirt, twisted lips dripping threats, took the trail after the sheriff, his riders following him.

IV

THE Texan followed the retiring riders with his eyes, his face still and thoughtful. He slowly, almost automatically, ejected the exploded cartridge from his gun and thumbed in a fresh one. Jane's voice broke into his thought-train, whatever it was.

"I did that!"

She had left the gallery and was standing on the ground by him, her face contrite, voice tremulous.

Black Bob glanced at her, then down at his torn and blood-soaked shirt upon which the girl's gaze was riveted. He shrugged, and said:

"You know, I don't believe I could ever learn to like that Hamlin jasper. Reminds me a heap of Pap's oldest brother. That was Delbert, the one that comes to a bad end—"

"That won't get it, Bob," she interrupted.

"Get what?"

"A laugh. Not even a smile. I shot you—and I never shot a man be-before," her voice faltering. "Does—does it hurt so terribly much?"

"Well—the good God bless you!" the Texan exclaimed in astonishment. "Is that what you're making all the fuss about? That skimpy little scratch!"

"It's all bloody. I didn't know you were hit. Honestly! Why didn't I?" suspiciously.

"I didn't aim for you to. Kept that side away from you. Wouldn't have mentioned it at all, only to call Hamlin's hand."

"You told the sheriff that Abe Harris did it—and he didn't!" Jane exclaimed. "I'm the one. I did it!"

"Down in Texas we don't dispute a lady's word—especially if she's as quick on the draw as you are," Black Bob grinned. "But—you heard what I told the sheriff. That's my story, and I'm sticking by it."

"Thank you, Black Bob Murdock," Jane said simply. "They raise men—down in Texas. Now, you come into the house and let me wash and bandage that wound. It may be skimpy, and all that, but it could get infected. Come on—and don't irritate me with an argument!"

It really wasn't any great shakes of a wound. Murdock felt considerable embarrassment over the fuss Jane made about it, but it was kind of pleasant, at that. He wasn't above enjoying the sympathy-arousing role, and might even have put on a trifling bit of agony had that been necessary. It wasn't. Jane was too genuinely hurt over being the cause of it not to simply smother him with attention.

When the bandage had been properly applied and the blood-stained shirt replaced by a fresh one from the tall puncher's war-bag—not until then was the girl satsified.

They had supper. There was bacon, beans, passable biscuits, and coffee. Jane apologized for the fare, and Murdock commented:

"When town's a right smart piece away and you haven't got anybody to ride in for you—"

"Let's not pretend," she interrupted. "This is the best I can afford. I'm just about the dead-brokest person in all Arizona, Bob Murdock. I've got six-thousand acres of deeded range, and two-thousand under long-time lease—and not a head of stuff on the whole of it. Counting out the three saddle head I've left. And there it is—both barrels."

"Your land free?" Murdock asked.

"Yes. Dad had paid the last mortgage off, a short while before he was killed. He bought from Jesse Oldham, of the Boxed O. This was once a part of the big Boxed O spread. Craig Hamlin tried to buy it back for himself, but Dad refused to sell. Brother and I refused also. It is good range. Plenty of permanent water, and lies well."

"Maybe, now, that's the reason Hamlin is raising all the ruction," Murdock offered

speculatively. "Permanent water is mighty important to a ranch."

SHE shook her head negatively. "Hamlin has plenty of water," she told him. "Enough for half a dozen big spreads. Water isn't at the bottom of it. Neither is that Spanish mine. And I'm not, really. He's given up any idea he may have had about marrying Jane Loving. As for more range for more stock—why, he's never had half the stuff the grass he's got would carry. Now—you tell me?" she ended whimsically.

"We'll just have to keep on letting X be the unknown element," he grinned. "But we won't accept X as the answer—by a long shot. This problem of yours has a findable solution—and we'll tag it. Now—I've got four punchers that'll be riding in sometime tomorrow—"

"Here?" she demanded in surprise.

"Yeah. They don't know anything about the Bridle Bit, but they'll be here. I marked my trail for 'em to follow along. Blast their eyes, hadn't been for that dance they heard about up on Little Stranger they'd have been along with me. They stuck for it—but of course I wasn't expecting any trouble. I'll shag a couple of 'em in for provender—and we'll kinda headquarter here for awhile. The boys ain't had any real fun since they left Texas, unless something come up at that dance. You second that motion?"

"I—I—you mean that you really want to see me through this thing?"

"Aim to."

"You make it mighty easy for me to accept—and I do," Jane said, relief in her voice. "You must have come straight from Heaven!"

Murdock grinned broadly. "Well," he drawled, "I've heard Texas called a heap of curious names—but never that one before. In fact, Janie, some loose-tongued folks have been known to intimate that Heaven might actually be in an opposite direction from Texas—"

He joined in her laughter, and when they adjourned to the front gallery Jane was in a much more cheerful mood. The Texan sat down, rolled a smoke and asked:

"Does this Hamlin jasper do his dirt in the open—or just how does he do it?"

"Under cover. Dad was shot out of his buckboard one night, down the trail yonder," she pointed. "He was driving home from Kingman. That was shortly after Dad had refused with finality to sell to Hamlin. Hamlin boasted that he'd get the Bit, whether or no.

"Jack was killed three months later. He had ridden up into the juniper-brakes on the north range, to investigate a smoke one of Hamlin's punchers had ridden by to tell him about. His bronc came home with the saddle empty—and his own men found Jack dead in the brakes.

"Nothing positive in any of it, I'll admit," the girl went on. "I came home and took over—and then Craig Hamlin tried to take me over. Me and the Bit. I quirted him off this gallery one night, and he stood at the fence, mean with rage and pain—and plenty careless. He shouted that it was bad luck to refuse to sell him the Bit—and I ought to know it by now. I think he referred to Dad and Jack.

"I had only six-hundred white-faces when I took over—and they simply faded out. Four punchers, hired separately, have been chased off—and you can see for yourself what has happened here. I accused him of running off my men, and of burning me out. And he had the brass to say that he tried to control his riders, but that he could hardly be held responsible for what they did when just projecking around!"

Her anger at top pitch, Janie stood up, small hands clenched, eyes blazing.

"I hate that man so, Bob Murdock, that some day soon I'll kill him myself!"

"All right, now, Janie," the Texan said soothingly, don't bother your head any more about this Hamlin jasper. You won't have to rub him out, I'm thinking—"

"But—as I feel now, Bob, I want to. I want to rub him out!"

"Now, now," the Texan chided. "It's bad enough for a man to kill another. It's plumb un-ladylike for a woman to up and crack one down. And that's almost identically what Pap said to his second wife, name of Birdie, when she'd down him with a chunk of firewood and was coming at him with the axe."

Jane relaxed and sat down.

"I'm almost convinced," she sighed, "that you haven't even got a father—and maybe never did have one."

"Down in Texas," he advised her, "we smile when we put out slurs like that."

"We're up in Arizona—or had you forgotten? Anyhow, why tell me so much about Pap?"

"So when I take you down to Texas with me," he said promptly, "and you lay eye to that old redhead, you won't be too dumbfounded—"

"You take me down to Texas! Why should I go to Texas? What has Texas got that Arizona hasn't got?.

"W-e-e-l-l," he offered, "Pap, for one thing—"

"Which gives Arizona something besides sunshine to be thankful for," was her frank opinion. "Now let's lock Pap in the stable for awhile. We've got to make some sort of sleeping arrangements. There isn't enough left of the bunkhouse—"

"I'll spread my blankets on the front gallery, and bed down there," the Texan interrupted. "We may have more callers tonight. I like to welcome callers right on the door-log—or even before they get there. So our problem is settled pronto."

Jane shook her head, despondent again. "If only our other problems could be settled so easily!"

"Say, now, I was thinking things were looking up," Black Bob said cheerfully. "That sheriff, now—he didn't seem hostile at all."

"He isn't," Jane agreed. "But if I know Bid, and I think I do, he won't interfere to protect my interests, nor will he side actively with Hamlin. I figure he means for us to settle our difficulty among ourselves—without his let or hindrance."

"In which case," the Texan pointed out, "the thing is reduced to a sort of six-gun gamble—table stakes, no limit, and no house-man sitting in. And that suits me, up one side and down the other. Hope the law does take a few days off and goes fishing."

"But suppose your men don't get here?" Jane asked uneasily. "You can't be sure they will trail you in. You just marked your trail here and there—"

"Texans being part bloodhound," Black Bob interrupted with a grin, "they'll be here. Would have come along with me, except for that dance up on Little Stranger. Moral—after this, hire cowpokes with peg legs. Honest," he ended seriously, "don't worry about this business. Just turn in, try to sleep—and leave it up to me. I won't fail you—and my punchers won't fail me. Goodnight, Miss Loving."

Jane watched his tall figure fade into the night, as he went toward the stable for his bed-roll.

Half an hour later, Murdock, rolled in his blankets, was hoping for the sound snooze he really needed, and wondering if he'd get it.

"That Janie!" he muttered drowsily. "The good God bless her — and may all her children be half Texan."

V

BLACK BOB MURDOCK was sitting deep in the wood one minute, on top of the old apple the next, then down into the wood again. It wasn't a bronc he was riding—somehow or other, he'd cinched his kak onto a hurricane—up and up and up—— He saw the moon distinctly as he sailed over.

The Texan rolled out of his blanket, sat up and reached for his rifle, his mind clearing instantly. He hadn't taken his

six-guns off. Just his boots. He got into them quickly.

They were far off as yet—but horses were coming. And horses wouldn't be coming without men forking them.

He was at the door of Janie's room quickly, knocking.

"Yes—what is it," she called sleepily.

"Dress quick," the Texan told her. "Get your rifle and all the hulls you can rustle, then beat it to the stable. Saddle both broncs — and stay in the stable until I come—"

"Yes—I will!" He heard her bare feet on the floor. "But what is it about?"

"Riders coming. Don't ask any more questions—but hurry to that stable!"

He went back onto the gallery. The hoofbeats were louder now. Riders were taking their time. He glanced at his watch. Three o'clock in the morning—a good hour to catch everybody dead to the world—

He heard the back door open and close —and light feet running. Janie.

He went back into the house, stood just within the doorway and waited. The riders were then half a mile away. A quarter. They stopped, and the night was silent.

They were visible in the vague light of an old moon, all huddled together. Talking it over. Half a dozen of them, as best he could make out. Then, abruptly, the huddle broke up, became a scattered line of horsemen—and they came on the jump, yelling, hooting like owls, firing revolvers.

THE Texan, as steady as the wall against which he stood, sighted on a rider about the center of the line—and let drive. A bronc reared, wheeled—and went away with an empty saddle. He triggered again —and a rider jerked backward, flopped crazily forward, then went out of his saddle head-first to the ground.

Lead came thick and fast from the four men remaining, and Murdock heard the voice of Craig Hamlin above the din:

"Hold up here, men!" he shouted. "Give Buck and his bunch time to smoke 'em up from behind!"

Murdock let drive again, missed—then sprinted out the back door and to the stable. Janie had saddled her bronc and was cinching up the Texan's.

"Lead your bronc outside," he told her, taking the reins of his own. "Ride east, and I'll follow. Keep as much cover between you and the house as possible. Ready? All right—ride!"

The girl swung into her saddle and set out at a swift canter. Murdock, gratified at finding that the paint-hoss wasn't limping too badly, followed close on the heels of the girl's mount. With the stable covering them, they reached a stand of timber, passed through and came out in a draw beyond.

"Why are we making a run for it?" Janie wanted to know, as he came up abreast. "Too many for us?"

"Hamlin and three of his buckaroos are out front," briefly. "Buck and some more coming up in the rear—so we take out."

"Stout fella, you!" Janie applauded. "Good judgment. And where do we go?"

"I can't make it fast or far on this lame bronc," he pointed out. "We got to find some good place to fort up. Where would you say?"

"Oh! La Casa—of course!" Janie exclaimed. "There's a square tower standing—if we can get up inside, we can hold it as long as our ammunition lasts. Listen!"

He heard it too. The clipty-clop of shod hooves beating the ground. Half a mile back, maybe—

"Set the pace!" Murdock ordered tersely. "I'll follow as fast as I can—but you make that tower anyhow, understand?"

"Yes!" she answered—and dug into her bronc's ribs.

The sound of hoofbeats was fainter. The riders were probably only guessing, the night being too dark for trailing. For that matter, it might have been Buck and his men coming up. He drew up and lis-

tened. No sound, save the hoof-beats of Janie's bronc, came to him. He went on, getting all the speed possible out of his lame bronc.

They climbed out of the draw onto a high mesa—and Murdock saw in the distance the vast, dark bulk of La Casa. When nearer, he was astounded at the extent of the ruins. It seemed as though all the rocks in Arizona had been brought to that spot, and piled up almost tree-top high.

What a spread it must have been!

Was it possible that Hamlin had learned of some secret place within the ruin—some treasure storeroom of the old dons? Was there something within the fallen La Casa Viejo which the rancher knew about, and was going all out to get?

That, the Texan reasoned, was the answer!

"Follow me close," Janie called back to him. She circled the mass of rock on the north, came to where a narrow passage lay between crumbling walls and headed unhesitatingly into it. Murdock followed, thinking:

She must have explored this old tumbledown shack thoroughly at odd times—and the good God grant that she knows what she's doing!

She seemed to know, right enough. After they had gone deep into the old pile, almost a quarter-mile it seemed to Murdock, they came to a stop in a walled quadrangle, and right ahead a square shaft lifted against the sky.

"A *patio,*" the girl told him, swinging down. "We leave our broncs here—and don't leave any cartridges behind."

Murdock didn't leave any. He took down his lass-rope, wound it about his middle, and followed the girl to a low, arched doorway in the square tower. He stepped within its blackness—

A match flared, went out—and a smothered exclamation came from the darkness.

"A ladder here, right enough—but it's brand new!" Janie exclaimed. "Somebody has been prowling here—that's sure!"

"All right. Let's do some prowling ourselves—and me prowl first," the Texan suggested, pushing ahead and finding the rungs with his hands. "Come right after me, Janie—and let's don't waste any time."

That ladder, Murdock thought as he climbed up, cinched the hidden treasure theory. Hamlin had been using the old tower for a lookout, while his men searched the ruins below. He mentally crossed out the X, substituting hidden treasure in its place.

He pushed head and shoulders through a trap, then found himself in what appeared to be a square room — with, he found with searching hands, another ladder leading farther up.

"Coming?" he queried the darkness.

"Yes. What's ahead?"

"Another ladder."

He came out onto a platform about fifteen feet square, with a broken rock wall three feet high encompassing it. He went back, took hold of the ladder they had just ascended and drew it up onto the platform.

Looking off in the direction from which they had come, he saw nothing at all. Beneath him, and as far as he could see by the dim moon, was a tumbled mass of fallen stones. It was as though the earth had opened and spewed unbelievable masses of rock in all directions.

"What do you think of it?" Janie, at his elbow, asked.

"Anybody would have one helluva time getting up here, if we didn't want 'em up—and we'd have one helluva time getting down from here, in case somebody didn't want us to get down. That about jibe with your ideas?"

"Yes. We should be able to hold the tower. I feel pretty safe up here!"

The Texan chuckled. "Pap felt safe, too," he told her, "whilst he bossed his first wife, name of Alamo Annie, from the top of a tall tree—"

The girl laughed musically. "And then —Pap had to come down?" she suggested.

"Or starve," he grinned.

"Bob—listen! Did you hear—"

Murdock seized her and dragged her down below the wall — and heard the chuck of the bullet he had anticipated, then the high snarl of a rifle from somewhere in the sea of jumbled debris below.

II

ONE shot—then silence.

"You see him?" Janie whispered close to his ear.

"No. Heard him."

"How could they get here so quickly?" she wondered.

"We were seen, and Hamlin's gang—assuming it is his gang—came the shorter way—"

"Hey, you up there!"

"Craig Hamlin!" Jane exclaimed in a whisper.

"Hey—yuh hear me, Killer? We know yuh're up there, so yuh gain nothing by dummying up. Hey—damn yuh, I wanta hold palaver!"

Murdock had not been idle. He had crawled along the wall in search of a break —and had found one. He poked the barrel of his rifle through the break and let drive.

A startled yell came up from below—and dislodged rocks rattled as somebody scuffed to cover.

"Shooting by ear ain't so good!" Murdock commented. "But that one was close enough to send Mr. Hamlin a-hellin'."

"Wonder how he liked the answer?" from Janie.

Her voice was almost smothered by the crackle of rifles. Peering through his break in the wall, the Texan pumped three shots into the yellow flares below, and a wail of agony told him that at least one of the slugs had made a target.

"Find yourself another hole!" Janie was on her knees beside him, crowding him away. "I need this one!"

"Keep away!" Murdock ordered fiercely. "They'll spot this break—and hell will pop. Get over to the back wall, find a break, and watch from there. Snap into it!"

Janie crawled across to the back wall, dragging her rifle.

Murdock left his break and crouched in the angle formed by the front wall and an end. He waited.

Another crash of rifle-fire broke the stillness — and lead chucked into the wall where the Texan had been. At the first sound of firing, he raised up cautiously in his angle, and pumped half a dozen slugs into the spot where flares leaped like yellow spears into the night.

There was no way of knowing what damage he had done, but three or four minutes passed and no more shots came from down there. Murdock became suspicious. "Janie!" he called softly. "See anybody stirring on that side—?"

He broke off, ear cocked toward the platform's open trap. The sound he had heard was vague—but real enough. The creaking of ladder rungs as somebody climbed up toward the square room below!

"Over here, Bob!" Janie called suddenly. "Three—four— Four of 'em. Sneaking over the rocks!"

"Give 'em hell!" he directed. "Keep 'em off. I've got enough here!"

His glance rested on a number of big stones which, having fallen from the crumbling walls, lay scattered over the floor. Laying his rifle down, he rolled half a dozen of the stones to the trap's edge—then waited.

Janie went into action at that instant, the snarl of her rifle mingling with whip-like explosions below. Lead buzzed and sang over the platform, some spudding into the wall.

"Got one, Bob!" the girl called exultantly. "The others went to cover like gophers!" She cut loose again—and Murdock saw what he had expected to see. Had been waiting for.

The ladder from the lower part of the

tower had been snaked up into the square room, and was, slowly and cautiously, being placed for somebody's sneak-climb up to the man-hole.

The Texan waited until he heard the ladder strain under a human burden—then rolled his rocks down through the trap.

A shrill yell, cut off at its peak, the sound of splintering wood as the ladder caved in—then more shouts and cries from below. From the sounds, Murdock judged his avalanche of rocks must have brought grief to more than one.

With both six-shooters blazing, he poured lead into the darkness below—until not a sound came up to his ears.

Janie was keeping up a steady fire from her side of the platform, and Murdock hurried over there. First dawn was coming. Already objects were eerily distinct. Who would the coming daylight favor? Murdock couldn't answer that for sure, but he rather thought the men on the ground had an edge.

PEERING over the top of the wall where a stone had become dislodged, the Texan saw somebody moving not more than thirty feet below. Somebody down there was making a try for the east wall—And then he saw why.

A pile of stones, almost pyramidial in shape, thrust well up above the walls of the tower—and a gunman up there would have them dead to rights. The man below had to be stopped, but the trouble was he did not expose enough of himself to offer a target.

Murdock knew what to do—and started doing it. He uncoiled his lass-rope from his middle, made an end fast to a solid jut of rock, then dropped the free end down. There was rope and to spare.

"Janie," he said, "you're safe up here. Nobody can get to you. Just keep on blazing away at whatever you see—and see everything that moves. I'll be back."

Before the girl could answer, Murdock was over the wall and going down the rope. He went swiftly, silently—and stood in the jumbled sea of rock below without having drawn fire.

Six-guns loose in leather, he started sneaking on his own account. There was not more than two dozen feet between him and the pyramid. He made his way slowly, careful not to make any more noise than he could help. He reached the base of the pyramid, circled it—and came face to face with a man who was almost in the act of starting the upward climb. Both men froze—

"Nice seeing you here, Hamlin," the Texan said softly. "And just think—I was beginning to believe there isn't any Santa Claus. Draw, damn you!" suddenly savage. "Fill your hand—it's a chance I'm giving you. Fill it—damn you!"

The Texan heard Hamlin's teeth as they clicked savagely together—and then the rancher was streaking for his gun. The Texan let him slap hand to butt, finish the marvelously quick draw—

Two six-guns roared almost in the same breath—and one of them sounded a knell of death. Craig Hamlin swayed dizzily from side to side, reeled backward—then flopped down limply on his face.

Murdock, face as hard and expressionless as the rock on which he stood, waited in his crouch, gun ready, eyes and ears alert—

Janie's voice from the platform brought him out of his stance.

"Bob—there's more riders coming!" she shrilled down to him. "Can't make out how many—but these rats don't expect them. They are looking around for Craig!"

"Tell 'em Craig is dead!" Bob Murdock called back. "And if there are four riders coming—they probably are my rannies, home from that dance!"

He went cautiously to where the body of Hamlin lay, and began a methodical search of his pockets. Among other items he took was a wallet well stuffed—and a glance at a paper, taken at random from it, interested the tall Texan much.

The snap and bang of rifles on the far side of the tower sent Murdock leaping back to his dangling rope. A moment later he was on the platform with Janie—and she was in his arms.

"Bob—oh, Black Bob!" she cried. "I lived ten years while you were gone!"

"Y-e-e-e-i-i-i-p-p-p-e-e-e!" The long, wailing cry came from below—and Murdock's lips widened in a grin.

"That's Texas!" he exclaimed. "Reckon that dance on Little Stranger musta busted up early—"

Janie was out of his arms and on the far side of the platform in a jiffy, and Murdock was there as soon as she. A riderless horse was running in circles two-hundred yards off, and a huddled figure lay on the ground not far away. A fog of dust in the distance revealed the direction in which the remnant of Hamlin's gang of buckaroos had gone.

Four riders sat in their saddles outside the bulwark of rocks, and one bellowed:

"If that's yuh up there, Bob, yuh better talk quick—else we aims to take that shebang apart. What th' hell sorta place is it, anyhow?"

"Howcome you fellas found us?" Murdock called back.

"I hunted up the sheriff, awhile back," came the answer. "An' he allowed yuh might be needin' help frum somewhere—Texas preferred. So when we heard all this hell over here, we knowed damn well yuh was mixed up in it somehow. When three-four rannies opened up on us, lost one and then rattled their hocks away, we figgered it was yuh up there. Now—where th' hell do we eat, an' when? We're hongry as bears!"

"Be down pronto," Murdock told him. "Janie," he said, showing her Hamlin's wallet, "it wasn't the old mine, the treasure-cache I figured out, or water, or land that Craig Hamlin wanted so bad. It was La Casa Viejo itself—or rather the acres of rock it now is.

"Just that. An assay sheet in his wallet tipped me off—even if that sundust affect and the color of these rocks hadn't already done so. Those old dons, Janie, couldn't recover lean ore from rock. Had no way of doing that. If the gold wasn't in almost a pure state, it was of no use to them. So—they built this great house from rock gathered on the ground, and thousands of tons of it that came from the mine.

"Hamlin got hold of the fact that this great heap of rocks was a rich gold mine in itself. What was lean ore three hundred years ago is, with modern methods of recovery, very rich indeed. A small stamp-mill, here on the ground, will tell the tale—and make you a rich woman. Still wanta sell the layout to me?" he ended with a grin.

The girl looked at him with a stunned, helpless expression. He repeated:

"This heap of ore-rock will make you rich. I don't want to buy it, Janie—but I'll marry it in a holy minute, if you go along with it. Just say the word!"

"Hey—Texas, when an' where at do us fellas eat?" came up in a now familiar bellow. The owner of the bellow was impatient, and making no bones about it.

"Oh, Bob!" Janie said softly, going very close. "It will be wonderful, being your wife. But—you must promise me something."

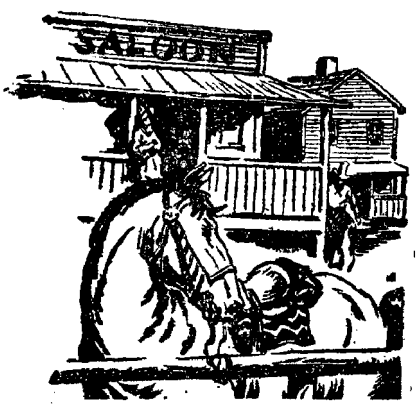
"Yeah? What must I promise, honey?"

"That you'll make Pap stay home in Texas!" she sighed, but with shining eyes.

"I promise," he agreed solemnly. "And that won't be any trick at all, Janie. You see," grinning widly, "two weeks before I left Texas, that rowdy old redhead was elected sheriff of Deaf Smith County—and if Deaf Smith keeps right on as it has been in the past, Sheriff Red Bob Murdock is going to have his hands full!"

" 'And may the good God bless him'!" Janie quoted devoutedly.

Then Black Bob did what he'd craved much to do since the minute he first laid eyes on Janie. He reached out with his long arms and enveloped her completely.



It Was to Sidewinder Hole That Rawhide Button Came Alooking for His Partner.

THEY started calling him Rawhide Button when he was sixteen, after he'd ridden and conquered an outlaw range horse credited with killing a bronco buster of considerable note. At twenty, tougher than ever, half the people in three counties knew him as Rawhide Button. But he wasn't working cattle now. Lure of the precious yellow had kept him hitting the mining camps for a long year.

Early in the afternoon of a blistering-hot day the Button limped into a tiny mushroom town named Sidewinder Hole. His gaze settled upon a building that flaunted the sign. Double Jack. This, of course, would be a saloon, a good place to go looking for folks. He limped through the doorway, dropped his dusty trappings beside a small table and wilted into a chair.

"Where's Big Bynam at?" he asked of a thickly-built bartender who was scowling at his ragged cowboy clothes.

The bartender did not answer. The slim newcomer's heat reddened eyes swept the place again. Little particles of glass that a broom had missed told him that the place had been recently shot up. There weren't many patrons; wouldn't be, at this time of day. His attention snapped back to the scowling barman.

"You," he barked in his weary voice—"I said, where's Big Bynam at?"

Behind the front end of the bar a door opened, and out stepped two men. They were tall and dark, and they wore gambler black. One of them spoke.

"What did you want o' Big Bynam, kid?"

"He's my pardner," the Button said. "He's straight, and I'm straight, and we get along. He left me on Badgertail Creek and comes over here to see how things is, and afterwhile he sends me word to hustle on over because he's doin' elegant and expects we'll soon be able to buy us a cow outfit and settle down to decent livin'. You know where Big is at?"

The two black-garbed men swapped glances that were not altogether bare of amusement. One of them said, "Bynam was here, but he's not here now. We sure don't know where Bynam went, or how, or why."

With his companion he turned back into the little office room. The door had scarcely closed on their heels when the ragged young stranger's eyes became hard blue slits. Big Bynam, blond giant, never would have run off and left him. As well as Rawhide Button knew that he was knee-high to a grasshopper, he knew that shady work had been done around here somewhere.

He'd better be smart, he thought, and keep this to himself for the present. Rising to his sore and aching feet, he faced the thick-set bartender.

SIGN ON THE BOOTS

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Lost River," etc.

"Me, I ain't et nary bite today, and I've walked since daybreak. I noticed a restaurant across the street yonder. You reckon you could loan me a dollar?"

Soberly the man behind the bar pointed to an ivory-handled .41 six-shooter in leather under the slim newcomer's hip. "I'll loan you a dollar if I can hold that gun as security, you to pay me back two dollars, the gun to be mine if not redeemed in two days. Okay?"

"Go to hell," the Button said, his hard blue eyes slitting further.

Big had given him that six-shooter. He swung around, picked up his load and limped out to the hot street.

Nobody was in sight, which meant that every miner there was on the creek slaving for the precious yellow. Except for three new rough buildings—saloon, store, and restaurant—Sidewinder Hole was made up of shanties, most of them patchwork. Around these poked Rawhide Button, doggedly looking for Bynam's shanty.

In a pile of rubbish he found a worn-out pair of boots that he had seen before. Only Big Bynam would have had boots as large as those. So this was, or had been, Big's shanty. He took them inside, dropped his trappings, and began looking everywhere for some indication of foul play or violence.

There wasn't any such indication. He opened the west door and examined the big boots almost microscopically in the bright sunlight. He was good at reading sign. Then his eye cut across the creek and he spied, sitting in a shaded doorway, a wizened little hard-rocker with a freshly bandaged knee. The old-timer had just come in. Rawhide Button put the boots down and went over to him.

"*Viejo,* you got any ideas about where Big Bynam is at?"

The answer was prompt and very blunt. "No."

"I think you're lyin', the same as I thought them two yahoos in black down at the saloon was lyin'. Who are they, *viejo,* anyhow?"

In answering that, the wizened hard-rocker was almost garrulous. "Jack Orr and Jack Franey. They owns the saloon. Y'know, two Jacks; Double Jack Saloon. They cashes up our yaller—saves us a heap o' bother—and keeps our cash fer us in their iron safe fer six pe'cent a month."

"Big had a heap with 'em, didn't he?"

"I reckon he did," the old-timer said. "But that wasn't rightly what they had their ruckus about. They—"

"I noticed that the saloon had been shot up lately. Big has caught the Jacks short-weighin' him." It was the plumb natural thing. Bynam was always smiling, always good-humored—until he was riled; the Jacks had taken him for a boob. Rawhide Button hurried on, "When was the last time you seen Bynam?"

"Yeste'day."

"His claim wasn't on the creek, like the rest o' the claims. Where was it, old-timer?"

"Yeah, musta been on the creek, kid."

"Look!" The Button was getting mad now. "You know somethin' happened to Bynam, but you ain't talkin' because them Jacks has got your dinero in their safe and you're afraid you'll lose it—and for that same reason nobody else here is goin' to tell me anything they know about what happened to my pardner. But if Big is still here I'll find him, alive or dead, and I sure better hadn't find him dead, and you can high-tail down to tell them damn pair o' Jacks if you feel like it!"

He was so sizzling hot with anger that he didn't limp at all as he went back to Bynam's shanty. But he cooled off fast.

Again, hastily this time, he examined Bynam's old boots. He was not mistaken. The sign was there.

Rawhide Button left the shack and climbed the ridge that rose behind it. The creek came from up to the right, along the foot of the ridge. A mile of its banks was thick with men working like so many ants. Farther up, the stream bent into hills that

were half rock and half covered with scrub.

He followed the ridgetop to a long hillside, and kept going, always with the stream in sight below him, until he came to a faint streak of new dirt that had drifted from somewhere above and to the left. He turned up the streak.

At the end of it there was a hole, a scarred windlass, rope, and a large, square wood-plank bucket. The hole was choked with loose rock. Bynam should have known better than to dig a mine hole that would cave in upon him!

Hell, he *would* have known better. The Button sank to his knees and peered downward. "Big!" he called, with only the merest shred of hope.

To his intense relief he had an answer from under the rock below.

"Yeah, Rawhide Kid. Somehow I knowed you'd come. I'm all right now—but—hurry, kid."

The rock was loose, so Bynam hadn't stifled. He was in a niche, with the weight mostly sidewise against him, but only a man of his giant physique could have lived the twenty-four hours under it. Rawhide Button forgot his weariness and began using windlass and bucket in the greatest haste.

THE old hard-rocker had told Jack Orr and Jack Franey what the salty stranger kid had said. Although the Jacks had hooted, they were on their toes when the angry little man and the angrier big man walked into the saloon at ten o'clock that night. Big Bynam and the Button had eaten from a food cache under Bynam's shanty, had rested for some hours, and were fit now.

In the same half-second's time four weapons came out to the lamplight. The crowd saw and froze. The dead silence was broken by the blond giant's big voice:

"You showed good sense, Jacks, in not tryin' to swing your guns into line. Me and my little pardner here, we sure woulda got you both. Now drop 'em, Jacks."

Orr and Franey dropped their weapons. Rawhide Button laughed. Bynam addressed the crowd.

"The lowdown pair short-weighed me, but it wasn't that. To settle that, I shot this place up, like you see. I mentioned that I thought I'd seen them two somewheres before—later, I remembered it was their pitchers on posters in a sheriff's office; they're wanted for a triple killin' —and yesterday them two snuck up to my mine hole and avalanched tons o' rock down on me, buryin' me alive to make sure I kept quiet!"

"Get that!" cried the Button, hard blue eyes slitted. "Buried him alive!"

Again there was dead silence. Again Bynam broke it.

"My kid pardner dug me out. Me and him, we've sent a Mexie on hossback after the nearest sheriff, who oughta be here in a hour or so. The wonder is that these Jacks ain't done skipped with our dinero, fellas. Just waitin' for more, I'm bettin.' I'm takin' mine right now. How about you?"

Bankers who have "runs" should have seen that "run." Luckily for Franey and Orr, they were able to pay out. Not long after this, officers came and arrested them, closed the Double Jack, and took them off to jail. Big Bynam and Rawhide Button started for Bynam's shanty.

The giant said, "Rawhide Kid, I looked for the mother lode and located only a pocket; rich pocket though, and when we get her worked out we can buy a cattle ranch easy. I sure do thank you, little pardner, but I don't yet understand complete how come you ever found me."

The Button said, "Big, you see this here knob on the top o' my spine, which I wears my hat on? I just used that knob to find out where you was at. I read the sign on your old boots. They didn't have creek dirt on 'em. It was different. It was hill dirt."

The American Didn't Know Exactly Which Country He'd Landed In, But He Was Sure if There Was a Spy Around, He Wasn't It

MONKEY MAN

By H. P. S. GREENE

FIRST LIEUTENANT DICK SLATE of the U. S. Army Air Corps stirred uneasily in his sleep. For hours he had been pricked by the stings of thousands of insects until they were not powerful enough to pierce his exhaustion. Now something hard and sharp was pushing into his belly, prodding him awake. He opened his eyes, then rubbed them incredulously.

A tall, copper-colored Indian dressed only in a breech-clout stood over him. The man's head was encircled by a dirty band of cloth which held a bundle of soft, white plumes like an egret's fixed to his forehead. In his hands he held a bow, and a long, slender arrow with which he was poking the flyer in the soft part of his stomach. The expression on his face seemed to be wary, however, rather than malignant.

Dick looked hastily around. Three more similar figures, but without the plumes, which were evidently the insignia of a chief, surrounded him on each side, and at his back. Each had a bow, with arrow notched. Dick asked:

"Well, what do you birds want?" Then, in Spanish:

"Que quieran ustedes?"

The Indian replied slowly in halting Spanish, "Wait a few little moments."

He then proceeded to lay down his weapons and unroll a small bundle which hung at his back into a pair of gray, striped trousers. These he donned, while standing on alternate feet. Then he retrieved his bow and arrow. In turn each of the other Indians followed his example. Their pants, however, were of plain cotton khaki.

While this performance was going on, Dick Slade was trying to pull himself together, and orient himself. He could feel fever mounting in his veins. He was accustomed to waking up in his bed in bachelor's quarters on the Zone, and not on damp ground in the jungle surrounded by armed aborigines. His wind flashed back.

ON THE previous day he'd taken off in his single-seater P40, and flown due east, angling across the Isthmus of Panama.

Over the jungle he had an impression of greater speed than when flying over any other type of terrain. Perhaps that was because progress on the ground below would have been so pitifully slow, fighting a way through the prodigal barriers that Nature so quickly erects and breeds in the tropics.

The ground that passed so swiftly beneath his wings was like another, deeper green sea, darker in color than the real water of the Gulf of Panama which he was leaving behind, or the Mosquite Gulf which loomed ahead. At ten thousand feet, where the air was refreshingly cool and nippy, a five-thousand-ton fruiter seemed quite tiny as she plowed along en route from Colon to Havana, and smaller vessels were hard to distinguish at all.

Soon he could see ahead the big Chiriqui Lagoon, and beyond that Almirante Bay, with its quaintly named mouths, Boca del Toro, Boca del Tigre, and Boca del Drago. Mouths of the Bull, the Tiger, and the Dragon.

His big in-line Allison motor had purred contentedly at cruising revs. Dick was comfortable in cotton slacks, a cotton shirt open at the throat, and heavy, seal-grain brogues. His parachute, and his helmet with its earphones were the only strictly technical equipment he wore. As he flew, he kept trying to tune in the unauthorized radio station which had been reported somewhere in that region.

Eastward from Almirante Bay were the Changuinola and Sixaola Rivers, the latter forming part of the boundary between Panama and Costa Rica. Far to his left the ground humped up sharply to his own altitude and even higher. The Chiriqui volcano was supposed to reach almost 12,000 feet.

Dick had followed the Caribbean coastline as far as Monkey Point, and then swept around a 90-degree turn in an 80-degree bank, and then headed south. He had eased the swift fighter upward to get over the hump.

His motor had puttered, and then quit abruptly in the most awful silence in the world—that of an airplane engine over impossible terrain.

"Caterpillar Club, here I come!" Dick had muttered, as he swept the greenhouse open and stood up. The prospect of jumping was not pleasant, but it was the only prospect in sight. And he had to be quick about it for the carpet was coming up fast. Dick took a deep breath and dived out of the cockpit as far from the ship as he could.

The cool morning air on his face became warmer even while he counted three —the morning sea breeze was already coming in and driving warm air up from the mountains.

Dick's bare fingers groped and found the ripcord grip—jerked it. He heard the 'chute crack, and felt the harness grind into his groins. As he snapped rightside

up under the powerful pull from above, he gasped at the speed with which he was nearing the ground. He knew the risks he'd had to take, making a jump into the jungle.

He might be impaled and skewered on a broken branch like a frog on a hook. He might break a leg, and crawl for days through the bush, eaten by myriad insects, until he died in agony. He might be left dangling by his shroud lines from a tree hundreds of feet tall, with a choice between hanging there until he starved to death, or cutting himself free so that he would fall to death or fatal maiming.

In split seconds the green sea of the forest changed into a mass of limbs and foliage as he crashed into its yielding embrace. The smaller branches cushioned and slowed his fall, even while they bruised him painfully. A larger limb caught him under the chin, almost knocking him out, as he grabbed wildly for support. His clutching fingers found a hold —his legs another. He clung to them as desperately as a baby monkey to his mother in the same treetop, before she went skittering away howling with fear at this strange monster who seemed to have attacked her from the sky.

Dick oriented himself amid the raucous squawking of swarms of parrots and macaws who were protesting at his invasion of their lofty sanctuary. He found himself clinging to a limb about the size of his arm with both hands, and astride another larger branch. As he regained use of his faculties, his first thought was to get down from his perch.

THE branch of the giant ceiba tree on which he was sitting was the lowest on the great trunk. If he had missed it, he would have gone on crashing down to the ground at least seventy-five feet below, unless his 'chute had hung up and left him pendant in midair. While he sat there trying to regain his breath, something bit him on the neck with a violence which almost made him lose his hold. He turned to see a great bird's head and bill on the end of a naked neck a yard long, and no bigger than a one-inch rope. It in turn was attached to an obscene, bare, pink body almost as large and round as a basketball, together with two legs as long as the neck. A choking effluvium of old dead fish hung around this monstrosity, which was, Dick realized, the shocking, unfledged offspring of some enormous bird, such as a stork or crane—a huge belly with neck and bill attached, expecting to be fed, and demanding it.

He slapped the snaky head away, and pulled in the shroudlines of his 'chute, dragging it down upon him and his companion, and distracting the attention of the voracious birdling beside him on the branch. He was all the more in a hurry now to get down from his insecure perch. If the parent of such a monster came along and found him there, he might easily be attacked, knocked to the ground, and killed.

He found his pocket knife, and hastily began cutting off lengths of shroudline and braiding and knotting it into a means of escape. One strand of the strong silk would probably support him, but he'd rather not risk it.

The time seemed long, but it was only a few moments before he had his lifeline firmly tied to the limb, and reaching to the ground. He was glad enough to trust himself to it, and slide swiftly down to the soft earth.

Already he'd sweated out enough moisture to be parched with thirst. With his knife he cut a three-foot length of liana about the thickness of the bay bird's neck, lay down on his back, and allowed the clear sap—practically pure water, to drip into his mouth.

After a few minutes the squawking of the macaws and parrots, and the howlings of the disturbed monkeys subsided. The voice of the jungle subsided to a buzzing in his ears—thousands of mosquitoes, flies and gnats had already arrived on the field

and were attacking in force. He had to move.

Downhill was the way to go. If he went downhill long enough he must reach the sea somewhere on the narrow isthmus. All he knew was that he was on the Pacific side of the Divide, at an altitude of five or six thousand feet, and perhaps thirty miles from the coast as his lost P40 used to fly. He might well have to travel a hundred miles or more to cover the same distance on the ground.

He started off, slapping insects, parting the underbrush with his hands, keeping an eye peeled for snakes. Before he'd covered a hundred feet he found himself confronted by a fallen tree almost as big as a barrack. He went around it, and continued his way. Within an hour his shirt and slacks were torn, the skin and flesh beneath them. Salt sweat stung and burned in the cuts, and the countless insect bites which peppered every square inch of exposed skin.

The sun was high. Then it began to lower toward the west, giving him an idea of his direction as he caught glimpses of its rays seeping through the thick canopy of the trees. More than once he had to use his knife to cut his way out of the tangles of lianas. A sharp *machete* would have won him many precious miles.

He was gnawed by hunger, but saw nothing that he dared eat. Thirst tormented him, but he hated to spend time cutting a liana and waiting for the sap to drip into his mouth. He knew better than to drink stagnant surface water. Just as the swift tropic dusk poured into the jungle, he came to a small, running brook. He knelt and drank deeply and gratefully.

There was no use trying to go further that night. Already he could see only a few feet. He lay for hours slapping futilely at the insects. At last he dropped off into the sleep of exhaustion, occasionally waking and turning to ease his sore limbs. Monkeys howled, and occasionally some bird would squawk somewhere in the treetops. Once two great, glowing eyes glared into his, to disappear suddenly when he shouted angrily at them. They might have belonged to a tiger—or to a harmless little deer.

The wind grew higher in the treetops, and leaves and twigs started to fall around him. The monkeys howled more dismally than ever. With a heaven-opening crash a solid sheet of water descended on the grounded flyer, drenching him instantly. Chills penetrated his flesh and bones, and he shivered as if in the grip of malaria. After a time, the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. It had dissipated the insects momentarily, and, feeling warmer by contrast, Dick fell asleep again.

When he awoke, it was to see the tall Indian with the bow and arrow and the egret plumes on his head standing before him.

When the chief had finished donning his ceremonial trousers, he seemed to feel ready for a palaver. He asked:

"You *macho* man?" using the contemptuous Costa Rican term—"*macho,*" or "he-mule"—for an American or Britisher. He spoke in Spanish.

Dick nodded. The chief went on—

"You like little monkey man?"

"No!" the flyer exploded. "Are there little monkey men here?"

"Two—three moons past little monkey men came here," the chief replied. He held up one hand, then two, with fingers spread, apparently indicating ten. "So many monkey men. We Talamanca Indian. No bother nobody. When *macho* man or Spanish man come into mountain—we go away. Pretty soon Macho man or Spanish man go away too. We Talamanca Indian no fight, no bother nobody, just go away.

Dick nodded. He had heard of the shy Talamanca Indians, of who few people ever got even a glimpse, as they retired silently into deeper forests at the approach of strangers.

The news about little monkey men was

exciting. Could the chief mean Japs? Perhaps the manipulators of the mysterious radio which had been bothering the naval and military authorities at the Canal Zone? Although the United States and Japan were at peace, everyone around Panama was very Jap and spy conscious indeed.

"Are there little monkey men around here?" the pilot asked again. "Where are they?"

The chief nodded.

"Little monkey man maybe one hour from here. They come, set up talk machine. They see some of us—kill two men, catch one girl. By and by kill girl, too. Very bad little monkey man. We kill three, but some still left. You kill monkey man if we let you go—give you gun?"

Dick thought fast. He could hardly start assassinating Japs—if, as he had no doubt, the chief's little monkey men *were* Japs. He didn't know whether he was in Costa Rica or Panama, and he had no license to kill people in either place. What he should do was to get help and have the intruders investigated and arrested, perhaps. But that might take weeks, much harm might be done, and the Japs might get away after all. Better get a gun, anyway.

"Sure, if I get a chance, I'll kill the little monkey men," he said. "Where's the gun?" There was no answer.

HE LOOKED up from scratching his leg where he'd pulled a tick off it. The chief was gone. A quick glance told him that the other Indians were gone, too. There was a crashing and slashing in the bush, but it was not the Indians. A little brown man, unmistakably a Jap, came into view. He saw the pilot with a hissing intake of his breath, and advanced the rifle he was carrying to the ready. He jabbered in Japanese. Another of his kind appeared behind him. Both carried rifles and *machetes,* and wore tennis shoes, brown shorts, sun helmets, and nothing else. They seemed undecided whether to shoot the American out of hand or not.

Then one advanced and shoved the muzzle of his gun against Dick's breastbone with painful force. The other unwound a length of strong cord from around his waist, and tied the pilot's hands tightly and roughly behind him, paying no attention to his protests. This done, he slapped his captive's face with his rough, grimy hand until he relapsed into enraged silence. Then one of the Japs led the way, while the other prodded the American from behind with his rifle.

It was a tough trip. The underbrush slapped Dick's face, and he had no arms free to ward it off. The insects stung and bit him joyously. Creepers tore at his legs, and sometimes tripped him so that he could not keep from falling. While he struggled to regain his feet—no easy job with his hands tied behind him—one of his captors would jerk him erect with a force which almost yanked his arms from his sockets. Fortunately the trip was not long.

The trio came suddenly out onto a level spot from which the underbrush had been cleared. In it were three nipa shacks of varying size. A man in a white linen suit, but with a holstered pistol at his belt, came mincing toward Dick and his two captors. He was small, brown, neat and immaculate. Astonished recognition dawned on his features.

"Dick Slate!" he exclaimed.

"If it isn't my old friend, Yamanaka!" Dick replied. "I wish you'd tell your gorillas to untie me."

A black scowl passed across the Jap's face.

"You will not refer to Japanese as any kind of a monkey," he said fiercely. "You are now Army Air Corps Lieutenant, I see. We saw your aircraft crash yesterday, and my men have been looking for you.

"It's a long time since we were at college together, and I beat you at the two hundred yard swim," he went on irrelevantly.

"If I remember correctly, it was the only

thing you ever did beat me at," the American returned angrily. "How about untying my hands?"

"Afterward, in the dressing-room, I heard you say, 'How'd that monkey ever manage to beat me?' I have not forgotten."

Dick was almost bursting with discomfort, pain, and rage. He snarled. "Damn you, Yama, what's the idea of keeping me tied up? You'll pay for this, you monkey."

The Jap scowled more ferociously than ever.

"It is often the custom to tie men's hands behind them when they face the executioner," he remarked. "Since I plan on ordering your execution as a spy, there seems no reason for untying you."

"Execution! Spy!" the American gasped incredulously. "Why, you must be nuttier than ever. If there's any spy around here, it's you. Panama is under U. S. protection, by treaty. And our countries are at peace, anyway."

"Today—yes. It is December the 6th. Tomorrow, perhaps not. I have a permit from the government of Panama to explore this territory in the interests of science. The fact that the president who issued it has been deposed by a Yankee coup d'etat does not alter the situation. In the meantime, you are a nuisance, and you have insulted the Japanese people, and me, a Japanese officer, by referring to us as monkeys. I can see no practical reason for keeping you alive. I always hated you, Slate."

DICK thought fast.

"I'll tell you a good reason for keeping me alive, as you put it," he returned. "It's a good way to keep from being tried for murder. I've sent the Indians to David for help. They've watched every move you've made, Yama, and they know just where your outfit is. They're watching you now. You made a mistake fooling around with them, killing their men and abusing their girls, and they're out for revenge. So you'd better untie me, and treat me pretty. I'm hungry and thirsty and sore, and I thought you prided yourself on being an officer and a gentleman."

The Jap looked around uneasily, trying to pierce the impenetrable jungle. He was plainly taken aback by Dick's words. He took out a knife, and cut the pilot's bonds. Dick rubbed his wrists trying to restore the circulation. At an order from Yama, one of the Japs handed him a drink of water.

A few minutes later he sat down to some kind of stew, composed of meat and rice. He thanked his stars he'd thought of saying that he'd sent the Talamanca Indians for help, and only wished that he *had* done so. The Japanese officer sat across the rough table in another folding campchair, and watched him eat and drink.

He couldn't eat much—he'd been so long without food that his stomach had contracted. He controlled a retch with difficulty as as he drew a tiny hand, no larger than a new-born baby's, from the stew. A monkey's hand!

"Cannibalism, eh?" he growled. The Jap leaped to his feet like a flash, and slapped his face across the table with one hand, while he drew his pistol with the other. He shouted something, and one of his men came running swiftly, and tied Dick's hands behind his back again, tighter than ever. Already the American regretted his crack, but a perverse instinct urged him on.

"Everybody calls you Japs monkeys," he sneered. "You can't get away from it, Yama. The Chinese call you monkeys. Why, even the Talamanca Indians, who never saw a Jap before, called you little monkey men right off the reel."

The Jap's sallow face was livid and distorted with unreasoning rage as he shouted, "You insult me—me, Commander Yamanaka of the Imperial Nipponese Navy. This is December 6th. Tomorrow you will find out whether we Nipponese are monkey men or not, for our airplanes will bomb and destroy your bases on the Hawaiian Islands at dawn. And it will

depend on me whether or not we destroy your Panama Canal, also.

"I am constantly in receipt of messages from the Canal Zone, both by wireless and by carrier pigeon. And my station here is powerful enough to reach our fleet far out to sea, and even to the Emperor in Nippon itself.

"I see you smile. You think I am a fool for telling you this, but I am not. You will never live to pass it on, be sure of that. The other side of those bushes there is a cliff more than a hundred feet high. I have sentries out—no one will come here to rescue you, Slate. Before they could arrive you will 'accidentally' fall over that cliff and break your neck. Nobody could prove otherwise, for we are seven men who will swear that it is so.

"I've always hated you, Slate, more even than other Americans, for your sneering smile, and your superior ways. I'm going to keep you alive, and tell you in person about the destruction of your fleet. I may allow you to listen to the story over the radio, even."

He shouted something to one of his men. The fellow approached close to Dick, and kicked the flyer's feet out from under him with a sudden motion. Then he tied his feet together, and fastened them to a strong sapling which formed one of the supports of the nipa shack underneath which they were standing. Then they left him.

THE pilot's tortures were terrible. His unscratched bites, the swarms of fresh and hungry insects around him, his bruises, and the bite of his unmerciful bonds—they were bad enough, but his mental sufferings were even worse.

He cursed himself for his stupidity in taunting the Jap officer into tying him up again. He might have managed to escape. On the other hand, he would then have learned nothing about the projected Jap attack. But to know, and to be unable to do anything! That was the worst of all.

The day dragged on to its close. Night fell quickly in the little clearing in the jungle, while the clicking of the radio was like a tiny hammer on the pilot's eardrums. His mouth was parched and his stomach empty to griping, but he said nothing, fearing to give the Japs the satisfaction of refusing him. A sentry with a rifle walked around, passing him frequently, for what seemed hours after dark. All of a sudden, Dick missed the man's regular tread.

He felt a presence behind him—something touched his bound wrists. Then the cords parted and his numb hands fell apart. A dark figure moved toward his bound feet, and the faint light glimmered on the white feather head-dress of the Talamanca chief.

The pilot rubbed tingling, agonizing circulation back into his hands and wrists. He flexed his legs and ankles. Silently the Indian pressed something into his hand—the unfamiliar form of a small-calibered Japanese pistol.

A scream pierced through the humming night, followed by hoarse, gibbering Jap voices. Dick fumbled with the pistol, feeling for possible unknown safeties. A form appeared before him—the small figure of a Jap—and he squeezed the handle and the trigger. The gun exploded, and the Jap staggered. Dick fired again, aiming carefully, and he fell. Figures were flitting about, and several more shots were fired. Two men were rolling on the ground, struggling. The chief bounded forward, leaned over them, and only one arose, the tall Indian.

The chief's knife, which had gleamed in the moonlight, was now dull. Dick ran toward the radio shack.

Inside, Yamanaka was bent over the telegraph key.

"Take it, Yama," the American said. The Jap whirled, snatching up a pistol as he did so. He and Dick tried to shoot at the same time, and both weapons failed. The two leaped toward each other, inspired by mutual hate. The Jap hurled his pistol,

but it only grazed the American's ear.

Dick threw his left as he came in range, but the Nipponese ducked and let the driving fist go over his shoulder. The pilot felt himself flying through the air, helped along by his skillful adversary and his own momentum. He crashed on his head and shoulders, but retained sufficient presence of mind to twist aside as he landed. The feet of the Jap, descending to give him the boots as he lay there, missed him. Then both were up again, balanced and ready.

Dick swung again, but pulled his punch. In his right hand, the butt of the pistol crunched into Yamanaka's skull. Everything in the clearing was suddenly silent.

Swaying on weak legs, the American began smashing the tubes and coils and condensers of the radio. He managed to tip over the heavy batteries.

The Talamanca chief came into the shack, scarcely panting.

"I think all little monkey men are dead," he remarked gravely, after he had looked over the scene, and kicked the body of Yamanaka.

"I've got to get to the nearest American patrol," Dick told him. "If I don't, maybe thousands of little monkey men will come here."

"One of my young men will guide you," the chief said gravely. "The moon is rising to help you find the way."

DICK never remembered much about that night or the next day. He walked on and on, tripping and stumbling, drawing on the very last ounce of energy stored away in his wiry body. He was no longer aware of the insects, and scarcely felt the lash of the interminable bush as it shredded away almost all the last remnants of his clothes.

When he staggered out onto the beach near David, his slacks were no more than the scantiest of trunks, and his shirt was gone altogether. When an American patrol met him the Indian guide had disappeared. He was speechless until he was half carried into Headquarters, then he gasped to the commanding officer, "Did they bomb Pearl Harbor?"

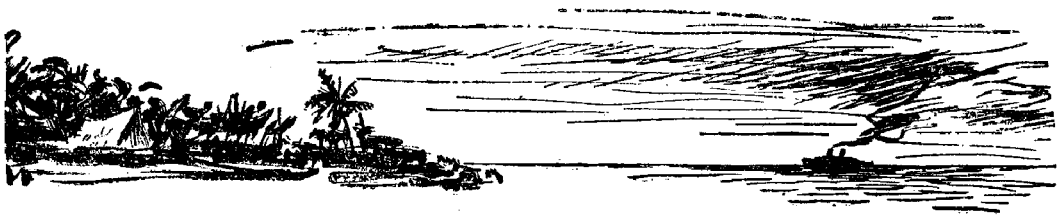
"Yes, they did," the C. O. returned, grim and amazed. "How did you know?"

"Did they bomb the Zone?" the pilot persisted.

"No, and they won't. A submarine could hardly sneak through."

Dick Slate slid limply through the arms of the two men who were trying to support him to the floor.

"He knows something, but we'll have to wait to find it out," the officer remarked. "Put him to bed, and call the Medical Officer. Whatever it is, I'll bet it will be worth waiting for," he muttered to himself.



NINE MINUTES SCREEN TIME

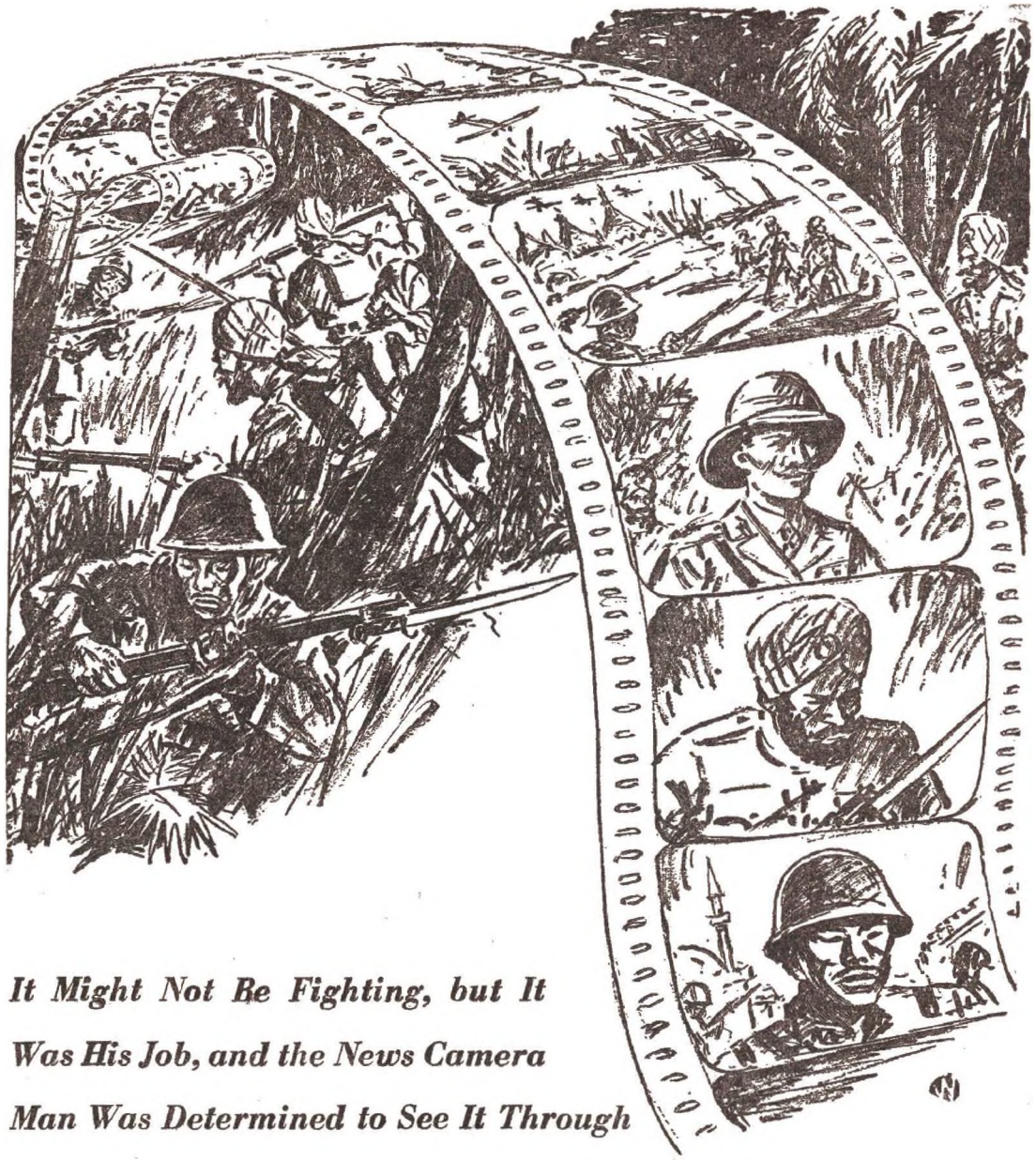
By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of "Guns for Pakistan," etc.

I

THERE were the leeches, the mosquitos, the sweat and the humidity of the Burmese jungle, and, of course, the Jap advance guard, which drove relentlessly toward Moulmein; but, early in the retreat, Tod Burke had decided that the chief menace, as far as a newsreel cameraman was concerned, was Captain Eustace Hewitt.

Mechanically, Burke checked the thirty-five milimeter Eyemo, and watched Santiago Garcia, the Filipino assistant, inspect the other camera, now that the exposed film had been removed and resealed into its container. Burke could feel Hewitt's bitter blue eye, that silent indictment which, sustained day after day, ended by



It Might Not Be Fighting, but It Was His Job, and the News Camera Man Was Determined to See It Through

making Burke feel useless enough to hate himself. By now, stubbornness rather than ambition, made him persist in trying to get a complete picture of jungle warfare.

In the short while since the halt, Captain Hewitt had cleaned up. He sat on a case of machine-gun cartridges, eating from a tin of bully beef. A Sikh orderly stood behind him, tall and bearded, stately in his ponderous turban. There was nothing to hand to the *sahib.* There was no wine to pour. There was neither a tulip-shaped snifter nor regimental brandy, poured from a dusty bottle into whose shoulder the regimental crest had been blown. There were no regimental cigars to offer. Yet Lal Singh stood by as though all these things were at hand.

And Hewitt sat and ate in accord.

It was not until the captain wiped his lips and his straw-colored mustache and carefully selected a soggy cigarette from the case which Lal Singh offered that he asked, "I say, how many minutes of screen time today?"

Hewitt's touch was light. The force lay in repetition, like the Chinese water tor-

ture, finally driving the victim mad. Where Burke had at first shrugged off what he called veiled disapproval, he now flinched under what he knew was the biting contempt of a soldier for a trifler who toys with celluloid when its cousin, nitro-cellulose, is killing better men all about him. And now, having been brought to doubting his own worth, Burke hit back.

"This jungle stuff is monotonous," he retorted jauntily. "An *advance* would be a nice touch of variety. Still and all, no one's come back with a good film of street fighting. Moulmein's ideal, pagodas and so on."

Street fighting in Moulmein where, if this retreat continued, Hewitt would have his back to the river; for a moment, the idea actually cheered Burke because it offered him verbal revenge. Hewitt's mouth tightened, though only microscopically, for hardly any tension could make it more uncompromisingly set than normal.

"I daresay," he observed quietly, "you'd find an advance more entertaining to your public."

BURKE'S hand trembled as he wiped the lenses and put them in their cases. Hewitt had won the exchange. He had twisted the counter-knifing so that whatever faint excuse there once might have been for cameramen had now ceased to exist.

The equipment having been checked, Burke and Santiago slung their hammocks and broke out their mosquito netting. The wiry little Filipino said, "The captain, he will be more—what you call it—"

"Simpático?"

"Yes, if we advance."

"I can see that," Burke admitted. "He's got a tough job, fighting a rear guard action, holding the skibbies so the main body can fall back on Moulmein. But he still doesn't have to make us feel like so much dirt! We can't stop the retreat, and it's a cinch we're not cutting down his backward speed or getting in the way."

"Is a good soldier. *Muy valiente.*"

"Sure he is. But that doesn't make civilians poison!"

BEFORE weariness and the pests fighting to penetrate his mosquito netting put him to sleep, Burke pondered on his deliberately tactless retort to Hewitt. Moulmein, everyone knew, was doomed; for all the stolid ferocity of the Sikhs, the hell-roaring valor of the Australians, the dogged resistance of the British, it had simmered down to a question of *when* rather than *whether;* for there were simply too many Japs. And now that Burke had finally been made to feel the uselessness of his calling, he snatched at the first chance of redemption. Instead of getting out, as any sensible person would, he'd film the actual street fighting, the bitter, hand-to-hand mopping up in Moulmein's alleys!

He pictured the city of minarets and pagodas, Hindu temples and Chinese joss houses; he would climb up to the *muezzin's* perch and instead of calling true believers to prayer, he'd get angle shots of the man-to-man struggle, without any jungle to hamper him. With such scenes canned, he would in some inexplicable way have redeemed himself.

Hewitt and his kind, associating cameramen with persons who checked out whenever the going was tough, would change their tune.

The enemy made contact with the outposts well before dawn. For a while, it seemed as if the line could hold, and, with every rifleman, every mortar squad, every automatic weapon section raking the jungle, no one had time or thought for breakfast.

"The Japs," Burke told himself bitterly, "have the edge because they got up earlier. And the Sikhs fight on empty bellies. No damn wonder this is a retreat."

Far off, he heard the roar and rumble of tanks. Jap pioneers, following the advance guard, were hacking a trail through the jungle, bridging swamps with bamboo

and tree trunks so that the armored equipment could wallow through.

Mortars pounded the line. Actually, the Sikhs were in combat groups, rather than in anything resembling a formation of skirmishers. Often, lacking a target, they could let their guns cool. Then the plunging fire of light mortars drove them to cover.

Burke and Santiago wormed and twisted their way along the front. Once, ducking to dodge the blast of one of those crazily key-holing bombs, Burke caught a glimpse of khaki, a glint of steel.

"They're coming through!" he yelled at Santiago. "Grab your bolo!"

IN defiance of the Geneva Convention, Burke carried a Colt .45, concealed in an armpit holster. Press correspondents and cameramen were not to be armed, and Captain Hewitt, the first day Burke had joined the jungle forces, had solemnly harangued him on the necessity of playing the game. "Moreover," he had added, "if you should be captured, you'd be shot as a *franc tireur*."

Now Burke figured that being executed as a guerrilla would not be worse than having a Jap bayonet spit him purely by mistake.

Three mortar shells landed in a cluster. The prolonged concussion hammered Burke against his camera. "Grab it and go back," he croaked when he could speak.

Then, without waiting to see how promptly Santiago obeyed, he wangled his automatic from the concealment of his shirt and crouched in the bomb-slashed shrubbery.

His hunch proved right. A squad of Japs, ignoring the risk of being sliced by fragments of their own shells, came bouncing into view to catch the Sikhs offguard, and still dazed by the blast.

In the first gray of dawn smoke and mist blended. The Sikhs recovered, most of them, and stood to the assault. They were big men, dark and grim and steadfast, soldiers who made a business of fighting.

Their bayonet work was fascinating. For an instant, though it seemed ages, Burke wished he had not sent Santiago to the rear; he wanted a flash of rally and counter-attack. They might have been spitting rabbits. The little yellow men stood not a chance against those bearded warriors.

Then Burke got busy with his pistol. There was not yet any question of self-defense, as far as he was concerned. That jungle encounter became a slow motion study in stubborn, steadfast slaying. It fascinated him. He could not take cover. When the Japs moved to catch the Sikhs from the flank, he fired, deliberately.

As though watching someone else's performance, he noted how the first man doubled up, and spun a little from the heavy slug which smacked him in the stomach; how the next one dropped his bayoneted carbine and clawed his chest. Then the Sikhs spread out to guard their flanks. They rolled back the attack, and however wounded, they smashed and slashed their enemy. They advanced, but not far; at first the Japs would not retreat, and then there were none who could.

The hole in the line which was not a line had scarcely been plugged when Captain Hewitt approached from the left. He was unruffled, and said, after eyeing Burke for a moment, "I daresay you'll be quite a hero when that film is projected."

It was only then that Burke realized how Santiago had covered the skirmish. The camera's purring was plain in the momentary lull.

Hewitt had arrived at just the wrong time. With his prejudice, he could not help but conclude that Burke had struck a pose, once the combat had ended. "Sorry," he went on, "I don't have a decoration to offer, it'd make a much better scene. Go to the rear at once. I made it quite clear that correspondents are not permitted to carry arms."

While Burke gulped for an answer,

Hewitt beckoned to a soldier. "Hari Singh, escort these people back to the main body."

II

THE sun was low when Burke and Santiago overtook the main body. Their escort reported to the adjutant of the regiment which was preparing a line of strong points across the road. The jungle was thinning and presumably would not give the Japs the cover which their highly specialized infiltration tactics utilized.

The adjutant glanced at Burke's credentials and said shortly, "Carry on. You won't need a guide from here."

He went about his business, of which there was plenty. It was far from clear what the Sikh had said in his brief sputter of Punjabi, and Burke did not care to risk asking.

A ruined monastery, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the road, caught Burke's eye. The trees and bamboo, clustering about, concealed the old building from aerial observation. Santiago grinned when Burke gestured and said, "Maybe it's too far gone for an officers' billet, but it'll do nicely for us."

The monastery was hardly more than a jumble of teak beams and dilapidated brick wall. Cobras would be a risk. Armed with long canes of bamboo, Burke and Santiago picked their way. The gilt face of a Buddha showed above a bank of rubble. The cells of the monks were jammed with rubbish. Burke, however, found sufficient ceiling beams in place to give fair footing, which Santiago improved by cutting and passing up more bamboo.

Luckily, Burke had a telephoto lens, and an aluminum tripod. For the first time since entering the jungle, he was glad that he had not thrown those accessories into the nearest *jeel*. This was the perfect setup; fairly open country, slightly rolling, with sufficient vegetation to keep the overgrown ruin from being conspicuous.

Santiago, swinging out to the nearest tree, was at work with his bolo, lopping lower limbs to give the 150 milimeter lens a wider sweep. Within half an hour, Burke was able to pan for a considerable arc, and from each of several stations on the top of the monastery.

"Hell of it is," he grumbled, "we'll be shooting into the sun in the morning."

The only out, as Burke saw it, was the chance that the rear guard would hold the skibbies until the sun reached a decent height.

Now that he was well beyond the reach of Hewitt's bleak eye and disapproving look, Burke's belief in himself ceased crumbling, yet a disproportionate part of his thoughts were directed to ways, mostly fanciful, of making Hewitt swallow every grain of that output of contempt; and at the same time, Burke resented the weakness which made him give such weight to Hewitt's opinion.

Burke's worry about shooting against the sun proved to be a bit premature. Far to his right, he heard the familiar rumble of combat. He went cold for a moment as he realized that the Japs had done it again. They were rolling up the British flank. They, Lord knows how many of them, had held Hewitt in place, apparently winning time for the main body of the rear guard, whereas in truth, they'd sent enveloping detachments to hit the right.

And the left! Planes were diving. He heard the high pitched *wooooeeeeeee,* the devastating *brrrump,* the shrill whistle of fragments. Smoke gushed up.

What in hell was Hewitt doing? Had they wiped him out? Had he tried to send runners to warn the main body?

Then Burke became a picture taking machine, one of the best in the far East; the man they sent on impossible assignments. At first, he had objected to Santiago as an assistant. While the little Filipino was as deft with camera mechanism, regardless of circumstances, as a good machine-gunner

is in his own field, he had a deep depression where his bump of caution should have been. So, not to be outdone by his assistant, Burke had had many an unpleasant moment until, in the end, he realized that he would still be only a good second string operator but for Santiago's Filipino recklessness.

Poking an f-1.5 into the teeth of a platoon of Japs, that morning, was typical. However, had Burke been nearest the camera, he'd have done the same, while Santiago slashed in with his pet bolo.

He spun the turret head, jammed his eye to the finder, and pressed the release. Those Sikhs serving a mountain battery moved like a machine. The colonel's command post should have been well back, but it wasn't. He knew that while there were plenty of colonels, there was only one line between here and Moulmein. And those stubborn Sikhs knew that he was with them, not behind them.

Then, far off, tanks and motorcycle carrying machine-guns drove by the flank guard.

It was happening on both sides. The mountain battery, man-handled into the road, hosed a tank; it burst into flames. But the Sikhs had to withdraw before they were cut off from the rear. It happened so suddenly, with so little warning that when Santiago said, "Maybe we better leave now," Burke had only one answer: "Too late. We got to stay here."

While he could have clambered down to join the retreat, the chances of getting a camera riddled by those whacking machine-gun slugs were just too good. So he stayed to film a retreat from the wrong side.

The camera was ticking when the Japs, advancing by rushes in small parties, approached the monastery. Burke flattened. Bullets cut leaves and branches which half buried him. Then, satisfied that they had left no sniping post behind them, the enemy swept on. Burke followed them with his telephoto, getting, despite the range, close-ups of the monkey men as they darted through the grass.

A line of Sikhs answered them with crackling fire. Then came a steel to steel clash to win time for the main body. Burke groaned, "If there were just a few more, they'd advance!"

Santiago handed him the other camera, re-loaded. Automatically, he thrust the exposed roll back into its can, and added parched rice to absorb the moisture admitted during that brief unsealing. "I guess we stay all night, no?"

"We stay," Burke declared, "till there's a chance of getting out with this stuff. If anyone has ever shot anything like this, he didn't bring it back."

That last provision loomed up unpleasantly. Now that the combat had swept past, he had time to drink. And sweat. And frown.

But not for long.

A RAGGED handful of men crept from the jungle's edge. Captain Hewitt, unbelievably, had survived, even though his runners had failed to warn the main body. He must have cut up the holding detachment which was to have kept him isolated, for future easy picking. But Mr. Moto had slipped.

"Follow me!"

They say that those words are the basis of all else in the manual. Hewitt proved it when, seeing his fears all too well confirmed, he went out in front. Straight, easy, careless, not looking back. Burke blinked, and did not move until Santiago prodded him, saying, *"Jesús Maria y José!* Get that!"

The image in the finder blurred for a moment, then cleared.

"Out in front," he muttered. "And alone. Lord!"

Then the Sikhs came out, bayonets at the ready.

Hewitt and his handful caught the skibbies from the rear. Before the action was out of range, Burke had his masterpiece

canned. He sat down because he could not stand. "I still wouldn't invite that guy out for the week-end," he said in a shaky voice. "But dig in and pray, do you get me?"

"Si, Señor," the Filipino answered gravely. "W'at in hell you think I do this past couple minute, heh?"

III

THAT night, Burke and Santiago set out for Moulmein, and before they had dodged the first three or four Japanese patrols and combat groups, they quit praying for Captain Hewitt. They had their own troubles. All that kept Burke going was the knowledge that two men, marching through the jungle and saw-edged grass can make better time than a platoon. More than that, the rear guard halted, every so often, to pound the Japs, to make the little stinkers deploy.

When Burke passed the British lines, he had his assistant and his two cameras, but practically nothing else. Captain Hewitt's company was now in the reserve to recuperate. Santiago's prayer had been answered.

He remembered that man, and that unhesitating advance of a battered handful, crawling out of one hell to charge into another; he remembered Hewitt's "Follow me!" And how that frosty faced Britisher had stalked through the grass, not once looking back to see if his men would follow. He remembered his own chill, the tightness in his throat, during those dragging deadly seconds in which not a Sikh had stirred.

Burke thought of all this, and he forgot that he disliked the only man who had ever made him question the sanctity of a cameraman's calling. He thrust out his hand. "Captain Hewitt, I'm mighty glad to see you got through. I saw—I was on the roof of that *pongyikyaung* back there—"

Hewitt eyed him from head to foot, but apparently he did not see the swollen and scarred hand. "I dare say you filmed it, and sensationally. I am required to tell you that all civilians must go to the rear. Good morning, sir."

He bowed, and executed a precise "by the left flank."

Burke, after gaping for a minute, withdrew the hand which still reached for nothing. He said, "Why—!"

Later, he and Santiago found an ox cart and joined the throng of *padi* farmers who headed for the gilded pagodas of Moulmein.

The Burmese were excited, but not in a panic. Buddhist priests, left shoulder exposed by yellow robe, shaven head bared to the sun, stalked placidly along. To these people, the departure of the British and the arrival of the Japs meant nothing at all; only a change of masters.

The whole business puzzled him. Turbanned Sikhs followed their Captain Hewitts as long as there was one man or one ice-blooded captain left. Then why didn't the Burmese go to bat?

That evening, Burke reached Moulmein. The sinking sun reddened the gilded peaks of the pagodas which crowned the three hundred foot spine which rose above the tidal inlets and flatlands on which the town was sprawled. Mosques with whitewashed minarets . . . the Vishnu Temple on Washerman Street . . . the Subramanya Temple . . . the Kali Temple . . . splendid landmarks, no matter how thick the river mists. All the gods of Asia had offices in Moulmein, and so did the American Baptist Mission Society; and all were helpless against the invader. .

The Continental Hotel, Burke's base of supplies, had not been damaged by the preliminary and rather spotty bombing of Moulmein, which had been no more than a reconnaissance flight to feel out the air defenses of the city. Aside from eating, shaving, and bathing, Burke made no concessions to the hardships behind him. He was burning with an amateur's urge to see

how his shots had turned out, for he felt that if successful, they would, by proving that he, and not Captain Hewitt had been the last one to leave the line of the ruined monastery, somehow uphold the honor of newsreel men.

Though he scarcely admitted it, Burke wanted to thrust the film before Hewitt's nose, and sincerely compliment him on that desperate charge he had led. Hewitt might finally see a light.

So Burke rounded up all the chemicals he could find in Moulmein. Most of them came from the stock of a Japanese photographer who had been taken into protective custody. He next got some sheet iron pans, and some bamboo, of which last he made a cage on which to wind the film. His argument was, "This is too hot to risk, some fool censor will fog it, some idiot will gum it up, I've got to dunk it, maybe the humidity did leak in, we sealed those cans in one hell of a hurry."

Very unprofessional, as he realized, so he had to argue with himself. And that night, in his room, he developed the masterpiece, leaving the remainder for shipment to Rangoon.

It was still early when he finished the job, and while Santiago stood by, first to wash, and fanning the film to hasten the drying, Burke went to see Yut Li, who had a speedboat.

The old Chinese merchant said, "I leave tonight, or no later than in the morning. Better go with me. You have done good work in the field."

He refilled the tiny teacups. Burke sipped noisily, after making pretense of inhaling the bouquet. Tea drinking was no treat; Burke would have preferred gagging on shots of *ng ka pay,* since he had to endure Chinese hospitality, but Yut Li was a nice chap who made an effort to speak English, in spite of his undoubted aversion to such a painful gibberish.

"Thank you, Mr. Yut," Burke said. "However, I am staying to film the street fighting. Maybe you have a *sampan* I could use. It could be hidden in some tidal inlet where Santiago and I could get it when we have to leave."

Yut Li placed his thin yellow fingers tip to tip. He sat there for a moment, drawing into himself until Burke felt quite alone and uncomfortable. Finally the old man said, "I have a speedboat. Go over with me. When my family is landed in Martaban, return in the boat. It is yours, provided that you promise you will destroy it when it has served your purpose. It must not be salvaged by the enemy."

"Thank you, Mr. Yut."

The little man in dove gray silk smiled. "It is really nothing. While Confucius said that a picture is worth a thousand words, I am not at all sure that your pictures are worth the risk you run."

"Captain Hewitt feels that way, too."

Yut Li's silk skull cap bobbed. "Without doubt the captain and I agree in lacking enthusiasm, but also without doubt, for utterly different reasons. Still every man does what he must do, so it is an honor for my poor boat to serve you."

The summing up was Burke's dismissal.

Back at the hotel, he asked the Bengali manager to take charge of the stock of unexposed film, and the still cameras which were in a steel locker in his room. "I'm sticking to the last," Burke explained. "Maybe I'll be able to move the stuff across the river myself. But if I am caught off guard, I am depending on you to get it over. Can I count on you?"

"Surely, *sahib.* I am leaving before things become serious."

While this was not such a good arrangement, Burke could hardly ask Yut Li, who had given him a speedboat, to take charge of a chest of equipment, particularly since the old man would not be dallying in Martaban. As Burke saw it, the risks were no greater in Moulmein than across the river, as far as unguarded property was concerned. And a man who is planning to film the sacking of a city can hardly be too worried about still equipment.

Somewhat before daybreak, Burke was in the cockpit, watching the Chinese helmsman maneuver Yut Li's cruiser down a tidal inlet, and then up the mile wide passage between Chaungzon Island and the mainland. Later, he watched Martaban loom up, on the further bank of the Salween. And then Yut Li's family, his secondary wives, and his servants were going ashore, some of the last named carrying heavy teak chests.

The old merchant gave Burke the ignition keys. "You know what is necessary.

And remember, when you return, allow yourself time enough to scuttle my boat."

The idea of scuttling that spirited craft, sinking her brass and her teak panelling, her gleaming deck and purring engines in that muddy water was unpleasant. Yut Li, sensing his thought, went on, "The Japanese will cross the river, in many places. The first ones over will get what boats they can, to send back for the others. So use, and then destroy. I shall not be here."

He clasped his hands, bowed, and went with his people. Burke took the wheel, and headed into the sunrise, and through the tangle of *sampans* and houseboats which jammed both banks of the Salween's three mile breadth.

SANTIAGO was waiting, back at Yut Li's boathouse, with the Eyemos. The British, falling back on Moulmein, had shortened their lines, and for awhile, they were holding, just a few miles east of the city. But the Japs, checked by resistance in depth, were beginning to bomb the town, and the ack-acks were answering. Shells made puff balls of smoke against the sky, and shrapnel rattled on the sheet iron roofs of the godowns along the river front.

Not far away, the fire department was busy. And as Santiago and Burke shifted from their methodical patrol of the areas they had decided to inspect in detail, making final choices from their earlier tentative selection of camera stations, they saw that Yut Li's house was ablaze.

Burke sniffed the fumes. Santiago, recognizing the odor, grinned. "He made sure no looters would get anything!"

While many of Moulmein's 65,000 inhabitants were flocking into the streets, carrying what goods they could, most were still going about their business. Women with baskets on their sleek black heads went to market, and in the bazaars, many of the stalls were stocked with produce. The bombing, which at first impressed Burke as perfunctory and spotty, presently displayed its pattern; the targets were mainly barracks, public buildings, European residences, the dozen odd mission schools and hospitals.

Although many natives were alarmed, most regarded the show as something which did not pertain to them; something which, while on the dangerous side, was nonetheless an interesting spectacle staged for their entertainment. All too often during his circuit of the bazaars, the jetties, the mosques, and the pagodas which crowned the long spine that divided the town into halves, Burke got the impression that there was much more of eager anticipation than of apprehension.

So, as the day wore on, and the sullen grumble of the guns in the east told him that the British and the Sikhs still were holding, Burke picked his camera stations so that wherever the break-through should come, he would miss nothing. Then, too, he had to find routes, direct and alternate

as well, to guard against delay in heading for his borrowed motorboat.

Finally, in spite of the favorable location of the boathouse, well inland, at the end of one of the many tidal inlets, he decided to protect his retreat by concealing the dinghy in the rank growth of another inlet.

All this done, he faced the real trial; waiting in a city whose lack of panic was more disturbing than any frenzy could be.

IV

FOR most of the day, the struggle east of Moulmein seemed a stalemate, and within the city things came to an uneasy equilibrium; but toward evening, Burke saw the shift. Platoons of Sikhs were barricading strategic streets; others were posting themselves on housetops from which they could enfilade the approaches. And then, after dark, company after company marched through town, and toward the waterfront.

By daylight, a show of defending in depth; by dark, a stealthy thinning of the hard pressed line to the east. Moulmein, Burke knew, was conceded as lost.

From the lower stage of a pagoda, there came an intermittent red glow which would be visible from the east. Burke guessed that a Jap-loving native was signalling to the enemy. He reached for his pistol, but then changed his mind, for he'd probably miss, and only get himself into a nasty jam.

Then, from the black mouth of an alley, a submachine-gun chattered. Slugs whined and zinged from the sculptured pagoda; the signal lamp went out. Automatically, Burke and Santiago flattened. When the burst ceased echoing, an ironic voice said, "Too bad we couldn't wait for your picture."

Captain Hewitt, it seemed, was in charge of the patrols which circulated about Moulmein. He stepped from cover, and continued, "I'm quite too busy to arrest you and send you to the rear. Frightfully sorry we can't delay the attack until daylight."

Burke shrugged. "Captain," he said wearily, "neither of us will be in Moulmein very much longer. Quit riding me. I'm just trying to do the job I was sent to do."

He went on with Santiago, and without waiting for an answer.

Moulmein seemed now to sense the closing in of menace, and people who had started the day with the idea of business as usual were developing last minute qualms. Turbaned Arabs, screeching Hindus, thin black Tamils jammed the streets; motor cars, horse drawn *gharis,* bullock carts, rickshas, all combined to make a traffic tangle which kept the Sikh policemen busy.

Burke gave up being sorry for the barefooted women, the bawling kids they carried, and the frightened ones they tried to drag by the hand. Bit by bit, he realized that many of Moulmein's population dreaded the Japs, yet sympathy could stretch just so far. He had a job to do, and it was not ferrying fugitives across to Martaban. At first, this was a hard truth to swallow, but soon Yut Li's speedboat ceased reproaching him.

A cluster of *budmashes,* Burmese hardcases, were looting a Chinese store. Elsewhere, a pistol crackled, and someone screamed. The police, however, could not check all the pillaging. What difference did it make? Just so much less for the Japs.

Burke halted, eye-measured the minaret of the Rakhai Mosque. It was just right, if a bomb didn't knock it in a heap. The incendiaries and the parachute flares, when the air attack started, would furnish plenty of light for filming the destruction, the street fighting, and the advancing squads of Japs as they mopped up. By dint of planning, Burke had reduced his wild project to something commonplace.

He said to Santiago, "Wait in the

mosque with the spare box and film. I want to look around awhile. If something good pops up, start shooting. I'll do the same wherever I am, and I'll work my way back, bit by bit."

"You think they break through soon?"

"This may go on for the rest of the night. For all of tomorrow. Hell, I don't know. With Captain Hewitt's patrols, and all the efforts to keep order, it looks as if they expect to hang on awhile. Maybe I can get an answer if I prowl."

Santiago, taking the spare camera and the cans of film, vanished in the dark enclosure. Burke took several steps, turned as if to go back, then changed his mind. He had meant to repeat his original instructions; just in case of a general surprise, it would be every man for himself, film what he could, and then head for the boat.

Moulmein was not blacked out; there were too many fires which, after having been apparently brought under control, had flared up again. Warehouse blazes were especially treacherous. One, now roaring briskly, attracted Burke, for this was another striking aspect of the build-up. When the big show came, he would have to concentrate on man to man clashes, and skip the broad effects.

But there was more to it than a waterfront fire, Burke learned when he came nearer.

Two policemen booted and cuffed refugees, clubbed and thrust them about, so that the stream of traffic swerved from the group who stood near the half ruined brick building, and the shattered walls of the compound which enclosed it. The black and gilt sign, hanging at a crazy angle, still identified the place: Municipal Hospital.

The sickly sweetish scent of ether leaking from cans, the smell of iodoform and of creosote tainted the air. It made Burke think of the wounded who needed these things which cluttered the street, and were scattered about in the half-ruined building. Two Hindus in white, internes judging from their jackets, addressed the craggy-faced Englishman who towered over the crowd, and stared at the flames which rose from the jetty at the end of the street.

HE CURSED, his voice cracked with a twist that knifed Burke, who sensing a story, had stopped. The light was good, all too good; with a fast lens and ultra-speed film, he could capture that face and get a portrait of war such as no cameraman had yet brought home.

The picture books were full of the usual tragic stuff, native women with starving or wounded children, but this was different; a square-rigged man was registering the impact.

"Doctor," one of the Hindu internes repeated, timidly touching the man's sleeve.

No answer. That face, which might have been rough hewn from knotted oak, twitched, then tightened, but the voice could not regain its deep note. "There is no chance." He gestured. "We'll have to leave this. And go. Do you understand? Go."

Burke did not use his camera. He shouldered several natives aside when he descended from the heap of rubble he had mounted to get that shot, and barged past the nearest policeman.

"These supplies, Doctor. Are *they* your problem, or is it—are there patients and your staff?"

The deep-set eyes focused, sharpened behind the rimless glasses. The man did not dare offer himself any hope, so he demanded, warily and incredulously, "Don't tell me you have a launch heavy enough. Ours is hopelessly ablaze. And no other transportation available."

"I have a power boat." Then, seeing the query which still lingered in the doctor's face, he added, "I'm Tod Burke. Newsreel. Waiting for the—uh, decisive turn. So while I'm waiting—"

"I'm Doctor Gilford. Give us a hand—no, lead the way!" He turned to the po-

liceman. "Ram Singh! Shir Singh! Clear the way for Mr. Burke."

Now that he had committed himself, Burke began to appreciate how far impulse had driven him. While Moulmein might hang in the balance for hours, and perhaps well into the following day, even this supposedly temporary quitting of his post could lead to complications. He should go to the hotel to see if the manager was still on the job. Santiago, waiting at the Rakhai Mosque, might stick longer than he should. On the face of it, giving Dr. Gilford a lift with supplies which, whether for civilian or military use, were vital, was certainly justified, even though he had to miss this prime chance of filming the capture of a city; yet Burke had a somber hunch which told him that there was more to this than appeared on the face of it.

Prodded by intuition, he turned and told the leading Sikh where the launch was. "You know the place?"

"Yes, *sahib.*"

Burke went back to join the internes, and shouldered the largest case he could manage.

V

LONG before the cargo was stowed, Burke's nerves reached the snapping point. There was more, much more than he had realized, and it took longer to carry than he had imagined. Bit by bit, he had entangled himself; a generous impulse, an entirely voluntary offer had kicked back, and what made the misery worse was that the knowledge crept up, a pace at a time, instead of suddenly overwhelming him.

Thus, his first premonitory urge to speed things up had made him shoulder a case of ether, when instead, after giving Doctor Gilford the keys, he could at once have hurried to the Rakhai Mosque to tell Santiago that something more important than pictures had come up. It was not that the doctor and the harassed internes were dallying; quite the contrary. But they were handicapped. Everything was important, nothing must be abandoned that could possibly be taken away, for Martaban was being jammed with refugees, and what emergency facilities would not be required by the retreating troops would be needed by civilians.

Loading a barge was one thing, and stowing a cargo into a Chinese merchant's pleasure boat was something else. "Too many doctors," Gilford grumbled, as he heaved and wrestled and rearranged, "when a stevedore would be more useful!"

Then he brightened, smiled a little and looked up at Burke. "Don't worry, you'll get clear with your boat before the show starts, I'm quite sure. One can feel, one can sense these things from the crowd."

He stopped short, seeing Burke's eyes, and his own face changed.

Burke said to himself, "The old boy thinks I'm scared into a lather."

Now that the loading was almost done, he could no longer afford to buck the thickening crowd, the prowling *budmashes* and *dacoits* bent on loot. Long before he could get to the Rakhai Mosque, and then to the hotel to check up on his still equipment, the doctor would be ready to shove off. The desultory bombing had slackened. Better carry on, and hurry back. Maybe it would work out, finally, and he'd be glad he gave a hand.

Captain Hewitt's single-tracked contempt had bitten deeper than Burke knew. The ice-blooded captain had aroused more than a bitter dislike for himself; he had also made Burke end by doubting that a man should think of pictures while soldiers retreated, contesting every foot. Sacrificing his routine, voluntarily upsetting his own game and in the only way one man could really help an army, made Burke feel that he had to a degree redeemed himself and his kind.

As Doctor Gilford wedged himself into the cockpit, Burke said, "That rail, that little brass rail, it simply has to stick up out of the water. This is not a submarine."

Gilford said, gratefully, "Much larger

than the launch we had. Those blasted saboteurs set her afire when she was practically loaded."

"Are you sure? About the sabotage, I mean."

"Quite. The nearest warehouse blaze was a considerable distance away. The policeman on watch insists there was an explosion. Thank God, the launch was small. Or all this would have been loaded, only to be destroyed."

The tide was right, filling the inlet to its very end, but with an overload to make the launch draw perhaps two feet more than normal, Burke was not so sure that he could dodge all the sandbars between Moulmein and Martaban. And running without lights was bad. The smoldering fires of the city, however they might look from the air, were now sufficiently under control again to make a blackout at sea level. Aside from the glow reflected from the gilded peaks of pagoda, Moulmein was a murky mass which squatted along the salt flats, though sometimes, looking back, he could distinguish the low spine which ran the length of town.

Once well out in the channel which reached for the Salween's mouth, Burke relaxed. Now that he was actually on the way, his impatience and irritation eased up, and he was genuinely glad; and he could voice the queries which had gnawed at him during the everlasting torment of that slow loading.

"Doctor, the stuff we're carrying is the difference between real treatment for the wounded, and skimpy first aid."

"Ah—um—well, now, they do have field hospitals," Gilford temporized cautiously.

"I've been in the field, with those troops. There never is enough medical service with a rear guard action. There can't be. The casualties are bound to be out of all proportion to the number in action."

"To be sure, to be sure." The doctor sighed. "War, you know. I suppose you're right, full equipment couldn't be mobile enough. The enemy ignores his wounded, while we—we think they deserve a chance."

"Then, damn it—now that we're under way, I can ask you—why wasn't there any barge, any transportation whatever to take the place of that launch of yours?"

"My dear fellow, we're municipal, not military. Everything has been spotted according to plan." He seemed amazed at the question, and went on, "We're volunteering, just as you are. Er . . . you got some good pictures, I hope?"

"Swell."

Like everyone else not in the business, Doctor Gilford assumed that after sunset, one couldn't shoot except by floodlights, and that Burke's work had long since ended.

The motor began backfiring, and the power fell off.

The doctor asked, "Is something wrong? We're drifting."

"We would," Burke growled bitterly, "with this mill not putting out enough to yank the hat from your head!"

The engine went dead. "All aboard for a free wheeling cruise into the Gulf of Martaban."

The drifting ended abruptly when the launch wallowed broadside into a sandbar just off Chaungzon Island. Burke broke out in a new sweat. All his premonitions and somber hunches returned. He hoped Santiago would have sense enough to check out before things became tough.

For luck, he jabbed the starter. The engine roared, the prop churned, splashing mud and water; in reverse, she worked away from the sandbar into which she had drifted hard abeam.

But he had barely nosed her into the current again when the backfiring started anew. Doctor Gilford groaned. The Hindu internes ceased their placid chatting. Burke, however, brightened. "My guessing machine's at work. Plugged fuel line. Too many kittens, burlap, and peb-

bles in Burmese gas. If we don't capsize from drifting, if we're not swamped, if some Nippie doesn't bomb us out of the water—"

"I trust you are a good diagnostician," the bewildered doctor cut in. "This is painfully out of my field."

"You might have your internes start singing. The President says song is grand for the morale."

"Mmm — you wouldn't be pulling my leg, would you?"

Burke spent half an hour finding wrenches, and then breaking the union joints of the fuel line. "If it's only not the carburetor," he prayed. "Good Lord, it can't be the carburetor. *Lay off that cigarette, you up in front!*"

He blew a dead wasp from the copper line. The fuel pump filter was fouled, but that was easy to remedy. Finally, he made up the joints, and without stripping any threads. The motor took off with a heart-warming roar.

Slowly, soggily, rail awash, she lugged upstream. She cleared the island. Ahead, Martaban's ruined fortress was a black silhouette. But the blackout was futile, for the waters of the bay and of the Salween marked the threatened areas too clearly for darkness to help.

As he made fast at a pier, Burke's impatience took hold again. "The quicker we're unloaded, the better I'll like it," he announced. "We've killed a lot of time on the way!"

The doctor's shaggy brows rose perceptibly. "Er—surely you're not going up stream, where the troops are crossing?"

"Hell, no! I've got to get back to Moulmein."

"*Moulmein?* I say—"

Burke began to wrestle a case of bandages. "You, there, Doctor Dass! Give me a hand!"

The interne jumped as though a whip had flicked him, and he stumbled in his haste to obey.

When the box had been boosted to the pier, Gilford detained Burke and demanded, "Did I understand you to say you were returning to Moulmein, and then coming back to Martaban?"

"You didn't miss it." He tried to sidestep to get clear of the doctor, but gave up when a hand settled on his arm. "Damn it, sir, I told you I had some work to do. Film the fall of Moulmein. Or the last minute victory we all know can't be this side of Rangoon!"

"But that—that's absurd!"

Burke shook off the detaining hand. "Doctor, I realize it is not as important as shouldering a musket, or healing the wounded, but it is my job, and while I'm glad to have given you a lift, I've lost a lot of time, I've left my assistant back there, waiting for me, I can't stand here chatting."

He brushed past, and clambered down the ladder. The doctor followed him to the muddy deck, then turned back to say, "Dass, take over, I'll be back presently."

Burke kicked the starter. "If you're not going ashore here, it'll be in Moulmein, I am in a hurry."

"I am going with you. In our haste and excitement," the doctor explained, as Burke shoved off, "we—I forgot—some biologicals, serums and the like, in the refrigerator. Some anti-venin. I can't ignore this chance to retrieve all I can. If you have time for filming street fighting, by Jove, I can pick around in the debris."

Burke hardened his heart. "Doctor, it is then up to you to do the salvaging, I am on the spot now for boy scout tactics."

"Quite right, my dear chap, I'm ever so grateful. And while the importance of films does seem overrated, it is not my place to criticize."

"That makes you a Christian!" Burke spoke with such force that the doctor stared at him. "I can't save suffering Asia, I can't send those skibbies running back into the jungle, but I can still do my own job and for a change, I am doing it!"

"To be sure, to be sure. And so I am

happy to take my chances. Your duty is to leave before it becomes too hot, or else you'd lose your precious film. Hell and damnation, sir, this is war!"

"If I were a doctor or a leader of men," Burke retorted, without any heat, "I'd be just as dead set on my profession as I am on this work. And if I live long enough, I'll convince you *and* Captain Hewitt that I have my place in the picture."

"Er—you mean, Captain Eustace Hewitt."

"The one and only."

Gilford chuckled. "I fancy he's been riding you. He loathes anything that detracts the dignity of war."

"You know him?"

"Well, rather. He assured me that the transportation officer worked under approved plans, and that however deplorable it was, salvaging a hospital had not been included in them." Then, with resignation, "But armies have always been guided by such considerations. Victorious armies or otherwise. Captain Hewitt is a first-chop soldier."

Burke twisted the wheel, and avoided a floating log. "If you'd seen him a couple days ago, you'd redouble that, and in spades."

THE launch, for all her making better time now that she rode as high in the water as she should, had covered only a little of the distance across the Salween when Burke groaned and pointed. The whine and roar and thunder of bombers shook the air, and geysers of flame gushed up anew from Moulmein's sullen smoldering. Land troops must be advancing.

Whether the Japs were desperately forcing their advance guard toward a sacrificial clash to make a man for man exchange which would clear the way, or whether they had fresh companies which were now enveloping one flank of the line of defense, he could not guess. But this was an all-out drive, and no doubt about it.

"How do you like that?"

"I can spend as much time clearing rubbish from that refrigerator as you can leaning over the parapet of a mosque."

From a distance, the hell showering over Moulmein appalled Burke; watching, he told himself, was worse than being in it. It was not that the actual danger was greater than what he had faced in the jungle; it was rather that the death of a city was more shocking than any hand to hand engagement could be.

"If Santiago checks out—hell, he won't—he'll be looking for me—no, he'll figure I've found a grand spot and that I'm busy—"

"I don't blame you for being concerned about your assistant," Gilford said sympathetically. "See here, Burke, you said you left a dinghy, just in case this boat was destroyed at her mooring, the way mine was. You needn't carry on, he'll have sense enough to retreat. After all, those biologicals are an after thought—"

"You might as well figure on salvaging them! Santiago's in that mess. They're pouring more into that town than I ever expected. But suppose he finds the launch gone. Not destroyed, but *gone.* He'd know I ran out on him."

"So he would."

That settled it.

Low swooping planes were spraying bullets into *prahus* and junks which bucked the current. And with the flames which now rose from Moulmein, visibility became better every minute. Burke brightened, and shouted above the clamor, "Hell, I wouldn't miss this for anything, it's colossal."

The doctor said, "I can't help but think Captain Hewitt is right, Burke. Cameramen must be quite mad."

VI

ONCE in the inlet, and back in the thus far untouched boathouse, Tod Burke handed Gilford the keys. "Get your

serums, and get out in the launch. They'll spoil if they're out of refrigeration too long."

The doctor stared at him. "Couldn't leave you stranded. You can't be working here very long."

"We have the dinghy," he said, recklessly, knowing well that some prowling native or panic-stricken refugee might have found it. "We'd counted on that as our reserve."

As he spoke, he hustled the doctor along, through the alleys which led toward the ruined hospital, and also toward the quickest route to the Rakhai Mosque.

The doctor, breathless from the brisk march, panted, "See here, Burke, I'll not take those keys—except—as a last resort—if the enemy—break through—and begin—their usual salvaging operations before you return—I'll leave—or try to—"

"Swell! In that case, we'd not be able to use it anyway, and you'd be keeping it out of their hands. For all we know, the Rakhai Mosque is safer than the spot that you've picked."

"I doubt that! It's frightfully conspicuous. I've often seen the *muezzin* when I looked from the dispensary window."

The streets were empty now. Those who had not fled must be huddled in their houses. Through the swirling smoke, Tod Burke could see the pagoda peaks, and the top of the Subramanya Temple. Somewhere, an oil reservoir was blazing; the petroleum fumes, dense and black, blended with the odor of rubber burning in a godown.

The scream of a bomber warned him. "That's got our number," he yelled, and caught Gilford's arm. "Duck!"

He knocked the doctor flat. And then the earth came up to meet them. The concussion wave was like a vise, a straitjacket pulling tighter and tighter, a club beating him on the head. Dust and choking fumes billowed, and a blast furnace gush of heat lashed at them. Fragments screamed, whistled, spatted and rattled against walls and roofs which still stood. Then came the final peril, trailing after; the thud and whack and thump of chunks which rained all about.

Burke, still numb, fumbled for his camera, and spat to get the dust and chemical taste out of his mouth. He swayed dizzily on his knees, then noticed that the doctor was not trying to rise. When he tried to help him, he pitched forward himself.

Once upright, after a struggle, he caught Gilford under the arms. As far as he could see, the medico had not been hit. The concussion however had made his nose bleed, and his eyes were blank. He did not answer when Burke shouted, "We're okay, Doc!"

Then, responding to voice and lift, Gilford regained his feet, but moved as one midway between waking and sleep. Burke muttered, "Just a deluxe edition of what I got. Better take him along."

The hospital was a hopeless wreck. During his absence, a bomb had completed the job. As they approached, Gilford's wits responded a little; though his speech was none too coherent, it was plain that he was shaking off the shock, which made Burke feel a lot better. But only for a moment.

The doctor had serums, anti-venin, and all manner of biologicals on the brain, a brain which while still somewhat addled, was none the less purposeful. He half pulled Burke off balance in heading for the ruins.

"A bit further up the way," Tod Burke wheedled.

That didn't work. "Uh . . . fearful mess they made of it. . . ."

Burke agreed, and nudged the dazed man to the right. "Need a steam shovel to clear it away."

"Refrigerator . . . may be holding. . . ."

"See here, Doctor, we've got to get help, you can't handle it alone."

Over and over, he repeated the litany. He told him about imaginary labor gangs,

about police and fire crews. Since he could not oppose the one track mind, he tried to lull it to sleep, to keep Gilford busy with suggestions as he nudged and directed him up the street. To turn the doctor loose now would be to doom him to capture and death. The right move was to take him back to the boat, but he could not continue leaving Santiago on a limb.

Walking slowly, halting every few steps for more persuasion, when his every urge was to dart from cover to cover, tormented Burke. The moment he relaxed and silently cursed himself for having ignored his original hunch, he lost control, and the doctor's scrambled wits began to assert themselves. His recovery was progressing just enough to make him harder and harder to handle, and still not sufficient to let him realize that his mission was blown sky high.

Time was shorter even than Burke's latest revision had indicated. He began to catch the bumble-bee note of bullets which keyholed, tumbling end for end instead of spinning as they should. Japanese small arms fire was reaching into town. What followed was worse; fewer of the slugs made that grumbling, mumbling sound indicative of having reached the extreme end of their range, and increasing numbers whacked overhead with the sharp pop of full velocity.

The Nippies must have edged between combat groups, leaving the Sikhs blazing away at shadows, or at small holding detachments; perhaps most of the defenders were standing in fatal clashes.

But Burke, desperate, hustled the doctor along, going up Great Pagoda Street, and then swinging toward the Rakhai Mosque. The white minaret was still intact, though a bomb had shattered the arched entrance of the building. The doctor, confusing one ruin for another, obediently stumbled into the brick and stucco-littered darkness.

Burke played his flashlight among the stumpy columns, and called Santiago. There was no answer. But in the niche where the *imam* conducted services he found the camera and the cans of film. His first thought was that Santiago, going up the ladder to size things up from the top of the minaret, had been nailed by a stray slug.

He turned to Gilford. "Doctor," he said, patiently reiterating the words whose repetition he was himself beginning to find maddening, "the hospital is finished. Blown up. You can't get into it. We've got to wait here for help."

Gilford fumbled, asked for a light, and laboriously seated himself on a chunk of dislodged brick work. "I'm afraid you are right," he said, slowly but with full intelligence. "I've been—" He passed his hand over his face. "Rather in a daze. Hope I wasn't an awful ass. Where are we?"

"Rakhai Mosque. Looking for Santiago."

"Oh, your man, of course. My head aches frightfully."

"No damn wonder. So does mine. Uh —can I count on you?"

"My behaving myself? Thank God, I'm awake, finally."

Santiago could not have gone far, and he must certainly have intended to return quickly, else he would not have left the camera, even though fairly well concealed, in the niche. Burke scrambled up the ladders which reached to the top of the minaret. There was no sign of Santiago.

"Scouting around for me," Burke said to himself. "Probably knocked down within a dozen yards of this place."

He left his own camera on the platform, and descended to get the rest of the equipment. Once on the ground level, he asked, "You're still shaken up. But I wish you'd try climbing. The bombing's slacking off now, and I'm expecting the street fighting to start."

It was a slow, painful ascent. Burke followed the doctor, and thanks to the narrow bore of the shaft, he was able to wedge himself at an angle, his shoulder supporting Gilford whenever a rest was needed. But at last they made the top.

After a rest, Burke went down again to get the cans of unexposed film. The Japs, taking a town, combed it with salvage companies who seized and classified everything which was portable. And film in a mosque might set them thinking.

That was how he met Santiago. The stealthy stirring in the rubble at the entrance gave him sufficient warning, so that he shifted, looked, and revealed himself without startling the hair-triggered Filipino.

"I have been look around. What you find?"

Burke told him, and countered, "What do you think?"

"This is one fine chance if we get out."

When they had ascended the minaret, another flight of planes was punishing the town, adding to the recent crop of fire. But most of the hell was concentrated. Peeping over the parapet, he watched the jets of flame gush up from the southeast and the northeast. The British and Sikh rear guard was getting it from overhead, which meant that thus far, they had fought off frontal and flank attacks.

AND now came parachute flares, blue white, blinding as noon day sunlight. Slowly, they drifted, making each street a canyon of glare laced by quickly shifting black shadows. By this light, low swooping planes could machine-gun the defenders whether they were behind barricades, or whether they were falling back through alleys which the foot troops could not enfilade.

The prolonged and ghastly blue dawn which soared on silken wings picked out Sikhs on housetops, where they waited to blast the approaching enemy. Now their advantage was gone.

Burke, seeing the first sign of all this, had snatched a camera. "Keep down," he shouted at Santiago. "Look up and watch, you can see if anyone swoops for me."

He was shooting by reflex action. Experience, not will, kept the Eyemo pointed, for this made those fierce jungle encounters seem matter of fact. There, men had fought, stood to their batteries, crossed steel in decent dawn or dusk or noon glare; this was massacre by cabaret lighting. But for the Japs, it was still far from shooting fish in a barrel.

One of the doomed Sikhs on a housetop laced the air with tommy-gun fire. The low skimming plane crashed, and ruddy flame geysered into the blue glare.

Automatically, Burke spun his turret to get a shorter focus lens into play as the fighting surged up Great Pagoda Street. He needed greater speed, for the earlier flares had settled low, though those last released still lighted the town below. The planes, having exhausted cartridges and pyrotechnics, were heading east. All that was now above Burke were funeral lights for a dead city.

The mopping up had started. Invaders, squattier than ever because of foreshortening, advanced from house to house, from alley to alley, routing out snipers and isolated squads of soldiers who, knowing the futility of flight, were ready to stand and protect as long as they could the crossing of the main body. On the further bank of the Salween, trenches were being dug, and pontoon bridges disassembled. Whoever escaped direct contact with the moppers-up would be on his own, to cross the river as he could, rejoin his comrades as best he might. For the first time, Burke knew the full meaning of "every man for him-

self." Those who stood did so because they had even less chance with their backs to the enemy. And some, he knew, would win through.

He wondered about Captain Hewitt, and strangely, he was rather sorry that he'd never had a chance to prove to that pig-stubborn man that filming a battle was not utter futility.

VII

WHEN a party of Sikhs came out of an alley to counterattack, Tod Burke worked like a mechanical toy. Far back in his brain, he knew that only the long discipline of a craftsman kept him at his post, kept him from yelling, kept him from going down to join those bearded men.

The surprised Japs fired, aimlessly. A few wild bullets chewed the parapet, but Burke was not aware of the stinging fragments for the pulsing button of the Eyemo steadied him.

He wondered if he had enough film. A man should have a mile of it. The lingering flares, now very low, brought out the white of turbans, the breadth of shoulders, the flicker of steel. It was almost a rout, but there were too many Japs, and not enough Sikhs. The yellow-bellies rallied. Another squad arrived. The flare expired, and the trailer jerked through the film gate; but Burke still crouched at the parapet, staring down at what he could see by the glow of burning buildings.

There was a cry, a volley, a spattering of slugs just as he dropped. He said, dully, "Damn fool. I'm spotted."

He heard the shouting below; commands and instructions, he judged, for the troops must now believe that there was a sniping post in the minaret. Burke drew his automatic. It was utterly useless against a mopping up detachment, and a civilian's possession of a weapon would make a firing squad just simple routine. The Japs, for once, would have international law quite on their side.

But he had a few moments. Valor, which no one ever claimed the Japs lacked, did not demand a needless and blind rush into a trap. So he said, "I'm going down to parley. You keep out of sight, and heave this gun over that way, so you'll not be caught with it."

"What do you mean?" the doctor demanded. "Here, here, you can't go down to face them alone."

"Oh, to hell with being sporting!" Tod Burke cut in. "I pulled this down on all concerned, shooting too long, and not ducking when I should have. It got me, that's all. Santiago, you're keeping out of sight, understand? You're getting those cans of film to Rangoon."

"*Si, Señor.* And you?"

"Prisoner of war. But you've got to get through. You and the doctor. That's your job. Understand, Gilford? I gave you a lift, now you give me one—by keeping your nose clean! By getting to safety, where they need you, *and where they need those films.*"

HE snatched the freshly loaded spare camera, and all the unexposed film. He was gambling that going down to confront the enemy would keep them from searching the minaret.

Below, shattered masonry was sliding. That suicidal charge by the squad of Sikhs had prepared the Japs for almost anything. Burke was not sure that he would have a chance to surrender. Cameraman or no, a man leaning over a parapet, during a street fight, is presumed to have fired a few shots, or he'd have kept his head down. His out, if any, was oil and bluff. He prayed and hoped that Santiago's Filipino temper would for once stay under control.

Luckily, Santiago did not doubt the value of pictures. He knew that the past few days of shooting would convince the country that retreating takes toughness and valor; that retreating soldiers do not fall back because it is easier, that they withdraw because they are outnumbered. And

whoever saw those reels would go Jap-hungry!

Looking back at it all, as he descended the ladder, he was glad now that he had helped Gilford; for he, Burke, regardless of salvaging medical supplies, would nevertheless have ended in just this predicament. And while getting a birdseye view of street fighting was a worthwhile end in itself, it was good to know that he had not ignored every other consideration.

Oddly, he still wanted to tell Captain Hewitt a few things, and he hoped, as he silently stepped from the lower ladder, that Hewitt would turn up among those who escaped from Moulmein.

The furtive stirring near the entrance suggested that he might play hide and seek, and worm his way into a crevice formed by a teak beam and a chunk of fallen wall. But he discarded that gamble, for his only way of keeping the Japs from a close search was to furnish them with a prisoner. So he drawled from the darkness, "You, out there! Is the coast clear?"

He was not surprised at getting an answer in English: "Immediate surrender or we use grenades. What unit?"

So they mistook him for an English officer? Burke answered, "Cameraman, Globe News. Don't throw grenades. You will spoil my pictures."

There was a muttered conference. This might be another group resolved to raise hell till the last. The Jap countered, "How many men in your detachment?"

"Just me. Tod Burke, civilian, unarmed. Who are you?"

The officer, now that Moulmein was in hand, could afford to be cagey. "Captain Ikawashi and patrol. Rifles cover you, coming out peaceably for honorable surrender."

"I'm coming out. If you shoot, you'll spoil pictures of the street fight. I was up there in the minaret, the light was good. It shows you winning."

Ikawashi could hardly doubt that one could shoot by parachute flares; whether or not personally proficient, he must be aware of the hundreds of "tourists" who had with Leica and Contax photographed harbors and military areas all over the globe. And to play up to the man's curiosity, Burke went on, "I'll give you light so you can see I'm alone."

HE GOT his pocket flash and played it on himself, and on the Eyemo which he held by its strap. A second passed, and another; no one fired. A sudden tremor shook him, his legs promised to buckle, though somehow they held. To win more time for regaining control, he deliberately played the reversed light to both sides, and back over his shoulder.

"Any other with you, we fire," Ikawashi said, and produced a light of his own. "Come forward, hands up."

Burke obeyed. Men stepped behind him, and deftly searched him. They found his credentials, and they found no weapons. By every rule, they should hustle him to the nearest stockade, and question him later, but Ikawashi, still curious, demanded, "Why do you wait when everyone but military persons leaving?"

"To get newsreel pictures. You advanced too fast, I could not get away. So I stayed. My last picture is good. A birds-eye view of men in action. Maybe you are in it."

"Maybe I am. We will see."

He gave instructions in Japanese. The firing had died down. The city was now unbearably silent, compared to its uproar of only a few minutes previous. A soldier prodded Burke with a bayonet. He tried to ignore his chances of being an animated tackling dummy, once the officer was out of sight, and said, cheerily, "This climate is bad for film. It should be developed tonight. In my room, under guard."

Burke hoped that Ikawashi could be baited into wanting to see a sight to warm any fighting man's heart: a bird's-eye view of himself making a clean sweep, hand to hand, of the enemy.

Jap arrogance and vanity should snap at it. Burke was grateful that he was not trying to sell this idea to Captain Hewitt!

"I went to risk and trouble," he went on plaintively, "they should be developed before the humidity spoils them. And I have some good stuff in my Contax, too. In my room."

Ikawashi spoke to the guard. The rest of the mopping up squad marched on, warily enough, though assured that the big task was over. Then the little captain asked blandly, "You have a Contax?"

This was the "tourist's" favorite, the costliest miniature on the market; and most legitimate correspondents had a Contax or equivalent in their professional kits. There was no reason on earth why an officer should not grab some private loot before an official detail covered the hotel. After all, the party was over.

"And a kit of lenses," Burke said, truthfully enough.

That added perhaps $500 list price to a costly start. He was by now fairly sure that the Bengali manager, caught in the panic, had not sent the still equipment across the river.

Ikawashi asked, "What hotel?"

"Continental."

Unless the place had been bombed, Tod Burke saw a chance to make something of curiosity and greed. Already, he had begun to win, for the minaret had not been searched. Apparently, the volley fired at him had been just on general principles, and Ikawashi seemed convinced that not even a fool of a cameraman would have crouched shoulder to shoulder with snipers in such a dangerous spot.

VIII

EXCEPT for members of the elite corps, the Japanese officer's education is restricted; once he leaves military matters, he is somewhat at sea, and has nothing except native cunning to guide him. But that last, Burke well knew, was deadly equipment, and Ikawashi would need careful handling.

Luck was with Burke when they herded him through the swinging doors of the anteroom, and into the enormous bedroom; the manager had bolted, leaving the locker of still equipment sitting in the closet. His neglect had become a blessing!

"Where is the Contax?" Ikawashi demanded.

"Right here. I'll unlock the chest."

Ikawashi's eyes gleamed. Whether he did or did not know anything about photographic equipment, the smooth-faced captain could not help but recognize the quality revealed in every chrome-plated control. Burke beamed, pointed at the conspicuous lettering on the front: "Contax. Genuine, made by Carl Zeiss."

He did not have anything like a full kit of lenses; aside from the one in the camera, there was only a wide-angle, an inconspicuous trifle, and then an extremely fast eighty-five milimeter. But that last was impressive. It filled the hands. Burke deftly removed the standard objective, and with a quick twist locked the telephoto into place.

HE held the camera out for a moment, letting Ikawashi get the full appeal of fine mechanism. The lens mount somehow suggested the barrel of a cannon reaching from a turret. It was made to fill the eye of any military man, simply by its solidity, by the precision engraving on the burnished cylinder.

Then Burke set the Contax aside, carelessly, and thanked that impatience which had made him develop those shots of Captain Hewitt leading the Sikhs. He pointed at the bamboo cage, the gallon jugs of chemicals, the large sheet-iron trays whose inside surfaces he had coated with wax so that they would not taint the developing solution.

"It will not take long. But there must be darkness. Ask your man to stand guard

in the hall. Even striking a match in the anteroom would be bad."

Ikawashi's glance slid from the gleaming Contax and centered on Burke. "I must watch you work. Do not try to destroy things of valuable information to us."

Burke gestured, palms turned up. "I am a prisoner. Still, I take pride in my work. I will be away from it a long time. So I have asked you to let me see the pictures I made tonight. The best I have ever done. And you also will be interested."

"You do not use a red light? That is unusual."

The captain's suspicion in a way reassured Burke; if things had been too easily arranged, it would have been a bad sign. He dug into the steel chest, found a leaflet which had accompanied bulk film, and then pointed to a line which read, *"Develop in absolute darkness."* He added, "This is special film, for night work. It is sensitive to red."

"Very well." Ikawashi tapped his pistol. "I stand by. No tricks. I show you special consideration later, but do not forget, you had only motion pictures, not any un-motion."

"That is understood."

Burke set up the cage with its bamboo uprights, and poured the gallon of discolored developer into the tray. He carefully took the temperature. He cautioned, as Ikawashi reached for a cigarette, "Even the glow of a smoke is too much. And the hall light—far down the hall—it makes too much glow over the transom."

The Jap gave the soldier some instruction. Then, after hanging a sheet over the jalousies, Burke went into his routine. It still was not dark enough for actual processing, but by now he was convinced that the captain would not know the difference.

He took the unexposed film from the camera and began to wind it on the cage. That done, he opened the remaining cans. While one hand turned the crank which rotated the developing cage, the other began to feed foot after foot of celluloid ribbon to the floor. At the beginning, he had made quite a show of cutting off leader and trailer and flipping the useless ends to the straw matting. It was unlikely that Ikawashi would wonder about a stray strip of film under foot.

"Please note the time."

"Time noted."

Ikawashi held all the aces. He was armed, while his prisoner was not; and in a bare-handed struggle, he was rightly confident of himself, even without the advantage of a sentry at the door. When Ikawashi called the seventh minute, a rather meaningless figure under the circumstances, Burke lifted the cage, and poured the developer into the wash stand pitcher. Then he emptied the hypo jug into the tray, and resumed his cranking.

After a moment, he fumbled for some matches and a pack of cigarettes. "Dim light will not hurt now," he said, "if you turn aside."

The captain took a light. So did Burke, and without breaking the rhythm of the cage. The darkness brightened, then dimmed again from the drawing on the smokes.

"How many minutes, please?" Burke asked.

As he spoke, he side stepped cautiously. The wrist-watch rose; the head twisted to read the phosphorescent dial. Burke's cigarette butt touched the dry film which was locked to the spool. The other several hundred feet were under the work table, and about the legs of Ikawashi's chair.

Amateur "safety" film is hard to ignite, and very difficult to keep burning; but this was nitrate stock, a first cousin to the stuff that sends an artillery shell on its way. In an instant, the captain was surrounded by a maze of hissing, flaming serpents. The intense heat made the cellulloid ribbon whip and squirm. Floor and straw matting flamed up.

Though Ikawashi had a pistol, he also

had a small hell about him. At his first frantic cry, a cry of utter dismay and amazement, the sentry bounced in.

The room was already a furnace laced with flame, and dense with poisonous fumes. While the two men were shocked and bewildered, the third was not. He heaved the pitcher of developer and the soldier went down. Without stopping to admire Ikawashi's blazing uniform, Burke bolted into the darkened hall, and raced the length of it.

Best of all, he knew the way out of the compound, and without lost time. Fire and an occasional yell were hardly sensational in Moulmein that night.

By now, the soldiers in the lobby would be racing to the second floor. However, the big problem was avoiding patrols. And Burke's intensive study of Moulmein, while looking for camera stations, now served him. Japs were radiating in every direction, hunting the perpetrator of the outrage. Sentries, passing along calls which originated at the source of the disturbance, helped rather than hindered Burke, for their garrison routine enabled him to spot them, and so change his direction.

He was almost at the waterfront when someone behind him gasped, "*Jesús María y José!* W'at in hell you do?" Before Tod Burke could recover from the shock, Santiago caught his arm. "A bomb catch her—the boat—we have now the little one, this way."

They plunged among ruins, and then knee deep into salt grass and mud. As Burke fairly wallowed into the dinghy, Dr. Gilford sat up and said, "Thank God, you did it!"

Santiago corrected, "No, *Señor,* he did it, before I had the chance."

They shoved off into the channel. Burke demanded, "You mean—you trailed me—to the hotel?"

"You talked too loud to the captain, is easy. *Chinga'o!* I do not know you have a trick, to light the film."

"You saw it?"

"The smell. How do you fix it?"

"No use telling you. It won't ever work again, not on the Jap army." Then he noted that something was lacking. "Where—where are—those films?"

"I give them to the doctor to wait with, he can paddle home if I get into trouble."

HAVING used his entire stock of film for Captain Ikawashi's entertainment, Burke had to go to Rangoon for a fresh supply. There, again impatient, he developed his shots of the sacking of Moulmein. He went even further; finding some positive stock, he printed everything, starting from the morning Captain Hewitt had ordered him to the rear. Inasmuch as one of the missions had a projector, Burke could not resist going to such lengths, for he had heard that Captain Hewitt was in town.

Finding him was easy. Burke brazenly stepped into the club where everyone who counted met for *pahits* every afternoon, and barged up to the captain.

Hewitt had not changed, except that a red welt seamed his forehead, that he was thinner, that the lines of his face were deeper than they should have been; he was still as icy as his eyes and voice. But now Burke was not abashed by any man's contempt. He said heartily, "Captain Hewitt, let's ignore personalities for the moment. Please come to the mission and let me project the sacking of Moulmein. Not more than nine minutes screen time. It's all duly approved by the censor."

The other officers wasted two seconds regarding Burke, then turned back to their *pahits*. After a moment, Hewitt said, "You reduce all that to nine minutes screen time, eh?"

"You've expressed yourself. Wouldn't it be sporting, as you people put it, to hear me out?"

Hewitt nodded. He turned to the group, nodded, then said to Burke, "Very well."

For nine minutes, the only sound was the whirr of a very old projector. Once

more, Jap and Sikh crossed bayonets; once more, the yellow men snaked and darted through the grass, and past a ruined monastery; and again, a British captain emerged from the jungle, taking fully four firm strides, and without looking back, before his weary and wounded soldiers emerged to follow him.

Those were slow minutes, though the sacking of Moulmein made each second at least an hour long. Then the screen went blank white. Hewitt did not speak.

Burke attacked. "Captain Hewitt, granted that I violated your ideas of how the Geneva Conference should be observed, don't you admit that American recruits, seeing that film, will learn more about Jap tactics than they possibly could from just listening to lectures?

"I leave it to you—was or wasn't Confucius right when he said that a picture is worth a thousand words?"

Hewitt rose. "Er—that speaks for itself, Burke. You are quite right. But if you've ever seen your men catching what mine did, you don't feel so cheery about the picturesque aspect getting such emphasis, if you know what I mean. It wasn't cinema entertainment, you know.

"Frankly, I was prejudiced. I didn't know, until just now, that you'd actually got into the scrimmage, that morning. I arrived just in time to believe you were—ah—posturing before your own cameraman, after the show had ended. Sorry." Then he brightened a little. "Er—rather dramatic, where we emerged from the jungle, by the monastery. One can have individual prints made if one had the film, couldn't one?"

"Certainly."

"May I—"

"Sure. I've not shipped the negatives."

Later, Hewitt fed the celluloid from the spool. Burke of course was prepared for the scissors cut which was to remove the frame; but Hewitt lopped out a two yard strip, in spite of Burke's exclamation and protest.

The officer explained, "I'd rather you didn't exhibit this bit, before my men caught up with me. I look very much of an ass, wondering if anyone's going to follow me."

"Captain, I do not believe that," Burke said, looking him in the eye. "Without being a soldier, I still know that was grand leadership, the real meat of it."

"Rot. Doesn't explain a blasted thing about Nippie tactics. I must insist, I don't want this displayed."

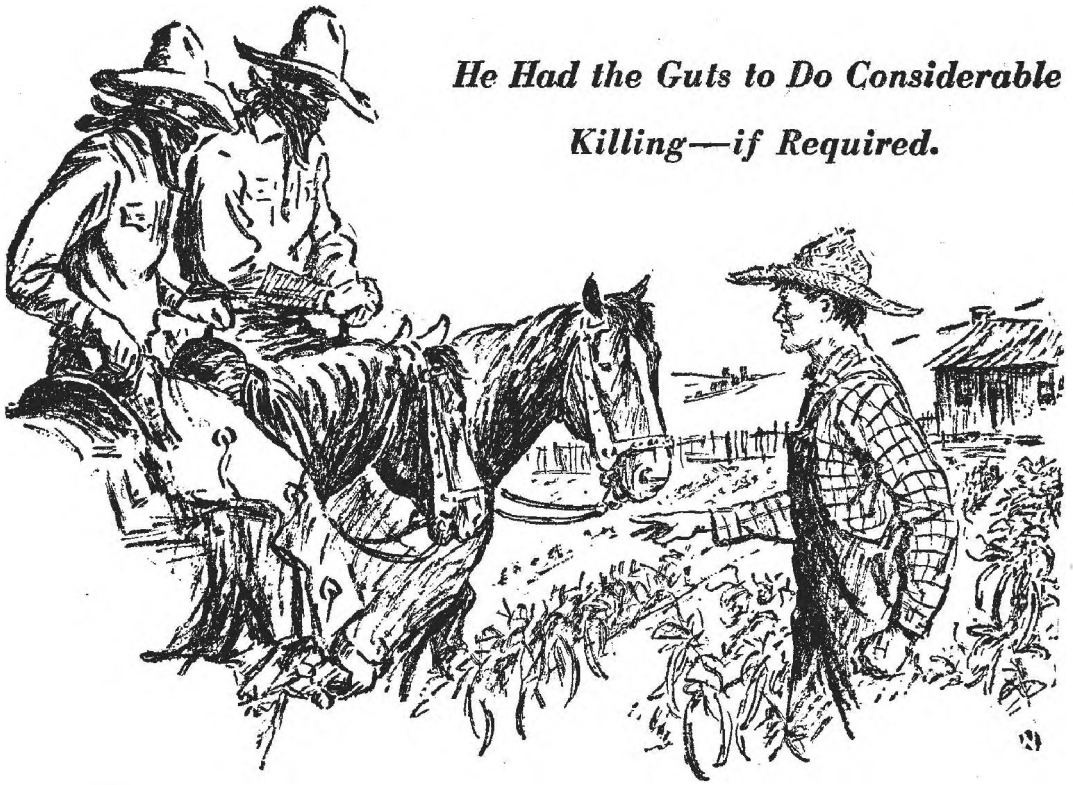
Burke took the spool, and found the short flash of himself feeding .45s subcutaneously, into Jap infantry at three yards. He took the scissors and sliced out the scene. Then, stepping well away, he struck a match. A single puff of flame obliterated all evidence of his personal warfare.

Hewitt's face changed, amazingly. He thrust out his hand. "I'm afraid I misunderstood you from the start. Though I could see on the screen that you weren't acting at all." He struck a match, and ended his own close-up. Then, chuckling, "Extraordinary how the stuff burns. You know, a native told me some Nippie captain was badly scorched while tinkering with a camera in the Continental Hotel at Moulmein."

"I didn't stop to check up."

"I dare say you didn't. I'm afraid they'd have shot you at once. By the way, Burke, won't you join us—a few *pahits* down at the club—Dr. Gilford's just arrived, and I think he'd like to see you."

"Thanks," was what Burke said; just that, and no more, because he was too busy thinking, "They're puzzling but not bad when you get to know them."



He Had the Guts to Do Considerable Killing—if Required.

BEAN PATCH BUSCADERO

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Sons of the Wind," etc.

BROCKY MILLS just couldn't believe it. Surely the few days he had gone without rations couldn't make a man too weak to sit on a horse. Cursing the strange dizziness that seemed to start in his knees and spread all over him, Brocky gripped the saddle-horn and pulled himself up straight, bracing his feet in the stirrups with a grim determination not to let himself faint.

"Looky here, cowboy!" he admonished himself aloud, sure nobody would hear him talking to himself in that unpeopled expanse of yucca-bristled dry hills through which he rode. "You've been hungry before, ain't you?"

Sure he had; hungry enough to chaw leather, plenty of times. That was how it had been yesterday when he over-ruled the demands of his stomach and circled wide to dodge a succession of ranchhouses where he might have stopped for food. Then his hunger had still been a gnawing desire to eat. Now he felt no urge of appetite; just a crazy, light-headed dizziness. Even the craving for whiskey was gone—and that, for Brocky Mills, was something to draw a big red ring around. To his surprise he found he could think about whiskey now as impersonally as a bartender. As impersonally, for instance, as old Bigotes Barela calmly taking away the bottle and telling him: "No more dreenk today, my fr'an'. You too moch dronk already!"

That was when Brocky had reached over the bar, and failing to grasp the bottle, seized the fat, sad-eyed bartender by one of his long salt-and-pepper *bigotes*. The veteran Mexican barman was good-humored, and he was Brocky's friend, but to be seized

by one of those mustaches of which he was so proud was "one theeng too moch!" His indignant response had been to hit Brocky Mills over the head with the whiskey bottle. And when Brocky still did not let go of his *bigote,* he had squalled angry Spanish cusswords and hauled a cannon-sized *pistola* from under the bar to flourish under the cowboy's nose. More than a little drunk at the time, Brocky had grabbed the *pistola* out of the barkeep's pudgy grasp and shot him with it.

The sight of Bigotes standing there behind the bar with a seep of blood slowly oozing through his bar apron had sobered the cowboy considerably, and the way Bigotes took it even more. Leaning unsteadily against the back bar, Bigotes had looked at him sadly.

"Now you have keel me, *higo,*" he had said. "More better you ron biffore the shereef gonna hang you!"

Brocky had run all right, and none of the few men in the saloon at that early hour had ventured to stop him. But it was the doctor he had run for—first: old Doc Shields, who lived in the last house on Alamo Road, at the west edge of town.

"I've just shot ol' Bigotes, Doc—you better git there *quick!*"

HE HAD paused only long enough to boost the rheumatic old *medico* into his buggy. Then, as the doctor whipped a long-legged sorrel into a run toward town, Brocky Mills had kicked his own bay into a long, fast lope in the other direction: a wanted man fleeing from the law and, so he believed, from the gallows.

Avoiding all human habitation, keeping clear of trails and roads, no hand had been raised to stop him, no officer had overtaken him. But hunger had. A man couldn't eat grass, like a horse. The next ranch or camp he sighted he'd have to turn in and get something into his gut. In the meantime—stick to the saddle somehow.

"Whiskey's like salt, Brocky," old Sheriff Lanhart had warned him a hundred times. "A little never hurt nobody, but for a man's main diet it's plumb pure pizen. Leave it alone, boy, or some day it'll turn on yuh, same as it done your father."

"Never mind me, Sheriff—I can handle it!"

Well, he'd sure "handled it" all right now! To help fight off the gone-away feeling that made his head seem to float like a breeze-borne feather, Brocky began to sing in a hoarse, dry-throated tenor:

"Rye whiskey, rye whiskey,
You've been my downfall!
You've kicked me, you've cuffed me,
But I love you for all!
It's beefsteak when I'm hungry. . . ."

That was when a wave of dizziness finally tumbled him sidewise out of the saddle. Even if he had not already fainted, the wallop of his head striking a rock as he hit the ground would have knocked him cold.

Brocky came to on a straw bunk in a one-windowed plank shanty, with a small, sparse-whiskered old man in shabby overalls pouring a mixture of canned milk and hot water down his gullet. Judging from the gurgly feeling in his stomach, he had already swallered quite a bit of it. The old man took the cup away and waited for him to finish swallowing.

"Rye whiskey!" croaked Brocky, speaking the words that would have come next in the song he was singing when he fell out of the saddle.

"Rye whiskey, hell!" The whiskery little man's voice was dryly sharp. "You'll drink what I offer—an' like it!" Brocky drank some more—and liked it all right, but even weak and dazed as he was he didn't exactly like the man's sharp tone of authority. It was something he'd never been used to.

"Kinder ramroddy, ain't you, Whiskers?"

"Can be if I have to," said the old man bruskly. "Shut up an' lay down."

He set a tin bucket of the milk mixture and half a dozen dry, scorched biscuit crusts on a bench beside the bunk.

"Take your time about eatin'," he said. "I'll be back."

It was mid-morning the next day when the old man returned. Trying the door and finding it locked, Brocky's strength had been insufficient to bust it down, so he had managed to climb a bench and crawl out the window. But a search of the premises on none too steady legs had netted neither horse nor saddle. Since there was no sense in trying to travel afoot, Brocky had crawled back into the shack and waited. In spite of his anxiety to be on his way, he was glad of a chance to eat and rest, though he rummaged the shack in vain for whiskey.

Just how come he was here in the first place Brocky wasn't certain. He remembered swaying dizzily in the saddle, and surmised that he had passed out, this little old whiskerino had found him and brought him here. What for, he couldn't figure. If it had been a simple case of rescue, why the locked door and no horse? More likely old Whiskers aimed to turn him over to the law.

Without a gun and still pretty unsteady on his pins, Brocky didn't know just what he could do to prevent it, but at least he'd make it hard for him. As he heard the old man's key in the door, he sock-footed swiftly from bunk to wood-box, seized a stout stick and with it upraised, ready to strike, stood behind the door as it creaked open.

The little old man came in with his hands full of lumpy gunny sacks, a big six-shooter sagging at his hip. Brocky thought how easy it would have been to bang that stick of juniper down over his head without warning, but he didn't do it. Instead he tried to make his voice sound tough:

"Drop them sacks, Whiskers! Then unbuckle your gun an' let it fall!"

The little man might not have heard him, for all the attention he paid. He moved spryly to the table and began pulling a variety of packages out of the sacks.

"Brought you a few supplies," he said, pausing to look at Brocky with small dark eyes that seemed to bore through him like a gimlet. "That is, if you're aimin' to take the job."

"The job?" Brocky felt foolish all of a sudden with that chunk of wood in his hand. "I don't want no job! All I want is—"

He broke off abruptly, a look like that of a hungry wolf coming into his eyes as he saw a bottle of amber liquid bearing a whiskey label come out of one of the sacks.

"All you want," commented his host dryly, "is somethin' for nothin'—an' some whiskey to wash it down with." He took the bottle and set it on a shelf. "In that case you just as well pull on your boots an' git out!"

"Afoot? Where's my horse?"

"You wasn't on no horse when I found you. You was layin' in the shadow of a couple of low-wingin' buzzards. It would of saved me right smart of bother if I'd left you there. What you doin' with that stick of firewood—aimin' to take it with you?"

A little shame-facedly Brocky tossed the stick into the wood-box.

"Looky here, Whiskers," he said a little edgily, "I reckon you did save my life. What is this job of yours? Something urgent?"

"You mean urgent for me or for you?" The grizzled little man shrugged and began stowing stuff on the shelves. "Fact is, your name's Brocky Mills an' you're on the scoot for shootin' a bartender in San Filadelfo!" At Brocky's startled expression he dropped one hand firmly to his gun butt. "I can turn you over to the law, young feller—or I can give you a job. You got the guts to do considerable killin'—if required?"

When Brocky didn't answer except by the look of horrified amazement that came over his face, the little old man chuckled:

"Well, don't swaller your cud over it. All I want you to slaughter is about a million Mexkin bean beetles that's eatin' up my *frijole* crop. Either you pick 'em or shake 'em off the leaves, whichever you like, an' mash 'em between your fingers."

Brocky looked puzzled: "You mean you aim to hire a full grown man to pick bugs off of bean bushes?"

"I never said nothin' about *hirin'*. I'm offerin' you grub—an' this shack to hole up in for awhile where nobody won't notice you."

"Yeah, I see," said Brocky, though he didn't. "What I mean, is bean-buggin' all there is to this job?"

The little man batted his eyes thoughtfully, and a troubled look came over his face.

"Bean-buggin'," he said, and then more slowly: *"An' keepin' your eyes open!"*

"You mean in case the law comes lookin' for me?"

"The law ain't goin' to bother you none here—not unless I turn you in. But the way this valley lays, this place makes a dang good stop-over for rustled cattle. It's been used thataway before, an' it might be again.

"I notice you keep lookin' at that bottle: how bad do you want a drink?"

"Not bad enough to turn cow-thief for it!" Brocky snapped out sharply. "You've kinder got me where the hair is short, Whiskers, but if you're figgerin' to rustle cattle—"

"Maybe I'm only figgerin' on findin' out who is!"

WHISKERS pulled his floppy nester's straw hat low over his eyes and headed for the door, where he turned briefly:

"I'm leavin' that bottle right out in plain sight purely for temptation purposes, young feller. Maybe you got the guts to let it alone, an' maybe you ain't. Make yourself at home. Anybody asks you who this bean patch belongs to, better claim it's yours. If you don't see me agin soon, you will later. *Adiós!"*

"Hey—wait!" But Whiskers didn't wait. Brocky got outside in time to see him step lightly across a stout pony whose dunnish-gray color matched that of the surrounding dry hills. "Hold on a minute! I don't even know who the hell you are?"

The grizzled little hombre grinned back over his shoulder as he reined toward the cover of nearby cottonwoods: "Maybe I'm the feller that drowned the duck!"

As he rode away Brocky noticed that the brand on the pony's hip was a JE, connected.

Turning back into the shack, he headed directly for the rough shelf with the whiskey bottle on it. For a brief instant it was in his mind to seize the bottle and hurl it out the window, to shatter on the nearest rock, but some inner stubbornness, aroused by the strange old man's challenge, refused to let him side-step the issue thus simply.

"So I ain't got the guts to let it alone, huh?" he muttered, and left the bottle where it was.

In one of the gunny sacks on the table he found three more heavy parcels, the contents of which he stared at in puzzlement: a gunbelt and holster, a well oiled .45 and a box of cartridges. From an old shed under the cottonwoods came a sound he recognized as the whinny of his own horse.

Brocky Mills scratched his blondish head.

"He leaves me my horse an' a pistol to pick bean-bugs with!" he said aloud, thoughtfully. "Well, I'll be a son of a gun!"

THE bean-bug business was certainly no fake. From some two acres of pinto bean bushes just beginning to blossom, Brocky shook little brown, speckled beetles and mashed them between thumb and finger hour after hour, day after day until his aching back seemed as hard to unbend as

the curve in a cold horseshoe. Bugs, bugs, bugs, thousands, yes millions of 'em!

"Dang my bean-bug soul," he asked himself, "why do I do it? Why don't I grab my horse, some grub an' that bottle of whiskey an' hit the trail?"

Well, for one thing, so far at least, he seemed to be safe here. Six days now, and not even the dust of a rider had shown itself to his watchful eyes. Not even ol' Whiskers had come again. This was better than hitting the *buscadero* trail, obliged to skulk and dodge like a hunted coyote. Yet Brocky knew that was not the real reason he stayed. Ol' Whiskers Who-Ever-He-Was had saved him from the buzzards; and even though somehow the old coot seemed to have found out that he was a fugitive from the law, so far, at least he hadn't turned him in. So if ol' Whiskers wanted his bean patch de-bugged, by all the well known cusswords, Brocky Mills aimed to de-bug it for him if it took all summer.

Garbed in a pair of old clod-hopper shoes and a battered straw *sombrero* he found in the shack, every morning Brocky fared forth to battle the bugs. Every day he kept at it by promising himself a good big swig of whiskey at the day's end. But always remembering ol' Whiskers' taunt about not having guts enough to leave it alone, he somehow managed to postpone the drink.

Out of this daily postponement came an idea that struck him just right: on the day he pinched his last damned bean-bug, he'd celebrate by drinking the whole dang bottle! It gave a man something to look forward to, anyhow.

As for the future after that—well, he'd been drunk at the time, he hadn't really meant to kill old Bigotes, and he still felt plenty bad about it. But going back to be hanged wouldn't bring Bigotes back to life, and the idea of a rope around his neck wasn't pleasant to dwell on. Neither was the idea of skulking somewhere across the Border, exile from his own country for the rest of his life. But it would sure beat hanging, at that.

For the present, there were plenty of bean bugs to smash. As for ol' Whiskers' advice to keep his eyes open—ten days of watchfulness just about convinced Brocky Mills that the little man had been talking through his hat. Besides bean-bugs, all he had seen was a few flea-bitten jackrabbits, a pair of high-sailing hawks and an occasional buzzard. But shortly after noon on the eleventh day, two cowboys dropped the wire gate without dismounting and came jogging across the field toward him, regardless of how many bean bushes they trampled.

To all appearances Brocky Mills was just another unshaven, red-necked nester in straw slouch and bib-overalls, too busy even to look up. Actually, belted on inside those loose bib-overalls was a well-oiled .45, and the eyes under that old straw hat were watching keenly, taking in every detail of the approaching horsemen's appearance, even to the JE connected brands on their horses' sweat-shiny hips.

Brocky knew good expensive cowboy outfitting from mere "Dude trimmin's," and certainly these two jaspers had it on. From box toes boot toes protruding from below their silver-conchoed chaps to the dusty crowns of their Powder River sombreros everything about them showed quality as well as genuine cowhand usage. Even the black bandannas masking all of their faces below the eyes looked to be heavy silk.

"Somebody," thought Brocky, remembering old Whiskers' shabbiness, "seems to be prosperous around here, anyhow."

In his role as dry bean farmer Brocky didn't wait for them to speak. His stubbled face took on an aggrieved scowl.

"Ain't you jaspers got nothin' better to do than tromple a pore man's beans?" he demanded.

One of the riders was of medium build, the other quite slight. It was the smaller one who answered.

"Oh!" he said in a tone that was slightly mocking. "These your beans?"

Something indefinably familiar about the voice from under the puncher's mask made Brocky wonder where—or if—he had heard it before.

"They sure as hell ain't yours!" Brocky grunted. "Who are you? What you wearin' them masks for? What you want here?" Brocky shot the questions at them rapidly, sharply, with a good show of nester indignation.

THE slight built cowboy took his time about answering them. First he laughed with apparent good humor and fished a silver dollar from his pocket, tossing it deftly onto the broad brim of Brocky's straw hat.

"That's for bean damage, Sod-Buster. An' these bandanners ain't masks. We're just ashamed to let anybody see we didn't shave this mornin'. As for who we are an' what we're doin' here—we might ask you the same, Sod-buster, only we're too damn polite. Anyhow it ain't nothin' to git excited about. We're aimin' to drive some cattle down this draw, an' them old corrals under them cottonwoods back there by your shack might do to hold 'em in, overnight."

"Good shade, too." It was the first time the larger puncher had spoken. Brocky wanted to ask them what use shade would be at night, but caught himself, and the banty puncher spoke up quickly:

"Yeah," he explained, "movin' cattle in this hot sun takes the meat off of 'em. We're liable to drive by night an' shade 'em in your corrals the next day. How much is it worth to you?"

Brocky shook a bean bush and began picking up and pinching the bugs that tumbled off of it.

"Whose cattle?" he inquired, without looking up.

"Seven UB stuff," volunteered the heavy built hombre. "Ol' Jim Edwards trail brand."

Brocky's eyes flicked to the JE brand on their horses. The banty's sharp, dark eyes looked hard at him.

"Jim Edwards," he drawled, "is the richest cowman in ten counties—an' the stingiest. You know ol' Jim?"

"Me?" Brocky shrugged. "I don't know nobody around here—nor don't aim to."

"A man don't need to—if he's got money." The banty drew a roll from his pocket and fingered out two tens and a five. "How's twenty-five dollars for the use of them old corrals?"

"Sounds reasonable. In advance?"

"Five," said the cowboy dryly. "Is it a deal?"

"Supposin' I ain't agreeable—then what?"

"Then," said the cowboy softly, touching fingertips to his gun-holt ever so briefly, "maybe you'll wish you was, Sod-buster!"

"You sure I ain't gittin' mixed up in no rustlin'?"

The smaller cowboy laughed, but the other man spoke harshly:

"Don't be a damn jughead!" he said. "We done told you once we're ridin' for old Jim Edwards, ain't we?"

"That's right—you did." Brocky's whiskery face took on a grin, and he winked one eye slowly. "An' even if you wasn't, it wouldn't be none of my business, would it?"

The two masked men looked at each other and the smaller one nodded. All Brocky could see of their faces was their eyes and eyebrows. As the larger man gravely returned his wink, Brocky's mind registered definitely the peculiar dot-like scar just between his sandy eyebrows—a souvenir of childhood chicken-pox, probably.

"I like a man," said the banty as he reined around to ride away, "that knows how to wear his nose short and his mouth shut!"

Until they were out of sight Brocky went on industriously de-bugging beans. Then

he smoothed a spot of ground, drew some brands on it with his finger and studied them.

"If I weren't a plain durn fool," he grumbled at himself, "I'd clear outa here right now!"

THAT night Brocky did not sleep well. Aided and abetted by a relentless bean-patch backache, a weird procession of dreams tortured his slumber. In them bean-bugs were monsters in bartender's aprons, forever seizing whiskey bottles out of his hand before he could drink. When, in rage, he shot them, suddenly they became humans—friends like old Sheriff Lanhart, or poor Bigotes, or the shabby old fellow who had saved his life. And through it all whirled a kaleidoscope of black masked faces and brands that changed so abruptly he never could read just what they were. Well on toward morning a mob of black-masked bean bugs dropped a rope over his neck and walked him off the edge of a cliff shaped like a UB brand. Before he hit the end of the rope he woke up.

"What I need's a drink," he told himself and started to get it, then made himself crawl back in bed. If a man can put off taking a drink for an hour, he had learned, he can put it off for a day—or a week. Before the hour was up, Brocky had decided to get to heck out of this crazy place before something happened—or before he went nuts waiting for it to. With the first gray of dawn showing in the east, he went out to saddle up.

That was when he heard the cattle coming—and changed his mind. Ol' Whiskers had asked him to keep his eyes open, and it looked like now was the time. Certainly he owed the old coot that much.

Six-gun at hand, Brocky crouched behind a huge fallen cottonwood that formed one side of the old corral and watched four riders drive some sixty or seventy yearlings in. Four was a heap of cowboys for that small a bunch, he reflected, unless they expected trouble. There was some bawling among the steers, but whatever driving sounds the cowboys made were strangely subdued. In the dim dawnlight Brocky could not make out their faces, but for size and saddle-set, two of the riders looked familiar.

With the last steer inside, the four riders dismounted, eased their saddles, rolled smokes and passed around a bottle. The light was swiftly growing clearer. Inside the corral one of the steers stopped broadside only a few feet away from the hidden cowboy. The brand on its hip showed plain—and fresh: UB. Yet the forward curve of the U, and the straight lines of the B looked somehow less raw than the rest. To Brocky the meaning of this was plain. JE had been skillfully burnt over into UB.

"Jim Edwards' road brand, my Aunt Juney!" thought Brocky. "This stuff's stolen!"

Dropping to his belly he crawled along behind the log to within earshot in time to hear argument:

"Damn it, Chris, I say one of us better stay here an' keep an eye on 'em!"

"Yeah?" The sarcastic voice was familiar. "An' git caught with our pants down if somebody shows up?"

"But look, Chris, supposin' that damn sod-buster—"

"Don't you worry about the sod-buster. Hell, he's our ace in the hole. Supposin' the Old Man does stumble onto the stuff here? Or supposin' the sod-buster takes a notion to snitch? This stuff's in *his* corral, ain't they? He's the thief—not us! Which you reckon the Old Man will believe—a sod-buster—or his own damn son?"

"Yeah," chuckled another voice Brocky thought he recognized as the other man who had ridden into the bean-patch, "Ol' Jim thinks the sun rises an' sets in his boy, Christopher. That's what makes it so damn easy! Tonight Chris'll play checkers with him—while we come back an' move the stuff on!"

"Right!" said Chris. "Now, boys. Let's clear outa here! Scatter—so there won't be too many horse tracks together! Butch, you—wup—looky yonder!"

He pointed. For a jiffy Brocky thought they had seen him, then realized they were staring over the log, not at it. From where he crouched he could see, even plainer than they could, the figure of a rider joggling down a bare brown hill toward them, not two hundred yards away. Even at that distance Brocky thought he could recognize the battered straw hat and slight, stooped figure of old Whiskers.

"Godamighty," gulped one of the cowboys. "It's ol' Jim himself!"

"Damn you, Chris," snarled another. "I thought you said he'd gone to Blue Rock! If he ketches us here—"

"Take it easy, boys!" Even Chris's voice sounded shaky. "Scatter out so the cottonwoods will cover you. Then start comin' back—like we was just sneakin' in on this sod-buster pennin' these cattle! Quick now—an' let me do the talkin'!"

Evidently one of them, at least, didn't trust Chris's plan. Venturing a look over the log, Brocky saw this puncher drop to one knee and aim a .30-30 at the rider coming down the hill. Out of the confusion in Brocky's mind, one fact stood out clear: the little old man who had saved his life was about to be shot.

TOO swiftly for accurate aim, Brocky threw down across the log and put a bullet close to the kneeling man's bootheels. At the shot the slight-built cowboy, whom Brocky knew now to be Chris Edwards, whirled, yanking his gun from its holster. To the kneeling hombre it looked as if Chris had shot at him.

"Damn you, Chris!" he cursed. "Who you think you're shootin' at!"

Whatever else he might be, Brocky saw that Chris had nerve.

"Nobody—yet, Butch!" he drawled. He advanced a step or two toward the other cowboy, now raising his rifle again. "Maybe we're caught, but if you try shootin' at my Dad again, I'll—"

Two shots cut off the quiet sound of his voice. This time Brocky's aim had been good—but not in time. The rustler called Butch sagged to the ground. But in the last moment of his life he had swung his rifle suddenly around to fire point blank into Chris Edwards' chest.

Seeing both men down, Brocky Mills ran, swift as a spooked coyote, around the corral toward where the other two cowboys had disappeared. One of them, having failed to retighten his cinch, was struggling with a turned saddle. In the face of Brocky's six-shooter, he threw up his hands in surrender. The other was gone.

When old Jim Edwards, alias "Whiskers" arrived he found Brocky Mills there in the corral with sixty odd rustled steers, two dead men and a prisoner. The little old man looked bleakly at the brands on the steers, at the two dead cowboys, one of them his own son, and then at Brocky, without uttering a word.

Whatever he was thinking, Brocky knew well enough what he did not want to think. Brocky tried to speak naturally:

"They'd of got away with it, Whiskers," he gulped, "if this cowboy"—he nodded toward Chris—"hadn't been right on their trail an' started shootin' 'em up just when I jumped 'em!"

"You mean Chris never had nothin' to do with the stealin'?"

"Hell, no!" said Brocky heatedly. "He was tryin' to stop 'em! Gosh, I'm sure sorry they got him, Mister Edwards. He—he had guts!"

The look in Brocky's eyes warned the live rustler to keep his mouth shut—or else.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said the old cowman quietly. "Just these two?"

Whether the old man believed the lie or not Brocky could not tell, but he was glad he'd told it. A man has a right to have faith in his own son—if there's any way to let him.

"There was a sandy sort of feller that was too fast for us an' got away. But I can identify him—by a chicken-pox scar between his eyes."

The old man did not seem to be listening. He stooped over his dead son, then straightened.

"I knowed somebody in my outfit had been stealin' my cattle," he said, "but neither me nor Chris could ever ketch 'em. They'd used this place before, so I secretly got holt of it, hopin' I could locate a man I could trust to help me trap 'em. An' it looks like I done it. With Chris gone, I'll be needin' a man like you, Brocky, for something better than bean buggin'."

SUDDENLY Brocky remembered.

"Mr. Edwards," he said soberly, "you ferget I'm wanted for murder!"

Despite the deep grief in his eyes, old Jim Edwards mustered a faint, friendly grin.

"In a pig's eye!" he said. "The morning before I found you laid out for the buzzards, I got a letter from my old friend, Sheriff Lanhart, askin' me to look out for you. All you done when you shot that bartender was tear up a little surplus taller. Bigotes not only didn't die, but he don't even want to prosecute. Claims you was his friend an' a good boy when sober. Seems like Lanhart agreed with him. So I just figgered I'd give you a chance to prove—hey, where you goin'?"

"Up to the shack," said Brocky, "after that bottle of whiskey!"

A moment later old Jim Edwards saw the cowboy he had befriended emerge from the shack, raise a full whiskey bottle and throw it, hard, against a nearby rock, then come striding back down toward the corral.

"Now," thought the old cowman, with a sort of grim satisfaction, "he won't never need to know it was nothin' but plain ol' vinegar!"

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SHORT STORIES—January 10th 1943

PETER MAGOTO, DRAGOON

By DON SNOW

. . . . He Was a Strange Man, a Magnificent Little Traitor

Boggy Depot
Choctaw Nation
September 14, 1837

Hon. Andrew Jackson, Hermitage,

SIR: It is with hesitation that I intrude this story upon the quiet of your retirement. Though I have not the honor of knowing you personally, my deep respect for your record as a gallant warrior through many campaigns inspires this communication. It is the story of a miserable little half-breed traitor, one Private Peter Magoto, Dragoon Regiment. I cannot conceive of an occurrence of more accumulated bewilderment.

As you may possibly know, I have been sent to this wilderness country to combat a sweeping Asiatic cholera plague. The gods may know a cure for the disease, though I doubt it. If there is such a remedy, it is not a combination of calomel, sulphur, phosphorus, and Seneca Indian oil—all of which, heaven forbid, I have tried repeatedly.

Choctaw drums were pounding as I hurried toward Colonel Beaty's office on my first morning at this hell post. They were ominous sounds, coming from somewhere in the Kiamichi mountains. The cholera fever was hitting these red people hard, and I knew they thought the white soldiers had brought the disease.

Nothing will shrivel a man's nerves like lying all night with one eye asleep and the other awake, listening to the endless, foreboding drone of drums. A bloodthirsty massacre seemed to me inevitable. And I had heard that these Choctaws were "civilized."

Walking briskly across the garrison yard I noticed a man sitting in the shade of the blockhouse, near the front barricade. A heavy iron ball was chained to his ankle.

Ordinarily, I would have been curious.

But Captain LaMonte had told me the night before about the liquor traffic. These men were restless when they weren't fighting. Somehow they managed to smuggle in whiskey besides their army ration of one gill per day. The guardhouse overflowed during quiet times and often they had to fetter the drunks outside with ball and chain.

Assuming the man just another drunk soldier I started on by when he called to me. "Major, sir!" His thin voice had a depressed note to it. I stopped and turned to him.

"Yes," I said. He was of small build, I could see, and dark. Probably a mulatto mixture, I thought. French-Creole, or some such. He pushed back a mass of thick, dirty-black hair.

"Are you the new doc?"

"Why yes, man," I said. "I'm Major Thorne." The drained expression on his face didn't change. I started to move on but something about his eyes stopped me again. They were small eyes, quivering one instant, then calm the next. I hadn't noticed them at first. In fact, at first sight you wouldn't even notice the man at all.

A tiny muscle knotted up in his hard-featured face. Then he broke into a slow, thin smile and wet his lips with his tongue.

"Major Thorne, huh? Did you ever fight with Andy Jackson?"

That was almost too much. His uniform showed him a private, and I was on my way to see the colonel. "No," I snapped. He scrambled to his feet with a growl, eyes blazing.

"Then you're not a soldier!" he screamed. His face turned into the thin, lifeless smile again and he straightened himself to all his height and said softly, "They're going to shoot me today—"

"Shoot you?" I asked, surprised at the complacent way he said it. "Who's going to shoot you, man?"

He sat back down by the iron ball and his face went hard again, and motionless. A far-off look came into his eyes and they fluttered slightly.

"I fought with Andy Jackson at Orleans," he said quietly. "I am a soldier."

Remembering what the captain had told me about the excess drinking, I shrugged. "You're drunk," I said, and leaving him bluntly hurried toward the colonel's office.

AS I entered, Colonel Beaty was sitting at his rudely-made desk. He laid down some papers and peered over his glasses.

"Come in, Major."

"Thank you, sir," I said. I offered cigars and we both lit them. "Well, sir, this cholera plague is the worst I've ever seen. I'm afraid I don't know the cure for it."

The colonel puffed at the cigar. "That isn't why I called you this morning, Major."

"Yes, sir?" I said, surprised. His lips went into a tight line and he got out of the chair.

"Damn it, Major! I've got to court-martial a man—a man I can't do without."

"Court-martial a man for being drunk?" I asked. The colonel smiled gravely.

"So you saw him? He's not drunk. He's a killer.

"Killer? That little man?" Being so early in the morning, the colonel's riddles baffled me. "Who is he?" Colonel Beaty stalked nervously across the floor.

"Name's Peter Magoto," he said at last. "He's killed three men in the last month. Three soldiers."

"Three *soldiers?*"

"Yes. And he tried to kill Private Gattis last night, but failed. Gattis is scared to death.

"Well, I'll be—" I muttered. It did seem incredible. And yet I remembered his eyes. "I'm surprised, sir," I said, "that he hasn't been executed before now." The colonel rubbed his white mustache with a big, rough hand.

"He should have been. The trouble is he speaks fourteen different Indian lan-

guages. We frequently have to skirmish the Osages, and Pawnees, and Creeks. That little half-breed knows more about these red savages than anyone else."

"But three murders, Colonel. He's dangerous." The colonel sat back down and picked up a paper from the desk.

"Here's a letter from the War Department, Major. The Adjutant General reports that the Choctaw Chief, *Pushmataha,* is in Washington. He wants to keep his people at peace with the whites.

"But there is a young buck warrior that is stirring them up. Name's *Ola-kop-tka.* 'Mad Buffalo' they call him. Chief *Pushmataha* is the only one who can stop him from arousing the wrath of his people."

"But what does that have to do with Private Magoto?" I asked, puzzled. The colonel pecked absently at the desk with a pencil.

"Magoto can figure out their movements ahead of time. As long as these drums are beating, we can't do without him."

"But why," I asked, "does he kill?" Knots came into the colonel's jaws. He shook his head.

"I'm not at all sure. The only thing he says is that they didn't fight with Jackson —that they're not soldiers."

I confess that my heart skipped a beat or two. "My God, Colonel," I said. "The man is mad. He's a lunatic!"

Colonel Beaty scratched at his white hair. "No, Major, he isn't mad. There are times when he shows brilliance in handling the Choctaws. Right now he's almost indispensable."

Offhand, I couldn't think of an answer to the problem. Those tiny, quivering eyes were still haunting me. He was such a little man.

We sat quietly for several moments. Colonel Beaty was puffing thoughtfully at the cigar.

Through the small window I could see across the garrison yard. It was a long quadrangle, and at one side was the large stone powder magazine. The stables were near the back barricade. Whites, bays, roans and sorrels were lolling quietly in the morning air. They were fighting animals, like the dragoons who rode them.

The officers' quarters were on the far side. The front one was Colonel Beaty's place. Near the front steps was a lattice work covered with wild roses. The colonel's fat wife was cultivating the earth around the flowers. I don't mean that she was too fat, but, frankly, I've seen better.

The colonel coughed. "As I was saying, Major." He puffed hard at the cigar and looked up at me. "About this court-martial—"

A sharp knock at the door broke in and Colonel Beaty, frowning, twisted his head toward the door. "Come in!" His voice was edged.

The door opened with a jerk and Captain LaMonte came in. His boots were glossy as usual, and his small, black mustache neatly trimmed.

"Excuse me, sir," he said excitedly. "But we have an important visitor." The colonel's heavy eyebrows raised.

"Visitor?"

"Mad Buffalo."

"Mad Buf—" Beaty got up quickly. "Where?" Captain LaMonte motioned with his head.

"Outside. Says he wants to talk with you."

"By all means," the colonel said. Then he turned to me. "We must treat this warrior with much respect—"

WHEN we stepped outside, the sun was high and bright. The Choctaw drums seemed louder and the Kiamichi breeze brought a foreboding coolness into the garrison. A flight of wild pigeons winged slowly overhead. A grasshopper popped in a hazel bush at the foot of the color pole.

From Colonel Beaty's strained face I realized the magnitude of Mad Buffalo's visit. When we neared the back of the blockhouse I got my first glimpse of the

red devil. He was a chocolate color, tall and muscular.

There was no clothing on him, save leather moccasins, and an ornamental breech-cloth fastened by a bright bead belt around his lean waist. Colonel Beaty held up his hand in greeting.

The warrior stood motionless, a sad look on his broad, angular face. Blinking his eyes slowly, he said something in Choctaw.

Colonel Beaty frowned, and turned to LaMonte. "Bring Private Magoto over here."

"Yes, sir." The captain hurried after Magoto. The little half-breed's face was still the same dead mask. But I could sense that underneath he was laughing at the colonel's helplessness.

Colonel Beaty motioned to him. "Find out what Mad Buffalo wants, Magoto." The little man's eyes fluttered brightly as he turned to the Indian.

They chattered for a moment in Choctaw and then Magoto looked excitedly at the colonel. "Mad Buffalo says the white people must leave at once because they have brought disease to his people."

Colonel Beaty wiped his forehead. "Ask him to come inside and smoke with us."

Peter Magoto smiled thinly and started chattering in Choctaw again. Mad Buffalo stared warily at us for a moment, then agreed reluctantly.

"Good," the colonel said, relieved. "Come on."

We went into the small house and Mrs. Beaty met us at the door. She was startled at first, then smiled warmly, the way a good fat woman can smile. Mrs. LaMonte was there, too. Tall, stately, and young looking.

I had always heard of the Whites and Indians smoking the "peace pipe" together. But this wasn't exactly a peace conference. The colonel took cigars from a cedar box and passed them around.

Mad Buffalo took one and looked curiously at it for a moment, then bit off a large piece of one end. He chewed down on the tobacco a time or two, then stopped shortly. Flinging the cigar down, he spat distastefully on the floor.

We all looked questioningly at Peter Magoto. A delighted grin was smeared over his queasy face.

"Mad Buffalo thinks the white people smoke ragweeds."

I couldn't restrain a chuckle. The colonel frowned, but Mad Buffalo didn't mind. He was looking about the room with much fascination. No one said anything.

I watched Peter Magoto. He was still a sordid, granite mask. But I almost respected the little man there. He seemed to know that the fate of the entire garrison lay in the way he handled Mad Buffalo. It frightened me some, but I respected him.

Then I noticed Mad Buffalo again, staring curiously at Mrs. Beaty. His head was tilted to one side like a spaniel pup. He walked over to her and examined the embroidered collar around her neck.

The colonel sputtered something and Mrs. LaMonte gasped. Mad Buffalo's face lit up approvingly.

Colonel Beaty came to his feet with a growl, but LaMonte flashed out a restraining hand.

"Easy, sir."

Mad Buffalo got very excited and started chattering his lingo. We all turned to Peter Magoto.

The half-breed listened very intently. Scratching his head, puzzled, he looked up at Colonel Beaty.

"Mad Buffalo wants to trade one of his squaws for your wife."

The colonel choked on a volley of curses and moved angrily toward the Indian. Mrs. Beaty's face turned chalky and Mrs. LaMonte gasped.

I stopped the colonel. It was amusing to me, in a way, but it would be serious business to make this Choctaw angry.

"Just a moment, sir," I said to the colonel. Then to Peter Magoto, "Tell Mad Buffalo the white woman is Colonel

Beaty's squaw." The colonel sputtered again and Peter Magoto talked with the Indian.

Mad Buffalo's lips curled down bitterly, and a savage shadow flicked across his eyes. He shook his head and chattered in a loud voice. Peter Magoto turned impudently to the colonel and shrugged.

"He says that his squaw is a good worker and never makes much talk—"

Storming words that I mustn't repeat, the colonel went for his saber. The Indian crouched like the animal he was.

But Peter Magoto jumped up quickly and sprang between them. Using many gestures, he shot a volley of words that I couldn't understand.

The Indian gasped in horror. A hideous look came over his face. Chattering wildly, he whirled and ran across the garrison yard and disappeared through the front gate.

After a breathless moment, all eyes in the room turned to Peter Magoto. Captain LaMonte strode over to the half-breed.

"What on earth did you say to him, Magoto?" But the little man only got a far-off look in his eyes and his voice was thin and smirking.

"Did you ever fight with Andy Jackson, Captain?"

Colonel Beaty grabbed him by the collar. "Now see here, you—" But Peter Magoto just kept his lifeless smile and shrugged.

"I fought with Jackson at Orleans."

With a curse the colonel shoved him toward the door. "Take him out!"

The captain left with him, but I could see then why Peter Magoto was indispensable. And to think—at first sight, you probably wouldn't even notice the miserable little traitor at all.

IT WAS barely daylight when the bugle aroused me. I'm sure I swore considerably, for I had been up most of the night with cholera-stricken soldiers. Since midnight four of them had died with the tongue-cracking fever. I am a callous man, but to watch helpless victims lie and pant, writhing, sweating for hours with burning temperature is hard to take.

Perhaps that was why the bugle irritated me so. Its ominous notes were sounding *Boots and Saddles.* As I hastily dressed, the call *To Horse* came and I knew something considerable was up.

Running across the garrison yard, I saw the men tumbling out of their quarters. Stable hands were saddling the horses, and the officers were screaming orders.

At the back of the sutler's shop, I met Captain LaMonte. He was on the double when I stopped him.

"What's up?" I asked. He waved toward the stone magazine.

"Powder's been stolen! Every damned ounce."

"How the hell—" I started, but he was off again, calling back:

"During the night. Mad Buffalo likely!"

I hurried to Colonel Beaty's office. Some more officers were there and the colonel was giving hurried instructions. He didn't notice me until the men started out. I moved toward the door with them, glad for the chance to try out the big black that had been assigned to me. I hadn't seen any real action in quite a spell, what with those two stuffy years in Washington.

The colonel caught my arm. "Not you, Thorne," he said crisply. "There's a job for you at the post infirmary. You follow with the supply wagons later."

"Job?" I growled.

"Yes. Private Gattis is cut to pieces. Magoto again!"

"Magoto?" I yelped. "Where is he now?" Beaty's face twisted.

"Deserted. Now get going. Gattis is in bad shape." He whirled around and left me standing there.

BY THE time I reached the hospital, the horses were all out and ready. I could hear metallic clicks as saber belts and

carbine slings were fastened. I paused at the door to take a look.

Gnarled, callous Dragoons they were, and trained. Proud to the man of the Cockade and Eagle — and not a jittery nerve among them.

Mounted they made a picture. Bays, whites and sorrels, each company on a solid color, each company different. Apparently the colonel had ordered Company D, the roans, to stay guard at the garrison. It put a tingling in my veins to hear him shout:

"Form—companies!"

Three captains screamed, "Company!" in unison. Then Colonel Beaty waved his arm high.

"Column of companies, forward—" His voice was deep, rumbling. "March!" he boomed and a full squadron of eager soldiers charged out of the garrison.

It was a hundred and twenty individual units of hell that rode out that front gate. Never before have I seen men like these, whose only point in living is to die fighting.

The dust was beginning to settle when I remembered Gattis. Peter Magoto had got him at last. I wondered if his desertion had anything to do with the powder robbery.

Inside the rude hospital, an attendant took me to Private Gattis' bedside. His long, lean face had a sardonic twist and he was mumbling, "Magoto—Magoto."

"Easy, fellow," I said, testing his pulse. He was about gone.

I removed the sheet and looked at him. It made me sick all over. The man's stomach lay wide open, slashed with a knife. I marveled that he was still alive.

"Get brandy," I said to the attendant. "Quickly!" But another look at the poor fellow told me it was useless. When a man is cut open like that, he is in the hands of the gods.

Amazingly, Gattis held on while I put him back together. The man had guts all right—but Peter Magoto spilled them.

The brandy rallied him temporarily, but he never had a chance. Before he died, I got his story, piece at a time.

It was an incredible thing to hear, his frank admission of framing Peter Magoto years ago—he and three other men. It must have been that Gattis knew he was done for, or he wouldn't have told it.

I had figured Magoto to be a smart man. And now I was finding out that he had graduated from a college in the East and was once slated to become a diplomat in the State Department. Then these four thugs had framed him on a rotten murder charge. It ruined his chances forever.

He had followed them relentlessly, waiting and hating with every ounce of his diminutive being. They escaped him for years until he found them in the army. When he enlisted in their outfit, they transferred to the Dragoons.

Doggedly he had followed, stalked them, hunted them down. And now, justice had come through—Peter Magoto justice.

Gattis died quietly, seeming relieved that he had told the story. I asked him if Magoto stole the powder. He said yes—that Mad Buffalo had nothing to do with it. I wondered whether to believe him or not. There was hate in the man's heart.

I put away my instruments and supplies. Sulphur, Seneca Indian oil, calomel — it seemed that something here would relieve this cholera fever. Then I realized that the phosphorus was gone. I had kept it in a bottle of water. Perhaps it was just mislaid, I thought. I didn't have time to worry about it now.

The supply wagons weren't quite ready. So I ordered my black saddled. Somehow, I had to find Magoto. With Choctaw drums and all that powder on the loose, hell would likely overflow.

THE fight was on, I knew. It was a hundred and twenty fight-happy Dragoons against God knows how many screaming redskins.

Way across a long, scrub-oak draw, I could see them go at it. The company of whites formed in a line, driving straight up the draw. Hundreds of red warriors on spots and paints were streaming down from the hills. The company of bays was on the left and above, and the sorrels were at the right, preparing a vicious double flanking movement.

Then they clashed. I don't know which can make the most noise, a fighting Dragoon, or a crazy redskin. Guns fired, arrows and lances flew, horses reared, and men fell. It was the best fight I ever saw.

As I approached the Dragoon wake, I happened to look across the slope where two riders were coming, hell bent. One of them was an Indian, the other in Dragoon uniform. By the time I reached the rear lines, they were close enough for me to recognize. Peter Magoto and Mad Buffalo.

I rode alongside Colonel Beaty. The old warrior seemed haggard and when he saw me, his eyes crinkled up in the sunlight. "How's Gattis?"

"Dead!" I shouted to him. "How's the fight?"

"Not so good," he called. "We're outnumbered a thousand times."

Then Peter Magoto and Mad Buffalo rode into the middle of the battle. The Indian held up his hand and shouted to his warriors. Instantly, the noise ceased. Magoto spurred toward the colonel.

"Colonel, sir," he said, saluting crisply, "you haven't a chance. There's thousands of them. Get back to the garrison!"

Colonel Beaty snarled at the half-breed and cursed bitterly. "You damned little traitor. I'll——"

Then Magoto sulked. He took on that lifeless smile of his and said nothing. He was a sinister little man. The fates had twisted him horribly. I spurred the black over to him.

"Private Magoto," I said sternly. "Where's that powder?"

He just grinned thinly and said, "Major, did you ever fight with Andy?"

That was too much. I leaned over in the saddle and grabbed him by the throat. "Listen, you little hell-cat. That talk won't work any longer." He showed not the slightest emotion.

I shook him hard. "You're not the tough guy, Magoto. Gattis told me about you. Now out with it. Where's that powder?"

The little man sat quietly, looking me over. Then he glanced at Mad Buffalo. "All right, Major," he said at last, but his expression didn't change. "I've got Mad Buffalo convinced that evil spirits have brought the disease."

"What about the powder?" I asked, impatient.

"I didn't steal it," he said. "Mad Buffalo got it. They're going to burn the garrison. They think I deserted the army."

"Where is it now?"

The little man turned to Mad Buffalo and chatted with him briefly in Choctaw. It brought a rise out of the Indian and he started talking loudly with his warriors. Finally Magoto turned back to me. His eyes were quivering a little.

"Mad Buffalo's warriors insist on burning the post. He says he can't control them."

THE Indians were talking excitedly among themselves and Peter Magoto looked up, startled.

"What are they saying?" Colonel Beaty demanded.

But Magoto didn't even notice him. The redskins were talking louder and louder and finally a group of them withdrew toward the hills. They were riding fast.

Peter Magoto seemed electrified. With a yell and a curse, he spurred his bay and headed toward the garrison. As he thundered away, he called back, "I fought with Andy Jackson, Colonel."

It left us stunned. What his evil little brain was plotting, I couldn't imagine. Gattis had said he stole the powder; somehow I believed it. I have never seen a man who could hate like Peter Magoto.

Colonel Beaty stormed around, and the soldiers were cursing.

Mad Buffalo called to his men and then made a few gestures. The entire band withdrew and rode away.

The colonel straightened himself in the saddle. "Form companies—" he called over his shoulder. "Squadron, forward—march!"

The regiment headed back toward the garrison. Captain LaMonte rode on one side of the colonel and I rode on the other. We didn't talk much. The little half-breed had us all baffled.

THE sun had moved to midafternoon when Colonel Beaty and I came out of his office. The air was hot and sticky. Extra sentry duty had been placed in the blockhouse all afternoon.

We questioned Peter Magoto again. All he said was that the Indians would likely attack. Then his eyes would flutter and he would mumble about fighting with Jackson.

The silence that engulfed the garrison was ominous. Every soldier was cringing, like an animal with his back to the wall. Heat was pouring in from the cloudless sky. The place was too quiet.

Then a sentry's shrill voice sliced into the silence. "Indians!" Instantly the garrison was seething with men. With clock-like precision, every soldier found his place.

Colonel Beaty and I ran to the observation window at the front stockade. Through the haze of heat waves I could see them charging toward us. Colonel Beaty was screaming instructions.

"Make every shot count, men!" And I knew that was important because all the powder had been stolen except a little in the powder horns in the arsenal.

Watching the onslaught of red raiders, I pictured in my mind how it would be. They would fire the front barricade, surround the entire garrison, and start pouring over the walls.

But I was wrong. A good hundred yards from the front walls, they stopped. After a time of talking loudly among themselves, a small group came on foot toward the garrison. They were pushing a small Army wagon, loaded heavily.

"The powder!" someone yelled, and a volley of shots rang out around me. Every Indian helping move the black hell-dust dropped dead.

All was quiet for an instant. Then another group of red men dashed toward the wagon. They pushed it on toward us.

It was an incredible plan that these bitter Choctaws had thought out. A few feet at a time they were bringing destruction closer to the blockhouse. And using an Army wagon loaded with powder at that.

"They're crazy," I yelled to the colonel. "Open the front gates and storm their little powder detail. We can capture it before they know it."

"*You're* crazy, Major," the colonel growled. "They'd like nothing better than for us to open the gates."

Four little groups of redskins died from Dragoon guns, but the powder was only a hundred feet away. If they blasted the blockhouse, the massacre would begin.

I heard footsteps behind. Whirling around, I saw Peter Magoto running up. He grabbed Colonel Beaty's arm.

"Colonel, sir," he said, excited. "I think I can stop them." The colonel looked down at him, surprised.

"Stop them?"

"Yes. Let me through the gate. Quick!"

The colonel's lip curled viciously. "You damned little traitor! You'd like to save your own hide. Get out of my way!" He caught the half-breed by the shoulder and sent him sprawling in the sultry dust.

I looked back at the Indians. Another detail had moved around the wagon. They were preparing to fire it and roll it on down into the blockhouse. Looking up, I saw Peter Magoto climbing onto the scaffold of the front stockade. Two Dragoons raised their muskets and fired at

him. Bue he was already over the stockade. Then he was running toward the Indians.

He was screaming in Choctaw lingo and his hands were held high, carrying something that glistened in the sunlight. I stood frozen. That little fellow had more tricks than I had ever seen.

He talked with the enraged Indians for several seconds. The entire band moved in around him. Then I heard his sharp voice calling to us.

"Colonel Beaty! Can you hear me?" The colonel looked at me questioningly. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Yes, Magoto. I hear you!"

"Now get this!" Magoto screamed. "I have told these red people that Major Thorne is a White Medicine Man who will save their people from the disease. I have told them that the Great Spirit will explode the powder if they try to destroy the garrison." He hesitated.

"Yes, yes, Magoto! Go on!" Colonel Beaty yelled to him.

"They don't believe me—yet. But they will!" He waited a moment.

"Yes, Magoto!" the colonel called again.

Still there was a short silence. Then a scream. *"Yieeeee!"* it sounded. "I am a soldier, Colonel! I fought with Andy Jackson!" The half-breed's voice was shrill and terrorizing. He was doing something with his hands. I couldn't imagine what he was up to.

Then I saw it. The shiny object he was carrying was the phosphorus from my medicine supplies. He was waving his hands, talking loudly in Choctaw, all the time pouring the phosphorus and water onto the wagon load of powder. The Indians seemed awe-stricken at the white waves of heat coming from the drug and his talk of magic. Magoto pushed the wagon toward them, then called over his shoulder.

"At Orleans, Colonel! *Yieeeee!"*

Then the earth belched up as the powder exploded. Chunks of men and dirt flew high into the air. The rumbling sound echoed endlessly through the Kiamichis. I've no idea how many Choctaws were killed.

Every man in the garrison felt the shock, but no one was hurt. I can scarcely realize the devastation wrought by that blast. It takes hot sunshine but a few seconds to heat phosphorus into a blaze. It takes a spark of fire no time at all to heat up a wagon load of gun powder.

Colonel Beaty stared into space for several seconds. I knew that the little man's supreme sacrifice was hitting him hard. His face twisted into the wry, characteristic smile, and he turned to me.

"Well, Major," he said slowly, thoughtfully, "there is one cure for cholera. Phosphorus and gun powder—and a half-breed to administer it."

PETER MAGOTO was right, sir. The Choctaws believed his story about the White Medicine Man. And they had seen the Great Spirit blow up the powder right under their very eyes. Those who were unhurt turned and ran away, screaming, yelling, howling, riding like mad. It is to me almost as a dream. Yet, I saw it.

We have had no trouble with the red men since. Chief *Pushmataha* returned the next week with the caravan of supplies from Fort Smith. The cholera plague is terrible, but those who have been under treatment for a few days seem improved. The Dragoons are getting restless again. Things are quiet. Dragoons like action.

They are still talking among themselves about Peter Magoto. He fooled them. He fooled the Indians. I'm not sure he didn't fool the Great Spirit. He was a strange little man, a magnificent little traitor. And to think—at first sight, you probably wouldn't have noticed him at all.

I have the honor to be yours respectfully, etc.—

(Major Johnathan Thorne,
Detachment Dragoons.)

The Ex-State Trooper Certainly Got Cooperation from the Wild Life About His Retreat

NIGHT SOUNDS

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "The Horse Hunters," etc.

HALFWAY up Pine Hill a fox barked, and through the gathering twilight came the lonely, rolling call of another fox answering. Buck Arvis stopped in his tracks, his lower jaw slack, the better to listen and his face alight with the pleasure that such sounds, though a thousand times repeated, always brought to him.

When the calling foxes were silent, Buck went on through the pine woods. The packsack on his back bulged with the supplies he had bought in Silvertown, and he bent his head into the tumpline. It was twelve miles from his cabin to Silvertown, and the pack was heavy, but Buck's walk was a lithe, springy tread that belied his forty-five years. After walking twenty-four miles, twelve of it with sixty pounds of groceries on his back, he still felt fresh.

It was freedom that did it, he thought, freedom to live exactly how and where he pleased. Throughout his twenty-four years on the State Police he had dreamed of this cabin in the woods, a place where he could live, indulge his taste for hunting and fishing, and not care whether or not he ever earned another penny. His pension of eighty dollars a month would take care of everything. And it had all turned out exactly as he had dreamed. Buck Arvis, the middle-aged man, was really Buck Arvis, the youngster, enjoying life as he had never enjoyed it before. He laughed, and quickened his step as he came to the last turn in the trail.

The morbid shriek of a whip-poor-will came from the creek, and Buck stopped again. But he paused only momentarily now because the cabin was in sight. To-

night, after supper, he would sit outside and listen to the forest noises—a mighty interesting study through which he had learned a great deal of forest lore.

Reaching the log cabin, Buck opened the door and went in. He backed up to a table and let the pack slide down on it, stretching his shoulders as he slid out of the straps and rubbing his forehead where the tumpline had creased it. He felt his way to the stove, took one match from a box, and returned to the table. He struck the match, located a kerosene lamp, lifted the globe off, and lit the wick. He was about to replace the globe when:

"Hi ya, copper," the voice was taunting, provocative, and filled with deadly hate. "I bet you never expected me."

Buck fitted the globe over the sputtering wick and the cabin was filled with light. He turned slowly, and looked squarely into the cocked revolver that Nick Caselli was pointing at his face.

"Remember me?" Nick Caselli asked. "I went to jail fifteen years ago. But I wouldn't have gone if you hadn't given the evidence you did. I got out last month. But all I thought about for fifteen years was what you said on that witness stand. Do you get it, copper? *That's all I thought about.*"

FOR a moment there was absolute silence. It was broken by Buck's laugh, an explosive little sound filled with the scathing contempt he had always felt for Nick Caselli and his kind.

"Sure I remember you," he said coolly. "You're the rat that went up for sliding a knife between your girl's ribs, ain't you? You killed her for three hundred dollars she had in her purse, didn't you, Nick? Hell, yeah, how could I forget anybody so damned dumb as to do the things you did after that? Put away that popgun, Nick. I ain't scared of it."

Sudden rage flitted across Nick Caselli's face, and his finger tightened on the trigger. But he relaxed the pressure. This was his revenge, his great moment. Before he killed him, he wanted to see fear of death on this hated man's face. He said:

"Copper, for fifteen years I been thinking how nice it would be to puncture your guts with a slug."

"Yeah? That's two things you thought of in fifteen years. Pretty good for you, Nick. But only a peanut-brain such as you would come here like this. Did you really think you'd get away with it?"

"You think I won't, huh?"

"You'd probably like to. But—" Buck's eyes strayed toward the clock. "Listen." He placed the palm of his hand in front of his mouth and the hoot of an owl filled the room.

"Oo-oo-oooo-oo."

Almost immediately it was answered from just outside the cabin.

"Oo-ooooo-oo."

Buck looked scornfully at Nick Caselli.

"You must have thought that I'm as big a damned fool as you are, Nick. Hell, I knew you were out. And I figured that the first thing a moron like you would think of was killing the man who saw that you got exactly what you deserved. So I kind of got ready for you. There's men outside the cabin, men who know how to shoot. You heard them answer the signal. Right now they're looking in the windows. So go right ahead and shoot me, Nick. Try it, anyhow."

Nick Caselli's glance darted to the window, and Buck leaped forward. His left hand closed about the gun. His right fist smashed into Nick's stomach, and raised to thud against his jaw. Buck pounded mercilessly, until he had forced Nick Caselli against the farther wall and left him a crumpled heap there. He pried the gun from Nick's fingers, and put it in his pocket.

"All right, Nick," Buck's voice was still calmly contemptuous, "get out of here and be thankful you're walking. If I ever see you within forty miles of Sinking Creek again I'll tear you apart with my hands."

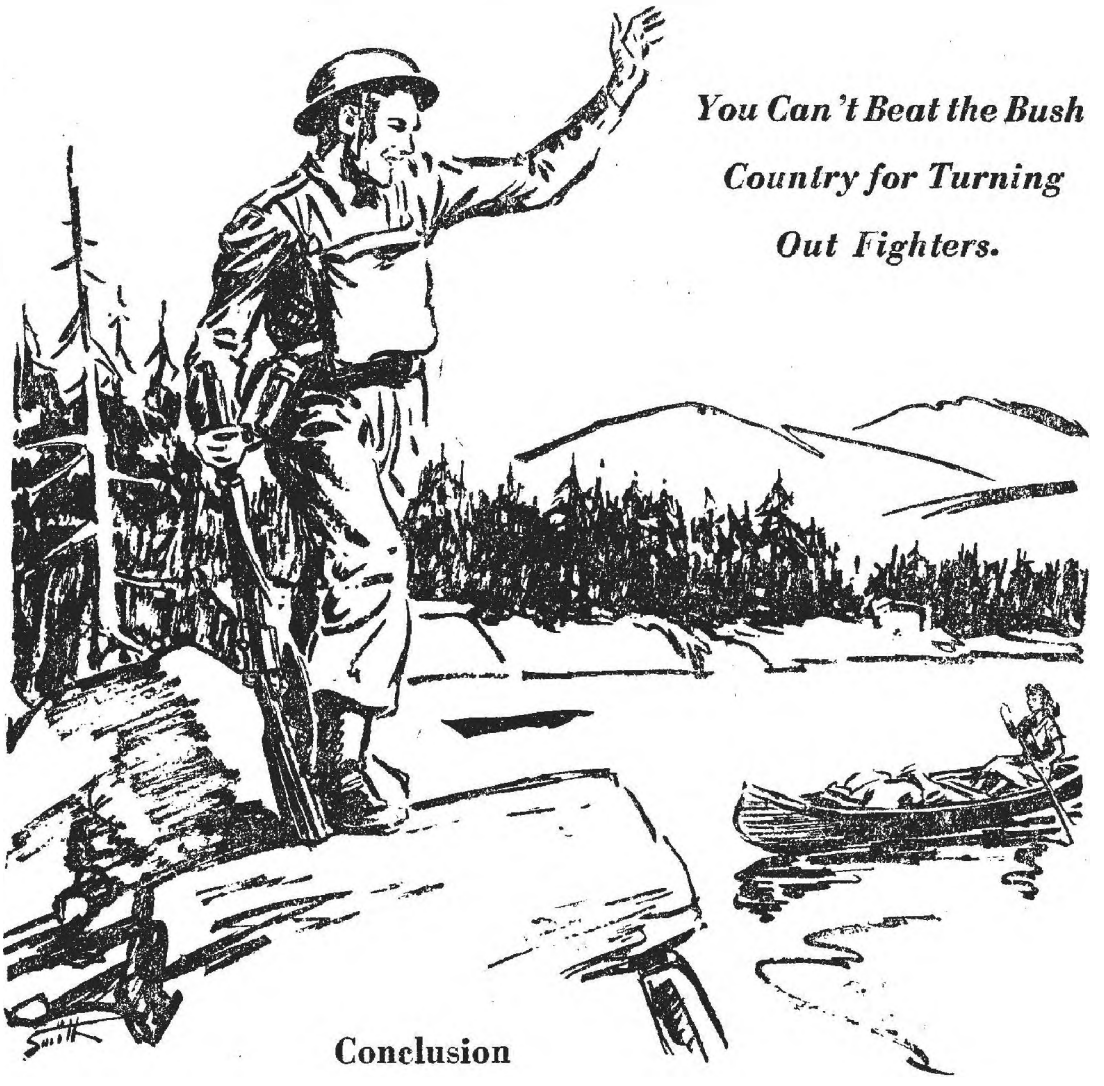
AFTER Nick Caselli had gone, Buck stepped outside. He breathed deeply of the clean air, and listened attentively as the hunting fox called again to its mate. Night noises were fascinating, and certainly told a lot about the creatures that made them. Many of them, though of course lacking any mechanical method of telling time, kept almost exact schedules. For instance, at exactly ten o'clock the fox would be barking from the top of Three Elms Knob. Then there was the owl that came to the tree outside his cabin and hooted at precisely eight o'clock every night.

Buck raised his hand to salute the owl's roost.

"Thanks, Pal," he said.

NEW RIVERS CALLING

By JAMES B. HENDRYX



You Can't Beat the Bush Country for Turning Out Fighters.

Conclusion

CHAPTER XXII

SERGEANT MCVANE ENLISTS A RECRUIT

STAN'S eyes shifted to the three other soldiers in the room, and to the one with the rifle over his shoulder who paced slowly back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the building. Then back to the steel gray eyes of Sergeant Jimmie McVane. He shrugged.

"I can't fight the whole army," he said in a low hard voice. "You've got me, like you said you would. Come on—get it over with."

"Okay," McVane said, drawing a form toward him and reaching for a pen. "Want to enlist, eh? What's the name?"

"What?"

"I said, 'What's your name?' You've got to have a name to enlist in this man's army."

"You—you mean——"

The sergeant spoke under his breath with a glance toward the others in the

room. "I mean I'm a soldier now—not a policeman. We've got a war to win—a damn tough war. You're worth a damn sight more to Canada fighting Germans than you'd be worth in Kingston Penitentiary. As far as I'm concerned you can forget Joe Bedore for the duration. After this show is over, though, you'd better get going. I'll be back in the police again. Murder don't outlaw—and it's just one of those things a policeman never forgets."

"I could never get going," Stan replied sourly. "You know when I got my discharge. And you'd be right there waiting."

"Yeah? Well—it just happens that I wouldn't know when you got your discharge. There's other things beside murder that a policeman don't forget. One of 'em is when some guy risks his chance of making a get-away to save the policeman's life, when from his angle he might better have kept on going and left him to die in the bush. Like I said—I won't know the day you're discharged—but I'll damn well know a week from that day. When you come back from over there and hit Canadian soil again—you'd better hit running."

"Okay, Jimmie. Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I'll get you yet. I'd have got you before this, if it hadn't been for the war."

"You'd have raised hell getting me! You haven't any authority in the States—and even if you had, you'd never been able to find me in the big city."

Jimmie McVane grinned. "Big city—my foot! Slim Taylor tried to put that one over. You've been up beyond the railways. Your kind don't belong in a city. Besides, in a city a young man don't wear a beard."

"What do you mean—beard?" Unconsciously Stan's fingers stroked his smooth jaw.

"I mean the one you had shaved off just before you came in here. You've got a swell tan, Stan—all but your face. That's white as this paper. Come on—what's your name? And where do you live?"

"Stan Novak. That's my mother's name. It's as good as any."

"Residence? And let me give you a tip—you say you've been in the States—why not claim residence there? I don't know whether they check up on enlistments or not. But you've got to name your next of kin so they can notify 'em in case you get knocked off. I'd hate to have 'em find out who you are and stick you in jail before I get a crack at you. I owe you one for breaking my arm."

"You enlisting Americans?"

"Hell, yes! We'll take anyone that can carry a gun."

"All right—make it Chicago, U.S.A."

"Chicago, *Illinois,* U.S.A." McVane corrected. "If you're going to be an American you don't want to forget a little thing like a state. And you better get hold of a book, or a map and find out something about Chicago—like the names of some streets and buildings. There's lot of Americans in this man's army. You might run onto some of 'em."

"Suppose I run onto some of the boys from Blind River or Thessalon?"

"You're not apt to. Most of 'em enlisted early and have gone across. I'd be over there, myself, if they hadn't shoved me into this damn recruiting job. How about this next of kin?"

"Make it John Novak. That'll keep 'em busy if they try to check up on me. Chicago's as full of Novaks as Dublin is of Kellys. My mother came from there."

"Okay. Any particular branch of the service you'd prefer?"

"No—just so it's something that will get me across where I can get a crack at those heinies. I sure as hell don't want to stay here at the Soo."

"I'll put you down for infantry preference. You can handle a rifle. That's my choice, too. Jack wanted to fly. He's in the R. A. F."

"Yeah, I heard about it in Blind River.

According to what they say, he's going good."

"Yup—thirteen planes to his credit. It might be the making of him. I sure hope so."

"Hell about Jim Cavendish, isn't it?"

"Yeah—the crooks! But we haven't got started yet. Just wait till the Americans get in!"

"You really think they'll come in?"

"I know damn well they will. They came in last time — and this is worse. They've got to come in. And believe me —when they do that damned Hitler's going to wish he'd kept on hanging paper! He started out to lick the world—but he's bloody well going to find out he's bit off more than he can chaw."

"This time I hope they let us mop up on the damn Germans—not let 'em off to start another war—like they did last time."

"You bet! I guess they've learned their lesson, all right. After this is over I've got a hunch that Germany'll never be in shape to start another war."

"I sure wish we could get into the same outfit, Jimmie," Stan said. "But I don't suppose that's possible."

"Don't be too sure about that. My captain's a swell guy. He knows I'm itching to get across. So does the colonel. There's a division shaping up, right now. It might be that we'll be going across together, and if we do maybe I can rig it so we'll be in the same company." The sergeant paused, a wry grin twisting his lips. "I don't want to let you get as far away from me as you did, last summer."

Chapter XXIII

LONDON

A SOLDIER conducted Stan and two other recruits to Depot, where he received a thorough medical examination, took the oath of allegiance, was given a regimental number, and taken to Quartermaster Stores where he received a complete outfit of military clothing and necessities. A draft was made up next day, and he was off to Basic Training Camp. Here he was assigned to a platoon consisting of forty men commanded by a junior officer, a platoon sergeant, a corporal, and a lance corporal.

Then for two months, from six-thirty in the morning until four-forty-five in the afternoon, he drilled, marched, practiced with rifle, pistol, anti-tank rifle, machine-gun, bayonet, anti-aircraft gun, and learned something of first aid, fieldcraft, and map reading.

In the middle of September he was transferred with a draft to an Advanced Training center, and it was there that Jimmie McVane caught up with him.

At Basic center all units had received the same training. Now for the first time, they were broken up for special training in the branch of service to which each individual had been assigned, Engineers, Artillery, Armored Corps, Ordnance, and Infantry.

Lined up for the first time on the drill ground Stan's heart leaped at sight of his new platoon sergeant. Somehow Jimmie had worked it! Jimmie's was the first familiar face he had seen since he had left the Soo and his heart warmed at the thought that soldiering wouldn't be so bad, side by side with Jimmie McVane. His lips tightened in the suppression of a smile as his eyes met the steel gray eyes of the man with the three stripes on his sleeve. The humor of the situation struck him forcibly. Here was the man who, for more than a year, he had feared more than any other—the man who was hunting him down to bring him back and throw him into jail to answer for a crime he had never committed—the man who had forced him to abandon his way of life and to hide in the bush far beyond the outposts of civilization. And now his heart warmed to him as it would have warmed at sight of a long lost brother—despite the fact that as soon as the war was over, Jimmie would

again be on his trail. He had promised that—there in the recruiting office in the Soo. And Stan knew that Jimmie would keep that promise, even as he knew he would keep his promise to give him a week's start from the day he received his discharge. Time enough to worry about that. There was a war to be won first. And according to the radio, and the newspapers, and the things the officers told them, it was a damn tough war. He was glad that Jimmie McVane and he would be buddies. Jimmie he knew was capable, and tough. He and Jimmie spoke the same language. Most of the others were from cities, and towns, and farms. They would be good soldiers when their training was finished—good enough to lick Hitler and his damned Germans. But—they were different. Jimmie McVane was a bush man. Jimmie was all right. He would go through hell and high water for Jimmie McVane. If it hadn't been for Jimmie, he'd never have known Helene—Helene with the bright red feather in her hair.

It didn't take long for the regiment to find out that McVane was a tough sergeant. Other platoons went through their training in a more or less perfunctory routine, and the men came to look upon members of McVane's platoon with a sort of pity. When they dug a hundred yards of weapon pits, McVane's platoon dug two hundred. When they marched twenty miles under equipment, McVane's men marched thirty.

But this pity died quickly when they met McVane's men on the football field. They found out then that not only McVane was tough—his men were tough—plenty tough—and McVane was tougher than any of his men.

The special infantry training included rifle practice and care, bayonet fighting, light machine-gun handling, and advanced training in the use of special infantry weapons, the mortar, hand and rifle grenades, tommy-gun, and digging tools.

Stan picked himself up and recovered his rifle one day after a ten minute go at bayonet practice against the sergeant. It seemed to him that McVane had been particularly rough—rougher than with any of the others. Every muscle in his body felt sore, and sullen resentment glowed in his eyes. There were no others near at the moment.

"You don't need to half kill a man to show him how to pull that trick," he growled under his breath.

"Yeah? Well your guts are still where they belong, aren't they? They wouldn't have been if I'd been a German and you didn't know that trick. It's a damn sight better to be half killed here than killed over there. What the hell do you think this is—a ping-pong game?"

"But, Jimmie—I couldn't gut even a German!"

"The hell you couldn't! You won't be saying that six months from now. This is a war. And the damned Germans have torn up all the rules! Look what their Luftwaffe's doing to England—bombing hell out of non-combatants, murdering old men, and women, and children in their own homes in London, and dozens of other non-military cities. Bombing hospitals!

"I know what the boys are saying about me—don't ever think I don't. They say I'm tough. And they're right. I'm going to keep on being tough. And when I get through with 'em, my men will be tough—tougher than the Germans. And I'm tougher with you than with any of the others. Do you suppose I want some damned Heinie to gut you before I get the chance to bring you in for knifing Joe Bedore! Not by a damn sight I don't."

Stan's scowl twisted into a slow grin. "Okay, Jimmie. But look out you don't make me too tough. Remember what happened up there on Minnechenaqua. Maybe you're gumming your own game."

"I'll take a chance," McVane retorted, a grin curling his own lips. "Some day, somewhere back in the bush there's liable

to be one hell of a fight. But first we've got to polish off the Heinies."

IT WAS the eighteenth of November when the outfit embarked. The second day out the fog lifted as Stan stood beside Jimmie McVane at the rail. Other ships of the convoy became visible, one by one. McVane grinned and pointed to a destroyer that passed close.

"American," he said. "They aren't in the war yet—but they're coming in, step by step. President Roosevelt turned fifty destroyers over to the British Navy a couple of months ago. Then he approved the selective service. And here they are helping to convoy Canadian troops across the ocean, under the American flag. It won't be long, now, before they're in. They're no damn fools. They know that if Britain falls, they fall, too. Hitler's out to conquer the world—and if the Americans don't come in, he'll bloody well do it."

In the huge army camp not so far from London Jimmie McVane accosted Stan one evening in the doorway of the barrack room.

"Put in for a forty-eight, Friday night, and we'll go up to the city. I got word from Jack. He brought down his fortieth plane. And the King's going to decorate him Saturday. I'd kind of like to be there and see it. Like to see what London looks like, too—after the pounding they've been taking."

Stan agreed. "Okay. Cripes—think of it Jimmie—seeing London! Funny how a guy will always hear about a place and never think he'll see it—and then something turns up and he gets the chance to. We'll see the King, too."

"I went up to Sudbury and saw 'em both when they were in Canada awhile back. Lizzy's a damn good looking gal—but he ain't so much to look at."

"Forty planes, eh? Jack's a fighting fool. I heard about him and Rose Brady being engaged. I'll bet she'll be proud when she hears about him getting decorated by the King."

The sergeant shot him a sidewise glance. "Yeah? Do you think Rose really cares for Jack?"

"Maybe not. But she sure as hell really cares for Rose. She'll be proud of the decoration—not of Jack. All the rest of Blind River and Thessalon, too, knows exactly how many planes Jack has shot down—but not Rose."

"She used to be pretty strong for you till you lammed out, that night."

"She was strong for the ten bucks a day I could make running a saw in the mill. Does she think I knifed Bedore?"

"Far as I know she's never come out with what she thinks, one way or another. A lot of people in Blind River and Thessalon don't think you did it, Stan—they come right out and say so. I wouldn't believe it myself if Jack and Bill Crosby hadn't seen the knife in your hand. I'm not saying you intended to knife him, nor that you even know you did it. You were so damn drunk that night you don't remember what happened."

Stan shrugged. "Okay. You sure don't have to worry about getting killed in this war. No gun Hitler's got would even dent that thick skull of yours. I'll go over and put in for that forty-eight. I'll be proud as you are to see the King pin a medal on Jack for shooting down those planes. It's a cinch no one will ever pin a medal on him for telling the truth."

It was early in the morning when the two reached London. For hours they wandered about the streets where, save for the scarcity of motor cars, life seemed to be going on about as usual, despite the fact that the city had been visited the night before with a particularly heavy air raid. They would walk seemingly for miles without seeing any evidence of the bombings, stopping in now and then at a pub for a glass of beer. Then they would turn a corner and for a half a block only masses of rubble, from which protruded broken

beams and bits of smashed furniture, remained of what had once been small shops, and the homes of the poor. Other shops stood windowless with fronts agape, their wares still displayed on the shelves, the proprietors behind the counters. Over one doorless shop hung a rudely painted sign: OPEN AS USUAL, while next door, on a board thrust into a pile of rubble before a shop with the whole front blown out were the painted words: MORE OPEN THAN USUAL.

Stan pointed to the sign. "You can't lick people like that," he said. "They can take it."

Jimmie McVane nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah—but it's giving it that wins a war —not taking it. Just you wait till we start dishing this out in Berlin."

They came to a corner where a whole block had been roped off. Two ambulances were drawn up close to the ropes, and several firemen and bobbies were on duty keeping people outside the roped area. Lines of hose were criss-crossed in the street and smoke issued from beyond gaunt brick walls. Even as the two looked a fireman staggered from the ruin carrying a burden which he deposited gently upon a stretcher laid on the sidewalk. Two bearers picked up the stretcher and trotted toward the ambulance beside which the two were standing. They looked as the bearers slid the stretcher into the ambulance. A young girl, her skirt burned completely off, her legs and one hand charred to a charcoal lay on the stretcher. Stan turned away, retching violently. "My God," he mumbled, when Jimmie joined him a moment later.

"Her eyes were open—and she was breathing!"

THE ceremony in the afternoon was impressive. Flight Commander Jack McVane and three others received decorations from the King. After it was over the two sought out Jack who had joined a group of flyers who had attended the ceremony. At sight of Stan, Jack gave a start.

Stepping aside the two brothers shook hands. "Good stuff, Jack," Jimmie said.

"We're giving 'em hell," Jack replied, his eyes questioningly upon Stan's face.

"This is Private Novak, Jack—for the duration. After the show is over he'll be Stan Klaska again—trying to keep about four jumps ahead of Corporal McVane, of the Ontario Provincial Police."

Jack nodded slowly. "I see," he said. "I—I wish him luck." Then he turned and stepped toward a waiting car into which several airmen had already crowded.

CHAPTER XXIV

COMMANDO

IN JANUARY Stan was promoted to corporal. A few days later Jimmie joined him as they walked back from tommy-gun practice.

"I'm quitting this outfit tomorrow—I hope," he said, "that is, I'm quitting it if I can pass."

Stan stopped stock still and eyed the other. "What do you mean—quitting the outfit? And what have you got to pass?"

"Examinations. And believe me they're plenty tough."

"You mean you're going to try for a commission?"

"To hell with a commission. Commandos."

"Commandos!"

"Sure. Damned if I'm going to hang around here all winter if I can help it.

Those babies are seeing action—and believe me, they're plenty tough. They're hit and run boys—raiding the coasts—Norway and France—do all the damage they can; then beat it back to the boats. I've had my eye on 'em for quite awhile. It's hard to get in—damn hard. They only take about one in ten who volunteer. And after they're in, only five out of every hundred make the grade. Captain Thorne fixed it up for me, and I had a talk with Colonel Newman, of the Commandos. He's a Territorial himself—swell chap, and believe me, he knows his onions. He said we should report tomorrow for the examination."

"We?"

"Sure—you and me. I told him there was another damn good bush man in our outfit that was raring to go. Told him how you handled Pussy Hare up there on Nemegos Lake."

"You heard about that?"

"Sure, from Slim Taylor and the inspector both."

"And I suppose that's another black mark against me—sousing Hare in the lake and making him throw away his gun."

McVane grinned. "The inspector loves you for it. It gave him just the chance he was looking for to kick Hare off the force. Even his M. P. uncle couldn't keep him on after that. If we can make good with the Commandos it'll give us a chance to even up the score—for Jim Cavendish, and that girl they put in the ambulance."

"Okay. What are we waiting for? Let's go."

The Commandos are a motley crew. Like no other military force ever conceived or assembled, they are made up not only of British nationals, with a sprinkling of Americans, but of picked men from the occupied countries — countries that have been ground under the iron heel of the German invaders. Hard, silent men—men whose smoldering eyes reflect the abysmal hatred in their souls. Poles, Norwegians, Frenchmen, Hollanders, Belgians, Balkans —men whose homes have been burned, whose wives and sweethearts and daughters have been ruthlessly violated. Men whose fathers, mothers, and sons have been butchered, or relegated to die amid the unspeakable filth, and misery, and starvation of the civilian concentration camps. Men whose fingers itch to bury themselves with German blood. Men who live for vengeance, and for vengeance alone. Men who expect no future, nor want any. Men who dare not face a future beyond this war. My wife?—my sweetheart?—my daughter?—where is she? Has death mercifully claimed her? Or—or——? My mother—was she kicked and beaten to death—or did she die of starvation? My little son—my baby—his childish prattle —the laughter in his eyes—the touch of his warm moist hand—*what did they do to him? Damn them! What did they do to him?* Future for these men? The strong iron bars of a madhouse. So they ask no future—only the present—and the chance to avenge—to die killing.

There was no perfunctory training in the Commando camp. For twelve, fourteen, and even sixteen hours a day grim purposeful men sweated and strained to perfect themselves in every trick of the art of killing. Men and officers trained together, and the officers had to be tougher than the men. They learned the hard way —by actual physical contact, not by the printed page. There were no married men, save those whose wives had fallen into the hands of the Nazis. They carried on where the routine military training left off, and they worked grimly, with no laughter on their lips—no joy in their hearts. Professionals instructed them in the arts of boxing, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu.

Each man had to be better than good with the pistol, the rifle and the tommy-gun. They learned to swim streams in full equipment and keep their rifles dry. And they learned all the tricks of the knife kill. Wide latitude was allowed in the selection of the knife, each man to his prefer-

ence. There were straight blades and curved blades, wide blades and narrow. There were long thin stiletto-like blades, and blades short and thick as cleavers. But all were deadly—deadly and razor sharp —to reach German hearts.

They learned how to slip up on a man and garrote him with a loop of fine steel wire before he could utter a sound. How to slip silently up behind a sentry in the dark.

They learned how to travel barefoot through the forest, noiselessly, day or night, to live on little food, to do without water. They learned to scale walls, and to throw hand grenades with the underhand technique of the soft ball pitcher —and they were only called good when they could unerringly toss a grenade through an ordinary window at one hundred feet. They learned to blow up bridges and buildings with dynamite, how to hastily construct self-igniting grenades out of a couple of empty bottles, a little sugar, potassium chlorate, battery acid, and gasoline. And how to make sticky grenades out of three or four pounds of dynamite, cordite, or T.N.T. with fuse attached in a sock tied up with a string and covered with a coat of heavy grease which tripled its detonating power. They learned how to land from attack boats and instantly spread out in a carefully ordered disorder the instant the flat front was let down, and how most effectively to cut through barbed wire entanglements. And in the evenings they studied the Morse and International codes, wireless, and the making and reading of maps.

In the evenings, also were shown the "hate films"—pictures smuggled out of the occupied countries of actual scenes from concentration camps, from prisons, and from the rape and looting of cities. A few were motion pictures—but for the most part they were stills, projected upon a screen.

On the screen one evening, flashed a series of pictures from Poland—the shooting of a dozen civilians by a German firing squad. The prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs, were marched from a jail and lined up against a wall, the various faces depicting misery, defiance, and stark terror. The firing squad took its stand, and at a word from a captain who stood off to one side, puffs of smoke belched from the muzzles of the guns, and the prisoners fell to the ground. At that point Zegota Krasinski, a huge Pole leaped from his bench, charged upon the screen, and with his hands tore at the spot where the German captain had stood when he gave the order to fire.

"Mine father!" he cried, hysterically. "They shoot mine father! I kill—I kill. Mine father is old man—can do Germans no harm! I kill all Germans I see!" It was with difficulty that he was restrained and forced back to his seat.

ONE evening after mess Stan and Jimmie McVane strolled into a pub in the village adjacent to the camp, and seated themselves at a table. Other men were seated at tables—two aged farmers, sipping their 'ahf-and-'ahf, as they eyed, half curiously, half fearfully the men at other tables—moody, hard-faced foreign looking men from the camp who drank in brooding silence, with darkly smoldering eyes.

When the barmaid came McVane ordered a bottle of beer.

"I'll take whiskey," Stan said. "By God, I need a good stiff drink. That big Greek who was showing me how to toss a man over my shoulder and shoot him before he hit the ground damn near killed me."

"I didn't exactly have a snap today, myself. Knife practice. I traded that big Serb with the scar on his chin out of a thick-bladed curved knife that would cut a horse in two. And he was showing me some tricks with it."

Stan drew his hunting knife from its sheath and ran his thumb along the razor-sharp blade. "I'll take a chance on this baby," he said. "I'm more used to it."

McVane's lips twisted into a grin. "You ought to be. When it comes to killing, you're one up on me."

"Still think I killed Bedore, eh?"

"Got to, Stan—till the jury says you didn't."

The door opened and a man stepped into the room, a tall, broad-shouldered man with pink cheeks and large soft brown eyes.

"There's that American Marine captain," Stan said. "Look at that face. He's pretty as a girl."

"The Germans won't think he's pretty when he gets a holt of one," McVane said. "Those Marines are tough babies, and don't let anyone tell you different. I've had him twice—once with the gloves, and once wrestling, and he damn near took me apart. He's pretty, all right—pretty like a two-ton bomb! Claims he's over here to learn something—but damned if I know what it would be—he knows all the tricks now."

The Marine caught McVane's eye, smiled and walked to the table. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Sit down and welcome, Captain. What will you have? This is Stan Novak."

The captain smiled and slipped into a chair. "I know Novak. We were comparing calouses on our feet the other night when we made that barefoot hike."

The barmaid paused beside his chair and he ordered whiskey. Officers and men mingle socially in the Commandos. They drink, smoke, and hob-nob together. Only on a raid is there a difference, and then iron-bound discipline is the unvaried rule. He reached out and picked up the hunting knife Stan had laid on the table. Noticing the milled cap at the end of the hilt he unscrewed it.

"Damn good idea," he approved "Waterproof match box and compass right in the handle, eh? Looks like an effective weapon, too," he added, running his thumb along the keen edge.

"I like it," Stan said. "Maybe when we graduate from this high school for murder I'll get a chance to try it out."

"Murder?" The soft brown eyes searched his face.

Stan grinned. "That's what they'd call it if we used any of the tricks we're learning, back home."

The captain nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. They would. A hell of a lot of men are being taught how to kill. It isn't the tricks they learn—hell, anyone could figure out how to kill a man if he wanted to. Hand to hand killing is going to become commonplace before this show's over. It's the mental attitude I'm thinking about. Some of the men are bound to go back into civil life with their perspective so twisted that killing won't seem like much of a crime. It's just one of those things, I suppose. The natural aftermath of this kind of a war." The barmaid brought the whiskey, and the captain held up his glass. "To our luck," he said, and downed it in a swallow. "Fill 'em up again," he ordered, handing the glass to the maid. "The Commandos are the tough boys of a tough war. Ninety percent of 'em are picked because they hate. Look into the faces, here at the tables—Poles, Serbs, Norwegians—men of the occupied countries. And every one of 'em hold an intense personal hatred for every German, because the Germans have seized their property, murdered those they held dearer than life itself. The Germans set the pace in this war. They have made murder a national pastime—the wanton murder of civilian populations. I haven't the slightest compunction in the world against killing Nazis with my hands, or in any way it's possible to kill them. Not because of any personal hatred—but because I know that if they should win this war they'll conquer the world—and my property would be seized, and my loved ones butchered—for they hate us Americans with an especial hatred. They have sown the wind, and believe me, they will reap the whirlwind. When Hitler begins to slip, the people in the occupied countries

are going to rise up, and a red tide of hate and reprisal will sweep over Europe. There will be a million murders in the wake of the retreating Germans."

"Any less would be too few," Jimmie McVane said.

"Only by means of force—by means of the Gestapo, and the Black Shirts, and by the murder of hostages, is Germany controlling the occupied countries. When that force begins to crack up the Germans will pay through the nose for their record of destruction, and torture, and starvation, and rape, and murder. Then the downtrodden will rise up, and Germans will be hunted in the streets, and in the fields and in the forests. They will be murdered in attics, and cellars, and in the darkness of alleys—and the nights will be hideous with the death screams of the craven Herrenvolk."

"Here's to the avengers!" Stan said, raising the glass the barmaid set before him. "I wish them luck."

"It's a break for us that Hitler jumped Russia," McVane said. "I was afraid after they signed that pact, the Russians would be in on Germany's side—not that they'd prob'ly amount to much."

The captain shot him a sidewise glance. "Don't be too sure about that. I've got the hunch, based on mighty good information that Russia is going to surprise the world. Attacking Russia was Hitler's second big mistake. His first was in not invading England right on the heels of Dunkirk. Either mistake would have been bad enough—both will be fatal."

"Things haven't been going so good in Africa," McVane said. "The Italians are helping Hitler there. I sure hope you Americans come in before it's too late."

"We'll be in—don't worry. You can forget the Italians. They never licked anyone but a bunch of Negroes. The British have chased 'em out of Ethiopia already. Hell, the Greeks would have made 'em jump in the sea, if Hitler hadn't backed 'em up. We've already landed a force in Iceland. Roosevelt and Churchill didn't meet out there in the Atlantic for nothing. And now our Navy has orders to sink any submarines found in U. S. waters. Each step is a step nearer war. The powder's in the keg. All that's needed is the spark to touch it off—and the spark is inevitable."

THE spark came, even sooner than the captain realized. One cold foggy evening a week later, as the captain slogged into camp with a platoon, a huge Pole rushed up to him, snatched him off his feet and tossed him into the air as he would have tossed a baby.

"America—she come in de war!" he shouted. "De Jap bomb America — sink many ship! Kill t'ousan' sailor!"

That night, in the pub, everyone bought him drinks. Stan and Jimmie McVane were there, and for the first time since he joined the Commandos Stan saw the light of hope in the eyes of the somber men—heard laughter from their lips, and heard the weird chant of their folk songs. At midnight they helped the captain back to quarters and put him to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

NIGHT RAID

IT WAS Christmas night. At the tables in the little pub, grim-faced men sat drinking. There was no laughter—no hilarity—only drinking—and at the tables low-voiced guttural mutterings. The radio on the shelf behind the bar had announced the fall of Wake Island and the capitulation of Hong Kong. The Japs were attacking the Philippines and Guam.

Lieutenant Joyce stirred his whiskey and soda, and glanced across the table at the American captain of Marines. Jimmie McVane and Stan made up the four at the table. "It's a hell of a Christmas," the lieutenant said gloomily. "Last year I was on leave. So was my younger brother,

Bryan. He was flying with Paddy Finescue's outfit. My sisters were home, and we gathered around the fireplace and sang carols."

"I was home, too," the captain said. "In Michigan. We had a tree all decorated and lit with colored bulbs, and there were presents on it. There was even a present for Jake, my big Chesapeake dog—a big bone with plenty of meat on it all done up in fancy paper. We made him open it himself, and he strung paper all over the house."

"Never heard of a Chesapeake dog," Joyce said. "Is it some kind of a hound?"

"Hound—hell! Duck dog—cold water retriever."

"How about you, McVane, where were you last Christmas?" Joyce asked.

"Camp Borden. Had a dance that night—lots of girls, and plenty of whoopee."

The lieutenant glanced at Stan. "And you?"

Stan grinned as his eyes met Jimmie McVane's. "Sorry," he said, "but anything I could say might give aid and comfort to the enemy."

Noticing the glance, the captain grinned. "Probably poaching on McVane's gal, while he was off in camp."

McVane shrugged. "He's welcome. I never was much of a hand with the ladies."

"And this year," Joyce said, moodily sipping his drink, "there is no tree, and no carols. And for Christmas presents, you get the loss of Wake Island, and we get the fall of Hong Kong. I'm glad I didn't get leave, this year. It wouldn't be the same. My older brother, Mike, was killed at Derna in April. And last month they shot Bryan down somewhere over the continent."

"I've got a kid brother in the R.A.F.," McVane said. "He got decorated by the King after he shot down his fortieth plane."

"More power to him," Joyce replied. "I hope he makes it a hundred and forty!"

"The air boys are getting all the action," the captain said. "I wish they'd let us get a crack at the beasts."

"Me, too," Stan said. "I'm getting fed up with all this practice. Why the hell can't they let us practice what we've learned on the damn Heinies?"

"There's an old platitude to the effect that practice makes perfect," the captain said. "And we want to be damn near perfect when we hit 'em. But it's like football—once in a while some coach makes the mistake of overtraining his men. Then the whole squad goes stale on him."

"Pickle your souls in patience," Joyce grinned. "It won't be long, now. I had a talk with the major, last night."

"Something cooking?" the captain asked, eagerly.

Joyce nodded. "Yes. And it smells like a German goose. Don't drink too much tonight. That's all I've got to say. A tommy-gun and a few grenades beat a hangover all to hell—where we're going."

Planes droned overhead. From a distance came the sound of an explosion, and then the ack-ack opened up.

"Just a bunch of Heinies with another Christmas present," McVane said. "At that, we're beginning to hear more of our planes than theirs, now. And there's a sprinkling of American planes among 'em, too."

"There'll be a damn sight more than a sprinkling when we get going," the captain said. "We're a big country, and we've been too damn complacent. Too many people listened to the damned pacifists and isolationists who kept telling 'em that this wasn't our show. But since Pearl Harbor they damn well know it's our show. We sure got caught with our pants down, but we'll pull 'em up again—thank God, they didn't cut our suspenders! When we go all out for total war, things will begin to hum."

"The isolationists probably thought they were right," Joyce said.

"Some of 'em undoubtedly did. Most of 'em though were just willing to let

George do it. Before December seventh it was charitable to give 'em the benefit of the doubt. But not since Pearl Harbor. They know now that this war was forced on us. That it is as much our war as England's war, and that if England falls, we fall, too—and they are no longer pacifists. If there's an isolationist or a pacifist left in America now, they're that way either because they haven't got a brain in their head to think with, or else they remain that way through selfishness or downright cowardice. I know the kind—they won't dare to come right out with what they think—now we're in the war. But they'll do everything in their power to keep their sons out of the armed forces. They'll be perfectly willing to see other people's sons go and fight to protect them from German slavery—but not their sons! Cowardice—contemptible selfishness—that's all it is. And believe me, if the war should go against us, and Hitler's hordes should overrun America, they would be the Quislings—the first ones to jump on the German bandwagon, and get themselves jobs helping the Reich to Naziize America. Not because they believe in Nazism, but because it will save their hides—they won't be jailed, or raped, or murdered."

"Nice people," Stan grinned.

"That's the hell of it," the captain replied. "A lot of 'em are considered nice people—by those who don't take the trouble to see through 'em."

LIEUTENANT JOYCE called McVane aside after mess the next noon. "Make up a list of forty names, Sergeant, and bring it over to my quarters in an hour. I'll make a similar list, and we'll compare notes. Every man has got to be good."

Sergeant McVane saluted, and turned away. An hour later he tapped on the lieutenant's door. Joyce placed the two lists side by side upon his table and bent over them. Presently he looked up with a grin. "Thirty-five names appear on both lists," he said. "The other ten are all good men. We'll take two from each list, and toss a coin for the fortieth." Stepping to the cabinet he took down a bottle and two glasses. "Come on, we'll throw a drink into us, and go talk to the Major. He's got a sweet little job all worked out for us."

Major Blamey looked up from the map spread out on his desk. He came directly to the point. "There are two objectives here, gentlemen," he said, placing a finger on the map. "A short-wave radio station and a barrack. Our information is that sixty soldiers are stationed here under a captain. You are to surprise the barrack, taking the captain alive for questioning, if possible, and destroy the station and all equipment. You, Joyce, will command the expedition, with Sergeant McVane second in command. I suggest that, upon landing, you divide your force, you to attack the barrack, and McVane the radio installment. Work as swiftly as possible, and when the objectives are accomplished, retire at once to the boats. I would advise putting the radio out of commission as quickly as possible to prevent the broadcasting of an alarm, as there is a considerable ground and air force stationed here at this point, within fifteen miles of your objective. Two competent guides, brothers, and natives of the village will accompany you." He paused and turned to McVane. "Is everything clear? Lieutenant Joyce and I have been over this before, so he is familiar with the action."

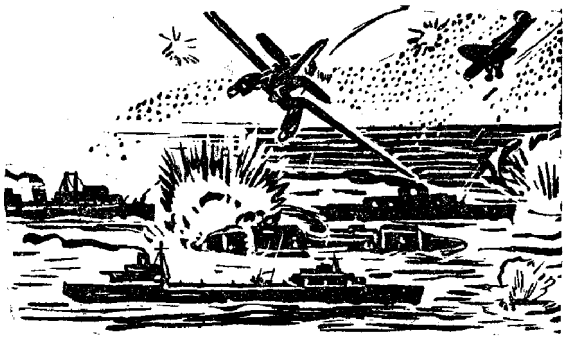
"Yes, sir," McVane said. "I understand."

"Very well. Good luck to you. You will start at dusk. A destroyer will convey you across the channel and stand offshore to await your return."

Outside the Major's door, Joyce handed McVane a paper. "Here is the list, Sergeant. Notify the men to assemble on the beach with full equipment, directly after mess."

McVane watched Stan toss a 190-pound

man over his shoulder as the other came at him in a crouch. He grinned. "Pretty neat," he approved. "Tonight maybe you'll get the chance to toss a Hun." One by one the selected men were notified as McVane passed among them at their work on the rifle and pistol range, on the obstacle race track, at the barbed wire section. And as each man heard the words his eyes lighted with eager expectancy. Here, at last, was the justification for all the days and weeks and months of gruelling work. Particularly Jimmie McVane noticed the eyes of Zegota Krasinski, the big Pole, who had gone beserk in the assembly room the night he saw, on the projection screen, his own father stood up against a wall and shot with twelve other helpless civilians by a German firing squad. There was no eager expectancy in the Pole's eyes—only smouldering hate. For a full minute he stood in tight-lipped silence, his huge fists clenching and unclenching, as a big blue vein swelled upon his forehead till it stood out like a whipcord. God help the Heinie he gets his hands on, McVane thought, as he passed on to notify the next man.



Disappointment and glances of envy showed in the faces of the men not selected. But there was no grumbling. They knew they couldn't all go. Their turn would come. They tore into the work with renewed vigor.

IT WAS a capable platoon that drew up on the beach for inspection in the early dusk of the short December day. Hard-eyed, and hard of body, each man trained to the acme of physical perfection—each man with the heart to kill—each man armed to the teeth with pistol, tommy-gun, grenades, and knife. McVane and Joyce passed among them swiftly inspecting equipment, for beside their weapons each man must carry matches in a waterproof box, wire cutters, first aid kit, flashlight, a coil of wire, and a gas mask. In addition many carried hatchets thrust beneath their belts. In addition, six of the men were issued five pounds each of dynamite together with caps and fuse, while McVane and Joyce added tear gas grenades to their own equipment.

Joyce gave an order, and the men marched swiftly and silently aboard the landing boat, a steel-sided affair, with the flat steel front let down, apron-like onto the beach. The front was hoisted, the screw, powered by a muffled Diesel motor, churned in reverse, and the boat backed away from the shore, swung in a wide arc, and headed out into the chop of the channel toward the dark hulk of the destroyer that lay a mile off the coast.

Huddled against the steel sides the men sat, grim and determined in their dark military blouses, brown pants, and flat steel hats camouflaged with netting. A low-voiced sentence, a short-clipped nervous laugh, the flare of an occasional match as some man lit a cigarette—but for the most part silence, save for the slap-slap of the little waves against the barge-like bow. The motor slowed, there was a metallic scraping and bumping, and the men swarmed up the ladders onto the deck of the destroyer. Davits swung outward, and the landing boat was hoisted aboard. There was a low rumbling deep down in the bowels of the ship, and the men, lined up at the rail, watched the coast of England slowly disappear into nothingness.

There was no smoking now. The flare of a match, even the glow of a cigarette might bring swift death swooping out of

the skies. On the deck the Commandos busied themselves blackening their faces, or with the small pocket oilstones putting the finishing touches to the razor-sharp edges of their knives.

In the chartroom Joyce and McVane bent over a map with the two guides—Frenchmen who spoke English.

"It is this way," one of them explained. "We will land here in the cove. It is two miles from the village. We will go, each company by a different route. The Germans are quartered in the church. The radio station is in the house of my brother here. The captain in command is quartered in the house—in a bedroom on the ground floor at the west side. Armand will accompany the sergeant and his men, who will swing to the left, and approach the village through the forest while I will lead the other company to the right, and we will enter the other side of the village by a lane that passes directly behind the church. Armand will lead the sergeant's company directly to his house which is at the edge of the village, and also upon the edge of the forest. They should arrive there five minutes before we reach the church."

JOYCE nodded. "Okay. When we reach the church, we will liquidate any sentries, surround the building, and wait. In the meantime, Sergeant, you proceed against the radio station. Take the captain alive, if possible, and demolish the house and all equipment. Then join us immediately. If you blow the place up, the noise of the explosion will undoubtedly cause the garrison to pour out of the church where we will be waiting for them. If not we will use other methods. The night is clear and we must use extreme caution. If we are discovered before our mission is accomplished, we'll be in for the devil's own time. There'll be planes and motor troops here from the big camp, fifteen miles back. The chances are we would be cut off from our boat. I think we both understand what that means."

The destroyer slowed to a stop. At the rail the men could see the dark blur of the shoreline. The landing boat was lowered into the sea and the men clambered down the ladders and took their places. A black-faced crew, looking like some fantastic conception of demons from hell. As the boat moved toward the shore they removed their shoes and tied them about their necks.

The landing boat nosed up onto the beach, the front lowered noiselessly, and the men split into two sections and silently disappeared.

Stan Klaska walked beside Jimmie McVane, directly behind the guide. Behind them, Indian file, trailed nineteen determined men, and as silently as Indians they moved swiftly through the forest.

Twenty-five minutes later the guide paused abruptly, halting the column. He pointed through the trees toward a point of light. "Wait here till I return," he said. "The light is from my house—from the radio station. I will proceed to the edge of the forest and see what I can discover."

Ten minutes later he returned. "The light comes from the window that was once my parlor. It is there they have their equipment. Before the door is a car. It is a large car—a Mercedes. The captain has only a small car, so it may be that an officer of importance is here from the air field. A soldier is in the driver's seat, and a sentry, carrying a rifle, paces back and forth before the house."

"Okay," McVane said. "Let's go."

At the edge of the forest, which was only fifty yards from the house, the detachment halted. As the guide had said the big shiny Mercedes was drawn up before the door, facing south, its rear toward them. It was an open car. Evidently the officer to whom it belonged wanted an unobstructed view upward where swift death might at any moment come hurtling out of the sky, where the R.A.F. was rapidly coming into its own. Between the car and

the house the sentry paced. McVane noted that he turned each time as he came to the end of the front wall, and retraced his steps. He nudged Stan.

"How about it?" he asked. "Can you take him?"

Stan pointed to the dark side-wall of the building. "I'll slip along the wall, and when he turns I'll get him."

The sergeant nodded. "Okay—but make it noiseless. That guy in the car won't be thirty feet away. Wait—we'd better get 'em both at once." The sergeant turned and passing swiftly back along the line peered into the unfamiliarly blackened faces. Reaching Krasinski, the big Pole, he plucked his sleeve and motioned him to follow. He halted beside Stan and then pointed to the car where a soldier's uptilted helmet showed above the back of the driver's seat. "That soldier," he said, "looks like he's asleep. You go with Novak. When he gets the sentry, you get the man in the car. He must never wake up—see?" The man nodded eagerly, his thick powerful fingers playing at the hilt of his knife with the long curved blade. As the two faded silently into the darkness, McVane passed the word to the others. "Keep your eyes on me. When I start, you follow and surround the house. Let no one escape. I'm going inside. When you hear a shot in there, those men in front of the house are to come on in."

Minutes passed as Jimmie McVane stood there at the edge of the forest peering across the tiny clearing. The sentry paced slowly back and forth, turning each time he reached the corner. In the car uptilted helmet remained motionless. Behind him he could hear the steady breathing of his men. It seemed an eternity he stood there straining his eyes for some slightest movement in the thin starlight. But the only movement was the measured pacing of the sentry. Where were Stan and Krasinski? What in hell were they waiting for? At any moment the officer, probably some general or colonel on an inspection tour, might step out and get into the car. Surely the two had had time to reach the building before this!

Then it happened. So silently—so swiftly and smoothly that for a moment the sergeant stood there blinking. The sentry reached the corner of the house, turned —and disappeared. And above the driver's seat of the car the steel helmet was no longer visible. At the corner of the house a figure rose to his feet, and another figure, silent as a shadow, slipped back around the rear of the car.

McVane trotted across the clearing followed by his men who fanned out and surrounded the house. The dead sentry lay at the corner of the house. From beneath the front door of the car a thin trickle of blood flowed across the running-board to form a slowly widening pool that showed bright red in the light from the window.

Confident that his blackened face could not be seen from the inside, McVane peered through the window. The next instant he flattened himself against the wall and snapped an order in a hoarse whisper. "Two officers coming out! Take 'em alive!"

Instantly Stan and Krasinski flattened themselves against the building, one on either side of the doorway. An inner door opened, an officer in the uniform of a colonel stepped into the tiny hallway closely followed by a captain. McVane could see that the latter wore the black uniform of the Hitler Elite Guard, with the death's head showing on the cap. Then the outer door opened and a flood of light shone directly onto the car, it's front seat crimson with blood. A startled guttural cry was instantly stifled as Stan, his hand over the colonel's mouth, kicked his feet from under him, dragged him down the single step, and straddled his body on the ground. At the same instant the big Pole lunged through the doorway, doubled the captain up with a well-directed knee jolt in the groin, and dragged him into the open. McVane stepped back, swung his tommy-

gun toward the window, released a burst, and the three soldiers at the instruments within the room, slumped to the floor.

Behind him Stan Klaska cried out sharply: "Hey—no! Damn you, Krasinski, quit that! You heard him say 'take 'em alive'!"

McVane whirled and his eyes widened in horror as the big Pole rose from his knees, wiping his curved knife.

"Damn! I kill him! I kill the man that kill my father! In the picture I see this face—the man that give the order to firing squad!"

"Good God!" McVane muttered, and calling to a half dozen of his men to follow, stepped into the building. Swiftly he searched the room, cramming all official looking documents into his pockets. Above a desk was a photograph in a frame—the photograph of the captain. Smashing the frame, McVane secured the picture and pocketed it. "We'll project that firing squad picture on the screen again," he said to the others, "and if the Pole is right—if that captain is the man who conducted that massacre—damned if I'll ever report Krasinski for disobeying an order! Come on, men—we'll set fire to the house, and get going."

The work was soon accomplished, and with the interior a roaring furnace, McVane wrecked the Mercedes with a grenade, ruined the tires with a hatchet, and led the way through the village toward the church that housed the garrison. Between them Stan Klaska and another man hustled the colonel along, gagged, and with his hands securely wired behind him.

Halfway through the village all hell broke loose ahead of them in an intense volley of tommy-gun fire. When they reached the scene a few moments later, smoke was pouring from the windows and the open doorway of the church, before which lay a grotesque heap of twisted bodies clad in underwear.

Lieutenant Joyce greeted McVane. "All set, Sergeant?"

"Okay." McVane pointed to the pillar of flame that showed above the tops of the intervening buildings. "There goes the radio station."

"Did you take the captain alive, as the major ordered?"

"No," McVane announced dryly. "The captain was a casualty. But we got a colonel in his place." He glanced at the pile of dead. "You seem to have done all right, too."

"Right-o. A couple of grenades and an incendiary, followed by a few tear gas bombs smoked 'em out, and we polished 'em off with the tommies. Never lost a man."

"Neither did I."

"Okay—let's go. Back to the boat, men. The job is done."

Chapter XXVI

DAY RAID

CAMP routine went on as usual. Late in February, with England still reeling under the loss of Singapore, it became evident to the men that something was in the air—something big. Officers dashed out of camp in cars to be gone for several days, and long conferences were held with officers from other Commando camps. One evening Lieutenant Joyce accosted Jimmie McVane in the pub.

"We're in for some more action. Tomorrow's the day. Big show, this time. A hundred men go from here. There'll be men from other camps. Here's the list—the major and I made it out this afternoon. Notify 'em to be fully equipped at ten tomorrow morning. We're going to wipe out a bunch of gun emplacements, destroy some power installations, blow up some locks, gasoline tanks, and ammunition dumps and raise hell generally. It's a four-way show—Commandos, tank unit, the Navy, and the R.A.F., all working together. And believe me, we're not getting out of this raid without any casualties.

We're selected to handle the tommy-guns and grenades. Commando Fours will handle the high explosive, and the Three, acting as paratroops will drop in behind 'em from the air. This will be a daylight job."

The American Marine captain slipped the bandage from his eyes and looked up as McVane paused beside him. Several parts of a tommy-gun lay on the floor before him. McVane grinned.

"Putting it together in the dark, eh? Well, you better get it right. There's a big show on—and we're the tommy men."

"Tonight?"

"No. Daylight job, this time."

The captain grinned. "I kind of like the black face act."

"You fellows sure did a job there at the church that night."

"Like shooting fish in a barrel. Damn it, Mac, I couldn't have done it if I'd thought of those birds that came piling out through that door as men. I'm not like the Poles, and the Norwegians, and the Balkan boys. None of my folks have been butchered. And the pictures haven't succeeded in working me into a frenzy of personal hate. I think of Naziism as a foul pestilence that is spreading out to engulf the earth. These German soldiers are not individuals—not men. They are the germs that are spreading the disease — and as germs they must be destroyed. Our way of life will not be safe as long as there is an active germ left in the world. So I destroy them, singly, or in groups without the slightest compunction. But these Norwegians, and Serbs, and Poles—they really hate."

A wry grin twisted McVane's lips. "You telling me! Fight next to Krasinski, some night, and you'll know what hate is. That germ idea is not bad. But—it's a cinch they won't all be killed. There'll be some of 'em left to spread the pestilence after this war is over."

The captain nodded thoughtfully. "That is the hell of it. A focal point of infection, I believe the medicos would call it. And somehow it's got to be neutralized and rendered harmless. Or at least boxed in where it can poison only itself. There's a big job ahead for somebody — to fix things so the pestilence can never break out again. I knew a lot of Germans back there in Michigan—old Germans, kindly and sensible—good farmers, and good neighbors. That's why it's so hard for me to hate the Germans. But—I guess that kind has pretty well disappeared in Germany. Hitler, Goebbels & Company have taken care of that. These young Germans are a different breed of cats. They've been taken away from their parents when they're five or six years old and educated in State schools—educated to hate all people and all things that are not German. Educated to believe that the Germans, the *Herrenvolk,* are the predestined lords of the earth—all other peoples are inferior—born to be the slaves of the *Herrenvolk.* Educated to regard the world as their heritage—and educated in the means of wresting this heritage from the people who now hold it. Educated to believe in only one God—and that God's name is Hitler. So—after the war—after these *Herrenvolk* are licked—how are you going to handle people who believe like that? How are they going to adjust themselves to the new order? They believe that they can't lose this war. When they do lose, and they find that they are not the lords of the earth, how is it going to affect them? What are they going to think? What are they going to do? How are they going to fit into a world they can't rule?"

McVane shrugged. "Don't ask me. All I've got to say is that I hope we do a better job than we did last time. And this damn Hitler—according to his pictures he looks more like a second rate bum than a god. Let's worry about the future when the future comes. Right now we've got a war to win."

Instead of embarking in a landing boat the hundred picked men were

loaded into lorries the following morning. They rolled southward, and toward the middle of the afternoon pulled into a coastal town whose streets and waterfront was jam-packed with lorries, officers' cars, supply vans, and men — men from the army, the navy, the R.A.F., and from other Commando camps. The harbor was crowded with small craft of every description—motorboats that had not so long ago been the playthings of the rich, Diesel-powered barges, light gunboats, a few American M T's. Overhead pursuit planes wheeled and circled, alert to keep any prowling German plane from spotting the embarkation. On the wharves men sweated to store the seemingly inexhaustible piles of boxes of ammunition and supplies aboard the craft. Lorry and van drivers cursed each other in the endless traffic jams, and men in uniform swarmed everywhere.

Lieutenant Joyce called McVane aside. "We're ferrying out to that gunboat, yonder. Step lively and select eight men, preferably men who have had hunting experience in the woods, take them to that Number Six lorry, and exchange their tommys for Canadian P-14s. Issue each man two hundred rounds of ammunition. We are to land on the mole. Our main force will advance directly into the town to clear the way for the demolition squads. You snipers are to slip away in pairs, and pick off their snipers who will probably be firing from roof-tops, windows, and from behind whatever obstacle will give them cover. Better carry all the grenades you can handle, too. When the show is over, pile into any boat you can reach. I have a hunch that the retreat will not be orderly."

It was late in the evening when the flotilla of small boats moved out of the harbor. The wind was rising and a nasty chop was running in the channel. As darkness settled indistinct shadowy forms appeared in the forefront and to starboard and port.

"Destroyers," McVane said, turning to Stan who stood next to him at the rail. "They're going to make sure we get there. I was talking to a sailor and he told me the sweepers had cleared a channel eight hundred yards through the German mine field. I hope to hell we don't miss that channel in the dark."

Stan's two hands were clutching the rail, and McVane saw that his face was deathly white as he leaned outward. "I hope we do miss it," he said miserably, as he jettisoned his supper. "The way I feel I'd like to hit a damn good mine."

"Cheer up," McVane grinned. "The worst is yet to come. Wait till those Heinies get to pecking at you."

"By God, it'll be on land! If I wanted to be a sailor I'd have enlisted in the navy. I haven't been so damn sick since the morning after the dance in Blind River. One thing—if the Heinies get me I won't have to make the trip back!"

"Must be awful to have a weak stomach," McVane grinned.

"Weak, hell! Look over there—those other boats aren't popping around like we are. I would draw the prize puke boat of the bunch!"

BROKEN clouds raced overhead allowing moonlight to filter through. Men slept wherever they could find room, or did not sleep at all. Several times during the night, flights of planes could be heard high overhead, and once, far to the southward, a series of heavy explosions was followed by huge fires that lighted the sky low down on the horizon.

A short time before dawn the course veered sharply and the flotilla increased its speed. As it approached the shore the roar of planes became almost continuous and the ack-ack opened up all along the line. The dark hulk of a destroyer a short distance ahead of the motor gunboat veered sharply and in an instant her guns roared and an enemy flack ship, not two hundred yards away burst into flame from stem to stern.

Then all hell broke loose. Searchlights from a dozen stations flared out their long cones of brilliant light, picking up the flotilla as shore batteries opened up with everything they had.

On the gunboat the Commandos gripped their weapons, their faces showing white and tense in the glare of the lights that moved and criss-crossed about the harbor, picking up first one boat then another in their pitiless glare.

So intense was the fire from the shore batteries that the surface of the water seemed pocked by a storm of giant hailstones. A converted yacht scarce fifty yards to port of the gunboat was hit and instantly blew up, throwing the bodies of men high into the air. Another, her steering gear rendered useless, careened wildly about, rammed the destroyer, and then promptly sank. From the mole, and from numerous dock installations machine-gun fire raked the flotilla.

Dawn was breaking as the gunboat headed directly for the mole, firing her rapid-fire guns at point-blank range at the pill boxes from which issued the deadly machine-gun fire. Other boats were already drawing up alongside the docks, the men pouring from their decks. A short distance away, tanks were disembarking from a steel landing boat. Three of the four pill boxes on the mole had been pulverized by the gunboat's guns as she drew alongside, and the top had been blown off the fourth which continued to fire as the Commandos poured over the side. Grasping their P-14s Stan and Jimmie McVane leaped onto the mole, and dodging behind a long pile of squared timbers and bags of cement that were evidently intended to be used in further fortification, slipped rapidly along to the rear of the pill box. Leaping onto the timbers, Stan tossed a grenade into the open top of the thing. There was an explosion—and the machine-gun fire ceased abruptly.

"There's four or five for Jim Cavendish," he said, as he leaped back to join McVane. "And with that sentry I got the other night, makes—call it six."

"I got three that night," the sergeant said. "That's nine. We've got two hundred shells apiece besides the grenades and our pistols. Let's make it a hundred before night."

The Commandos, with Lieutenant Joyce at their head swept past up the mole, and the two fell in behind.

The noise was deafening. The guns of the three destroyers that had accompanied the flotilla were replying to the shore batteries, and the scream and crash of bombs from the supporting planes was almost continuous. Raiders were swarming onto the docks, adding the roar of their tommy-guns, Sten guns and mortars to the hellish din.

"Look!" McVane cried, pointing upward toward a Dornier with three Spitfires on her tail which was making directly toward one of the destroyers in the harbor. The Dornier dropped her bomb, and flame shot upward from the deck of the stricken ship, just as another Spitfire swooping low came up beneath the Dornier and gave it all it had. The German plane, out of control, began a rapid dive, seemingly straight at the two who stood there on the mole. Before they could make a move to seek safety, the big plane crashed squarely onto the deck of the gunboat from which they had just landed. There was a terrific explosion, as plane and boat were wrapped in a mass of flame. "Did you see that Spit? Got him right in the belly! Maybe that was Jack."

"If it was, he sure messed up our ride home," Stan grinned, pointing to the burning gunboat. "We've got to hitch-hike now, and believe me, I'm going to pick a destroyer!"

THE Commandos with their tommy-guns had reached the shore and were fanning out and advancing toward a power house as the two overtook them.

"This way," McVane said, leading off

to the left toward a line of parked lorries. "That's a demolition crew with their packs of explosive falling in behind our boys."

A dozen men bearing packs were just crossing the cobbled plaza when one of them staggered and fell.

"A sniper got him!" Stan said, pointing to an open window in a house facing the square. "He's in there. We'll get that guy!"

A car tore out of a side street and swung into the square, barely missing a parked lorry. A helmeted soldier was at the wheel, and two uniformed officers were in the rear seat. Quick as a flash, McVane jerked a grenade from his belt and tossed it into the car as it flashed past. "There's a pineapple for breakfast!" he shouted, as the car shot forward, passing over the legs of the wounded man who was struggling to rise. The next instant the tonneau exploded, tossing the mangled bodies of the two officers onto the cobblestones, as the car careened wildly and crashed into the front of a building.

"Good work!" Stan cried. "Hold on a minute till I drag that poor devil over here out of the road where he can die in peace without being squashed by the next car that comes along."

He returned a few moments later, half dragging, half carrying the man, and laid him on a low embankment beyond the lorries, just as McVane's rifle cracked, and an enemy soldier folded across the windowsill of the house across the square as his rifle crashed to the pavement. "That's four more for me," the sergeant said, counting the three in the car—and I'll bet one of them was a general—he ought to count ten."

STAN didn't answer. He was staring down into the face of the man he had dragged from the roadway. He dropped to his knees and raised the head on his arm. "Pierre!" he cried. "Pierre—for God's sake, speak to me!"

The man's eyelids fluttered open and he looked up into the face bending over his own. His lips curved into a faint smile. "Stan," he whispered weakly. "This—isn't Berlin. But—it's on—the road."

"You bet it's on the road. And by God we'll never stop till we get there!"

"I have—stopped. I will never get there. If—if you—get back—tell Helene——" the voice trailed off into silence.

Stan shook the man and cried, with his lips close to his ear, "Yes, Pierre! Tell her—what? What shall I tell Helene?"

Once again the eyelids fluttered open. "You—will go back—to Cabin River?"

"You bet I'm going back! I—I'm going back—to stay!"

"That's—good—" again the voice trailed into silence, and this time Stan did not try to speak to him. It was no use. Pierre Bovee was dead.

Stan stood up and reached for his rifle. "Come on," he said, in a low hard voice, and started across the square.

"Come back!" Jimmie McVane cried. "Keep out of the open! Where the hell are you going?"

"I might be going to scalp that Heinie you just shot. Sister Marie—she'd understand."

CHAPTER XXVII

RETREAT

TEN minutes later, as the two slipped between two houses and emerged onto a wide street that led to the sea, they suddenly crouched down behind the low palings of a painted fence. A car whirled around a corner and skidded to a stop before a pretentious looking stone house. The door opened and four men in officers' uniforms dashed out and crossed the sidewalk. Two leaped into the car, and the other two were about to follow when two rifles cracked, two thin curls of smoke issued from between the palings, and the two on the sidewalk settled to the pave-

ment. The rifles cracked again, and in the rear seat the other two slumped out of sight. Then Stan shot the driver. "Five more," he said grimly. "We're coming along."

A terrific explosion shook the ground, and above the spot where the powerhouse had been; the air was filled with flying debris. For an hour the two prowled among the streets and alleys, picking snipers off roof tops, shooting them out of upper windows, as the battle of the waterfront raged in undiminished intensity. Other explosions rattled windows, and then, suddenly, flames shot high into the air, and the whole sky seemed blotted out by a dense cloud of black smoke.

"That's the storage tanks," McVane said. "The others were the ammunition dumps—and according to what Joyce told me, we've accomplished all our objectives. We better work back toward the harbor. They'll be retreating to the boats, now. And this would be a hell of a place to be if the others went back home."

As they came to the square they could see men retreating toward the docks. From an open window in the second story of a house a rifle cracked, and a Commando stumbled and fell, sprawling grotesquely upon the cobblestones.

"Damn him!" Stan cried. "We can't get him from this angle. Let's slip in the back door and get him in the room."

Dashing around to the rear, the two burst open a door and found themselves in a kitchen. A buxom young woman stared stonily at them for a moment, then her eyes widened.

"Engliss?" she asked, in a strained undertone.

"Yes," McVane answered, "and we're going upstairs. There's a man shooting from the window—a German sniper."

The woman apparently understood enough to grasp his meaning. Placing her finger on her lips, she nodded violently and held up two fingers of the other hand.

"Two of 'em, eh?" McVane said. "Okay —there's two of us. Where's the stairs?"

Opening an inner door, the woman pointed to the stairway, and indicated by a gesture, that the room they sought was to the left. Pistols in hand the two noiselessly ascended the stairs. McVane grasped the door knob, as Stan stood ready with his pistol.

As the door flew open Stan leaped into the room and fired as the German turned to face him. The man crashed to the floor, and from behind him another pistol barked, and Stan whirled to see Jimmie McVane go down. Beyond him in the narrow hallway a dim shape appeared, and Stan fired three shots in rapid succession. Then he leaped to the door. The soldier who had shot McVane lay with his head and shoulders on the stairs. He bent over McVane.

"It's my leg," the sergeant said. "It's broken, I think. Listen! The firing outside is increasing—the boys are taking to the boats. Get to hell out of here! Never mind me. You may have a chance to make it."

"You go to hell!"

"You heard me. Proceed at once to the boats. That's an order."

"And you heard me. Go to hell—and that's an order, too." Stan stepped to the window and looked out. "Couldn't make it, now, even if I tried," he lied. "The boys are all on the boats or on the docks, and the Heinies are between us." Stooping over the dead German soldier he began hurriedly to take off his uniform. Stripping off his own, he donned the other, and looked up to see the woman bending over the wounded man.

"Fix his leg," he said, pointing to the injured member. "I'll come back for him in a few minutes!"

"Where you going?" McVane asked.

"I'm going to get that car and drive it around here. Then we'll hustle you into it, and get to hell out of here. I don't like this town."

Racing through an alley he emerged

onto the broad street and sped to the car that still stood in front of the stone house. Tumbling the dead soldier from the driver's seat he sprang in, shot down the street and into the alley. At the rear of the house he halted and dashed in, to find that the woman had applied an effective tourniquet to McVane's leg. Between them they got him down the stairs and into the tonneau of the car. Rushing back into the house, Stan retrieved the two rifles, and his uniform.

"Keep down so no one can see your uniform!" he said. "Lay down on those dead Germans till we get out of town. Anyone seeing me will think I'm on my way to pick up an officer, or something."

"Where you going?" McVane asked.

"How the hell do I know? Any particular place you'd like to see?"

"Blind River, Ontario, James," McVane said. "Step on it, and let's go."

Stan drove with the two rifles and his revolver on the front seat beside him. But no one paid the slightest attention to him as he roared through the streets and out onto a country road. Six or eight miles out he turned onto a little used road that led into a wood. Stopping the car he got out and opened the rear door.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "First I'll bandage that leg, and bind on some splints. Then we'll manage to get you into one of these uniforms. How'd you like the ride? I notice you've been sitting on the fat one. The other one's uniform ought to fit you pretty good."

Dragging the bodies of the two officers from the car, Stan bandaged McVane's leg, and bound on some rude splints he fashioned from tree limbs. Then he stripped the uniform from one of the bodies and with some difficulty managed to get the sergeant into it.

"There," he approved. "Now you sit in the back seat and look snooty as hell, and we'll get past any sentry, or road guards, or whatever they've got posted. I've got the rifles here. I'll put yours where you can reach it—and we'll get through one way or another."

"Through—to where?"

"Blind River, you damn fool! Ain't that where you wanted to go?"

"Do you know any German words?" McVane asked.

"No. If we've got any talking to do we'll do it with the rifles—that's a language the Heinies can damn well understand."

"Yeah, but we can't either of us talk French, either. We can't go on shooting everyone we see."

Stan grinned. "Which way's Russia from here? We might shoot our way through and join up with old Joe Stalin, if our gas holds out. But I've got a hunch these Frogs hate the Germans plenty. When they find out who we are, they'll probably give us a lift—like that woman there in the house."

Stan backed the car around and headed out onto the main road that paralleled the coast. Ten minutes later they were flagged down by two soldiers who stood at a cross-road. As Stan slowed down, Jimmie McVane fingered the trigger of his rifle, but seeing the uniforms, the soldiers signaled them to go ahead, and Stan stepped on the gas.

At the next cross-road a single soldier barred the way. As the car stopped, he stepped close and said something in German. Stan fired, his pistol within six inches of the man's face, leaped out and dumped the body onto the floor of the tonneau. A few miles farther on he turned off the road toward a small collection of huts near the shore of the sea.

Two elderly Frenchmen looked up from their work of mending a net and eyed them apathetically. Stan stepped from the car and approached them. "We are not Germans," he said. "We are Canadians."

One of the two jerked erect and glanced toward the road. "I lived for many years in Canada—at Gaspe, in the Province of Quebec. Are you from the air?"

"No. Commandos. We put on a show down the road a ways, and couldn't make it back to the boats. My friend, here is wounded. We stole this car and got to hell out of there."

"Ah, yes, we have heard the shooting, and have seen the smoke of many big fires. And now you would return to England, *non?*"

"You bet—if there's any way we can get there!"

The old man smiled. "You have, what you call the luck. Under my floor are three men from the air who are English. Their plane was shot down two days ago. Tonight we run them across. We must fish for the Germans. Today they came and took the fish. They will not come again for three days—twice each week they come and take the fish we catch in the nets. Tonight we set the nets again—but also we run the men from the air across to England. Drive the car close to the house so it cannot be seen from the road, and we will put you under the floor with the others."

"Under the floor?" Stan grinned. "That sounds too much like 'under the sod.' You mean in the cellar?"

THE man returned the smile. "You need have no fear. We hate the Germans. We have no cellar, else the Germans would search it. But we have removed the earth from beneath the floor making a space that will hold six men. Twice before we have returned men of the air to England that they may continue to fight."

"Good work!" Stan approved. "But —how about the car? The damn Germans are bound to find it here—and not only that there's a dead soldier in there. I shot him up the road a piece when he stopped us. If the Germans find that here, they'll stand you up against a wall."

"The Germans will not return today—and tomorrow the car and the dead soldier will not be here. My brother here can drive a car, and tonight he will remove it far away. Even the tracks of the tires will be gone."

"Okay," Stan replied, and stepping into the car, swung it close beside the hut where it could not be seen from the road. Working rapidly the three lifted McVane from the car and carried him into the house. Moving a heavy cabinet, the Frenchmen lifted two boards from the floor, and after much difficulty, aided by the three R.A.F. men, they got the sergeant settled in the excavation, then the others lay side by side, the boards were replaced, and the heavy cabinet moved back into place.

"Who tipped you off to old Jules Monet?" one of the air men asked.

"No one tipped us. We made a raid down the coast a piece and missed the boat, so we grabbed off a car and beat it. Just happened to turn in here because it was close to the sea. Looks like we struck it lucky."

"Luck like that is too good to be true. I hope it holds for a few more hours. There are thirty or forty of these spots along the coast — French fishermen and farmers who pass the boys along when they're lucky enough to brolly out. But there's plenty of the other kind too—damned quislings that are willing to turn us over to the Germans."

"How long have you been here?" McVane asked.

"Since yesterday morning. We carried a package to Essen, but the air was so full of flack and crickets we only got an outside view. Then coming home, we ran into a solid lump of blitz."

"I've got a brother, a pilot in the R.A.F. —McVane. Maybe you've run across him."

"Sure, I know him," one of the men said. "Flew with him in Wilson's squadron. Got a flight of his own, now. Went up to London and collected a gong, not long ago. And, boy, can he play pussy with a Spitfire!"

Stan slept, and despite the pain in his leg McVane managed to doze off half a

dozen times. The shallow cell was dark as a pocket, and the air was foul and stuffy. After what seemed endless hours, footsteps sounded on the floor above them and the heavy cabinet scraped and thudded. Then the boards were lifted, and one by one the men emerged, carefully lifting McVane out and laying him on an improvised stretcher that the Frenchmen had provided.

The night was dark, and as they stepped out of the hut Stan saw that the car was no longer where he had left it. A cold drizzle wet their faces, as they carried the stretcher to the tiny dock and helped McVane into the fishing boat. The others piled in, and a moment later the motor started and the boat moved slowly out from shore.

Stan found himself beside the old Frenchman who spoke English. He stared out into the opaque blackness ahead. "How can you see?" he asked. "They've been training us to see in the dark—but it's so darn black tonight you can feel it."

"I cannot see. Tonight it is too dark to see."

Ten minutes later he changed the course, and changed it again in another five minutes. Stan stared at the man through blackness so thick he could not see even the whites of his eyes. "Where's your compass?" he asked. "I didn't see you look at it."

"I use no compass. I know the way. For many years I have lived here."

"But—aren't there mines along the coast here?"

"Ah, yes, there are many mines. I will avoid them."

The man moved a lever and the boat shot ahead at increased speed. Stan sat with clenched fists and tight-pressed lips, half expecting each moment to be his last. An hour passed, and nothing happened. Sounds of deep steady breathing beside him told that the air men were asleep.

"I see you got rid of the car," he said finally.

"*Oui.* My brother drove it away. We have a joke on a man who lives five kilometers away from us. He is known to have delivered a British air man to the Nazis. A month ago it happened. He seeks the favor of the Germans by betraying those in whom we must trust. But the Germans do not trust him completely. They regard him with a measure of suspicion. Me they do trust—my brother and I. So they only come to our house twice a week to take the fish. But they visit this man's house every day. Tomorrow, when they find the car close beside his barn with the dead German in it they will question him, and then they will stand him up before a wall because he will not be able to tell them about the car and the dead soldier. And that will be good. France has no need of such as he."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SERGEANT MCVANE SAYS "GOOD-BY"

ONE morning, two weeks later Stan stood beside a bed in a hospital not far from the Commando camp. Jimmie McVane looked up into his face.

"Well, I got the verdict, last night. The show's over, for me. You've got to carry on for both of us, Stan. I go back home on the next boat—today."

"God, Jimmie—it's probably my fault. I maybe messed up your leg moving you, or didn't put the splints on right, or something."

"Don't be a damn fool! It was the bullet that messed up my leg. They say it will be a little shorter than the other—that I'll always walk with a limp. Hell, man—if it hadn't been for you, I'd never have got out of that house!"

Stan grinned. "I told you I'd get you to Blind River. That's what you ordered, and I'm a good chauffeur."

"Take care of yourself, Stan. Don't let the Heinies get you. Remember, you're my meat."

"Hell—if you give me a week's start, like you promised, you'll never get within a hundred miles of me!"

"You'll get your start—but it won't do you any good."

"Maybe you won't even get your job back—with a game leg."

"I'll take a chance. I'll be a good man yet, when it heals up."

"Pretty good," Stan admitted with a grin. "But not good enough for the job you've picked. Anyway I'll be glad to have a man on my trail that I know I can lick."

"Lick—hell! The only reason you got me that day on Minnechenaqua was because my foot slipped on a wet rock!"

"Yeah? Well, there's a hell of a lot of wet rocks where I'm going."

"Didn't know they had 'em in a big city," McVane grinned.

Stan scowled. "City, or bush—you'll never catch up with me. If you do, it'll be too damn bad. I've learned a lot of new tricks, here."

"You haven't learned a damn thing I haven't—remember that. And I've got two words to go on—words that lad whispered—the one you dragged off the square. Helene—and Cabin River."

"There's lots of Helenes," Stan retorted. "And if you find Cabin River on a map, go there, look it over from one end to the other—and I hope it's a long river."

A nurse appeared in the doorway, followed by the doctor, and four men in white jackets. One of the men unfolded a stretcher.

"Time to get ready, Sergeant," she said.

McVane thrust out his hand. "So long, Stan."

Stan gripped the hand. "So long, Jimmie. Stop at the drug store in Thessalon and tell Cavendish what the score is—eighty-seven Heinies between us. Eighty-seven of 'em—for Jim."

CHAPTER XXIX

HOME FROM THE WAR

A MONTH almost to a day from the morning they shipped Jimmie McVane home, Stan Klaska looked up from his bed in a hospital that had once been a castle, into the eyes of the young doctor who had just taken his pulse.

"You'll stand the trip, all right. They'll be coming to pick you up very shortly. Cheerio!"

"The trip! What trip?"

"The trip to Canada. You're going home. How does that sound?"

"It sounds rotten. Hell, we haven't started on the damn Heinies yet! My leg will be all right. I want to carry on. I want to get to Berlin."

The doctor smiled. "If you get to Berlin, it will be after the war, I'm afraid. Our orders are to evacuate coastal hospitals of all casualties not returnable to active service."

"But what have a couple of bomb splinters in the leg got to do with not returning to active service?"

"They've got a lot to do with it—when one of them smashes a patella—a knee cap."

"Does that mean I'll always be a cripple?"

"Not necessarily. But it means that the process of repair would take too long to attempt it here, where at any moment we're apt to have urgent need of every available bed."

It was the young doctor in the hospital in Toronto, with whom Stan talked hunt-

ing and fishing, who gave him his first hope of ultimate complete recovery, after studying the X-ray plates of the injured knee.

"It's a cinch you're never going to have full use of that leg the way it is," he said. "If you want me to operate, I'll go ahead. I can't promise that it will be successful. You might be worse off than you are now. But there's a chance—I'd say about fifty-fifty of complete recovery. It will be a long drag—I don't mean the operation, but the recovery. First no exercise, then a few minutes a day—proper manipulation, and all that sort of thing. My father has a farm not so far out of town that would be just the place for you, and where I can run out from time to time and keep an eye on you. What do you say?"

"I say—go ahead. I wouldn't be worth a damn in the bush with my leg the way it is. And if I've got to spend the rest of my life in a town, I won't give a damn if it's twice as bad as it is. I don't know when I can pay you, but——"

The doctor laughed. "If it isn't successful, forget it. If it is I've got a hunch you're going to be paying me all the rest of your life—steering me onto some of this good hunting and fishing you've been telling me about."

"Okay," Stan grinned. "It's a deal. And if I don't show you better hunting and fishing than you knew there was—you can smash up the knee again."

IT WAS early in September when Stan left the farm. He walked with the aid of a cane. Improvement had been slow but steady, and the doctor predicted that by Christmas he could throw away the cane. His discharge had come through in July, and he had grown a beard. He stepped off the train in Blind River and smiled as he wondered whether Jimmie McVane had got his job back. He hoped he had. Jimmie would never recognize him now—what with the beard, and the loss of twenty pounds, and his slight limp.

The tang of autumn was in the air that blew fresh from Lake Huron. The marshy smell of summer was gone, but the smell of fresh sawed pine was there and—from the direction of the mill the whine of the saws came faintly.

Blind River hadn't changed. It seemed ten years since he had been there, instead of two. He walked slowly from the station. An old man was servicing a car at the filling station at the jog of the road. Stan paused and glanced across to the curb. It seemed that he could see Joe Bedore lying there, his body half in the gutter. He wondered about Rose Brady—and instantly his thoughts flew to Helene, as they had flown a thousand times in the months he had spent at the farm. He would go on to the Soo tomorrow, and take the A. C. to Hearst. Then somehow he would get a canoe onto the Kabinakagami and on to the Albany and find Helene—Helene, with the bright red feather in her hair. He had to find Helene — had to tell her about Pierre.

He crossed the King's Highway, and half a block down the street stepped into a beer tavern, sat down at a table, and ordered a bottle of beer.

Five minutes later the door opened and a man stepped into the room, a man who walked with a limp, and who wore the uniform of the Ontario Provincial Police. Stan's heart leaped as for a fleeting instant his eyes met the eyes of Jim McVane.

There was no one else in the room save the man behind the bar as McVane walked slowly toward the table and stood looking down at the figure clad in mackinaw coat, checked flannel shirt, and coarse woolen trousers.

"Hello, soldier," he said abruptly, and held up two fingers to the bartender, as he seated himself opposite the man in the chair.

"Soldier?" Stan repeated, with a rising inflection. "Do I look like a soldier?" He poured the rest of the beer from the bottle into his glass and drained it as the

man set two more bottles on the table.

"Yeah—Commando. How's Lieutenant Joyce, Stan?"

Stan Klaska's eyes went suddenly hard. "Okay. I've been discharged for more than a week. I didn't think you could spot me. I wanted to see Blind River again—so I took a chance." With a swift glance at the automatic pistol in McVane's holster, he reached out and grasped the beer bottle by the neck. "But by God, if you take me you'll drag me to jail! I'll never walk there!"

Like a flash McVane drew the pistol and covered Stan. Moments, long tense moments passed as they sat there glaring into each other's eyes across the little table. Then, very deliberately McVane lowered the gun, slipped out the cartridge clip and tossed it onto the table. Then he removed the cartridge from the barrel and slipped it into his pocket, as he laid the pistol down beside the clip.

Stan nodded, and tossed the bottle into a corner where its contents ran out upon the floor as the barman scowled—but said nothing, preferring to leave the matter to the police.

"You're a good sport, Jimmie," Stan said. "But you're a damn fool. You'll never take me, now. I can knock hell out of you the best day you ever saw."

"Bragging, eh? Well, have another beer — and tell me how they got you. There'll be time enough for that, later."

The barman brought another bottle, retrieved the one from the corner and scowlingly mopped up the floor.

"It wasn't a raid. We put on one more show after you left—embarked from Scotland and burned some fish oil factories and warehouses in Norway, and liquidated about forty Nazis and a bunch of Norwegian quislings. We didn't have anything to do with the quislings. It was a half dozen Norwegians we took along as guides that polished them off. Boy, as soon as the Nazis pull out of Norway, there's going to be some plain and fancy murder over there! Those lads didn't say much—but they'd come from this town and knew every quisling in it, and the way they went into those houses and dragged 'em out and put the knife to 'em was a caution to see. When those boys get going they mean business. They don't fool.

"I got mine back in England in the warehouse. They had a bunch of us in there unloading cases of American canned salmon when a Heinie came along and dropped a bomb through the roof. I got some bomb splinters in the leg. They shipped me back home, and a doctor in Toronto fixed me up. Says by Christmas I ought to be able to throw away my cane. How did you come out, Jimmie? I see you're limping a bit."

"Yeah, and I always will limp. My left leg's about an inch short. I've got a built-up sole that helps. I was afraid it would knock me out of getting back on the force, but they gave me my old job back."

For an hour the two sat there at the table sipping beer and recalling incidents of their soldiering. Finally McVane glanced at his wrist-watch. "Come on along, Stan. It's time we were going," he said, as he slipped the automatic into its holster and pocketed the clip.

"I'm not going, Jimmie," Stan replied bleakly. "Not without one hell of a fight, I'm not. I told you I'd never walk to jail. If you get me there, by God, you'll drag me! And you ain't man enough to do it."

McVane grinned. "We'd look swell, wouldn't we—a couple of cripples mauling hell out of each other here in a beer joint? I should think you'd have had fighting enough in Blind River to do you for quite awhile. But get this—if I'd set out to arrest you, I'd damn well do it—and don't you forget it!"

Stan shot him a questioning glance. "What do you mean—if you set out to arrest me? I never killed Joe Bedore. But you think I did, and——"

"I *did* think you killed him, Stan. I never thought you meant to kill him. I

thought you were drunk, that night, that you didn't know what you were doing. I thought so till a month ago. I know different, now."

"You mean," Stan cried, his eyes lighting eagerly, "that you know who killed him? That you got the man who did it?"

Jimmie McVane's face was grave. He nodded slowly. "Yes, Stan, I know the one who did it. But I didn't get him. The Heinies 'tended to that."

"The Heinies! What do you mean?"

For answer McVane reached into his pocket and tossed a letter onto the table. "Read that," he said tersely. "It came two months ago. Rose Brady got one, too. From Jack. He'd written 'em out and addressed 'em, one to me and one to Rose. They were to be mailed after his death."

"His death! Good God, Jimmie—is Jack dead?"

"Yes. He took on four of 'em at once, somewhere over England. He got two of 'em—his forty-fifth, and forty-sixth—then they got him."

"God, Jimmie, I'm sorry. Jack was doing a swell job."

McVane nodded. "Yes—he was. Maybe it's best the way it is. Jack died a hero. Maybe if he'd come back he'd have started in where he left off. He was a swell flyer—Jack was. But you know, and I know, as a civilian, he wasn't so hot. He might have got in trouble. He tells there in the letter than he knifed Bedore in the fight, that night. He had it in for him for knocking him and his truck off the road on Camp 22 hill one time. And he had it in for you—on account of Rose Brady. He knew you'd threatened Bedore, and were hunting for him that night—and he knew you'd be blamed for the knifing. It was a dirty trick, Stan — a damn dirty trick. But—maybe you can forget it, now."

Stan handed the letter back, unopened. "I've forgot it already, Jimmie. Jack was a soldier—and a damn good one. Let's always remember him that way."

McVane reached out and gripped Stan's hand. "Come on," he said gruffly. "It's time we were going."

"Going where?"

"Home to supper. I'm living here, now. Married Blanche Brady—you remember her—Rose's sister, used to be in the office at the mill. Rose is living with us. The old folks are dead. She'll be glad to see you."

"Did Rose think I knifed Bedore?" Stan asked, abruptly.

Jimmie McVane cleared his throat. "Well—you see, Stan—she was pretty thick with Jack—and—"

Stan nodded. "I see," he said, shortly.

"But there were a lot of other people that never did believe you did it. Old man Allard, and Spikey, and Phil Billips, and Reid Ainsworth, and Ella Taylor, and plenty of others."

"Ella Taylor! Have you been up to Nemegos?"

"No. Ella and the kid are living with old man Gordon on the farm there at Sowerby. She sold out the store after Slim was killed.

"So they got Slim, too, eh?"

"Yeah—Slim never got back from Dunkirk. Come on, we'll be going. Blanche'll have supper ready. I wonder if Rose'll know you with that beard on."

"How did you know me, Jimmie? I thought you'd still be after me and I'd have you fooled."

McVane grinned. "I thought I'd still be after you, too—thought it all along till Jack's letter came. I knew when you enlisted that you'd just shaved off a beard—could tell it by the color of your face. I figured you'd grow another when you got back, So, over there, I kept studying you—the way you walked, the shape of your hands and your ears, and your nose. Then you remember, some of the boys would be taking snapshots here and there. I got one of you and drew a beard on it. I'll show it to you when we get home. Looks just like you."

Stan grinned. "Smart cop. Does Rose

know you and I soldiered together, in the Commandos?"

"Yeah, I've told 'em all about it—after Jack's letters came. She'll be anxious to see you."

"But—hell, Jimmie—isn't she all broke up about Jack?"

McVane slanted him a sidewise glance. "Not so anyone can notice. She didn't even stay home from the drive dance—and that was only ten days after we got word about Jack. I don't think she cared a hell of a lot for him."

"She don't care a hell of a lot for anybody but Rose," Stan said.

"She isn't the girl Blanche is—by a damn sight," Jimmie admitted. "But come on—let's get to hell out of here! Blanche is having supper early, tonight, because there's some kind of doing at the hall. There's a war bond drive on—speakers, and bingo games, with war bonds and savings stamps for prizes. There's some breed girl going to be there. She's been traveling all over Canada, and they say she's sold more bonds than all the rest of 'em put together. She killed an escaped German prisoner that tried to blow up a bridge and wreck a troop train somewheres up on the C. N. She's been at it for over a year, and this is her last appearance. She don't like cities—wants to get back up north. Inspector Bliss of the Mounted and a couple of M. Ps., Cooper from Sudbury and Miller from Bruce Mines, have got her in tow. They say she's a swell looker, and smart as hell. We don't want to miss it."

Supper, that evening, was a rather uncomfortable affair, with Rose Brady doing most of the talking. When it was over, Rose and Stan followed the McVanes to the hall.

"And tomorrow, Stan," Rose was saying, "you can shave off that horrible beard and get a job in the mill. Why, just think—it won't be any time at all till you'll have Dad's old job—head sawyer—twenty dollars a day, Stan! That's a lot of money."

"Yeah," Stan said. "It's a lot of money."

The girl frowned impatiently. "What's got into you, Stan? You seem, somehow—different."

He nodded. "Yes, I suppose I am different—a hell of a lot different from what I was when I left here."

"I never did believe you killed Joe Bedore, Stan."

"No? Did you tell 'em you didn't believe it?"

The girl flushed. "Well, I—I thought it was best to let 'em think I did. Jack said you did it—and I couldn't call him a liar, could I?"

"There were other people who didn't think I did it—and they weren't afraid to come out and say so."

"But I—I had to keep on the good side of Jack. You see, after you went away—I—we were engaged."

"Yeah—so I heard."

"But—Stan—really I—I never really cared for Jack. If—if things hadn't turned out like they did, I'd have married you."

STAN nodded. "Yes — prob'ly you would."

"But now everything's all right again! You'll have a job in the mill, and it won't be long before you'll be drawing down your twenty dollars a day. We can fix up the house and by the time they have cars for sale again we can get a Cadillac or a Packard—with leather seats and one of those let-down tops, where you just have to press a button. There'll only be one or two men in the mill who'll be drawing down the money you are."

"I like a canoe," Stan said. "I'll be going to the bush."

"The bush!" They had reached the short flight of steps that led to the hall. "Do you mean, Stan Klaska, that you'd turn down twenty dollars a day to go into the bush for four dollars?"

"I'd turn down twenty dollars a day in a town to go to the bush for nothing." He paused and pointed through the open door

where people could be seen moving about among the various games. "Remember what you told me, that night—right there in that room? 'Go to the bush,' you said. 'Men like you don't belong in a town.' I never forgot those words, Rose. I never forgot 'em because I knew they were true."

The girl bit her lip as rich color flooded her face. "Come on," she said. "Let's go in. If you want to quarrel, let's wait till this is over. I don't want people to think I had to come here with Blanche and Jimmie."

A half hour later there was a commotion outside and four people entered the hall and proceeded to the raised platform at the end — the platform from which Moose Sanjon and his orchestra were wont to blare forth the music for the dances.

The games ceased and people settled themselves in their chairs and waited expectantly. Rose Brady cast puzzled sidewise glances into the face of Stan Klaska who sat beside her, his gaze riveted upon the figure of the girl who was seated on the platform between the two members of Parliament.

Inspector Bliss stepped to the front and made a short speech, briefly reviewing the progress of the war and of Canada's part in it. He was followed by Mr. Cooper, from Sudbury, who outlined the Dominion's all-out effort to furnish men and material. Then Mr. Miller, a fine figure of a man, stepped forward and in a few well chosen words introduced Miss Helene Bovee: "a young woman who killed a dangerous Nazi with her own hands, and whose sales of war bonds within the past year have run into millions."

Stan Klaska's fists were clenched till the nails bit into his palms, and he could feel his heart thumping madly as he stared tensely at the girl who stepped lightly to the front of the platform—stepped toward him as she had stepped that morning across the little clearing on the bank of Cabin River — plaid skirt, blue cape, and the bright red feather in her hair.

She paused beside a small table and laid a package on it. "War bonds," she announced simply, "for you to buy. Canada needs your money — needs it to produce guns, and tanks, and planes to beat the Germans. And for ships to carry these things to your sons and brothers, and fathers who are fighting overseas, that we here at home may live our lives in freedom and in peace, and not be forced into German slavery like so many poor people in Europe.

"These men who fight need clothing, and food, and ammunition, and those of us who remain at home must see that they get these things. They are giving their lives —you are asked only to give your money. You, who buy these bonds, will get your money back with interest—their lives they will not get back.

"I live far beyond the railways. When they talked of war I did not care—for I said 'war will not come to bush country!' But war did come. My brother went. And another went, also—one I loved even more than I loved my brother—more than my life.

"One day, after they had gone, my grandma and I were tending nets in Albany River. I looked up and saw canoe coming. My heart was glad because I knew that canoe. It was canoe of him I loved. I think—he has come back to me. He did not go to war. Then canoe landed, and I saw it was not he, but another. He looked at me and my grandma and the two little ones and he said 'where are men?' I said 'We are alone. Men have gone to fight Germans.' He said 'who are you to talk of fighting Germans?' He saw me looking in canoe, for in there is a tent I have seen many times before. 'Why do you look at canoe?' he said. 'Have you seen it before?' I said 'Yes. It belong to man who has gone to fight Germans.' Then he grew very angry. 'There is one less man to fight Germans!' he said. 'For I killed this man and took his canoe. And I will kill you all.'

"He came at me, and my grandma tried to stab him—but he kick her with his foot and she died. He came at me again, and then little boy of seven years picked up knife and stabbed him behind, and he turned to kill that baby. So, I kill him with my knife.

"Then Inspector Bliss came. He is Sergeant Bliss, then—and he look at the dead man and said he is German prisoner who got away from Espanola and tried to blow up bridge and wreck troop train and kill many soldiers. And on the Kabinakagami he kill old Seesawbig, an Indian, who was a good old man, and take his tent and his rifle and grub.

"And so when I know this man is German, I am glad I kill him, because he tried to kill many soldiers, and he killed the man I love—and old Seesawbig, too. And he killed my grandma who was very old. And Inspector Bliss went away, and then he came back and said that those in Ottawa want me to come and tell people about the German, and sell war bonds. I did not want to go. But when he told me it would help to fight the Germans I went with him. For more than a year I have sold war bonds. They have told me that the Germans killed my brother. Always the Germans will kill. They killed my papa, years ago in other war. All people have been good to me. They have bought my war bonds. I have done my bit, and I am glad. Because now I am going back to bush country. But it will not be like it was before—for those I love are dead. Always war brings sorrow and sadness. This war has brought sorrow and sadness even far back in bush country." She paused and picked up the packet from the table. "And now will you buy these bonds? Please buy them—for the men who are fighting over there."

The simplicity—the unconscious drama of the girl's words struck home. There was a rush toward the platform, as people crowded forward to buy bonds.

STAN KLASKA sat as one in a trance as his ears drank in the girl's words. "Who was this man she said she loved more than life itself? Could it be—? But no—this man was dead. This German prisoner admitted killing him. And yet—"

He rose to his feet and walked toward the platform, elbowing his way through the crowd. Rose followed, hardly knowing why. He took fifty dollars from his wallet, and extended it toward the girl on the platform. When she reached down for it their eyes met. The girl recoiled. Her hand clutched at her heart, and her breath came in quick, short gasps between her parted lips. "Stan!" she gasped. "You—" Then her other hand flew to her lips, and she glanced fearfully toward Inspector Bliss.

"Yes, Helene—it's me. That German lied about killing me. And it's all right—the police know, now, that I did not kill that man."

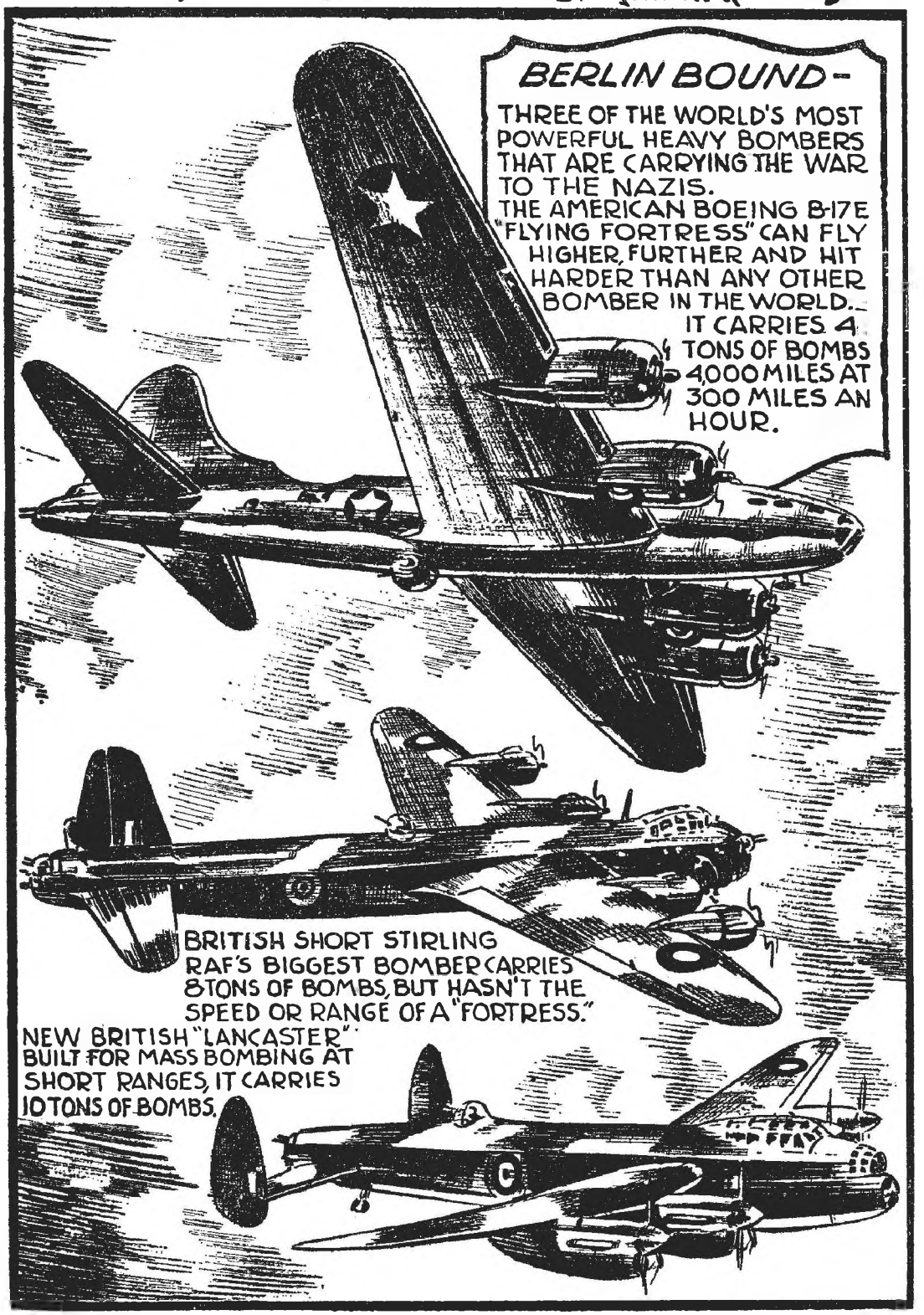
"I knew it all the time," she said, "because you told me that you did not kill him."

People still crowded the platform, and Inspector Bliss was taking their money and passing out the bonds. A few stared at the two—but in the confusion none sensed the drama of the meeting. The dark eyes of the girl strayed beyond Stan and met squarely the blue eyes of Rose Brady. Then they returned to Stan's face. Her lips moved—and the words sounded strange, and toneless and wooden. "And so now you have come back from the war—back—to the girl—who is beautiful?"

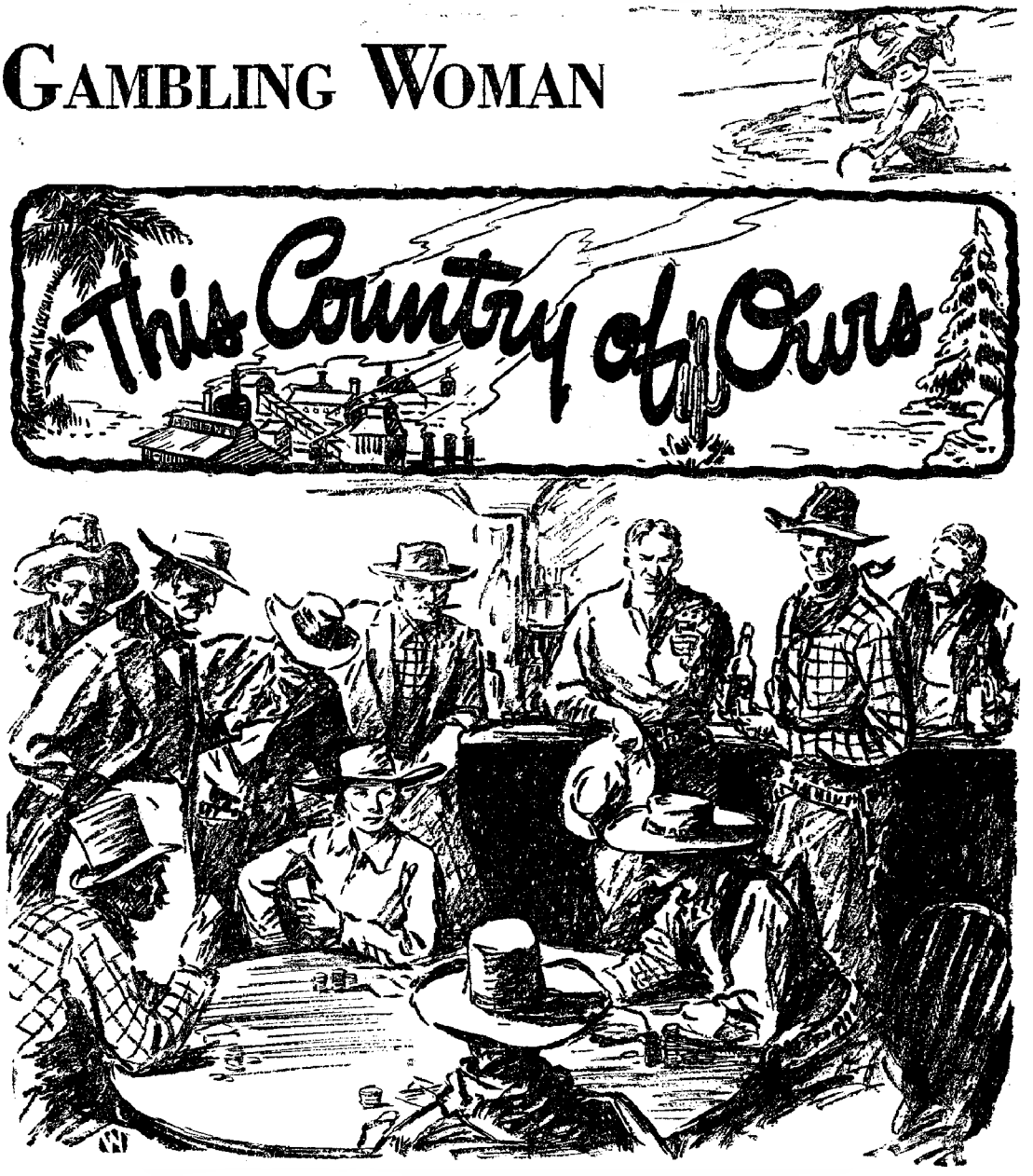
"Yes, Helene—back to the most beautiful—the most wonderful girl in all the world. Tomorrow, dear we go back to the bush country. You and I together. Where we can hear the wind in the spruce tops—where always we can explore beyond the next ridge—where always there are new rivers calling." He turned and glanced at Rose Brady. "Men like me don't belong in a town."

Wings for Victory

BY Jim Ray



GAMBLING WOMAN



By H. BEDFORD-JONES

"You Said It, Partner, She Likes to Be Took for a Man."

Yellow nuggets on display,
Yellow dust for money,
Miners washing rotten quartz
Thick as flies in honey;
Paydirt lies in yonder crick
And the hill behind it;
But—don't aim to get rich quick!
Gold is where you find it.

Shysters, rascals, low riffraff
Crowd the golden border;
Criminals and killers laugh
At thought of law and order;
Within this liquor-ridden hell—
Satan sure designed it!
What hope for any soul can dwell?
Gold is where you find it.

TEX JUDSON was long, lanky and cynical, with a shrewd twinkling eye and a smile that Dave Sinclair liked at once; it held a certain kindliness, a human warmth, rarely found in these parts. Judson swept out a slender and well-kept hand toward the far-reaching mixture of long huts and Indian tepees that extended to the banks of the Platte.

"So you came in the coach that arrived last night, Mr. Sinclair?" he replied to the question Sinclair had asked. "No need for a hotel, sir, none at all. You can take the first deserted log house you find; there are plenty. Everybody's gone to the diggings that can go."

"Oh!" said Sinclair, still stiff from his night's sleep in the coach.

"Lose no time, either," advised Judson, "if you want to run for Congress. You don't?" he went on, at Sinclair's blank look. A chuckle seized him. "Ha! Gather a hundred Americans together anywhere beyond the settlements, and they instantly lay out a city, frame a State constitution, apply for admission into the Union—and fifty of them become candidates for Congress.

"Well, Mr. Sinclair, this is Denver City, in the territory of Kansas; and already there's talk of forming a new state around this desolate metropolis. But no doubt you're headed for the gold diggings like everyone else."

"Not me," said Sinclair, getting out a corncob pipe and stuffing it. "I've got to get my carpet-bag located somewhere and get to work."

"Is it possible that Denver City is your oyster, then?" inquired Judson. "We've got six hundred houses, half as many more abandoned or unfinished, a couple hundred Indian lodges, a hundred tents of various sizes, and some dozens of prairie schooners being used as abodes. May I ask among which category you expect to work?"

Sinclair grinned. He already knew that Judson was a gambler by profession, but he liked the lanky Texan.

"I'm a surveyor, sir," he rejoined. "Leastways, that's what I make a living at weekdays. Sundays I am, or was, by way of being a preacher."

Judson regarded him with open incredulity and amazement. "I don't believe it!"

"Well, it's true, or was. I'm not connected with any church now," said Sinclair, "since there's no congregation of the Reformed Campbellites this side o' New Brunswick, which I left ten years ago to come to the States. But in a pinch, I could preach once more."

Judson caught the dry humor. "Oh! I see. You've not preached for ten years, eh?"

"No, friend, I've lacked in grace."

Whether Sinclair spoke in earnest was hard to say. His rather irregular features were sunbrowned, firm, high-boned; he was certainly no more than thirty. His blue eyes carried a glint of humor. His figure was stalwart, roughly clad; he gave an impression of competence. If he lacked the lithe smoothness of the gambler, he was certainly not awkward.

"Hm! I was about to propose that you share my abode, close by," said Judson, gravely, "but it would scarcely do. I'd lose face at once if it were known that a preacher was living with me; why, my competitors at the Denver House might not even speak to me on the street! Of course, if you were only a surveyor, that'd be quite all right."

Dave Sinclair eyed him sharply for a moment; then, at the same instant, both men broke into a laugh. Sinclair put out his hand to Judson's hearty grip.

"Done with you! Not a soul shall know the infamy, I promise you! And I thank you for the kindness, friend Judson. By the way, did you ever hear tell of a young woman named Nell Foster, with a family of the same name, in these parts?"

The gambler reflected. "Barring Injuns, greasers and Chinks, there's exactly

five women in the city, plus Franky Farrell; none of 'em is a Foster. But I hear there's a full ten thousand emigrants coming, between here and Fort Leavenworth alone, to the gold diggings; so if you're looking for the lady, she may be on her way."

"No." Sinclair shook his head. "She came with her folks seven years ago in the big gold rush. 1852, that was. Never heard from again."

"Maybe went to Oregon or stayed in Utah. Well, find your carpet-bag and I'll make you at home in no time."

"Home" was no more than the usual log cabin, with earthen floor, sod roof, a corner fireplace in Mexican style for cooking, oiled-paper windows and boxes for chairs. It was, however, shelter, and Sinclair asked no greater luxury. This settlement among the towering Rockies had an enormous daily flood and ebb of comers and goers; white, endless caravans of prairie schooners bound for the new gold fields, or unhappy miners coming back to sell tools and grub at any price and hit for home or for Californy.

It was the height of the 1859 summer, and the Pike's Peak rush was gaining force each day. Nearly a thousand Arapahoes lived in the heart of the city; there were Mexicans, breeds, trappers, crooks and fugitives from justice, Americans from every part of the Union, and gamblers in number. Rifles and pistols or revolvers were carried universally, and scarcely a day passed without its shooting affray.

SEEING that his new living companion took from his carpet-bag a Bible and a Colt's revolver, Judson nodded cynic approval.

"Shoot 'em with one hand, bury 'em with the other! Seriously, Sinclair, preach all you like; but first get started as a surveyor. First impressions count heavily here. Half our citizens use false names and have police histories; it's decidedly offensive manners to ask questions about a man's name or his past. If you want to preach, there'll be no objection, but get off on the other foot, I beg of you."

Sinclair laughed. "Give me a nap and a shave, and I'll get off on the other foot by joining you at the Denver House at noon. I understand that's the chief attraction here."

"Good! And I, in turn, will acquaint you with the art of gambling—the chief rule of which is never to show up at the tables until the other fellows have been going it two or three hours, while you've been getting a bit of shut-eye. Good! See you later."

So Sinclair got his quiet sleep and his shave. But he never forgot his first afternoon and evening in Denver City, or rather at the Denver House; for the person he met, and the singular happening there, overshadowed all else.

HE strolled through the streets on his way to the rendezvous, absorbed in everything he saw. Half-naked redskin families playing about, lordly warriors snoring in drunken dreams; the one-room log shack where the owners and staff of the *Rocky Mountain News* ate, slept, wrote and printed; land speculators rushing immigrants around to inspect city sites and lots; the bustling express office, where everyone gathered for news and mail from home.

And, looming ahead, the majestic Denver House; a one-story structure thirty-six by one hundred and thirty feet, with log walls and dirt floor. Its main feature was the huge bar and gambling room that ran the full length of the building.

Here Tex Judson was waiting. He introduced Sinclair to one or two others of the fraternity. They proved to be quiet, pleasant men of Judson's stripe, but said frankly that they were poor specimens to judge by. You should see the downriver gamblers from the packets, or Bully Triggs from New Orleans, or Handsome Joe Montez from Santa Fe—or, for a

change, Franky Farrell, yonder in the corner practising her three-card-monte!

The bar was well occupied, despite the hour, by groups of drinkers. One poker game that had been running all night and morning, was dragging along its weary course. Suddenly, over the hum of voices, leaped a shrill exclamation.

"Well, if it ain't Davy Sinclair, the boy preacher of Argyle! Davy Sinclair growed up!"

SINCLAIR halted and swung about; someone here who knew him—who, then? No one responded to his look, to his demand; who had spoken? No one was paying him the least attention. The bartender, belted with two guns, gave him and Judson a cheerful nod.

"Did you hear it?" Sinclair glanced at his friend, puzzled.

"Sure. Looks like somebody here must know you but don't want to be recognized. Here, I want you to meet Franky Farrell."

He marshaled Sinclair toward a corner of the room. At a table by itself stood a queer figure, booted, spurred, gun on buckskinned hip, bedraggled wool plains hat on head—a man, to all appearance, but Judson chuckled.

"A woman, sure. Treat her like a man, mind you. And don't tackle her game or she'll trim the pants off you! Franky's one of the best gamblers in the business. She don't drink or stand for loose talk, but she runs a straight game, and when it comes to cussing she has a tongue to blister a Missouri mule driver! Hi, Franky! Shake hands with a friend o' mine, a tenderfoot just come to town!"

Sinclair was introduced and shook hands in awkward bewilderment. By no stretch of the imagination could anything feminine be found in Franky Farrell's features. They were thin-lipped, hard, with gimlet eyes, and had been quite deeply pitted by smallpox.

"Here y'are, gents, in time to take my money!" said she, shuffling the three cards in front of her. "This ace of hearts is the winning cyard! Watch it carefully. Let your eagle eye follow it while I shuffle. Keep track of it as I lay it down. Pick it out and you win my money; but I warn you, gents, this is my reg'lar trade—the hand is quicker than the eye! Gives me two chances to your one. Go on, pick your cyard—the ace wins! I take no bets from cripples, orphan children or gents who are dead broke. Lay down your money and make your choice! Who'll go me for the ace of hearts?"

Sinclair, during her swift patter, noted that one corner of the ace was slightly bent. He pointed it out to her, politely.

"Careful, there! You'll lose a lot of money if you bend the cards that way! Anybody with a sharp eye could tell—why, what's the matter?"

From Judson burst a guffaw. Franky Farrell flushed angrily, then, at Sinclair's real confusion, broke into a toothy grin and flipped over the cards. Bent corner was *not* the ace of hearts. Sinclair dimly comprehended his own naive blunder, when Judson caught his arm and dragged him away.

"Come on into the dining room. Something I meant to ask you—oh, yes! Where's that place, Argyle?"

They got a table in the crowded little dining room, and Sinclair made response.

"That's the town I come from, back in Nova Scotia. Look, Judson, I was joking you about being a preacher. That was when I was a boy, ten years and more back. There must be some Canuck or Bluenose here who recognized me."

"None that I know of," said the other. "Well, let it ride; no harm done. I've got you known as a friend o' mine, so you ain't likely to get skinned; just the same, you steer clear of the tables. I'm going to get some sleep this afternoon."

"Why in the afternoon?" demanded Sinclair.

"Better still, up to about eight tonight. Keeps you fresh when the others get

jaded; it's a prime secret. Along about two in the morning you're on your second wind when the rest are down with the heaves. With a few tricks like that, a straight player can lay over all the crooked workers going."

"That woman we met—is she really a gambler?"

Judson chuckled. "Gambling Woman, huh? You said it, partner. She likes to be took for a man. She used to work the Missouri packets, I hear. As I said, she don't drink and she lives straight and plays straight. Sometimes she sticks to three-card, which is usually good for a hundred dollars a day; other times she sets in at poker. She's good. Nobody knows much about her history; best guess is that she's a professional gambler's wife from St. Louis and took up the game after he got killed. Don't know if it's true. Well, you circulate around and before evening you ought to have a surveying business well established. But mind, cash and nothing else! Everybody's out to hook everybody else here, remember. And no mercy shone. You lose your scalp if you don't keep your eye peeled."

That afternoon, with Judson snoring at home, Sinclair circulated from the settlement of Auraria, now incorporated with the city as West Denver, to Cherry Creek and the Platte. He tramped over the whole place, now with eager speculators, now with anyone who came along, now alone.

There was a shooting at the Platte ferry, and he loaned his gun to the sheriff, who had pawned his official weapon for twenty dollars to buck the games, and who made ineffectual attempts to enforce order; it was no go. Everywhere he found a rushing, hearty informality that astonished him.

With canny Scots sense, Sinclair had decided not to hit for the riggings but to settle here in Denver City, the future metropolis of the mountain country. And long before sunset, when he tugged off his boots to rest his aching feet, he had been confirmed in his resolve. There was no smaller coin in circulation than a twenty-five-cent piece, but money was abundant, "deals" of all kinds were being made hotfoot—and that afternoon did actually get him established as the only surveyor in the city, the last gentleman of that persuasion having decamped for Gregory Diggings after swapping instruments for mining tools and grub. Sinclair swapped a new extra pair of boots for said instruments and was ready to go, with high bids being made for his immediate services.

"The boy preacher of Argyle"—that familiar phrase lingered in his mind. He searched faces everywhere, asked questions, and found no answer to the puzzling query of who could have spat forth those words in the Denver House. With darkness he lit a lamp, cooked supper and woke up Judson; he was a fair cook.

"What made you blurt out at me about you being a preacher?" demanded the curious gambler, over their meal. Sinclair laughed boyishly.

"Well, I was once. I knew you were a gambler so I thought it'd shock you, maybe."

"Just trying a game on me, eh?" Judson said, with a twinkle. "And were you trying to pull my leg with your question about Nell Foster?"

"God forbid!" he said gravely, and then came out with the harsh thing he had locked away in his heart." She was my sister, four years older than I. Our parents died when I was a baby. Life was a hard struggle with bitter poverty, there in Nova Scotia. Some distant cousins, also Sinclairs, took me to raise; Nell was taken by the Fosters. All were good folk but overstrict in religious matters. The Sinclairs were fanatics. As a young fellow I absorbed a lot of their notions."

THE fame of Davy Sinclair, the boy preacher of Argyle, had gone far and wide; he, boy-like, had enjoyed the show-

off and applause in the scattered backwoods settlements. But there came a time when, man grown, he revolted against it all, suddenly and completely. The Fosters were emigrating to the States and California with the gold rush; he, too, wanted to go.

Instead, he found that he was expected to become a minister and carry out his "preaching calling." He revolted against that, too, and settled it all by running away to sea. Eventually he worked his way westward, became a surveyor, and set out for the golden Rockies.

"So here I am and here I stay," he said. "I agreed today to lay out his properties for Wilkins, the speculator, and take some city lots in payment; I think I'll settle for good and grow up with Denver City. A merchant named Blake wants me to do a good deal of work for him also, for cash."

"Good Scots sense," agreed Judson. "And your sister?"

SINCLAIR shrugged. "Not much chance of finding her, I expect. Perhaps, when this country gets settled and orderly, if it ever does, I can have some luck. She's my only flesh-and-blood kin and I'd like to find her, of course. But from what I hear there are thousands and thousands of such separations. Right now, I'd like to find the man who recognized me today!"

"We'll go look, then," Judson said, laughing, and clapped him on the back. "Good man! You had me worried, about that preaching business. Horace Greeley, the New York editor, was here last month. He made a hell of a big speech over at the Denver House; the games all knocked off and the bartender quit work, while he was speaking. He made a powerful address, too; real strong, it was."

"For abolition, I suppose?"

Judson grinned. "No. It was against gambling and against drinking—and everybody cheered him to the echo, and went back to the bar and tables. Ready? Let's go; make your first day in Denver City a real good one! But, mind, no gambling."

Back they went to the Denver House for a couple of hours. Sinclair met gamblers of all descriptions, hawks and wolves and worse, saw Franky Farrell at work amid a crowd of immigrants, was introduced to local characters and celebrities. When it was learned that he was a settler and not an Argonaut, round after round of drinks were called for, and he could not escape the celebration. He headed home somewhat unsteadily, at length, leaving Judson seated in a poker game with two other gamblers and several miners in buckskin and moccasins.

Next morning he went to work, still keeping his ears open for some sign of the person who had recognized him so mysteriously.

Wilkins was an avid speculator. After the first gold reports had apparently proven false, he had bought in town lots and houses at ten or twenty dollars each, and had gone in heavily for the construction of new houses, hauling logs and planks from the sawmill sixty miles away. Now he was reaping his rewards, along with plenty of competitors.

Wilkins was a fox-nosed man of forty, a sturdy fellow belted with hunting knife and revolver, abrupt and choleric when in liquor, and an inveterate gambler, doing more of his business at the Denver House bar than in the open. He had a great deal of land to be divided into lots, and others already surveyed to be corrected; Sinclair was to receive one in every twenty lots for his work.

It was very different with Blake, a genial merchant from Philadelphia, who had taken in a number of lots on a debt and wanted them surveyed. The late unlamented surveyor, it proved, had overworked himself at the Denver House bar, and corrections were in order on all sides. So Sinclair found himself crowded with work enough to more than fill the long mountain days. His mornings he put in

at the Wilkins job, his afternoons at Blake's or other sections.

As he slept of nights and Judson of days, the two got on famously; Sinclair rarely saw him except upon visits to the Denver House. But, one morning, Franky Farrell came striding out to where he was working, in boots and buckskin. Sinclair was no longer shocked by sight of a woman in man's clothes; the endless immigrant wagons had brought many a woman to the gold diggings who dressed the same way. He fell into casual talk with his visitor.

The Gambling Woman, as she was sometimes called behind her back, was acrimonious, hard, profane and able as any man at fight or dispute; but she did no drinking and countenanced no loose talk. At gambling she asked no odds and was a frequent winner and a good loser.

"I want some lots surveyed," she said abruptly. "The lines ain't been run true. Can you do it?"

"Sure," replied Sinclair. "First of next week, not before. Suit you?"

"Yep. I hear you aim to settle regular here."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he said with Scots caution. "Might be a good notion."

"Why?"

HE gave her a surprised glance, and smiled. "I think the city has a future. And all this country around here.

"Good for nothing but gold," said she, relaxing. "Easy to make mistakes. Back in Missouri I knew a heap o' folks from Boston. High-faluting folks, college educated. They had to choose between two settlements, Kansas City and Kidder. They figgered close, and made it that the coming metropolis was Kidder and Kansas City had no chance to boom. So they settled at Kidder. The wagon-trails changed course and now they're high and dry and Kansas City is booming."

Sinclair laughed. "Well, it's hard to tell, sure. I'm not much at gambling; money's to hard to get. But I'm stopping in Denver City for a while, anyhow."

"Think twice," she advised. "Once the diggings peter out, what's here? Everybody allows the land along the Platte's no good, won't grow anything but sand."

"So I hear," he rejoined. "I figure different. It's good land along all these streams. Within fifty miles of Denver City I'd bet anything could be grown—anything! I'm going to take up some of it, if I get a chance."

She gave him a hard, slow look. "You see anything in this country except gold and suckers?"

"Plenty. Folks are in too much of a hurry to see it. Why, it used to be the same back at Fort Leavenworth and at Independence and Saint Jo! They were just jumping-off places. Now they're settled towns in the middle of rich country. This will be the same. And the mountains, too—more than just gold in them! All kinds of metals, I bet. It's worth working for, this country is, worth a little hardship! I think it's great."

"With your gift of gab, you'd ought to run for Congress," she said dryly, and turned away.

He took to dropping in at the Denver House, of evenings, for a drink with Judson and a bit of relaxation. At such times he would always get a nod and a word from Franky. Everyone regarded her and thought of her as a man. When an ebullient drinker shot off her floppy hat, she thrashed him properly and it was just another fight. And, in an argument with two gamblers from Taos, she used her revolver handily. There was a good bit of shooting in the Denver House.

Sinclair sat in twice at poker games. To the huge amusement of Judson, he won heavily; on the second occasion, he was ahead three hundred dollars and a number of city lots when he drew out, at four in the morning. Wilkins, one of the players, was furious at his withdrawal, and a clash was barely avoided.

Two days later, Franky Farrell came striding across the prairie where Sinclair was setting his stakes, and paid him for surveying her lines.

"Keep your eye peeled for Wilkins," she said. "He's acting mean as a bear with a sore head. Has he settled up for your work?"

"No," replied Sinclair. "He's good for it—"

"Don't fool yourself," she cut in. "He's plumb crooked. Say, are you still inquiring around for Canucks or folks from Nova Scotia?"

"Why, yes!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Have you picked up any news?"

She nodded, her hard bronzed features set in their usual cynic sneer.

"Joe Binns, who supplies antelope meat to the hotel, was drunk and talking last night. Told me his real name is McIlvaine and he's from some place in Nova Scotia named Liverpool. Is there such a town?"

"Sure!" Sinclair brightened. "Thanks a lot, Franky! I'll go look him up."

"Then tote your gun," she advised. "He had a heavy load on last night."

Sinclair lost no time in looking up the blear-eyed hunter, who peddled antelope steaks to all and sundry at four cents a pound. Binns was surly and flew into a profane fury at the first question, denied any knowledge of Nova Scotia or Canada, and with blistering adjectives swore he had never been east of Texas in his life.

More, he called in two other men to prove it, termed Sinclair a damned prying fool, and in a raging passion snatched up his rifle and pulled the trigger point-blank. The rifle missed fire, luckily, and leaving Binns to be handled by his friends. Sinclair walked off, in no mood to push the quarrel he had caused. Evidently, he concluded, Franky had made a mistake.

His inquiry dropped there, for the best of reasons; a wild street affray that same night wounded three men, and put Binns and another in the hillside cemetery, a rapidly growing landmark. Already there was talk of forming vigilance committees to handle the lawless element.

More than this was afoot; Sinclair became informed of things that amazed him, which as yet remained unknown generally. He obtained no settlement with Wilkins, who remained evasive but made specious promises; speculation was now going on in a big way, and Wilkins was in with a group of aggressive, hard-drinking, unscrupulous characters who preyed on returning miners or hopeful immigrants alike.

Sinclair found his business branching out; he took on two assistants and was thinking of opening an office in a house of his own, and abandoning the jumped cabin. Then, of a sudden, everything around him seemed to break loose with a vengeance.

On a Sunday afternoon, a day when games and bars were going full blast, there was a not unusual interruption of affairs in the Denver House; someone brought in a desolate woman immigrant found starving in the wagon, with her children. The husband and father had died; the oxen had strayed; the woman was bewildered, frightened, hopeless.

The fraternity of gamblers took the lead; they were a free-handed lot, and if the worst of them was quick to kill, he was equally quick to contribute. Money poured in upon the poor woman, not in driblets, but in stream of gold-pieces and in pokes of dust. When she was gone and play had been resumed, Sinclair got hold of Judson and drew him off to a table in one corner. The gambler had been drinking a bit but was far from affected.

"I've got something big to put up to you," said Sinclair, when drinks had been served. "Lay off the firewater till I get through. You've been playing in luck lately, and I want to make use of some of your dust. It'll pay big dividends; the more we can raise, the better."

"I'm agreeable," said Judson, smiling. "Call Franky over; she made a huge strike

last night at poker—cleaned out a fat crowd. She can put in plenty—"

"Why drag Franky into it? I don't want her as a partner," said Sinclair.

"Kind of particular all of a sudden, aren't you?" said Judson.

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Shucks, Dave! Remember when you won real heavy at the tables? Franky done that a-purpose. She's thrown stuff your way right along. Why, most of your good luck has come from her—she's sent no end of jobs to you."

"The devil!" Sinclair started up, but Judson caught his arms and forced him back.

"Easy! Don't be a fool, Dave! No harm in having friends, is there? You'd ought to be grateful to Franky, not get your damned Scots pride up! I've done my best to help you, too. Let me call her over here and tell us your proposition."

Sinclair frowningly agreed. He was amazed at this disclosure. Why Franky should have gone out of her way to throw luck at him, he could not see; nor did he entirely believe it. He nodded when she settled into a chair opposite, and in her expression he found only her usual acid, casual greeting; certainly it held nothing personal.

"Make it quick, Dave," she said. "There's a big game starting."

"This is bigger," he rejoined, leaning forward and speaking quietly. "You don't realize what's going on around you. Nobody knows it yet, but yesterday Blake sold a corner lot for twelve hundred dollars—cash. He'd have sold it for fifty gladly, last week."

"Good lord!" exclaimed Franky in disgust. "Are you going in for speculation?"

"No. Look here, now. A huge brickyard's going in along the river. The express people are planning a two-story frame terminus building. The assay office people on G Street are going to put up a regular mint and banking house. So it goes—everybody's making plans; this winter will see a tremendous building boom."

"The gamble at the tables yonder is safer," said Judson cynically.

"Maybe. But here's a gamble on our very country—I can buy a big section of F Street that isn't laid out yet, if I do it today. Come in on it with me," said Sinclair. "It's part trade; I'll need all the lots we can rake and scrape. It's owned by the Grubers, those two Dutchmen from St. Louis; they want to pull out and go home."

"What d'ye mean, gamble on the country?" demanded Franky Farrell. "Go on; I like to hear you talk. You want to speculate, like I said."

"No; buy and hold." Sinclair met her hard, level gaze. "I believe this whole section of country is rich, richer than any of us dream. The mountains are rich; the land is rich. The Grubers own some land along the Platte; we can get that, too. I propose to pool our lots, all we can get, sell them now, buy out the Grubers, and sit tight. Gamble on this country of ours, sure!"

"Count me in," said Franky abruptly. "How much do we need?"

Sinclair told them. From her weighted coat pockets Franky drew out two fat leather pokes of gold-dust and tossed them on the table.

"That, and as much more," she said, "an hour from now. Cough up, Tex."

Judson grinned, and obliged. "There y'are. I've got a batch of scrip—lots and land. All right, Dave; it goes in. How 'bout you?"

"I've saved money; and I've some lots, and I'll get what Wilkins owes me today," replied Sinclair. "I'll get the Grubers signed up at once."

"Tex, we'll make an honest man of you yet!" said Franky. "Put your deal through, Dave. In an hour we'll have the rest of the yellow stuff ready."

She rose and sauntered off. Sinclair gathered up his plunder joyfully and went off in search of the Gruber brethren.

They, like so many others, "had seen

the elephant" as the saying went; discouraged, sick of the western country, hating the naked mountains, and with no luck at the diggings, they wanted only to get back across the plains at any cost. They could see no future in sand and sagebrush, as they contemptuously called Denver City, and obviously considered Sinclair a fool for buying them out.

They signed up in a hurry, handed over their land deeds, and agreed to take the balance of their due on the morrow.

Sinclair headed back to the Denver House. Once he had the lots due him from Wilkins, he could sell out everything he held and put the money into the big venture. He found his two associates as good as their words. Franky was in a game but handed over the agreed balance. Judson, who was not playing, had also obtained the needful sum.

"I still think you're an ass," he observed. "You can lend out the money at twenty-five per cent a month—"

"And risk losing it all. No thanks! Hello, there's Wilkins! Just in time, too."

WILKINS, with a number of fellow speculators, was approaching the bar. Sinclair headed him off and beckoned him aside.

"I've got a buyer for all those lots you owe me, Wilkins, so fork over the papers, like a good chap, and we'll get squared away."

"What lots?" demanded the other.

"No time for joking, old man. The one in twenty of the addition I ran the lines on—the price we agreed for the job."

"I owe you nothing—not a red cent!" cried out Wilkins violently. "Why, you have the gall of a canal horse! You got plenty out of me when you backed out of a poker game winner—you can't work me for any more, you damned little Scott haggis! Get out of my way and bother me no more or I'll run you out of town!"

His cronies applauded him vigorously as he shoved past and went on to the bar, ignoring the furious and incredulous surveyor.

Sinclair was aware of curious looks, and read them aright. Men were waiting to see what he would do; so, covertly, was Wilkins, hand close to gun. The approved thing, as Sinclair well knew, would have been to draw his own gun and call for a showdown. Instead, he turned away, with the very practical reflection that a dead Wilkins could make over no lots.

A braying haw-haw of triumph went up from the group. Wilkins was slapped on the back and lauded to the skies. A moment later, as he leaned with both hands on the bar, stuck out his chest and posterior, and drank in the flattering praise, his feet were suddenly kicked out from under him. He fell, face down, struck the bar-rail with his chin, and lay senseless. Sinclair straightened up, holding the bowie-knife and revolver of Wilkins.

"Don't get excited, gentlemen," he observed, cocking the revolver significantly. "Our friend Wilkins is going to change his mind about what he owes me. Somebody oblige by chucking some water in his face—or whiskey's better. Thanks."

Astonishment passed into roars of laughter, amid which the revived Wilkins changed his mind and made over to Sinclair his due; the change from threatened tragedy to farce struck the general fancy, and if Sinclair had absorbed all the complimentary drinks offered he would have been carted home in a wheelbarrow.

As it was, he escaped from the confusion to attend to his own business, which kept him on the jump for the rest of the day; he had to dispose of his own lots pooled with those of Judson and Franky Farrell. This was not difficult, since city lots were one form of currency; that same afternoon, in fact, ten well-located lots passed over the poker table from the sheriff to Tex Judson.

Then the Grubers once more, who were already packing a wagon for the trail. They were paid off in full, and Sinclair headed

home in the dusk of evening for a wash before rejoining his new partners to celebrate the venture. He found a folded paper shoved under the cabin door, and when he had lit a lamp stared in new astonishment and perplexity at the hasty scrawl that greeted him:

"Look out for trouble, Davy, or you'll preach no more. Wilkins is making bad medicine."

Davy! No one hereabouts called him that; and the reference to preaching, too! No doubt of it; this note of warning came from the mysterious person who knew him of old. It was meant to impress him, and so it did. He wanted no more trouble with Wilkins, but he could well understand that the speculator might have to save face or go bust.

So, before leaving for the Denver House he buckled on the Colt which he seldom wore, at the same time resolving to give any provocation a wide berth.

PICKING his way among the usual groups of drunken Arapaho warriors, he came into the big barroom to find it well thronged and blue with tobacco smoke, and the tables all going full blast. Franky Farrell was the center of a crowd who was bucking her three-card-monte skill, with some success.

Sinclair edged his way through the throng toward her table, intending to ask if she knew the writing on the scrawled warning. He was so intent upon her that he failed to notice those around. Suddenly there was a surge of movement, a burst of alarmed voices, and the crowd frantically scattered or ducked for safety. Sinclair heard a voice from behind him.

"Now, you durned hoss thief, I got you! Go for your gun! Go for it!"

He recognized the hoarse growl of Wilkins, even before he looked around. There was the speculator, frenzied with liquor, revolver out and covering him. He knew in a flash that he was lost. At his first movement, Wilkins would drill him. Mouthing curses and obscenity, the exultant Wilkins snarled furious triumph.

"Go for it, damn your dirty hide! Go for it—"

A shrill yell, a figure flashing between them, and all hell burst loose. Wilkins beat at the grappling figure. Sinclair leaped in upon them, others surged forward—and suddenly the bursting explosion of the weapon roared out. Amid the reek of powder-smoke, Sinclair hammered the cursing Wilkins down. Again a shot roared, the powder searing across Sinclair's neck; and then, from one side, another shot. Judson, this time.

The smoke cleared. Judson calmly put away his gun. Sinclair came to his feet and reached down to help Franky Farrell up. It was she who had intervened. She stood up above the dead Wilkins—and staggered, crumpling over. A cry burst from Sinclair as he caught her.

"Good God! She's got it—lend a hand—"

Everything was stir and bustle; Franky was carried into one of the adjacent bedrooms, the Denver House boasting some hotel accommodations. An immigrant doctor took charge, excluding all others. He came out, presently, shaking his head.

"No hope, boys. She wants to see Sinclair and Tex Judson. Sinclair first, she says."

Sinclair stepped into the room, came to the bedside, reached down and took Franky's hand. She was smiling slightly—no longer the twisted, bitter smile he knew so well. Her features had relaxed and changed. He stared at her in astonishment.

"Well, Davey!" she said faintly. "And to think ye never knew me again, lad—nor did I want you to know me. So many years since ye saw me—and it's been a bitter hard life, and nothing in it to be proud about—"

Sinclair dropped to his knees, utterly astounded.

"Then it was you—all the time—"

"Sure it was me, Davy I knew you right

off, and could have bitten out my tongue for crying out at you that day! She smiled again. "You've done fine, Davy, but not me. The smallpox got us, back in St. Louis. It got the Foster family, all but me—and many's the time I wished it had got me, too—"

His sister. He could not believe it, yet knew it for truth. His sister, so long sought, so long lost and unknown!

He could find no words. He reached forward and kissed her; for an instant her fingers closed convulsively on his.

"I tried to save ye, Davy lad. All's for the best. Get Tex—I wan to say good-by to him. But don't tell him, mind!"

Sinclair called over his shoulder, and Judson came into the room. Franky Farrell looked up at the gambler.

"Good luck, Tex! You and Dave take my share of the new venture and play your luck hard. I got no one else to leave it to."

"I wish to hell I'd shot that skunk a minute quicker!" said Judson huskily, taking her free hand. "Franky—where you want us to plant you?"

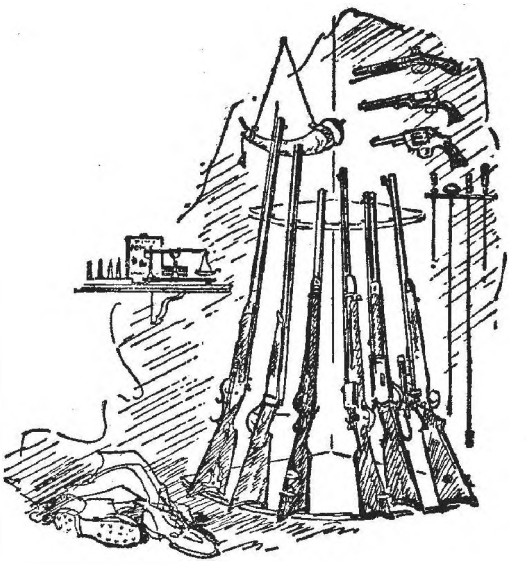
"Upper end of the cemetery." She chuckled faintly. "I can watch the city from there on the hillside—see you two make your pile. It's like you said, Davy—a grand country, along here. It'll be ours, a lot of it—quick, Davy—good-by—"

Sinclair kissed her again and stood up, choking. It was the end.

"She seemed to like that, Dave," said Judson softly. "Look how she's smiling! Look here, I aim to fix up the tombstone for her—not just a board, but a real stone. Only, I don't know what name to put on it! Reckon she'd like just 'Gambling Woman'?"

"She might," replied Sinclair. "But I know a better one, and we'll use that."

So Tex Judson, after all, had to be told.



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Wild 22's I Have Known

SEVERAL years ago Winchester presented to the Secretary of War a Model 94 lever action caliber .30-30 rifle. It was number 1,000,000. That's quite a big pile of rifles in any man's talk and when you consider all the other models of big bore rifles of various makes, such as Winchester, Remington, Savage, Sharps, Ballard, Bullard, etc., you have a hell've a lot bigger pile. Now for each large caliber gun there must be at least 10, maybe more small bore rifles, mainly .22 rim fire. In this bunch of .22's there is only a small percentage of expensive match rifles.

What I'm trying to say is that by far the

most common type of gun in the United States is the inexpensive little five, ten or fifteen dollar .22.

These guns are generally used for plinking (shooting at tin cans, clods of dirt, etc.,) with a little small game or varmint hunting thrown in for good measure. These shooters are the ones most neglected by the so-called gun experts who write about the rifled tube. Perhaps there isn't much to say that will help these brethren. But I'm going to sound off anyway.

I have slightly worked over several of these cheap little guns—had a lot of fun doing it and without exception got them to shoot better than they would when I bought them.

A little single shot Mossberg first got me interested in finding out what could be done with these plinking rifles. The one I had was supposed to have been hand picked. It wasn't. I found out later it was just a regular run of the mill job. The sights on this gun were excellent—interchangeable front and micrometer rear. At that time, the whole works cost me only $6.15 bran' new. The trigger had quite a little backlash as it had to be pulled all the way to permit the removal of the bolt. A set screw adjusted to hold the trigger just after the firing pin was released was installed through the guard back of the trigger. It took a little experimenting here as I wanted it just right when screwed all the way in. So, to remove the bolt, it was only necessary to back out the set screw until the trigger could travel all the way back.

The let off was crisp with no drag so I didn't have to fool around with the sear. The darned trigger felt like it could be controlled, so I took it out to the range for a tryout. I used several brands of ammunition and discovered this little gun handled Klean Bore better than any other I had on hand.

It shot well but was a little light so I took the stock off the barrel-action and bored some small holes in the forearm bar-

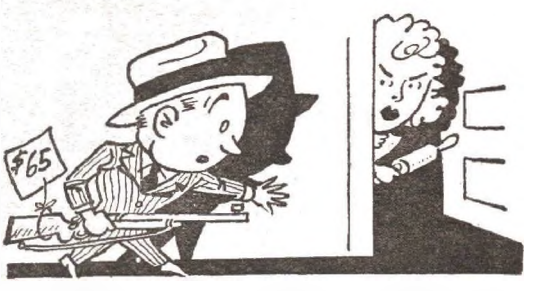
rel groove and in the butt stock under the butt plate. In these holes I poured a total of about two pounds of lead. After the lead cooled a bit I put the stock back on the barrel and action. The gun was a little muzzle light so I put a half pound more of lead in the fore-end.

This little gun then balanced well so I tried it out in the off-hand, sitting and pront positions. It really put 'em in. I shot a possible 100 and four 99's prone at 50 feet on the standard 50 foot target which I thought was excellent for a $6 rifle.

Next a five X Lyman scope was mounted on the barrel. This combination gave good results at fifty yards—but not so good at a hundred. I was no doubt expecting too much. We used this gun for plinking for about a year before I traded it off.

At about 75 feet we could generally hit an empty .22 Long Rifle case using the scope. I'm sorry I didn't keep this little rifle!

Since then I have fooled around with three or four of these little single-shot guns in various makes. In each case these guns had the crudest sort of open sights



and lousy six to ten pound trigger pulls. The bolts were pretty rough too.

In each case to fix up the trigger pull I used a file or a small grinder to square up the sear and its engaging lug, finishing up with a hone. This brought the pulls down to a little under four pounds, which is okay. I used Gun Slick for a lubricant on the sear and also on the whole bolt. It's amazing what this stuff will do to smooth up the action.

The set-screw trigger stop was also installed on these guns.

I had to mount receiver peep sights on the guns as I couldn't do a durned thing with the open jobs.

After over four years experimenting with these inexpensive light guns I have come to the conclusion that with little effort they can be made to shoot surprisingly well, for general use. One thing I do know is that you can't make them into first class target rifles no matter what you do to them. So, if you want a target gun to use at all distances, go out and buy a Winchester Model 52 or a Remington Model 37.

When you consider that these beautifully made rifles will last a lifetime (with proper care) they are really cheap even at the current high selling prices.

Let's say you go out and buy a good target rifle for $65. If you belong to a shooting club you'll use it at least three hours a week. If it takes you fifteen years to wear out the barrel (I have a Winchester Model 52 which has been used for almost twenty years and it shoots with the same excellence as when new) you have used it for 2,340 hours which means that your rifle cost you less than three cents per hour. Compare this to the price of going to the movies. Pretty cheap, huh?

Show this to the better-half when she squawks about that little steel and walnut beauty you lugged home last week!

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

(*Continued from page* 8)

having to make a parachute jump into the jungle has always fascinated me, so I've written my story in this issue about it.

"The shy Talamanca Indians of Costa Rica, who are rarely even glimpsed by intruders, are an interesting subject. The old German photographer of Puerto Limon, who went to great lengths to take pictures of them, claimed that the only way he got them to pose was by bribing them with presents of pants, a decided novelty to them.

[*Turn page*]

"The jungle local color in "Monkey Man" is personal experience, and, if I do say it myself, I think it's good.

"H. P. S. Greene."

News Camera Men in the Front Line

THE news correspondent and cameraman today is actually in the thick of it and to a degree quite unknown in the days when I was shouldering a musket in the 15th Cavalry (dismounted), over in France, says E. Hoffmann Price about his novelette in this issue. Something like eight correspondents have thus far died with their boots on, if not in the actual line of combat, then very close behind the lines and in many cases, as the direct result of enemy fire. The crash of a military plane got Melville Jacoby. A top flight cameraman is among the prisoners of Bataan and Corregidor. My classmate, Colonel Mike Buckley, was not spending his time in Northern Africa sipping gin and bitters and listening to rumors; though his duties at that time (pre-Pearl Harbor) were those of non-combatant observer, he still managed to end up as a prisoner. So, I believe I am justified in making Tod Burke a bit dare-devilish, particularly since gents with Speed Graphics trotted right along with the Marines at Tulagi.

Hunting Skibbies and Nazis and kindred vermin with a camera, movie or still, is not a pansy job, not even if you use a telephoto lens. You're just as liable to be plugged or bombed as a soldier, and without the fun of lobbing some slugs back.

There are spots in my yarn, *Nine Minutes Screen Time,* where a pause for elaborating on technicalities might have helped, but I hesitated to interrupt the march of the story and perhaps annoy the reader who objects to too much detail.

Some of the many camera fans among your readers may shake their heads when I speak of filming the sacking of a city at night. Now, I confess, I have never sacked a city, or filmed the job someone else did, but I have burned up a number of miles of 35 milimeter film under very tricky lighting. For instance, I've snapped, at speeds comparable to a movie camera's shutter (one-thirtieth second, *in general),* such tough bits as "man changing tire by illumination of car headlights"; "close-up portrait of man lighting cigarette, match flame furnishing sole illumination"; candid shots of dinner guests in a room with conventional Mazdas of normal strength; and all these with a garden variety f-3.5 lens, such as the original Leicas, as well as today's Argus and Eastman "35" and like have as standard equipment. The secret (if any) is in the film, a souped up, extreme speed variety which, however, is readily obtainable for any full size movie camera or 35-milimeter candid job. So, with blazing buildings, with parachute flares of magnesium light—have you ever flopped face down in the mud, while they floated overhead, and tried

to tell yourself it wasn't kinda bright, even too bright? Anyway, Tod Burke didn't have a technically impossible job a-tall!

More than that, his kit of lenses included one which is able to concentrate on the film roughly six times as much light as the f-3.5 of the popular-priced candid camera.

I admit that developing movie film in a hotel room in Moulmein is not a choice chore. But in France, I developed 9x12 cm. plates in a couple of aluminum mess kits, and washed them in a horse trough, after first dunking them into a solution which hardened the gelatin so it wouldn't melt and run away in the warm water. And you'd be amazed at what a handy chap can do with a hundred feet of movie film. Not the least amazing is what happens when you drop even a small spark on a length of it.

"Safety" film is quite hard to ignite (comparatively speaking) and it won't sustain combustion. But the professional "nitrate" stock is a first cousin to the propellant used in naval and artillery pieces—indeed, because of the thinness of movie film, it burns, in open air and unconfined, much more rapidly and dangerously than the big hunks of powder used in, say, a 155-milimeter howitzer or G. P. F. To get an idea of how Captain Ikawashi felt, just buy yourself a very short strip of nitrate film, drape it near or about your ankles, and apply the lighted end of a Bull Durham cigarette, and see if you do not almost at once go into the advanced figures of a Highland fling. I trust that the slighly sadistic touch worked on the Nippie captain does not offend any of your customers!

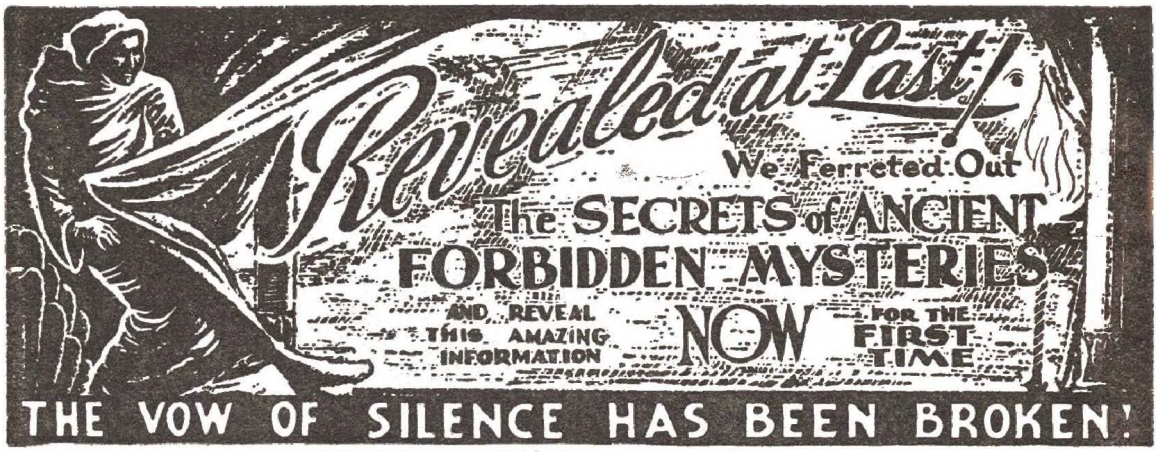
You may wonder about a cameraman taking a tripod into the jungle. Support for a movie box is vital, else the projected image will weave and flicker distressingly. Julian Bryan, who has made many expeditions into Central Asia, admits that he always regretted the optimism which, in his first attempts, led him to dispense with a tripod. And in recent years there have been available duraluminum tripods of great rigidity and little weight. As for the hefty hunk of glass called a 150-milimeter telephoto: there are times when any cameraman would welcome a chance to get a long way from his subject, without also having the image too small to count. Particularly if the subject is warlike and nasty. And though, because of jungle growth, a telephoto would seldom prove useful, when the time came it would surely pay off.

Moulmein, made famous by Kipling, has many pagodas, all with unpronounceable names; and not one is called the "Moulmein" Pagoda. In case you wonder why Burke worked from a minaret, let me state that while *Chinese* pagodas have stairs leading to the top, the Burmese article has a solid shaft, and hence wouldn't do.

Finally, Moulmein has an amazing collection of mission schools, hospitals, orphanages, to offset the heathen temples and Moslem mosques.

Until the next time, greetings and best wishes.

E. Hoffmann Price.



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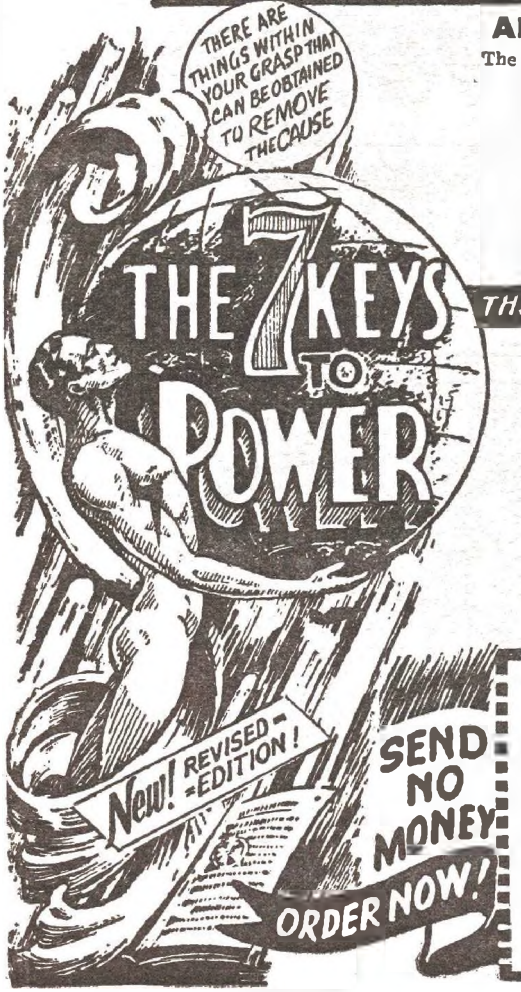
He says, "Follow the simple directions, and you can do anything you desire. No one can tell how these Master Forces are used without knowing about this book, but with it you can mold anyone to your will."

From this book, He says, "You can learn the arts of an old Science as practiced by the Ancient Priestly Orders. Their marvels were almost beyond belief. You, too, can learn to do them all with the instructions written in this Book," Lewis de Claremont claims. "It would be a shame if these things could all be yours and you failed to grasp them."

He claims, "It is every man's birthright to have these things of life: MONEY! GOOD HEALTH! HAPPINESS! If you lack any of these, then this book has an important message for you. No matter what you need, there exists a spiritual power which is abundantly able to bring you whatever things you need."

OVERCOME ALL ENEMIES, OBSTACLES & HIDDEN FEARS



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WHY BE SATISFIED WITH *LESS*... WHEN $1.00 A MONTH INSURES YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY FOR *MORE*... IN Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY?

HERE IS PROOF THAT GUARANTEE RESERVE'S FAMILY GROUP POLICY GIVES YOU *MORE* PROTECTION

$5,897.83 For the 5 members of a laundry operator's family in Indiana, $1.00 a month provides $5,897.83 protection against travel accidental death, $3,935.22 against auto accidental death and $1,962.61 against ordinary or natural death. Get this remarkable low-cost policy for free inspection—find out how much life insurance your family can buy for only $1.00 a month.

$6,344.70 A U. S. Government clerk of Washington D.C. has insured 4 members of his family in one policy—with $6,344.70 protection for travel accidental death; $4,229.80 for auto accidental death and $2,114.90 for natural or ordinary death. One dollar a month is all the policy costs him.

$5,018.70 A Michigan farmer, his wife and 4 children (6 people in all) are insured in a single $1.00 a month, Guarantee Reserve Family Policy for a total of $5,018.70 against travel accidental death, $3,345.80 against auto accidental death and $1,672.90 against natural or ordinary death. Take advantage of the Free Inspection offer and see this marvelous all-coverage policy.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION — MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN—AGES 1 TO 65

By figuring separately the amount of life insurance on each individual of the family instead of bracketing them in age groups—the Guarantee Reserve Family Group Policy pays up to 50% more—in many cases double—the benefits provided by other similar life insurance policies. Yet the cost to you and your entire family is the same—Only $1.00 a month. The amount of life insurance provided for each family varies according to the ages and number of family members insured. Mail the coupon to find out how much life insurance your family group gets for only $1.00 a month. From 2 to 6 members of your family can be insured in this policy without medical examination. No Red Tape—No embarrassing questions—Take advantage of this free inspection offer without obligation.

INCLUDES PARENTS, CHILDREN, BROTHERS, SISTERS, GRANDPARENTS, AND IN-LAWS

As many as six who have an insurable interest can be included in this amazing low cost life insurance policy.

Relationship makes no difference in the amount of benefits paid. Each member of the family is given the maximum protection provided for his or her age in consideration with the number insured.

The policy was prepared by nationally known insurance experts to provide safe, reliable life insurance for entire family groups at a price everyone can afford to pay—Only $1.00 a month.

Read the actual case histories here and you can see for yourself how much more you get for your money in this new kind of Family Group Policy.

Actually get a policy for free inspection showing you and your family what this policy will do for you. Send coupon for free inspection offer today.

COMPARE WITH ANY OTHER FAMILY GROUP POLICY COSTING UP TO TWICE AS MUCH

We want you to compare this policy and its benefits with any other family group policy you ever read about or heard about — and remember this policy is offered by a safe, reliable company with over $15,000,000 of life insurance in force. Send the handy free inspection offer coupon so you can make this comparison—mail it to GUARANTEE RESERVE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY, Guarantee Reserve Bldg., Hammond, Indiana, Dept. 57-M-2.

MAIL THIS FREE OFFER COUPON!

SPECIAL 10 DAY *FREE* OFFER!
This policy is sold by mail only . . . to save agents salaries—medical expense—and collection costs. Get policy for 10 days. Read it—Decide for yourself—No Obligation.

Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE CO.
GUARANTEE RESERVE BLDG., DEPT. 57-M-2
HAMMOND, INDIANA

Without cost or obligation send details of your new Family Group Policy and 10 Day Free Inspection Offer.

Name _____

Street or R. F. D. _____

City _____ *State* _____

SEND NO MONEY