"Laying the Ghosts at Burnt Ranch"—WALT COBURN

Short Stories

Twice A Month

November 25th

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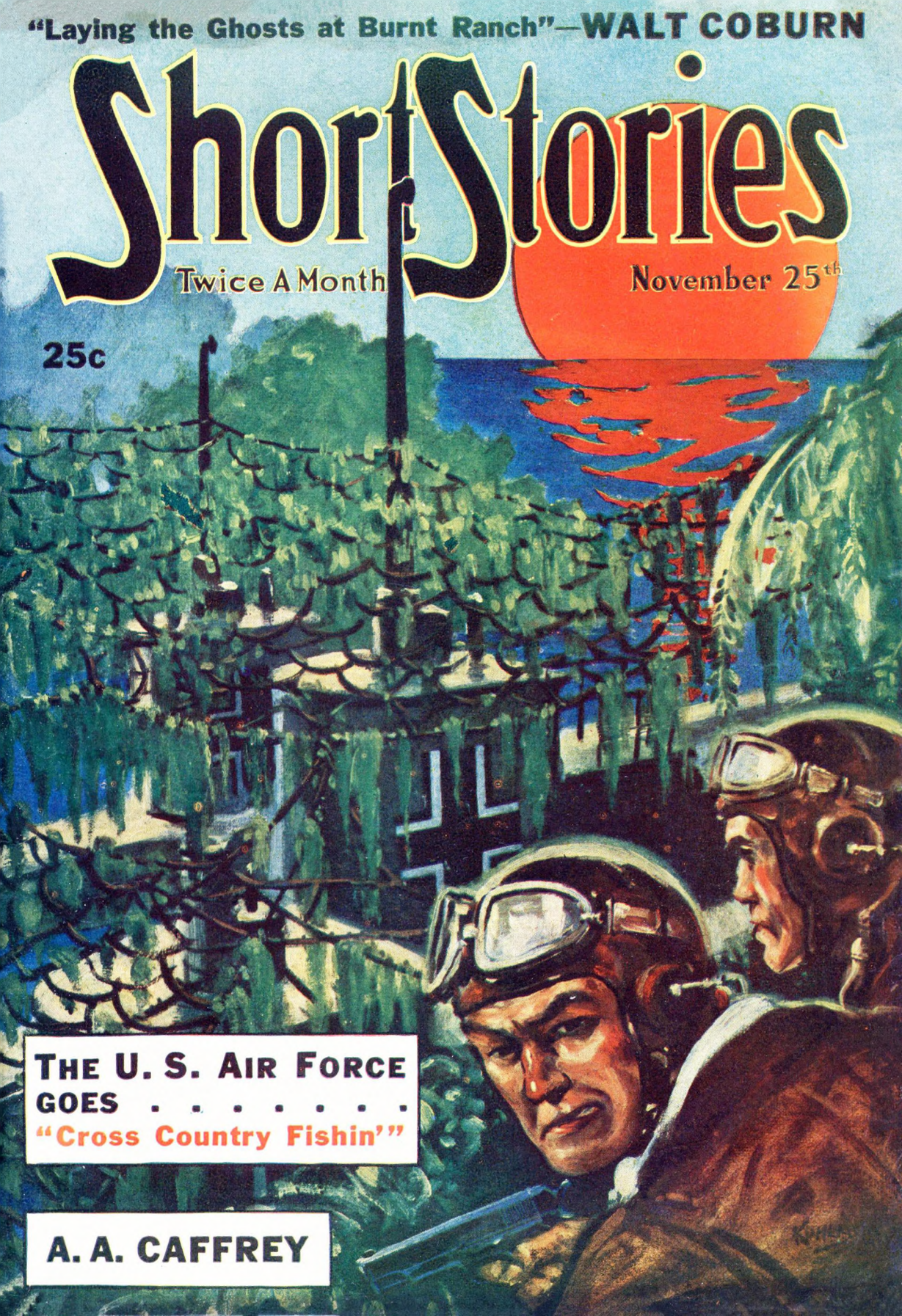

THE U. S. AIR FORCE GOES . . . . . "Cross Country Fishin'"

A. A. CAFFREY

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LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. November 25, 1942. Vol. CLXXXI, No. 4. Whole Number 886.

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

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

NOVEMBER 25th, 1942

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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Name_____ Age_____

Position_____ Address_____

The Story Tellers' Circle

Welcome

THE MUSKETEERS AND THE SERGEANT is a first—C. P. Donnel's first appearance in SHORT STORIES. Hope he'll return soon; we thought that this story was swell. Here's a letter from its author:

After a decade of newspaper work, I tackled fiction under the impression that it was lighter, less demanding work. That impression was erroneous.

I am married, and my wife likes my stories, but my young son and daughter are unable to conceal their overwhelming preference for the adventures of *Superman* and *Captain Midnight* (a fact which I resent) and *Huckleberry Finn* (in which case we see eye to eye).

Philadelphia born, Virginian by virtue of a long residence in Norfolk, I now live in Connecticut, and since the room where I write is less than a hundred yards from some 1,000-odd riveters, welders, and chippers in the South Yard of the Electric Boat Company (submarines), my natural ambition is to own a quiet farm in Vermont not less than five miles from a main road.

As a reporter I covered more than seventy-five murders and took part in a number of dope raids and other little expeditions. But my most dangerous assignment was when, as a cub substituting for the woman's page editor, I staged and helped judge a recipe contest for housewives.

C. P. Donnel.

No Rice in Burma

WARREN HASTINGS MILLER has written us stories of places-in-the-news before this, and his story of Japs in the rubber plantations in this issue carries on the tradition. Here's a bit about Mr. Miller himself:

Born August 21, 1876, so I am an old-timer by now. I was an Ensign, U.S.N., during the Spanish War and saw much service in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Engineer for twelve years thereafter, I finally succumbed to a love of hunting and fishing and camping in the great outdoors and became editor of *Field and Stream* in 1910. In 1918 the Navy called me back into service as a Lieutenant, U.S.N.R., and I served as aide to Admiral Worthington and later reserve gunnery officer of the U.S.S. *Utah*. It was about then that I began writing fiction, to supplement the lieutenant's pay to keep a large family going.

The subsequent years were devoted to much travel in the Far East, Middle East, and the Sahara, south of Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco. These trips were the basis of many books and stories.

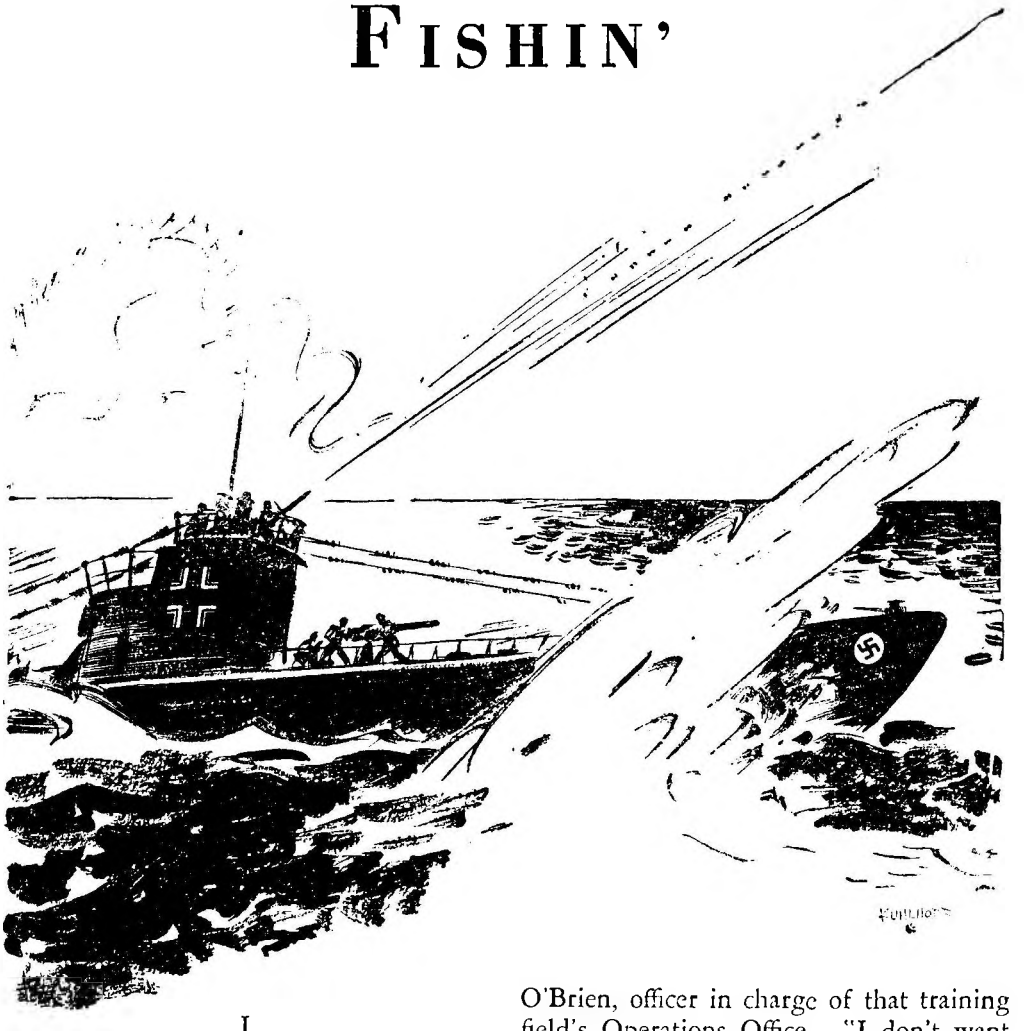
This present war finds me on the retired list of the Fleet Reserve. I volunteered for active duty, in this third war of my lifetime, over a year and a half ago, and was placed on the waiting list of those to be called. So far the Navy has got up to 57 years in calling back its veterans. My turn may come soon, who knows?

Meanwhile, curiosity over what has happened to all my friends, both native and Colonial, in all these places where I once went to get authentic ground-material impels me to write again. Following events as closely as the censor will let us, one wonders what has happened to Siti Ishtar, Queen of Kota Sembilan in Malaya, or to Sidi Harzala, that shiek who figured in the Fezzan story, *Red Star of Islam,* to countless other characters who were drawn from life in earlier Orientals. How have they fared in the Jap invasion, the fighting all over Egypt? History informs us as to the main events; one cannot but speculate on the reactions of one's old friends, caught in the maelstrom of modern civilized barbarity. Disillusion, famine, and guerrilla fighting seems to be the lot of most of them. In Burma, the great rice-exporting country, there is now no rice. This year's invasion took care of that. The Burmese welcomed the Japs at first; what do the fighting Shans think of them now? One takes pen in hand as he guesses what Gyi Pyi would be doing about it!

Warren Hastings Miller.

Sergeant Bill Small of Army Air Forces Thought Something Ought to Be Done About the Axis Pig-Boats Gruntin' in the Gulf, So He Did It—and It Was an Epic Tale

CROSS COUNTRY FISHIN'

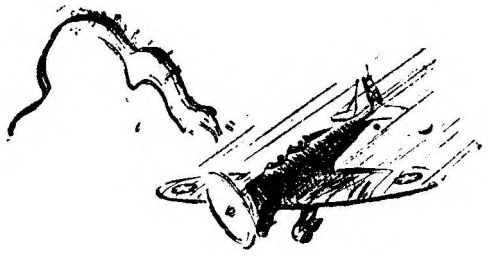


I

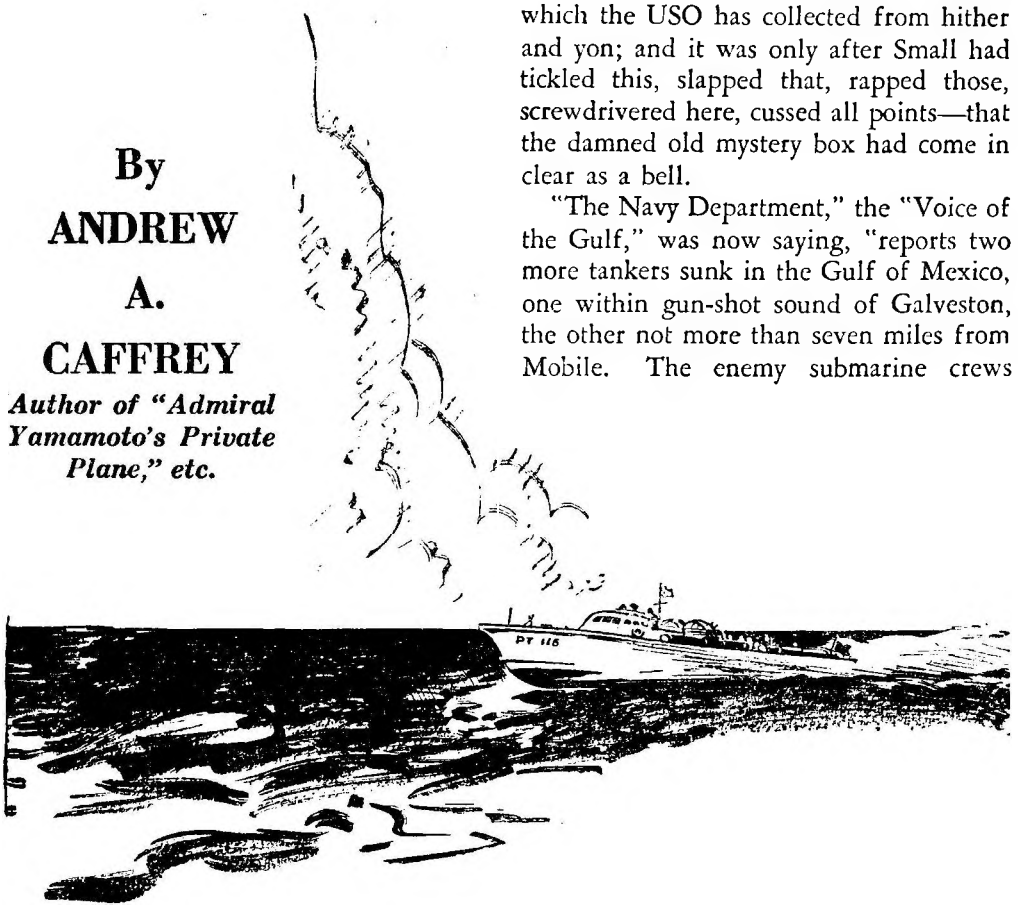
STAFF SERGEANT BILL SMALL was disturbed, perturbed and downright sore about those Axis subs that were roaming the Gulf.

"It doesn't add up, Captain," he was telling his superior, Captain O'Brien, officer in charge of that training field's Operations Office. "I don't want to speak out of turn, but I'll be damned if we don't look like a bunch of softies—us shore-based Air Forces gents allowing the pigs to come a-gruntin' right into our front yards.

"Damned if they haven't got more gall



By
ANDREW
A.
CAFFREY
Author of "Admiral Yamamoto's Private Plane," etc.



agreed. "Who else but a bunch o' nutty spaghetti-stringers'd take a chance like these babies is runnin' in the Gulf? Them goofy guys just want to see America, in the worst way."

Even as the corporal was speaking, Staff Sergeant Bill Small worked on a radio. It was one of those used-and-abused radios which the USO has collected from hither and yon; and it was only after Small had tickled this, slapped that, rapped those, screwdrivered here, cussed all points—that the damned old mystery box had come in clear as a bell.

"The Navy Department," the "Voice of the Gulf," was now saying, "reports two more tankers sunk in the Gulf of Mexico, one within gun-shot sound of Galveston, the other not more than seven miles from Mobile. The enemy submarine crews used incendiary machine-gun fire to ignite the oil-covered waters while the crews of the tankers struggled to quit ship in lifeboats."

than the razor-backed hogs out in the barrens."

"And, Sergeant," said O'Brien, "I'll run chances of speaking out of turn and agree with you. This is bottoms."

"Man, oh, man, them lousy Wops!" said Corporal Cosetti. "An' to think that my ol' gent used to go for this Mussy Lena guy!"

Sergeant Small laughed. "Co' here thinks it's his Dago friends that're raiding the Gulf," he explained to the captain.

"Sure thing, you bet," Corporal Cosetti

"More of the same," said Captain O'Brien. "Murder in the Gulf! Burning oil—it's a nasty way to die. Hell's own way."

"Yes, sir, that's playing it rough," Small agreed.

"An', Cap'n, it's sure bringin' the rough stuff right close into where we live," added Cosetti. "Mobile's where me girl friend

lives. 'At's where I hang me hat on week ends."

II

FLYING SERGEANT SMALL, being an old-line active hangar chief, and not one of these newfangled staff-sergeant pilots, had to take his flying when and where he could find ready equipment and spare time for air work. During the present wartime hullabaloo, said flying periods have been few and far between for Small.

Same goes for Corporal Cosetti. Long, long ago, with Captain O'Brien's willing nod, Staff Sergeant Small had undertaken the small job of building Cosetti into a flyer. And it is, as a rule, just a small, part-time task, for men like Cosetti, living and eating and talking nothing but ships and flying, take to the handling like small birds to air once they get the chance to do some birding on their own.

Cosetti, like all tyros of air, had an unsatiated craving for hours on the wing. And if he couldn't get hours, he'd willingly settle for minutes or fractions thereof—which is air hunger. Also, it is something that only an enlisted man can suffer. So, just so long as Cosetti could beg rides and get a bit of air work from either Small or Captain O'Brien, he could swallow the big grief and carry on as a mighty handy hangar mac—but every danged guy who came into Small's hangar for a ship, either officer or cadet, was Cosetti's enemy. After all, an enlisted man lives but once, and if he can't get in his air work when promised, well—er, well, he's gotta cheat a bit.

So able Mechanic Corporal Cosetti, like any good air mac, made his own flying openings—not that he was hanging it on anybody, especially his hangar boss, Sergeant Bill Small. Hell's bells, that's how Small got his own flying start.

THE ships under Corporal Cosetti's direct care were in the habit of developing certain dangerous flying oddities, not to say downright idiosyncracies. Maybe some ship in particular wouldn't come out of a spin. Or perhaps, as was more often the case, one of the cadets told Cosetti that the dam' old crate was always trying to fall off into a spin. Or as on many complaints, the ship was loggy. It wasn't "there" on the controls. Or it was the motor.

The motor in particular. Cosetti was a star mac, and he could make a motor look worse than a wrecking crew in a junkyard. He could almost convince Sergeant Small that " 'at ol' motor in ship No. So-an'-So ain't got the power to blow papers back at the office fan. . . . An' I can't figure it, Sarg. . . . She ain't got any air hours to speak of. . . . An' her valves ain't blowin' . . . Sure, Sarg, the carb'ration's jake. But she jus' ain't there. . . . What say we take 'er up an' see what's wrong? . . . After all, Sarg, it's what these babies do in the air that counts. . . . Like a cadet says: a guy's gonna fight the enemy in the air, not on the ground. Let's go, eh?"

But of late Sergeant Small wasn't falling for that stuff. Small was too busy, and ships were too few. Air students were too many, and their hangar-hauntings—in quest of available ships — were too, too heart-rending for even Bill Small.

Cosetti, though, had an idea that it was something else again. It was the thing which, in Cosetti's mind, kept Sergeant Bill Small from being a perfect soldier. It was that blonde gal of the sarg's that swell-lookin' Kay Call down in Headquarters, that important civilian employee who handled the post's registered mail, the flying of which important correspondence, to and from the airmail field in town, took up so much of Small's limited air work. Now, as Cosetti figured it, if Sergeant Small wasn't flying Kay Call and her official mail to and from town, Small would have more time for Cosetti's dual-control training. Hence, Cosetti almost ranked Kay Call along with and among those other enemies of his—the cadets and offi-

cers who came to Small's hangar for ships. It was all tough on Cosetti, who said at some length to Sergeant Littlejohn, "I wonder why don't Sarg Small let the Call jane get somebody else?" he complained, while the two of them worked a ship just inside the big training hangar. "Him an' me could be up there together havin' fun."

"Oh, boy," said Littlejohn, "maybe it is you he'll marry!"

Cosetti and Littlejohn had their line of light chatter interrupted at that point by Sergeant Small. Small and Captain O'Brien had been standing together out on the cement apron, watching the air work going on in the far skies beyond the reservation's boundary fences. And now Sergeant Small stepped a few paces toward the great hangar doors and gave Corporal Cosetti a hail.

"Ship No. 16 is coming in, Co'," he made known. "Better get out here and see what's wrong. She shouldn't be coming back to the line in the middle of a period. Gosh, guy"—and Small was just ribbing the kid—"I wish you'd keep your ships in better order."

"Gee, Sarg," Cosetti said, hurrying toward Small, "I'd be the first one to let you know, was I sure they was anythin' wrong with one of my busses, eh, I mean—"

"I know what you mean. And you would," Small agreed. "You and your dam' personal flying time! But you'll get some, Co'."

Corporal Cosetti hurried afield to meet the incoming No. 16 well out on the service apron. But the pilot on the controls, riding alone and with the rear pit empty of student, dribbled on past the waiting Cosetti and came hard in to where Captain O'Brien and Small were beginning to step lively—in their efforts to keep clear of that whirling, whistling propeller. Stepping clear of danger, then getting a better look at the pilot—Lieutenant Hinkley, an instructor—they realized that the young fellow was excited.

Lieutenant Hinkley pushed back his goggles, killed his power and stood on the front seat.

"I came in, sir," he said to O'Brien, "to report another ship sinking out on the Gulf." And as he spoke, the excited Hinkley half turned and pointed to where a high cloud of black smoke was flattening itself thousands of feet in the air, and some twenty-odd miles to the west.

"You saw it?" O'Brien asked.

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Hinkley said. "And, by hell, sir, I was helpless. Me—this ship—with no guns, no bombs, no way to give a hand. It was hell. This tanker, sir, was going up toward Mobile. We happened to be out there, actually circling the tanker, when the sub surfaced and put three torpedoes into it. Then, when it was going down, while the crew was lowering lifeboats on the oil slick, the damned Axis cowards opened fire with machine-guns and deck cannon. That smoke pillar is all that's left. It was as good as over when we pulled out and started back here. I feel damned small, Captain O'Brien. A man should be able to do something. But as it was, we—Say! You'd think they'd be afraid of a plane, and—"

"Who was with you?" O'Brien asked. "And by the way, how did you happen to be so far out? That ship channel is fully fifteen miles offshore."

Lieutenant Hinkley agreed to O'Brien's last statement first, saying, "Yes, it's fully fifteen miles out," then went back to answer the first question. "I had Captain Vallenar along. He's one of my aerobatics students, sir."

Captain Vallenar, besides being one of Hinkley's students, was also connected with his country's consulate in New Orleans. And his country happened to be one of the South American countries that are still playing ball with Berlin, Rome and Tokio. Vallenar was not exactly held in what you'd call high esteem at the post's Officers' Club; and many's the staff officer wished to hell that Uncle Sam would quit

inviting all those assorted good and bad neighbors to send their hand-picked commissioned favorites to American fields for flight training in times like these.

"You see, sir," Lieutenant Hinkley went on, finally answering O'Brien's second question, "Captain Vallenar usually asks me to fly him out over the Gulf. It's a little bit out of the way, but the captain claims he can fly circles and figure eights with more ease and confidence when he has water, instead of trees and swamps, under the ship. And, as I said, the captain was doing the air work and we were circling this tanker long before the sub surfaced and opened fire. But, sir, that sub must have seen us circling the tanker."

"Circling the tanker?" O'Brien asked. "Are you sure you weren't spotting—for the enemy sub—instead of just circling?"

Lieutenant Hinkley's jaw dropped. His face bleached. Unconsciously, his right hand pointed sort of feebly off toward the high western sky—off to where the black smoke was now diffusing itself with the dark grays of some thunderheads.

"You mean—?" he started. "You mean, sir, that that dirty low-down son—By hell, sir, I'll go out to where I left him—out at Aerobatic Stage—and, as sure as I'm a foot high, I'll—"

"Forget it, Hinkley," Captain O'Brien said. "That's an order, Lieutenant. You'll forget it—for the time being."

"Yes, sir," Hinkley said. Then lowly—"for the time being."

III

CAPTAIN O'BRIEN went directly to Headquarters, there to talk things over with the commanding officer. The C.O. listened, with many the nasty cuss-word interjection, then suggested that the captain take matters up with Major Reno. Reno, as O'Brien and a few others knew, was Army Intelligence's liaison officer for all air fields in that corps area. He wasn't a pilot, but rated merely as one of the ever-growing group of Air Forces ground officers, and little was known of him beyond the four walls of the small office which he occupied, off and on, over in Personnel. Major Reno, the C.O. made known, happened to be on the post that day.

Major Reno glanced up and said, "Oh, hello, O'Brien," when the captain knocked and came in. "What's bothering the Irish now?"

"The Latin neighbors, Major," O'Brien answered. "I think we have something big for you."

"Boy, can we handle 'em big!" exclaimed Reno.

Reno had been working with the oldest paper-work sergeant on the post—old Pete "Elephant" Crater. They called old Pete "the charter member," this because of the fact that he had been on the place, as he himself said, ever since Uncle Sam took the dam' layout away from the Seminoles. He was nicknamed "Elephant" because of his mighty paper-work-man's memory, for they say he never forgot — and this included items large and small, things good, bad and indifferent. But now, when Captain O'Brien spoke of big things to be talked over, old Elephant Crater glanced up from the report upon which he had been doing a sweat and guessed, "I suppose you mean 'Get t'hell gone outa here, Crater,' eh, Captain?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned, Sergeant," Captain O'Brien said.

" 'Course not," Major Reno added. "Stay where you are, Sergeant. Let's have it, O'Brien."

Captain O'Brien said, "There's a South American flying student on this post by the name of Vallenar, Captain Vallenar."

Without taking his eyes away from the report upon which he was working, old Elephant Crater grunted, "Student be damned, Captain. 'At Vallenar gent's been flyin' 'em since Hector was a pup."

"What do you mean, Sergeant?" Captain O'Brien asked.

"Just that, sir," old Elephant Crater

stated, taking the cig from his mouth and tapping the ash into a handy top drawer. "This Vallenar gogo was with the first group of good neighbors that South America ever sent up here to crowd good Yank kids outa their flying time. Let's see. That was back in the winter of 1919-1920, and they came to Carlstrom Field. I was at Carlstrom then, and I handled all the paper work for said Good Neighbor group."

"I'll be damned!" said O'Brien. "You couldn't be wrong, could you? This Captain Vallenar came here, this time, as a student."

"No, Captain, I couldn't be wrong," Elephant Crater stated. "And isn't he a pretty dam' ancient student? Doesn't that hide of his look like a skin that's been lived in for more years than the average student?"

"I wouldn't know," O'Brien admitted. "I can't guess these South American boys within ten or twelve years, as a rule, and I never paid much attention to Vallenar. Truth is, I don't cotton to the feller. What is more — he hasn't spent much time around Operations."

"Well," Elephant said, "he was plenty young back there at Carlstrom Field. Oh, maybe well under twenty. One of the kids of the group, as I recall. So he wouldn't have to be more than forty now. Hell, sir, that ain't ancient. But this Vallenar, take it from me, is the Vallenar I knew back there."

"Thank God for you and your pachydermatous memory, Sergeant Crater," Captain O'Brien kidded. "Now, with you accounting for a phony student in our midst, what I have to tell Major Reno won't sound so danged long-bow. Yes, sir, I think this thing is going to add up quickly and if the sum total doesn't give us a rat under the line, then I lose my guess."

When the captain had finished his story, Major Reno pounded the edge of his desk for a full thirty seconds of thoughtful, tight-jawed meditation, then said, "Yes, this is something, sure as the good Lord made little green apples, slick dark-brown neighbors and dumb flying lieutenants. Say, how do you figure this man Hinkley—has the feller got all his marbles?"

"Just a young feller going out of his way to oblige," Captain O'Brien said, being an officer and gentleman who'd defend any of his instructors to the last ditch. "You know how it is—too much of this good neighbor thing. Man! If it doesn't break Uncle Sam's heart, I'll set 'em up for you."

"I think you have set them up for me, O'Brien," Reno said. "But hell, man, are we up to our chin in work here! The sergeant and I really rate a helper. Say, how about it, could you suggest a good helper for me?"

"A helper along what line?" O'Brien asked.

"Somebody who knows files. Somebody with the ability to go back through Air Corps school records, back in Washington, and dig up all the statistical dope attesting to the fact that Sergeant Crater is absolutely correct, and that one Vallenar did go through the school course, down at Carlstrom Field, some twenty-odd years ago."

"Well, Major, this is a great post," Captain O'Brien boasted. "You just name it, and by hell we can furnish it. I think I can recommend the exact person you need. That'd be Miss Call. You know Kay Call. She has the 'in,' knows files and records, possesses the required gray matter, and is available if you have the power to demand and get."

"What this office wants, it gets," Major Reno stated. "And yes, I know Miss Call —but not as well as I'd like to, if you get what I mean. Gentlemen, that's a woman!"

"Oh-o," mused old Pete Elephant Crater, "is this going to be good! The minute my old thin-skinned friend, Bill Small, hears that the girl friend is going to work

for a visiting officer of an affiliated branch of service—Bang!"

"Sergeant," O'Brien said, "must you drag out all those old family skeletons here and now? Couldn't you spare me, at least, this one bitter cup?" O'Brien was recalling past performances by Bill Small.

Major Reno, no doubt, savvied only an inkling of what the sergeant and the captain were discussing. However, insofar as he had admitted at least a passing interest in Kay Call, it is highly likely that he, an army man, had heard just who was Mr. Big with the chief Headquarters lady.

Anyway, Major Reno dismissed the whole matter with, "Well, gentlemen, we're not in the habit of sending an operator down to the station with a motorcycle escort, plus all the horn tooting. The lady should be long-gone before your friend Sergeant Small learns that the next few evenings are going to be as the inside of an old discarded boot—dark, musky and hollow. But the feller has my sympathy."

IV

A STAFF-SERGEANT'S pay rate does not permit of any real big-time night-spot activities. But then again, the Everglades Room at the Ponce de Leon Hotel isn't what you'd call big-time. So Sergeant Small wouldn't be much of a man-about-town if he couldn't take Kay Call to that nearest-to-camp joy spot one or two nights a week. And he did. The music was that of Senor Poopo's South American band, five long-haired boys with as many rasping stringed instruments, and a loud concession in the general direction of Western Hemisphere solidarity and the Good Neighbor policy.

"Jamming to music like this," Sergeant Small shouted into Kay Call's shell-pink left ear, "makes a guy appreciate the quiet of a starting apron when all ships are revving their motors for take-off. Hey, listen, I see a couple of the good neighbors giving you the once-over, and I warn you —if there's any attempt to cut in, Lady, old man Hull and Mr. Wells're going to have a job on their hands trying to straighten out what I'll do."

The Everglades Room, being so close to the post, bowed, or stooped, to the cut-in —when the cutter-in happened to be a right-John sort of a gent. Small, though, didn't like it at any time, for he didn't stand to gain anything by taking advantage of the privilege. When a man had Kay Call in his arms there wasn't a chance on earth for anything in the line of improvement, and Small knew it. So the sergeant's evenings in the Everglades Room were more defensive than recreational.

The O'Briens — Captain and Mrs.— were with Major Reno when they trapped Sergeant Small and Kay Call sitting alone, backs to the wall, at one of the most-under-the-palms rear tables. Captain O'Brien took Kay Call by the elbow, eased her toward Reno and said, "You two know each other well enough to handle this one catch-as-catch-can, so go ahead and make Senor Poopo and his boys happy. I want to talk with Sergeant Small about tomorrow's hangar work. Shop talk is always such swell fun. And you, Ma," he added, turning to Mrs. O'Brien, "might—"

"Ah, Captain O'Brien, and the charming Mrs. O'Brien, I presume!" gushed a South American voice; and O'Brien turned to face a fellow officer of equal rank—Captain Vallenar.

O'Brien's first impulse was to push with the right hand and say, "Go 'way, my little man!" but better judgment prevailed, and he said, "Good evening, Captain Vallenar. Yes, this is Mrs. O'Brien. Mrs. O'Brien, this is Captain Vallenar, one of our courtesy students from South America. Or should I say 'student,' Captain Vallenar?"

"Ah, yes, yes, yes. Student flyer, Captain O'Brien," the gushy Vallenar agreed. "But could I have the pleasure of this

dance with the so-charming Mrs. O'Brien?"

"Captain," O'Brien said, "I won't advise one way or the other, for I know that you *students* are devils with the ladies. Eh, Senor?"

"*Si,* Senor. *Si,*" the Captain Vallenar admitted.

When Captain O'Brien slid in alongside Small, the latter handed his boss a pack of cigs and asked, "What's the idea of ganging me, Captain? Do we guys like these ground-force Air Corps gents that well?"

"Major Reno's jake, Sergeant," O'Brien said. "After all, he ranks me, and anyway, what happened to your girl is nothing compared to what befell mine. Gee, I feel guilty, she was such a swell mother for the O'Brien kids."

"You still rate Vallenar as rat, eh?" Sergeant Small asked. "Anything new on that? Any signs of action?"

"Not yet," O'Brien said. "But of course it's out of our hands."

"That being the case," Sergeant Small speculated, "I'll have to depend on Gabby Gall to keep me wised up." Private Gabby Gall, Small's spy at Headquarters, was an orderly in that important official citadel of orders, supercedes, rescinds and what-have-you. In the past, as on all army posts, Orderly Gabby Gall had foretold just about each and every happening, large or small, befalling officer, man or civilian employee. And Small always claimed that Gabby would lose an eardrum one of these days—getting the thing too close to official doorknobs.

O'Brien laughed. He said, "My guess is that your friend Gabby is doomed to be the fourth monkey in the line this time. Not only will he see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing, but he'll smell nothing. It's in smart hands, Sergeant. And right now, if I know anything"—and O'Brien was watching Reno and Kay—"I think it's being passed along into what I rate very smart hands "

"I'm still betting on Gabby," Sergeant Small insisted, and Captain O'Brien found himself wishing that Senor Poopo's South American orchestra would end the number right there, thus putting an end to what he was beginning to find a tight situation; and by gosh the Senor did, though through no intent of his own. It seems that Captain Vallenar and Mrs. O'Brien were just dancing by the senor's podium when the senor chanced to spy the captain. The senor turned, brought his baton up in a snappy salute, and bowed, throwing his fat patio hard back against his music-stand. The stand clattered floorward among the fellow musicians. Two or three of the musicians, trying to play and trying to reach, messed things up—and all hands tumbled with the senor's music-stand. So that was the end of that number. O'Brien felt better.

But just as Kay Call and Major Reno broke into the clear space at ringside, they bumped into Captain Vallenar and Mrs. O'Brien. The girls, still laughing at what had befallen Senor Poopo, grabbed forearms, and then introductions were in order.

Captain Vallenar was bowing to the floor, for it was plain to see he had never before had the good luck to meet Kay Call. So when the flustered Senor Poopo, with both his podium and patio back in order, once more tapped his baton atop the stand for the next dance, Captain Vallenar danced floorward with Kay. And Reno took Mrs. O'Brien out into the big push again.

"You see how it is," Captain O'Brien said to Small. "We're just a pair of washed-out wall flowers."

"Not by one hell of a sight, sir!" said Staff Sergeant Bill Small, coming to his feet. "Here's where I cut in. Oh, I know it's going to lead to sharp words, but I'll take a chance."

"Hop to it, son!" Captain O'Brien urged. "Damned if I'll have any shabby sergeants working for me "

V

STRANGE to relate, the lady didn't fly off the handle. Instead, when the round ended and Small led her back to the table, Kay came smiling.

"Bill rescued me," she told Captain O'Brien, sliding in along the wall cushions. "B-r-r-r," and Kay shivered, "but that man is clammy. B-r-r-r-r!"

As Kay Call once more b-r-r-r'ed, she reached for the ends of a silk-and-lace scarf she'd been sporting across her back and arms, and began wrapping it for warmth across her shoulders—perhaps against the night air from the distant Gulf, or maybe from the clammy thought of Captain Vallenar. However, as she snuggled the scarf closer, her right hand seemed to discover something foreign to the touch, and the lady asked, "What's this?" as her eyes went down to where the right hand was untangling something from the lace of that flimsy throw. The foreign object was a gold pencil. Its clip had become tangled with the lace.

"Good Lord, I've turned purse-snatcher —or something. Now I wonder whom I robbed—Major Reno or the captain. Did you notice either of them with this, Captain O'Brien?"

O'Brien took the gold pencil from Kay's hand. He studied it closely. "It's not American. Not what you get even if you miss the sixty-four-dollar question. Oh, here it is—Made in Germany. Or, at least, the Spanish or Portuguese equivalent of Made in Germany. I'm not up on my Spanish. Here comes the good woman and Major Reno. Maybe he'll know something."

Reno took the pencil, studied the trade name on the clip, plus the Made in Germany on the barrel, and said it was Spanish. No, he said, it wasn't his. But he'd hold it, if Miss Call didn't mind, and ask Captain Vallenar whether or not he'd been robbed—by a lady's scarf—of one gold pencil.

"Of course," Reno kidded, "this might be just the modern version of dropping a handkerchief accidentally on purpose."

"If you learn that it is, sir," Sergeant Small said, "just let me know. I'll drop something accidentally on purpose. But, right now I'm going to take Ma O'Brien out among 'em and tramp on her feet."

"Two can play at that," O'Brien said. "Come on, Kay."

When Major Reno was alone at the table, back there under and behind the palms, he studied the gold pencil a bit closer. He then stood up, took a few paces floorward for a closer look at the milling throng, saw nothing of Captain Vallenar, then went back and sat down. Working with his hands below the edge of the table, Reno began taking that Made-in-Germany article apart. Except for a never-used lead point, the gold pencil wasn't a pencil at all. Inside, after he'd unscrewed the cap, Reno found nothing—till after he'd finally discovered that the empty inside, in turn, screwed out. Then, between the walls of the inner and outer cylinders, there was something. A few sheets of micro-thin tissue, about the size of the usual cigarette papers furnished with the makin's, and on the three thin sheets was what Reno recognized as cipher. He wasn't surprised.

Major Reno raised a hand and caught a waiter's eye.

"What will it be, sir?" the hurrying waiter asked.

"Any of the boys out in the kitchen got the makin's?" Reno asked.

"Why, I have, sir," the waiter said. He set his tray on the table, began fishing through his pockets, and, sure'nuff, he came up with the makings. "Help yourself, sir."

Reno said, "I just want two-three of the papers. Going to play a little joke on the friends. Thanks, that's fine," and he passed back the book of papers. And when the waiter had picked up the makin's, plus a piece of change, then hurried kitchenward, Reno began putting the gold

Made-in-Germany pencil back together. The thin cigarette papers, of course, replacing those with the cipher, said sheets with the cipher being now in Reno's billfold.

Just as he got everything shipshape again the number ended. The dancers came back to the table, and found the gold pencil resting on the tablecloth. Major Reno reached out a long forefinger and began rolling it toward Kay.

"On second thought, Miss Call," he said, "maybe it would be better if you hold onto this pencil. After all, the captain was dancing with you—not with me. There's little question but that it's his."

There was a bit of crushing and crowding, out there in the mob, and somebody was shouldering his way toward their table. It was none other than Captain Vallenar, and as the captain came he was sort of plucking at his left chest pocket—the place a military gent, slightly non-military, might wear a pencil with clip.

"Ah, ladies, and gentlemen, I have lost —ah, there it is! My gold pencil, Miss Call, you have found it, yes?"

"It caught in this lace—right here, Captain," Kay Call said, then showed how the thing had happened. "I'm glad we found it."

"And I, Miss Call. I am so glad to find it. Oh, I thank you so much! I kiss your hand—"

"Waiter," Captain O'Brien said, "bring one tiger's-blood zombie for the sergeant, and see that it's spiked with rattler's spit."

VI

NEXT morning in his small room at the end of the barracks, Small heard the joyous reveille, clicked on his shelf radio, then dressed to the sad tune of a voice that told of three more sinkings, one in the Atlantic and two in the Gulf; and when he reached the big washroom, Corporal Cosetti was blueing the air with his opinion of "them lousy, cowardly rattlesnake sons that sink defenseless guys an' gives 'em no show for their white alley."

As a rule, even in the middle of a big war enlisted stiffs, don't know any too much about what's happening, nor do they worry much beyond the prospects of getting to town at the end of certain days. But like Cosetti, this submarine rash had 'em all itching; and the real scratch that they wanted to apply was "on the dam' dopes in our own country that stand for this stuff!" It was hard to understand.

"Gee, gang, I think I'll go over the hill, join the Seminoles down in the 'Glades, get me a canoe an' paddle out across that Gulf by meself," Corporal Cosetti made known. "For a fac', I bet a guy could do some good for hisself. You know. Jus' get out there, sit quiet, then be on hand when one of them pigs comes to the surface.

"An' when they does—whango! I'd kick the bloody teeth outa them. 'Specially was they wops. Us Dagoes can sure be dopes when ya give us half a chance, eh?"

"Dam' right," somebody agreed.

"Hey, how do ya mean that?" Cosetti demanded.

"You heard him!" Small snapped, coming into the big room just at that point. "You—a Seminole Indian! You and who else?"

"You an' me, Sarg," Cosetti came back. "I'll bet you an' me could do some good for ourself. Say, why don't you talk to the Old Man 'bout you an' me riggin' up one of these trainin' buses with a bomb-rack, an' goin' out to do what all the rest of Army an' Navy air don't seem to be able to do? What I mean, us guys could do it, too. I ain't kiddin', Sarg. It calls for men, an' that's us."

"It's going to call a whole lot louder," Sergeant Small said, "before I'll go out in a canoe and sit around waiting for a pigboat to surface."

"I'm a-shamed ya, Sarg," Cosetti said, as though one of his mighty idols had tumbled into the dust.

HARDLY had the hangar forces reported for duty and opened the big doors before Orderly Gabby Gall appeared in the doorway of Sergeant Small's hangar office. Gabby was delivering some routine memo of small importance, but, as usual, he had something worthwhile to divulge.

"Your gal's goin' north this mornin', Sarg," Gabby Gall took time out to relate. "Washington."

"Say that again," Small suggested.

"She's got a seat on the regular ferry transport, on the mornin' trip," Gabby made known. "I just had a look at the dispatch sheet, over in Operations. You didn't know about it, eh?"

"If you're lying, as usual, Gabby me boy," Small said, as he picked up the phone, "I'll tie a knot in your tail that only a loving mother can un-chaw—"

"Hello, Sleeping Beauty!" he then said to the switchboard corporal. "Get me Miss Call's office. Yeah, you heard me—Miss Call.

"Oh, hello, Kay. . . . What's this I hear about you leaving home? . . . What! It's true? Hell, lady, I never thought you'd do me like this. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Listen, soldier," Kay Call said, and she said it in a low voice, "I couldn't. That is, this is official business. I, er, well I can't say anything over the phone. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, I don't," Small answered. "But on short notice like this, you can't expect me to send you away with the usual candy and flowers."

"I can too," Kay Call snapped. "The transport's departure is set for 9:15 and if you're suddenly bashful about saying good-by in public—in the proper way—you might meet me over here and tell me good-by in the corridor."

"I'll be there, Lady, but I still say . . . hello . . . hello!"

"Guess I'm right, eh?" Orderly Gabby Gall asked.

"Aw, you're slipping, pal," Small said. "You were right about the lady flying out on this next transport, sure'nuff, but I have a hunch that you're missing a mess of doings on this post. Take it from me, there's something big going on here. And what are you doing about it—getting to the bottom of things? No! Just gabbing and stalling 'round here while you should be down at the brain factory with your ear to the ground."

"Is that so?" Gabby asked. "Let me tell you, Sarg, I know more'n you guess. Listen. You know this Major Reno? D'ja know he's Army Intelligence? Well, he is. And them two FBI guys that have their office in the postoffice buildin' in town come on this post at 3:30 this mornin' an' went right down to Reno's office. An' they're still there. Now what do you know about that?"

"How come you're up and prowling at 3:30 a.m.?" Small asked.

"I ain't," Gabby Gall said, "but a sidekick of mine, Gummy Ginsburg, was standin' sentry on Main Gate. Gummy heard these FBI guys tell the sergeant of the guard an' the officer of the day that they wanted to be taken down to Major Reno's office. You can count on us guys, Sarg. We don't miss no bets. Say listen, Sarg—"

"How much?" Small asked.

"How about two bits, come payday?" Gabby requested.

"Guess you rate it," Small agreed, kicking in.

VII

THE Army ferry transport came up from the south—from Miami and Caribbean points—and stopped only to discharge or take on passengers and small-bundle freight matter. When it was still a small speck in a high, big sky, Sergeant Small and Kay Call strolled across the apron from Headquarters. At the same time, Major Reno and two lean, keen-looking civilians also strolled out on the cement, and you'd guess that maybe Major Reno

was merely showing this air post to a few boys from home.

"Good morning, Miss Call—and Sergeant Small," Major Reno greeted. "Who's going away—not you, Sergeant?"

"No, sir. This little bag belongs to the lady," Small replied, but, to himself, he said, *You're not fooling anybody, Mister. And those other two guys are all-eyes, too.*

A few minutes before the ferry transport set down on the east-west runway, Captain Vallenar and two of his fellow countrymen hurried over from Officers' Club. They, too, wanted to be on hand to see who was who on today's passenger list. The captain said good-morning to Major Reno, then bowed low to Kay Call. Also, he was very snappy in returning Small's salute. Of course, inasmuch as the sergeant was now on the post, the salute was obligatory.

When the ferry transport dribbled up to the passenger apron, the service crew rolled the loading steps alongside. The oval door opened and a few riders stepped down to stretch a leg or quit the plane. Among the few who merely stepped down to stretch a leg was a gaily uniformed officer of one of the South American countries.

Captain Vallenar seemed to know this new arrival, and he was openly surprised to find the gaily uniformed one on this plane. There was a great deal of fast Spanish chatter—light talk with much personal pawing and laughing—and Vallenar saw to it that his original two companions should meet the new one—a major—and join the small talk.

SERGEANT SMALL, having handed Kay Call aboard, noticed that Major Reno and his two civilian guests were on all sides of Vallenar and his merry group. And Small even caught a few words and names, intermingled with the Spanish, which sounded as though the new, gay major had perhaps come from San Juan, Porto Rico, and Miami, and that he was going as far as Jacksonville on this plane, then to Savannah.

Then there was a great flurry of Spanish, and the gay major was fumbling through his pockes for a scratch pad and pen. Plain to see, he wanted to jot down something that Vallenar had told him. Finally, he dug up a fountain pen. The thing wouldn't write.

In English, he said, "This fountain pen is absolutely no good either high in a plane or low on the ground. Ha-ha! Give to me a pencil, Captain Vallenar. And you may have this pen with my compliments. Or you may throw away the accursed thing, Captain."

Captain Vallenar reached for his left breast pocket, took out the gold pencil and handed it over, saying, "A fair exchange, Major. I will have this fountain pen repaired, or, as you say, throw the accursed thing away. No, no, no, you may keep the pencil. Oh no, it is not gold—just imitation. Say no more, sir."

So saying, Captain Vallenar clipped the no-good fountain pen, carelessly, in his left-breast pocket.

Just as carelessly, once the plane was away, one of Major Reno's two civilian guests backstepped onto the gaily-dressed South American traveler's boots, half whirled to regain his footing, said, "Beg your pardon!" put a hand on Captain Vallenar's chest, just to steady himself, then finally regained his footing—with the no-good fountain pen palmed nicely in his big right hand. It was quick and clean-cut, but that's the way the FBI likes its boys.

So back in Major Reno's office, five minutes later, the no-good fountain pen was on the desk and under tear-down inspection.

Sergeant Elephant Crater was in the corridor, with his broad back to the office door, and when Orderly Gabby Gall roamed aimlessly down the hall, old Elephant Pete growled, "Continue the march, Greaseball. Go ahead, don't stall here!

If I ever find you peekin' under this door, I'll tramp on your dam' neck."

"Aw, Sarg, can't a feller kill a little time?" Gabby Gall whined, stepped wide past old Pete, then hurried out the door that gives on the garden between Headquarters and Officers' Club.

Inside the small office, one of the FBI sharp blades stood between the two windows, looking out—and he, too, chirped a warning at Gabby Gall when that worthy quit one of the gravel walks.

"All right, soldier!" the FBI man chirped. "You didn't lose it here."

Over the desk Major Reno and the other FBI agent worked rapidly. The fountain pen, like the gold pencil that wasn't a pencil, turned out to be not a fountain pen. It had a point, and that's all. Broken down, torn apart, it proved to have double walls, and fine sheets of cipher paper right where Reno and the FBI's knew they'd find thin sheets of paper. Reno said, "Really damned juvenile, eh?"

"Same code," the FBI man told Reno. "A kid could break it down. It's what you might call an Axis Latin Department code. The Spanish aren't any too bright on handling this stuff, and the Axis boys introduced them to this particular code when Franco's mob had to have some way of talking across the street without being tripped by the smart Loyalist groups. Yeah, it's the same code as we found in the gold pencil. Same line of general information, too. Where the gold-pencil dope told of ship loadings and approximate sailing dates from Galveston, New Orleans and Mobile, these sheets give enemy sub dispositions at certain island bases in the Caribbean and on the Central American coast. Yes, here's a request for torpedoes, urgent, at this 'W' base. 'W' turned upside down becomes close to making an 'M,' and that's nothing else but Martinique. And here's the Spanish for 'pepper' and 'fuel,' and 'pepper' means Cayenne, so they must be running short of Diesel oil at that French Guiana base. Oh, it's so damned simple that you'd almost think they were stringing us along.

"But now there're still lots of odds and ends to be picked up. Captain Vallenar had to deliver this somewhere. And that gaily-dressed South American major was getting off at Jacksonville and carrying the gold pencil some place from there. Maybe to Savannah or to one of those damned hard-to-reach private islands on the coast. Of course, he'll be tailed when he steps off at Jax, so we'll know more about that later."

"And how about Captain Vallenar?" Major Reno asked.

"We'll take the captain to town," the FBI man said. "It won't be safe for him to be without protection when that gold pencil arrives at its destination with three blank cig papers where these code sheets should be. And, anyway, I'll bet you a dinner, Major Reno, that Gil, here, and I can talk with Captain Vallenar—maybe for five, six, eight, ten or a dozen hours—and discover where he is supposed to deliver this no-good fountain pen. Who knows, we might even deliver it for him. Deliver him and it. And you say the damned rat was actually spotting fire for the sub, eh?"

"All right, soldier!" the man at the window was saying. "I told you once that you didn't lose it here."

Major Reno glanced across the desk and out into the garden space. Sure enough, Orderly Gabby Gall was fully fitted with burlap bag and nail on stick. His business, for the time being, was picking up—a butt here, a candy-bar wrapper there—and, maybe, a bit of information wherever a bit of information might be found lying around neglected.

VIII

THAT same day, just when the afternoon training period was getting its ships into the sky, Captain O'Brien strolled

into Sergeant Small's cubby on his usual after-lunch tour of hangars.

"The FBI," he said, "has taken Captain Vallenar out of the fire-spotting business. They've jailed him in town. Major Reno, and keep this under your hat, Sergeant, is Army Intelligence."

Small grinned. Then he said, "If it wasn't for my own spy at Headquarters, Captain, both items would be news to me."

"You mean— Oh, hell. As an officer, I know full well that I should turn up this Gall, but what the hell! The next orderly in line would be just as bad—and working for you."

"Don't have him shot yet," Sergeant Small requested. "I've been thinking of something Gabby told me a few weeks ago. Do you know this Gummy Ginsburg? He dogrobs for some of the officers when he isn't on K. P., sentry duty or garbage detail. You know, he's the squirt that has that stripped-down Model-T that's always parked under the bushes just north of Main Gate. Well, anyway, Gabby and this Gummy Ginsburg shag all over this end of the state whenever they can get off the post."

"Yes, I know the kid," O'Brien finally decided. "Don't tell me that he's understudying Gabby as your spy."

"No," Small answered. "But Gabby told me about a week-end trip they made down to the Gulf Coast. He said they followed the Rat Creek trail—right through the big cypress swamp—down to the Gulf; and, Captain, that's some path-finding. You know it's rough going.

"I didn't know it till Gabby told me, but he claims that Rat Creek gives on the Gulf just north of that German settlement, the place where the sponge divers are. You know that German layout, the place we used to call Gottingen on the Gulf?"

"I do," O'Brien said flatly, "and I've often wondered why Army shags the Japs back from the Pacific Coast and still allows the Nazis to inhabit spots like Gottingen on the Gulf. What about it?"

"Well," Small related, "a mile or so back in the swamp, that is a mile or so in from the Gulf on Rat Creek, Gabby and this Ginsburg kid happened on a picnic party of three light pickup trucks and a few power boats. At least, Gabby said it was a picnic. But he also told me that he never saw such a hell of a picnic. He said that the guys—and there were no women—had supplies enough for an army."

"Who were the guys?" O'Brien asked.

"Gabby said the only guy he knew by sight was that South American gink that has the orchestra in the big hotel, the gink that sometimes brings his musicians out to play for dances at Officers' Club."

"Senor Poopo, eh?" O'Brien mused.

"Can't be anybody but," said Small. "But this is what made me wonder if something wasn't rotten in Gottingen on the Gulf—the picnic gang, as Gabby called them, wouldn't let the kids leave the place, once they'd stumbled on the spot. Gabby said that at first the Dutchmen—he meant the Nazi gang—were mad as hell. They thought Gabby and Gummy were party-crashers. Or so thinks Gabby.

Gabby told me how some of the Dutchmen went into a huddle, then finally decided that they'd let the kids stick around for a while."

"In other words," O'Brien estimated, "they decided that our boys were just a pair of harmless dopes."

"That's how I make it," agreed Small. "But anyway, Gabby told me that they had boxed and casked picnic supplies, lots of fuel drums for their motorboats, but no music. Gabby said he'd been at lotsa Turn picnics, back home, and that there was always plenty of bum music."

"And how did they get away?" O'Brien asked.

"Gabby didn't know. You know those punk kids, Captain. They go out in the sticks and drink anything that's offered free. Gabby admitted that he and Gummy Ginsburg woke up in a Holyroller's meet-

inghouse shed, somewheres on the Gulf highway, late Sunday morning. He said they didn't know how they got that far, but that their heads didn't fit. The damned dizzy punks!"

"I don't know!" O'Brien exclaimed. "Dizzy as they are, they're part of the picture. But this Senor Poopo—I wonder—"

"Just a moment, Captain. I was coming to that," Sergeant Small said. "You remember that Mrs. O'Brien was dancing with the Vallenar ape when Senor Poopo balled the detail and broke up a number under an avalanche of toppling music-stands and falling musicians?"

"I do. And the good woman says the guy dances divinely, though clammy to the touch," O'Brien remembered. "So?"

"Well," Small, in turn, went on to recall, "I remember now what Kay had to say about it—when I was walking her home. Kay says that she almost flipped a loop when she stepped on Senor Poopo's baton. You remember he dropped it when his fanny went back and tipped the music-stand, and that that was when the fat boy went to pieces and started grabbing for things—and that he was down on his knees scrambling for it?"

"Yes. That was what started me laughing," said O'Brien.

"Maybe we should not laugh," Small said. "Do you remember what that baton looks like? It isn't the usual ebony stick. No, sir, it's a high-class, jointed-like, chased-gold baton, by hell! And what do we make of that?"

"Jointed?" O'Brien repeated. "Let's make a small fishing pole of it and go back to the Gulf Coast—down to Gottingen on the Gulf."

"Maybe not a bad idea, sir," said Small. "Captain, I have a hunch that maybe Vallenar's gold pencil was the end section of that jointed baton when Senor Poopo first raised it in salute to Vallenar. Kay says that it was Vallenar who finally pulled the baton from under her left foot, handed it over to Poopo, and at the same time hissed something that sounded like the Spanish version of that good old Hun *Schweinebunde!* or peege."

"Could be," O'Brien agreed. "Come to think of it, Mrs. O said Vallenar was all aflutter when it happened. Could be, Sergeant."

IX

IT WAS in the hangar, along toward quitting time that afternoon, that Corporal Cosetti dropped another surprise package into the hopper of that air post's non-scheduled doings. Cosetti, working alone on one of his training ships, had been trying to mount a new tail wheel. Small, noticing that the corporal had reached a spot where the task had become a two-man job, stepped over and bent his back, too.

"Say, Sarg," Cosetti suddenly said, "ya know I been thinkin' I'm a hell of a dope."

"Have it your own way," Small consented. "Why?"

"Well," Cosetti asked, "you remember what Gabby Gall told us about that picnic he bummed in on down near the mouth of Rat Creek? I been thinkin' 'bout that. Gabby said that this band gink, this Senor Poopo, was with them Dutchmen from Gottingen on the Gulf. Ya know, Sarg, that picnic layout could be a sub supply base if that Wop is in on the deal?"

"Wop? Who do you mean—Wop?" Small asked.

"Senor Poopo," said Cosetti.

"The band guy is a South American, Co'," the sergeant said.

Corporal Cosetti dropped his tools, straightened the kink out of his spine, stared at Small and exclaimed, "Are you kiddin'? Listen, Sarg, I know ol' man Polo from 'way back. He lived right across the street from us back home, him an' his wife and thirteen kids."

"How come you never said you knew him?" Small demanded, and he was finding this stuff hard to believe.

"I did say so," Cosetti answered. "You ast Sergeant Littlejohn, or Corporal Greer. When I first see ol' Polo come out here to play for the hangar dance—'at was last month—I told 'em I know that ol' greaseball. Sure, I know him. Us Cosettis and them Polos used'd have lots of fights. Ol' lady Polo was always puttin' on the dog—tellin' people that they was royalty, that they come down from this Marco Polo guy. They allus had more jack than us, ya know."

"Well, I'll be a nasty name!" said Small. "What else?"

"Well," said Cosetti, "like I tell, us Cosettis couldn't get along with them Polos, either with the ol' man an' woman or with the kids. My ol' gent used to argue about Mussy Lena with ol' Polo. Two of them oldest Polo kids went back to Italy, an' both of them died in Ethiopia —where they was fightin' that Hail Seelacy nig."

"Axis guys, eh?" Small remarked.

"Dam' tootin'," agreed Cosetti. "An' only last week the ol' lady—I mean my own mamocha—writ me in a letter that the FBI guys picked up Vitorio Polo an' Edna. Edna is one of the oldest girls—I used to sort of go for her. The ol' lady says that Vitorio was dodgin' the draft, she thinks, an' that Edna was caught talkin' out o' turn. That's her all right. But what a looker!

"I don't know, Sarg," Cosetti then said slowly, returning to the tail-wheel labors, "but I'll lay ya five to one, come payday, that ol' Polo ain't down in this neck of the woods just for the music. Poopo? I got a laugh outa that. I writ home an' told the folks— Poopo!"

"Well, Co', you've been a great help," Sergeant Small said, mopping his hands with the woolwaste and starting for the post street that leads toward Headquarters. "I'll tell you more when I know more."

When Sergeant Small reached Operations, Captain O'Brien's next in command, Lieutenant Ganes, took Small aside and said Captain O'Brien had just been called down to Major Reno's office.

"Sure. I guess it's all right if you go down there," Ganes agreed. "You might have to fight your way in over old Crater's body, but if you think the business at hand calls for the effort, hop to it, Sergeant."

Elephant Crater was standing out in the corridor enjoying a quiet smoke—with his back to Reno's door. He glanced down the long corridor when Small, with Orderly Gabby Gall at heel, came down the glistening brick-red linoleum strip.

"That a friend of yours, flyer?" old Crater asked, hooking his chin in the general direction of Gabby.

"Never saw him before," Small said. "He just got caught in my slipstream as I swept through the front door. Pete, I want to talk with Captain O'Brien. Operations tells me he's in here with the major."

Before Sergeant Elephant Pete Crater could put up any sort of an argument, Major Reno's voice sang out, "Okay, Sergeant Small, come in."

"Mittflopper!" old Elephant growled toward Small, stepping aside, opening the door at the same time—and aiming a size-15 boot at the passing seat of Orderly Gabby Gall.

Major Reno, Captain O'Brien and the two lean FBI men of a previous meeting in that office listened to Small's account of what Corporal Cosetti had divulged.

"Nice going," Reno enthused. Then he turned to one of the FBI agents and suggested, "Guess maybe the time has arrived to take Senor Poopo away from his baton."

The FBI man picked up a phone, called for a number in town, and while waiting for the connection, agreed, "No time like right now. The boys should have him in the town bastile by the time Gil and I get back there. Yes, Sergeant Small, this is very nice going. The South American thing had us down. Poopo—Polo."

Captain O'Brien had been pacing the small office, even while Small was telling

the Cosetti story. And now, just as the FBI agent started to speak with his in-town office, O'Brien turned to Small.

"Sergeant," he said, "we just got bad news from Washington. Washington reports that Kay didn't arrive with that ferry job she rode out of here."

"Didn't arrive? And the ship got through okay? I don't get it, Captain—Oh! You mean Kay's in on this job? She's working out of this office?"

"That's right, Sergeant," O'Brien admitted. "Major Reno had a piece of record research that called for a brain, and I could recommend only one such—Kay Call."

"And is that all we know—that she didn't arrive?" Small asked.

"No. Washington reports that the transport touched in at Charleston, South Carolina, to discharge a civilian Navy employee, a fellow who'd come up from the base at San Juan. But when they set down they blew a tire; and the pilot suggested that the passengers stretch a leg and get a bite to eat. Well, when time came to shove off again, Kay wasn't on hand. The pilot, no doubt, just thought she was a run-of-camp civilian employee on vacation—one with enough pull to ride Army transport. There are such, you know."

Small stared at O'Brien for a few seconds of silence, then turned toward the door. "Guess that's all, Captain," he said. "I'll have to get back to the hangar. It's close to quitting time. Or, perhaps, close to starting time. I might be asking for a few days' leave, Captain."

"It'll be yours for the asking, Sergeant," O'Brien promised.

X

STAFF SERGEANT BILL SMALL holed up in his small room early that night, and he finally stopped pacing the limited floor space, pressed out the hundredth cigarette, and bedded down to a radio that was still telling of Gulf and Caribbean sinkings. Then, just as he was about to douse the light and click off that misery box, a new broadcast began to tell of a late Navy report telling of a sub attack within sight of Moultrieville, at the very mouth of Charleston Harbor.

Small finally went to sleep trying to add that up: His girl disappearing from the ferry plane at Charleston, while going to Washington on anti-sub business, and now a sub just off the mouth of the port where Kay was last seen. He couldn't add it up.

Early morning was the same, except that a new Navy report said that no fewer than three enemy subs had been in on that off-Charleston attack. Also, all three rat boats had surfaced and machine-gunned the decks of the sinking freighter. Not a man survived, as far as was known, and the ship was admittedly American.

In the washroom, as usual, Cosetti was seeing red and turning the air blue. Cussing's an art—especially when it's highlighted with broken English; and Corporal Cosetti sure breaks it up fine when properly excited.

"Aw, you heard that new sub broadcast, eh Sarge?" he half-sobbed. "Oh, them dirty— Listen, Sarg, why'n'hell don't somebody do somethin' about ships that go out an' down without no escorts to protect an' help 'em?"

"Co'," Small said, "you'd think a ten-year-old kid would have the answer to that—why do ships go out—and down—without any signs of escort? Yes, sir, you'd think there'd be a quick answer for anything as easy as that."

Sergeant Littlejohn had his face in a swell mess of suds, and he said, "Why don't you big shots leave the war to the guys that are supposed to handle the fightin'? I was talkin' with some of the stiffs from the Bomber Command in town last night, guys from down near Tampa. They tell me that all them bomber fields're gettin' loused up with these attack-bomber jobs. You know, the Douglas an' North Americans. They say that some of them

babies pack one hell of a wallop. They've got a new bathtub setup under the bomb-bay, an' what do you guess—they have four automatic cannon in said bathtub."

"Four's a lot of cannon in any bathtub," Small estimated.

"Yeah," Littlejohn agreed. "But like I say, the pilot just aims the ship an' these four cannon start firing when the radio beam finds enemy metal in front of it. Even in fog and dark. They won't need no bombs for the pigs when they really start work on 'em."

"When they start work on 'em," Small repeated. "Now where have I heard those words before?"

"They've started," Littlejohn made known, "an' how! You know when I took that hop late yesterday afternoon—with Lieutenant Siskin?" Small said yes, what about it.

"Well, we went out over the Gulf a few miles. Sarg, we saw more U. S. heavy an' light bombers than you ever dreamed of. I tell you, gang, this man's Air Force is buildin' up to a hell of a fast finish on this sub thing. And, by rights, it's the Navy's job."

"Aw, sez who?" demanded Cosetti. "It's anybody's job, an' them Bomber Command guys better stop buildin' up an' start doin' something about rippin' down. Or by hell, us guys will. We ain't dopes. They's plenty things smart guys can do, even iffin they do 'em by accident. Say, you guys remember what that garbage scow done just outside the Golden Gate. It sailed right over a Jap sub an' sunk it. Seen sub, sunk sub, an' them's the kind of accidents I'm for.

"Hey, Sarg, I gotta get out to the hangar early. That motor in No. 7 ship was cuttin' up again, last thing yesterday. An' I told the cadet that brung it back to the line that maybe you an' me'd have to take it up an' find out what's wrong. I'll have it all ready by the time you get out to the hangar, then iffin I can't find the bugs, we'll hop it, eh?"

"You going out there without breakfast, Co'?" Small asked.

"Sure," Cosetti answered, finishing what he called a wash. "Guys can't wait for breakfast when they's war work to be done, can they? Do sailor guys on liferafts get breakfast?"—and he was on his way.

"How about that," Small asked, of nobody in particular, "do guys on liferafts get breakfast?"

"Not unless they can eat Nazi machine-gun fire," Littlejohn answered.

THAT morning, the hangar crews streaming out to start the day's work looked off toward the Gulf and saw flights of high-tailed, blunt-nosed jobs that flashed two sun-splashing discs on their bows, and knew that the twin-engined attack-bombers were really on the job. And high and far in the west—way out there over the Gulf—was a black layer of cloud that wasn't cloud at all, but black smoke, and some watchers guessed that the enemy subs were still on the job, too."

Sergeant Small wasn't really dressed for work. He didn't know whether or not he'd try to go along with the thing or ask Captain O'Brien for a few days off. There'd be ferry transports going north during the day, up to and beyond Charleston, and O'Brien would fix it so's Small could ride any one of these. But what could he do in Charleston? And what could he do here on the home post? He could do absolutely nothing on the home post, not even his usual hangar work, for the heart of him wasn't in it.

That Call gal was up there—last seen when the ferry job set down at Charleston—and by hell, that's where Small should be!

Corporal Cosetti was neck-deep in a motor that—according to him—was full of bugs. Small, though hardly interested, guessed that it was Cosetti who was full of bugs, and that the wild-eyed mac just wanted some air work. Small, for once

in his army life, had no interest in air work. So he sort of sulked in his small office, watched Littlejohn boss the job of getting the training ships out to the starting apron, and continued with that great task of deciding whether to stick here on the home post or start for Charleston.

Just before flight time, for first training period, Gabby Gall came in with a memo saying that first-period activities were washed out. All students were to report in Assembly.

"Okay, Gabby," Small said. "What do you know?"

At that point—and while Gabby Gall was sort of stalling the question—Cosetti thrust his chin through the door and suggested that Small fly the ship with the motorful of bugs. Small, in view of the first-period washout of flying activities, could hardly refuse.

"All right, Co'," he agreed. "Get it out on the ready apron, and I'll be with you in a minute."

"Listen, Sarg," Gabby Gall said, when Cosetti had gone, "I can count on you, can't I? I got somethin' for you."

"You know you can count on me. Come on, what is it?" Small demanded.

"They've heard from Miss Call," Gabby made known. "Look—now keep your shirt on—I was takin' care of the switchboard for the corporal when the call came through.

"Gosh, I couldn't help hearin' what was said, could I? Anyway, Miss Call phoned in from up Charleston way. 'At's up the coast, ain't it?"

"South Carolina," Small answered. "Shoot."

"She wanted Major Reno, so I plugged in on Reno's office," the kid said.

"Come on, what else?" Sergeant Small urged.

"That's all," Gabby answered. "'At tough guy Crater come down the corridor an' slapped me dizzy. He said I was listenin' in on personal conversations. He took over the headset—an' then he begun listenin' in. Yeah, that's all I know, Sarg."

Small was on his feet and rubbing his hands. For the first time in hours he could indulge a smile. So he began to reach for helmet and goggle, then he went to a locker and lifted his parachute from its hooks. Oh, this was the time to fly. This was the time for a man to get up there and kick it around for a while. This was the time and place for a flying guy to zoom the fence, jazz the barracks and roll his joyous wheels on the big hangar roofs.

But just as Sergeant Small was starting toward the great outdoors, a post jeep whirled in through the mighty south door and braked down to a stop within arm's reach of Small. Captain O'Brien, Major Reno and the two FBI men were aboard.

"Sergeant," Captain O'Brien said, "turn the hangar over to Sergeant Littlejohn. We're hopping up to Charleston. Oh, I see you're all set to fly, eh? Good. Come on, jump aboard."

XI

WHILE Sergeant Small sat in the pilot's seat and warmed the single big radial of the post's six-place courier plane, Captain O'Brien and the other three climbed aboard and settled down. And when the motor had idled back from its final high rev, O'Brien began to pull the safety-belt of the co-pilot's rightside seat across his middle.

"You fly it, Sergeant," he said. "I don't want you sitting over here, biting your fingernails back to the first knuckles, through six hundred miles of air. Man, are you tense! Relax, soldier."

"I'm overtrained," Small retorted. "I've been on the starting line all night, Captain, and now it's hard to believe that I've got the gun. All right, gentlemen, hang onto your hats! We're going up Charleston way."

The courier ship had a skyful of billowing summer clouds between the post and

the northern end of that long run; but Small sent the 300-mile-per-hour hotshot right under those clouds, northeast along the cross-state highway, and pulled up now and then—just a bit—when high ground or tall trees suddenly came before the nose.

"This is the stuff for soldiers," O'Brien turned and told the other three more-or-less-tense riders. "The sergeant thinks he's going some place fast when he sees things swishing past like this. And, I might add, we are."

And they were. Charleston's crazy-quilt pattern of inlets, outlets, islands, creeks and rivers was just ahead at 11:30, and Sergeant Small put 'er down and rolled to a stop at exactly 11:45.

A Captain Kent, one of Major Reno's Army Intelligence co-workers, was out on the apron to meet and greet the incoming courier plane.

"How are you, Kent," Reno said, stepping down first, then turning to make a few quick introductions. "Where's Miss Call?"

"She's in the field manager's office," Captain Kent said. "You see, sir, the lady was pretty well done-in. Oh, no. She's all right now, but we thought it best that she take things easy.

"Say, Captain O'Brien, what kind of women do you have on that post of yours? God help us, gentlemen, this Call lady sure turned in a job of work! But let's go. We'll let her tell it."

Kay Call was on an office divan, with a white-garbed nurse at her side. To say that Kay looked a bit washed-out would be putting it mildly. But the old fight, and the big smile, were still there. And Small was the one who got the first handshake when she said, "Good to see you, soldier—and Captain O'Brien. Major Reno."

"You feel strong enough to lift a weight, Kay?" O'Brien asked.

"Why, certainly. I'm better than new," Kay Call answered, "and I don't know why they're babying me this way."

"All right. Then lift the weight of suspense from us poor weak men. Now how come you're here in Charleston instead of where you were sent—Washington?"

"It's a long story," Kay smiled, "and, believe it or not, Captain, it goes right back to that darned gold pencil that I stole from Captain Vallenar. Oh, why did I ever return it!"

"Miss Call," Reno said, "that wasn't exactly a gold pencil."

"Oh, I knew that, Major Reno," Kay answered. "I guess I'm a bit of a spy. Anyway, I was watching you—through all that mob and all the palms—when you began taking that pencil apart. Yes, sir, I even saw the waiter give you that book of cigarette papers. And that's the reason I was somewhat surprised when I saw the gold pencil show up again."

"And it showed up again?" Reno asked. "Where and when?"

ON THE ferry plane, just before we set down at Jacksonville yesterday noon. There was a civilian Navy employee aboard. His name was Burger, and I heard him telling the ship's flight engineer that he had been stationed at several of the new naval bases in the Caribbean. He said that he was going to the Charleston Navy Yard.

"Well, now, to go back a bit. You remember that gaily uniformed Good Neighbor officer who got off the plane and talked with Captain Vallenar?"

"We do, and quite a gay blade he was," Reno said. "Wasn't he going to Jacksonville? Did he get off there?"

"He was and he did," Kay said. "And a gay companion he was, a veritable life-of-the-party gentleman. Well, anyway, that gay major spent most of his time talking with some army officers aboard. They were those four who didn't get off at our post. But just before we landed at Jacksonville, the South American major fell into what seemed a chance conversation with this Burger, the Navy civilian."

"Were they talking shop—our shop?" Reno asked.

"Not too much," Kay answered. "The major spoke mostly of naval doings down in his own country and this Burger fellow said that he'd never been that far south. The major said that Burger must come down, and when he did, look him up."

"And Mr. Burger was all for that," Reno guessed.

"Oh, yes," Kay agreed. "So Burger wanted to know where he could find the major, if he went south. What name? What department, and so on. Then, as the major rattled it off, Burger began going through his pockets, looking for a pencil, and finally decided that he didn't have one."

"But the South American major had a pencil—the gold one," Reno said.

"Yes," Kay admitted, with surprise. "How did you guess?"

"Why," Reno told her, "just after Sergeant Small handed you aboard that ferry ship, Captain Vallenar handed that gold pencil to the gay major."

"Oh, I missed that," Kay lamented. "But I didn't miss it when the major offered it to this Burger fellow. But the ferry ship was actually in its landing glide by then; and this Burger fellow just thanked the major for the pencil, stalled some more while he watched the field come up, and didn't use the gold pencil for any writing. And I kept an eye on this Burger to make sure. Then, when he put the gold pencil carefully in his inside pocket, I decided that I was going to watch Mr. Navy Civilian Burger very closely from then on."

"Come, come, come, lady," Captain O'Brien pressed. "Tell us now how you flirted, outrageously, with this Burger fellow, only to his undoing."

"I didn't," Kay said. "He never gave me the least bit of a tumble. Thank heaven!

"So we took off from Jacksonville and landed here. Then, when the pilot gunned around at the unloading ramp, he gunned too hard, or maybe braked too sudden, and blew a tire. All hands were told that we'd be here at least a half hour, and now was a good time to get a bite to eat. So everybody unloaded. This Burger fellow, of course, was quitting the flight here at Charleston, and I made sure he didn't get out of my sight. I followed him as closely as I dared."

"How close?" Captain O'Brien kidded.

"Close enough to see that he passed two Navy Yard station-wagons that were mighty handy in the parking space. I thought that was very funny. Any civilian Navy employe, intending to go to the Navy Yard, would naturally rate transportation in those official cars. Instead, Burger hurried to a private car—a slate-colored Buick sedan—and the driver was on his way almost before Burger had closed the door. The car's motor must have been running."

"Gentleman in a hurry, eh?" Reno said.

"For a few seconds," Kay Call went on to tell, "I thought the game was up. That car with Burger got under way so fast. And I was quite a distance from the taxi stand, but, worst yet, there was only one taxi there, and a fare was stepping aboard when I started toward it.

"Oh, Lord, I felt sunk. But there were two young army recruits sitting in a parked car, and seeing that I was in a hurry, one of them chirped, 'Taxi, lady! Taxi!' And I took them up on that, took an unladylike chance, and ran over to their car. They were swell kids. One stepped out and swung the rear door open, and the one behind the wheel stepped on the starter."

"Now for the chase!" Captain O'Brien kidded, sitting far forward on the edge of his seat and rolling his hands. "Let's go!"

"We did," Kay remarked. "I took out my post identification badge and showed it to the kids. I told them that I was on official business and that they must follow that car. Well, they took a good look at

my photo on the badge, said they wouldn't do anything for that dead-pan victim of a passport photographer on the badge, but they'd do it for me—the fresh kids! But they were nice. And could that driver wheel a car! I—I—"

Kay Call showed signs of fainting. The nurse was at her side in quick order and protesting. "Miss Call is getting too excited, gentlemen," she said. "She has talked too much. This girl has been through an ordeal. You'll have to give her a few minutes' rest."

"Darned right, nurse," Captain O'Brien agreed. "She's got me excited, too; and, as the doc said when he passed the expectant father out in the maternity ward's anteroom, this suspense ain't doin' Sergeant Small no good either. Let's go out for a smoke, gentlemen."

XII

FIFTEEN minutes later when the six good men returned to that office, Kay Call was all set to resume her story.

"Sorry to do a dim-out on you gentlemen," she apologized, "but as my nurse says, I had some rough going. Truth is, I got myself dunked. But that comes later.

"So let me see. Oh, yes, this young enlisted man was following Burger's car. And the car went north out of Charleston. It passed all roads that would have taken Burger over to the Navy Yard, then carried on out into the country to the north of the city. I told the young fellow to hang back as far as possible then, just so that we would be certain to see and not be seen—or, at least, not be suspected.

"Miss Cotton," Kay then asked, turning to the nurse, "how far did you say it was to Bulls Bay?"

"It's about twenty-five miles to the bay," the nurse said, "but closer to thirty to Raccoon Key and those other islands where you went."

"Well," Kay went on to tell, "that's where the first fast run ended. On the shore of this Bulls Bay. We saw the Burger car turn off the highway and bump toward the water down a rutted lane. We carried on, at a good speed, and didn't even look toward that other car. Then my driver pulled up suddenly and swung off the highway when we came to a packing house where there were crowds of men working.

"That was about half a mile north of the lane where Burger had turned east. Well, my two recruits seemed to know their way around—one of them, Ears, the driver called him—said he came from a crossroads about seven miles from that packing house. Anyway, he knew the white foreman. He said we were going to leave the car there and go down toward the bay looking for seashells. I hate seashells."

"You'd better take a few minutes' rest, dearie," the nurse suggested, and then began preparing a drink for Kay. The telephone sounded off just then, and Captain Kent reached for it.

"Sure, Kay," O'Brien said, "ease up. We can wait."

Captain Kent was saying, "Who? . . . Yes, I know it's long-distance, but who do you want. . . . Hastings?"

"Guess that's me," one of the FBI men said, getting up and moving toward the phone. "Hello, Hastings speaking. . . . Oh, hello, Ned. What's bothering you? . . . No! . . . Well, maybe that's not too bad. I think we had him pretty well accounted for. . . . What? No! Oh, the devil! That's bad. Oh, dammit all, that shouldn't have happened. Well, anyway, Ned, thanks for calling. . . . What? Up here? We're just getting in on it now. I'll let you know when. Well, so long."

Agent Hastings pushed the phone away from him, stared at the circle of questioning faces, started to say something, then changed his mind and turned back to Kay Call.

"What say now, Miss Call?" he asked.

"I'm okay," Kay said. "Well, Ears and

the other boy—his name is Blackner—started east. We went through a settlement of old colored-help quarters, then off the road and into a sugar-pine woods that Ears said was just about the spot we'd last seen the Burger car."

"Aw, that guy Ears wasn't so hot," Sergeant Small decided.

"But he was a good judge of Southern distances, Soldier," Kay Call made known. "He hit the desired spot right on the nose, as he himself proudly admitted."

Major Reno stated, and definitely, "You found the car, and a few other cars, parked in an old tobacco curer, and just east of the curing shed there was another old building."

"Why! How did you know?" Kay asked, and with surprise.

"We've been that far," Reno answered. "Truth is, we lost a man between that tobacco curer and the other old building; but the gang got away. Don't tell me you got beyond that point?"

"Far, far beyond, Major Reno," Kay stated. "But not for quite some time. It was about two-thirty in the afternoon when Ears first brought us within view of that hideout.

"Then, for almost a whole hour, we sat quietly and watched the place. There was some small activities—between the cars and the old building where we guessed Burger was staying—but no real signs of any work being done.

"It must have been that the men in that old building felt perfectly safe for they spoke loudly, and even yelled to each other, sometimes from the cars to the building, and vice versa, of course."

"Not in English?" Reno asked.

"Oh, no," Kay exclaimed. "All in German. And I can still feel my ears curl when I heard what this Ears boy said when he first heard that Nazi tongue."

"Come on—what did Ears say?" Captain O'Brien urged.

"Have a heart," Kay begged. "But I think the boy rates some sort of a medal—for good intent, if not for subsequent action.

" 'Lady,' Ears said to me, 'if Blacky, here, and I doubted you at first, this Hun jabber satisfies us. Now look. These German butchers can have just one direction from here—out on the bay, or out across the bay and up into the islands. There's a cluster of islands just across the bay, north of Racoon Key. They'll have boats, and I think I can promote one, too.'

" 'Sure,' young Blackner said, 'I'll take my jackknife an' start making a dugout outa one of these standin' pines, Cracker.'

" 'Don't be funny, Blacky!" Ears said. 'You stay right here with the lady. I'm going back to the packing house and get me a gun, and ask the foreman where there's likely to be some sort of a skiff handy. He'll know. Maybe I'll get us one with an outboard kicker.'

" 'An' try for one with a bar an' swimmin' pool, too,' Blackner agreed. 'But I'd sooner you'd be goin' back through that brush, Cracker, than me. I think I saw a rattler when we was comin' in. I didn't want to frighten the lady.'

" 'What's rattlers!' Ears said. "Anyway, chances are it was just a moccasin. They're both harmless till they bite you — then you're harmless. But I'll be on my way. Let's see, it's going on to four. Chances are, these Huns won't start stirring till sundown. I should have more time than I can use.'

" 'Ya might phone back to camp,' Blackner told Ears, 'an' remind 'em that you an' me's still A.W.O.L.' "

"So that's the kind of soldiers you were playing cops and robbers with?" Captain O'Brien asked.

"No, they weren't that at all," Kay Call answered. "They were just two harmless young recruits. Two nice boys that Major Reno's Army Intelligence had staked out at the airport watching all incoming and outgoing traffic."

"Oh, by the damn!" Reno wailed, then got up and began pacing the floor. "Lady,

is there anything you miss? Can't we keep one small secret from you?"

"Why should you?" Kay Call asked. "Aren't I one of you?"

"Any time you say, Kay Call. Any time you say," Major Reno was quick to agree.

XIII

MAJOR RENO finally walked over and slapped Captain Kent's shoulder. He wasn't sore, but this, as he saw it, was funny.

"Did you know this was happening?" he asked. "Did you tell Blackner and Halsey to be open and above board with good-looking gals?"

"Sir," Captain Kent said, "the lady didn't even tell me that our undercover men were right out in the open—as far as she is concerned. But this 'Ears' thing—Ears Halsey, oh wait till I tell him that Miss Call's dubbed him that—Ears."

"Not I," Kay protested. "That was what Private Halsey seemed to answer to. But, anyway—"

"Pardon me, Miss Call," Kent cut in. "You can rest up. I can take it from here. Fact is, I want to take it from here. I don't think you'll do yourself full credit, from here on, if you do the telling. I'll tell it more after the fashion Blackner and Ears Halsey told it to me."

"Sure, and use all the cuss words, Captain," O'Brien urged.

"Well," Captain Kent went on to relate, "Halsey went back to the packing house to see what he could do about locating a boat. As Major Reno just said, we'd been in that neck of the swamp before, and during the past few weeks just about all handy water craft have become not so handy. It took longer than Halsey expected to get even a hint of where a skiff might be located. Meantime, daylight was beginning to go out of that sugar-pine stand wherein Miss Call and Blackner waited."

"Oo-o, and it was a crawly place," Kay Call remarked.

"Yes, but finally this Burger fellow and three others came out of the old plantation building, looked very carefully at the rifles they were packing, then went along the rutted trail which, as Miss Call said, leads eastward from the highway."

"That dirt trail," Reno told all hands, "is especially deep-rutted because it has carried some big truck loads—submarine and other supplies — since, and before, Pearl Harbor. Go on, Kent."

"Well, Blackner was against following Burger & Co. till Halsey returned. Blackner thought he knew that neck of the swamp, and he didn't care to run too long a chance. But Miss Call said she was going through with it, even if she went alone. And it was that womanly persistence that won the day. It helped hook up a link that, hitherto, we weren't able to connect. And was it a tough one!"

"This," Major Reno admitted, "is where I came in—and went out—the time before when we muffed something. What was it, Kent?"

"It was that we took too much for granted, that we were too easily satisfied with the obvious, Major," Captain Kent stated.

"We thought that anybody quitting that old building and starting toward the coast would have no other destination, down that trail, than the coast. That is, the closest beach on Bulls Bay, opposite Raccoon Key. And we were waiting for them down there on the beach."

"O-o-o, now comes the creepy part!" Kay Call shivered.

"There's an old abandoned oyster bed behind a long levee about half a mile east of the old plantation buildings. At one time, a big promotion outfit tried raising oysters commercially there, but gave it up. Now the bed is dry, for the most part, and we should have wondered about that; it shows that somebody's been keeping the old flood gates in condition."

"Give each of us a black mark, or make it two black marks," Reno agreed. "Dry

is right. But go on, Kent. This sounds good."

"That old levee, when it was built, was built to stay, and built right. I don't know why it was done, but it was heavily timbered from end to end—a full mile of it—and there's an underground free passage all that distance."

"Creepy and clammy, is right," Captain O'Brien agreed. "Don't tell me you went into that tunnel of love, Kay!"

"Not I," said Kay Call. "Uh-huh."

"Burger and his party did," Captain Kent went on. "And if Miss Call—with Blackner still arguing against it—hadn't been right on the Nazi heels the trick would have been lost. Those aforementioned Nazi heels went underground at one of the old flood gates."

"And where does that levee tunnel lead?" Reno asked.

"Just where we wouldn't expect it to," said Kent. "It's a U-shaped levee. It runs north and west, and that northwest end and opening puts you back almost on the highway, north of the packing house. But it comes out into a devil of a swamp thicket; and from the swamp end of the levee tunnel to a boat landing on an inlet from Bulls Bay, this outfit, believe it or not, has a narrow-gage track. Light trackage such as you'd find in a gravel dump, and it runs all the way back through the levee tunnel, too. There's the means of transporting supplies, heavy and light, from the rutted-road to the boats in the inlet."

"We almost missed finding the place where they came out of that tunnel," Kay put in, "it was getting so dark—and Blackner and I were so leery of snakes and such. Ug-ug!"

"Anyway," Kent continued, "Miss Call and Blackner managed to be close at hand when Burger and his mates came out, and they also took the long chance and followed them along this narrow-gage to the inlet. There was a speedboat waiting at the flat. It was dark enough then, and Burger and his whole party loaded aboard and started for the bay."

"And we thought we were watching everything sail away from us when they went," Kay lamented. "It was hard to take."

Kent laughed a low satisfied titter. "They got a funny break there. Halsey had got a tip from the packing house foreman that he might be able to get an outboard-motored flatbottom from a Negro cropper who lived on a creek about half a mile north of the packing house. Halsey went to the cropper's shack and had luck. More luck, though, lay in the fact that the shack was on the very inlet where Miss Call and Blackner stood in the dark waiting for something to happen—and listening to the roar of Burger's speedboat growing fainter and fainter out on the bay.

"That was a break!" Reno agreed. "And it came in time?"

"It certainly did, Major," Kay chipped in. "Private Ears was surely a fine sight for tired eyes; and were we owls tired, too!"

"But you know those outboard kickers," Kent reminded all hands. "Halsey got within a hundred feet of the float, began to pull down on his motor speed, for a landing, and the danged thing konked out on him. Left him out in the middle of the inlet. Well, that's grief for you. Anyway, after Halsey wore out his good right arm trying to rope-snap that motor back to firing, Blackner made a swim for the flatbottom and gave him a hand. They wound up by paddling to the float and taking Miss Call aboard."

"And wasn't that funny—if it wasn't so darned near-tragic," Kay Call remarked. "We even started away from the float that way—Ears Halsey and I trying to paddle—with two broken oars—and Blackner still pulling that crazy rope that kept breaking and slipping out of his hand. Lord! I almost got down on my knees, in prayer, when the old put-put began ticking again."

"That's pleasure-boating for you, and you can have it," Captain O'Brien said.

"But let's get after them there rats, gal."

Kent continued. "Halsey and Blackner tell me that they had nothing but the sound of Burger's speedboat to go by when they reached the bay, and even that sound was mighty low and far away. They say, as close as they could guess, that the Burger boat was going north through the channel between the west end of Raccoon Key and the mainland. This, of course, meant that it was going up among the islands north of Raccoon. Up there, Burger and company would be just one of the many fishing and pleasure boats that are still allowed to ply those waters—as long as the Coast Guard doesn't catch them going outside."

"It's a tough patrol for the Coast Guard, too," Major Reno remarked. "Easy enough to watch the mouth of Charleston Harbor, but keeping an eye on all those outlets, inlets and what have you, is a heartbreaker for any service."

"And don't the Nazi runners know it!" said Kent. "But, as Blackner and Halsey knew, the chase was a hopeless thing from the start.

"From where they came on the bay, the west tip of Raccoon Key was maybe eight or ten miles away, and the far end of the Key — where Burger's speedboat would reach the open sea—another five or seven miles. Those distances were too much for a flatbottom plus a balky outboard kicker."

"Yes, sir, it called for young guys and a lady who still believes in miracles," Reno admitted.

"And you couldn't stop 'em," Kent enthused.

"They knew that their only hope was by getting themselves in trouble—in trouble with the Coast Guard. So the brave put out to sea. Yes, sir, they put that old flatbottom put-put on a dead line for Europe and kept it crawling that way."

"And," Kay Call said, "it brought quick results—what I mean. Here's where I get dunked."

XIV

A COAST GUARD sub-chaser, laying idle with motors dead, rode the ground swell just off Bulls Bay and watched for lights along the blacked-out coastline from Charleston to the inshore tip of Raccoon Key. There could be only a quarter hour of such idle close-in watching for this boat. Within that brief length of time the full harvest moon would sail its golden disc above the Atlantic horizon, and then it wouldn't be safe for any idle U. S. boat to find itself silhouetted against the dark shoreline.

The crew of the Coast Guard sub-chaser was already breaking up that below-decks crap game when the dribbling inshore sound came to ear.

"She's a low-powered kicker," the man on watch said.

"Guess you're right," the officer of the watch at his side agreed. "Even money, it's the Nigger in the flatbottom, the dizzy lug we turned back last week. I told that nig I'd sink him next time."

"An'," the seaman on watch reminded his superior, "he says 'How you get that-aire way, Mister Navy? Ah's got me a legal right t'go out fer mah night fishin', ain't Ah?' "

The officer of the watch listened again in silence. Then he jingled his engine room for motors.

"That's him all right," he told the man on watch. "See him coming, dead ahead there? You know, I've been thinking. Maybe this nig isn't so dumb. Could somebody be using this guy and his old flatbottom as a decoy? Maybe we'd better let him ride for the time being and take a fast turn up around the seaward end of Raccoon Key, and those other islands."

"You mean," the enlisted man asked, "maybe somebody's makin' a run out to sea — out from between them other islands?"

"It could be," the officer of the watch stated. "But then again, we warned this

nig; and by hell I'll give him the swim I promised."

So saying, he threw the lever over to Full Speed Ahead, and the keen hulk that had been such a dead thing on the ground swell, whipped itself into splendid life and started shoreward.

The sub-chaser, boosting its speed from nothing to fifty miles per hour within the passing of a few roaring minutes, bore hard down the small object that only keen eyes could detect on the water ahead. And when the sub-chaser was within a scant fifty yards of the small speck on the surface, the helmsman threw her hard to starboard, took a sea over his right gunnel, then swept on past the little bobber that seemed to shoot past at a terrible rate of travel. Then, while the flatbottom went skyward on the sub-chaser's wake, said Coast Guard heller came about, brought its motors down to "Stand By," and prepared to ease in and pick one colored fisherman out of the deep.

Instead though, there were three people in the drink, and none was colored. Two of the three were reaching for the third, and the third, a girl, was the first to get her voice and yell.

"Oh, that was a dirty trick!" Kay Call was telling the world. "Yes, and it's a Coast Guard boat, too. Shame on the Coast Guard!"

"Lady," somebody aboard the sub-chaser apologized, "the mistake is all ours."

"That helps a lot!" Kay Call sang back. "But it'd help a whole lot more if you'd get us out of this water, then go to work. Work's what I said. There's a job to be done. We're not out here for the sea air."

Blackner and Ears Halsey handed Kay Call out of the Atlantic and into the reaching hands of the surprised sub-chaser men.

"Don't stand there, sailors!" Halsey was then yelling, even before he and Blackner were pulled to the deck. "You men have a job on your hands. There's something going to sea at the northeast end of Raccoon Key, or we miss our guess."

The engine room signal went over to Full Speed Ahead, and the boat that seemed anxious to shake itself to pieces with power was under way.

"Just as we thought," the skipper yelled in Halsey's ear. "That flatbottom you three were riding has been out here before. But last time, last week, there was a fly nig in it."

"He's not so fly now," Ears Halsey yelled above the whine of engines, roar of exhaust and splash of bow spray. "He's up the creek in his shack with a bump on his head. The guy wouldn't rent me the flatbottom, so I had to discuss it with him—the quick way.

"Say! It does add up, doesn't it? You say this nigger was running out, as we did, south of Raccoon? Well, it's a cinch he was working as a decoy, an' no two ways about that."

"And what are we chasing now?" the sub-chaser skipper asked.

"A Nazi mob in a fast speed job," Halsey told him. "The lady here—by the way, meet Miss Call—came into town on the heels of a renegade Navy Department civilian employee, guy named Burger. Chances are, you're shaggin' some sort of a sub-supply contact, and there must be something offshore here."

"There always is — the whole dam' Axis!" said the sub-chaser skipper. "Give us a few minutes, though, and we'll see whether or not there's anything working its way out of the channels northeast of Raccoon—and, I might add again, there usually is. Brother, these waters reek with Axis grease."

AT SIXTY miles per hour, behind two wide wings of white bow wave, the sub-chaser put the full west-to-east length of Raccoon Key astern, then came into the chop of the narrow channel that runs in between Raccoon's seaward end and Point Romain at the southern tip of Cape Island, the next small body of land northeast of Raccoon.

The engine room took another jingle and brought the motors back to stand-by, then to a full stop. And the sea was as quiet as the grave. And the big harvest moon was swelling on the horizon.

"You couldn't be wrong, could you, Mister?" the skipper asked Halsey.

"There's always a chance of that," Ears Halsey admitted, "but the speed job went up inside, behind Raccoon, and, Mister, we couldn't be wrong about that."

"Couldn't Burger's boat have passed out —out through this channel, or by some other passage—by now?" Kay Call asked.

"Yes," the sub-chaser skipper admitted, "there's another channel at the north end of this Cape Island, but that's five miles. Oh, but don't let this get us down, folks. Life's like this for us, almost all the time. Just one disappointment after another. Maybe I'd better get you wet folks back to the station."

XV

CUTTING in just a bit on Captain Kent's report on that moment of stalemate, Kay Call said, "We could have tossed that sub-chaser officer overboard when he suggested giving up the chase and taking us back to dry land. Good Lord, that was no time to stop."

Captain Kent continued, "Blackner and Halsey, when they told me about it, said they were all for tossing Coast Guard to the sharks too. But of course they were outnumbered. Naturally, the Guard boys guessed that they were probably getting a run-around by this wet party of three. How did they know that it wasn't just a beach party sobering up?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Captain O'Brien agreed. "Man—if Coast Guard knew Kay Call as well as Sergeant Small and I do—would they be suspicious! Wouldn't they, Sergeant?"

"You tell 'em, Captain," Small answered. "I've got to keep peace in the family, you know. But the lady's going to be hard to handle, now that she's been talking tough with sailors."

"And, gentlemen," Captain Kent said, "it was Miss Call who told-off Coast Guard. Halsey and Blackner will swear to that. They'll also admit that Coast Guard was gentleman enough to bow to a lady. And when the lady insisted, the skipper said, 'Okay, Miss Call, we'll make an offshore run just to satisfy your curiosity'.

"So they got that water-slapping sub-chaser half out of the briny and let her ramble due east, straight out to sea. They were twenty miles out to sea when the skipper once more brought his boat down to a stand-by, and with motors purring low, all ears stretched and all eyes studied the ocean. But it was more of the same—nothing.

"Then, just when the skipper started to say 'I told you so,' he, himself, caught a light-blink on the surface, maybe five or six miles southeastward. It was almost directly under that big yellow balloon of a moon. Also, at that same split second, just about all watchers aboard the sub-chaser spotted something else between them and that one blink of light. The sub-chaser men said that they were then satisfied that the speed job had done its sneak-out by switching the power from fuel—that is from internal combustion—to compressed-air tanks.

"Anyway, there was the speed job ghosting ahead out to where that blink had occurred. And right off the bat, the sub-chaser was on its way again."

"I was frightened stiff," Kay Call admitted. "But I loved it. Oh Captain Kent, you can't tell this part. It takes somebody who was there."

"Lady, you were *there*," Kent praised. "Go ahead, tell us about it. And you may take a bow when it's over."

"Well," Kay said, "when our motors started roaring, the Burger boat realized—if it hadn't heard us before — that they were being pursued. I remember seeing a few quick blinkings, or flashes, then this

Ears boy and Blackner slapped me down, and I do mean just that. 'That's rifle-fire!' Halsey yelled. 'Keep down!' And we did, but not the sub-chaser men. Not much! They were doing some gun-firing of their own by then—from a machine-gun on the bow.

"Then there was another blinking and a flash from well out beyond the boat we were chasing; Halsey and Blackner yelled that that was another ship of some kind firing on us.

"And all of a sudden—oh, of course we were half up on our knees and peeking—we all saw this other ship. It was a big boat with a funnel and derrick booms, and the whole thing was just under the big moon by then."

"What was it?" O'Brien asked. "Never mind the secrecy, gal."

"The skipper yelled down to us, 'We've got a sub mother ship dead ahead! A mother ship and at least three U-boats alongside! Ye gods, folks, we've hit the jackpot! Give 'em hell, men! Give 'em hell! Ready on the torpedo tubes! Stand by on the depth charges! An' put a light on 'em! Hit 'em with that light!"

"Oh, Miss Call! Miss Call!" the nurse warned. "You—"

"Don't stop me now, Miss Cotton," Kay Call urged, "for nothing could stop us then. Oh, were we on the beam! Were we there with the solid-sending. Yea, brothers, we were. Hurrah for Coast Guard!

"Well anyway," Kay Call went on, cooling down a bit and getting back to that water battle, "we hit that Nazi layout with a powerful searchlight. And, at that exact second, the sub-chaser's heaviest forward gun hit the cluster of mother ship and subs with a direct hit. But two of the U-boats were already trying to get away.

"'They're crash-diving!' the skipper yelled. 'Stand ready with depth charges! And fire one torpedo! Nice work, gun crew!'

"The skipper yelled that—'Nice work, gun crew!' when our forward gun hit Burger's speedboat and blew it apart, and the shot, as Blackner told me, was almost point-blank and the range not more than a hundred yards. Fact is, some parts of Burger's speedboat fell on our sub-chaser as we swept ahead past where it had been when that shot caught up with it. It was awful!"

"Awful swell!" Sergeant Small enthused. "Go ahead, lady. You fellers sure are doing nice work. Give 'em—You know what."

"And we did," Kay stated. "The boys put that torpedo right into the broadside of the mother ship. Blackner, at the time, said that we were within four hundred yards of the target—and that we almost outran the torpedo. We didn't notice it, but our boat had almost stopped by then. But when the torpedo was in the mother ship's side, we were on our way again."

"Drop those depth charges, gal! Get it over with," O'Brien cheered.

"They did," Kay stated, "and how! We swept ahead between the sinking mother ship and one of the subs that had been alongside; and there was so little room for the sub-chaser's passing, that I'll swear a long-armed man could have reached out, to either side, and touched Axis property. And when we were there in the thick of it, I heard the order to drop depth charges, and my heart stood still.

"But that was all that stood still," Kay Call said, "for—"

"I know what you mean," Captain O'Brien said, "but don't let me interrupt you."

"We actually sideswiped one of the U-boats that had tried to crash-dive," Kay Call related, "and then all hades seemed to be breaking loose almost directly under our stern when the depth bombs let go. You won't believe me, but we actually bounced.

"Right away, the sub-chaser came around, lined its bow on that spot where things were still falling and splashing, and

started to run, almost full speed, for another attack. The powerful searchlight was turned on again, and we saw the mother ship when she went completely under. There wasn't much left then but a lot of floating debris on a big oil slick. The sub-chaser ran back and forth across that big oil slick three or four times. Then, for the first time in quite a while, I heard the skipper talking with his men.

"He said, 'That's funny, I don't think there's a single survivor.' And the helmsman laughed and said, 'Sir, it'd be damned funny if there was a survivor. I'd go back. No, sir, there'll be no prisoners taken this time. Too, too bad'."

"No prisoners taken?" Captain O'Brien remarked. "A tough, tough war, me hearties."

"After that, that was all," Kay Call concluded. "Oh, by the way, Major Reno—I think I should be able to go on to Washington this evening. I know you'll forgive me for this little delay."

Before Reno could decide on an answer, the FBI man who had answered that telephone call spoke up.

He said, "I'll bet you don't go to Washington, Miss Call. That phone call I had was from town. That young Lieutenant Hinkley, the boy who was piloting Captain Vallenar when the good captain was caught spotting for that Gulf U-boat, went to town, visited Vallenar in the city jail, and shot him to death."

"Ye gods, no!" exclaimed O'Brien.

"Worse yet, young Hinkley turned the gun on himself. Poor devil, he's dead. Thirdly, and on the good side, that Senor Poopo, or Polo, heard the shooting, thought a liquidation was in order, broke forty ways from the center and confessed everything he knew about the Axis setup in the vicinity of your post."

"Miss Call," Major Reno decided, "there's no reason why you should go north. That clears the Captain Vallenar slate very nicely. Yes, we'll all be on our way when a few last odds and ends are picked up—out there around the old plantation hideout, and along that levee tunnel that runs in the direction we didn't expect."

"Tell you what," Captain O'Brien suggested, "let's you and I, Major Reno, and Captain Kent and the rest of the boys, pick up those odds and ends while Sergeant Small takes the courier plane and flys back to the post with Miss Call. We old married men can grab any one of several Air Forces ferry transports going down that way later in the day."

"But shucks," said Reno, "that's a pretty big ship for just two people."

"Don't let that worry you at all," Captain O'Brien said. "The sergeant should be able to shrink that ship clear down to one seat, or I don't know army.

"Sergeant Small, do you think you can handle this one-woman anti-U-boat menace, all alone?"

"I'll deliver her to the post hospital or bust, Captain," Small promised.

XVI

NEXT morning when Mrs. O'Brien, the captain and Sergeant Small visited Kay Call down in Major Marying's fine establishment of long quiet corridors, white beds and iodoform odors, the major said that Kay was there for the day—at least.

"He means that," O'Brien told Kay, when Major Marying had gone, "but I want to tell you a few things about what you settled up Charleston way, Kay. The cipher sheets that your friend Burger thought he was carrying to that sub nest, aside from listing ship concentrations at Gulf ports and troop movements in that area, also called upon that mother ship to send its brood around into the Gulf. Major Reno tells me that the U-boats have been depending almost entirely upon this method of sending orders and advices, due to the fact that enemy radio sending can be both jammed and picked out of the air."

"But they'll never reach the Gulf now," Kay Call said.

"Thanks to you and your two recruits, they won't. But it's only by the skin of his teeth that your old Uncle Sam has missed one awful spell of Gulf grief. Army Intelligence tipped off Major Reno that the Gulf ports are all set to ship out the greatest flotilla of troop and material transports that ever put out across the Caribbean. The sheets of cipher that Vallenar should have received in that no-good fountain pen, besides listing certain U-boat shortages, made clear that the Caribbean rattlesnake bases are ready."

"Are or were, Captain?" Sergeant Small asked.

"Both," O'Brien stated. "The cipher was definite enough to place some of the sub bases beyond doubt, and Reno says they'll be rubbed out today, but there's still a world of grief ahead. And no doubt of that. She's still a tough war, folks."

"No chance, I suppose," Small speculated, "that the Gulf has lost any of its pig boats?"

"Not a chance," O'Brien answered. "The no-good fountain pen sheets that should have gone from the gay major to Vallenar to Senor Poopo to the Nazis at Gottingen on the Gulf then hence prove beyond doubt that the Gulf has more bases than you could shake a stick at. And here we working men are losing golden hours telling wild stories to wild ladies. Sergeant, let's you and I get back to the hangars. There's a war to be won—by accident, if necessary, but won at any cost."

"Even if gents have to work," Sergeant Small agreed, getting to his feet, trying a stretch, then following Captain O'Brien out into the long corridor.

THE first period of school work was getting along toward its noon closing when Staff Sergeant Small arrived back in his own hangar and asked Sergeant Littlejohn and Cosetti how they'd handled business while the brains—Small in person—was absent.

"Not too bad, Sarg," Cosetti said, "but they was times yesterday that I thunk we'd have to send for you. Man, was they some air activities off over the Gulf! We could see them bomber squadrons dartin' every whichway all day long; an' some of our pilots was way outa bounds—way out over the Gulf—an' they come back an' report that they could see them Bomber Command guys splashin' things on the surface. They musta been tryin' for pigs, eh?"

"Could be, Co'," Small agreed. "They say that you'll find pigs where pigs is."

"An' in town last night! Whew! Was there troop transport on the highway. An' all Coast Artillery stuff. Anti-aircraft units. Say, you don't suppose they expect an air raid down this way—on the Gulf ports? All that road transport was movin' toward the Gulf."

Corporal Cosetti pointed through the big open end doors, off into the high clear sky to the west. "There goes a flight of them attack bombers now," he said. "See 'em—seven ships. An' they're hell bent for the Gulf, too. That's how it was all day yesterday, Sarg. We should-a been there. Us guys might-a done some good for ourself. I have me a idea them attack bombers're too hot, too fast, they don't get to see what's on the water—or what's jus' under the water."

"You ain't kiddin' nobody," Cosetti snapped back. "Jus' give me a shot at 'em Wops, or pigs. Man, oh man, jus' give me half a chance!"

Sergeant Littlejohn, remembering some little piece of unfinished business, quit Small and Cosetti. Cosetti, also recalling unfinished business, pointed toward the only ship in the hangar, the ship containing a motor which Cosetti claimed—yesterday—was full of bugs.

" 'At motor's got 'em, all right, Sarg," he argued. "Lucky we was short a instructor this mornin' — cause of what poor Hinkley done to hisself—or we wouldn't

've had ships enough. No kiddin', Sarg, us guys should fly that ship. Don't we rate no air work a-tall?"

"We do and we don't," Sergeant Small said, "but—

"Hey, Gabby, you looking for me?"

Small had suddenly interrupted his conversation to flag down Orderly Gabby Gall.

Gabby was wandering down the hangar-fronting apron more or less aimlessly, as was his way when on the make.

"Oh, hello, Sarg," Gabby exclaimed. "Gee, I thought you'd be campin' down at Post Hospital, regular. Say, you guys in the hangar're in for a soft time of it."

"What do you mean?" Small asked.

"I just heard the C.O. talkin' with Major Olds and Captain O'Brien, an' he told 'em that they'd have to wash out all trainin' flying, an' all air work, till further notice."

"They can't do that," Small said. "Why, hell, they'd wash out our end of the war if they did. This place, Gabby, is where we train pilots for the war, for the big war. You've heard about it."

"Yeah," Gabby Gall agreed. "An' I heard about that General Drum washin' out all trainin' flyin', both army an' navy, up in that other corps area—from Maine down to North Carolina. That was way last July. You remember that, Sarg?"

"The dope's right, Sarg," Cosetti said. "I remember that."

"That makes it two dopes against one," Small agreed, "and so it could happen here. Well, let's go fishing."

"Aw, Sarg, let's go flyin'," Cosetti begged, "before we get the Operations Office order tellin' us to hold all ships in the hangar."

"Co'," Sergeant Small decided, "you've got an idea there. It might be days, even a week or more, before the order is lifted. Maybe it won't be lifted till this mess in the Gulf is all cleared up. Yes, sir, you and I are going to see what's wrong with that motor. I think you rate it."

XVII

SERGEANT SMALL, as a general thing, phoned Operations whenever he intended flying test on one of his hangar ships. Captain O'Brien, though, had often said that the phoned permission wasn't absolutely necessary—in Small's case. "Use your own judgment," he always told the sergeant. "There isn't a man on this post who outranks you when you're behind controls, and I know that you're not fooling around up there just to kill time. Soldier, you rate a little leeway."

Small guessed that he'd better take advantage of that leeway now. There was no telling when the order to wash out all air work would become effective. It might wait till the end of the present period, or it might be delayed till the end of day. Then again, in view of all that Bomber Command activity out over the troubled Gulf, the Operations Office flash might send phoned orders to the outlying training stages and have the day's doings ended as soon as the officers in charge of the several stages could flag their students down.

Already, with the flying-training period drawing to a close, Sergeant Littlejohn and the other crewmen were coming from here and there—wherever it is that hangar goldbricks sleep while ships are in the air —and getting ready to meet the first two home-coming jobs. While far off in the western sky—the direction toward which the wind was blowing—a great flock of training planes was rounding in for the landing approach. It wouldn't be long now, and if Small and Cosetti wanted to avoid more delay, they'd better get aloft, and away from that hangar, before work piled up. It wouldn't do for two non-coms to quit the apron just when the after-period labor was coming in for servicing.

So Small, telling Cosetti to get his chute and other flying equipment, did likewise, then had a few off-the-record words with Littlejohn.

"As soon as I get under way," he told

Littlejohn, "give Operations a ring and report that I'm flying a motor test on this ship. Tell them it's a piece of trouble-shooting that's been waiting for a couple of days. And if you hear any startling news while I'm gone—that is, if any queer orders come through—don't forget to tell me all about it when Co' and I get back."

"Sure," Littlejohn agreed. "And don't try to fly that Gulf on a trainin' bus' tank. Remember it's good for only two hours."

"I'll try to remember that," Small said. "Guess maybe we'll work off in that direction and see what's cooking out there."

Sergeant Small and Corporal Cosetti, flying trouble-shooting test on such a hop as this, always equipped themselves with their own arrangement of two-way rubber-tube phone, better to talk over the air action of the motor, propeller or control under observation. And, of course, Small used the phone for purposes of instruction—and Co' for asking questions of Small, and cussin' when the dam' ol' crate persisted in flying the way he wasn't flying it. Which was often.

Now all Small said was, "You take it over, Co', and let's see you make this motor sound as bad as it sounded to you on the ground."

"Okay, Sarg!" Cosetti sang back—or forward. "Say, I think I'll fly 'er west over the swamp, jus' so's I won't be tanglin' with any of them incoming cadets."

"You wouldn't be aiming at that swamp near the mouth of Rat Creek, would you? You're not nosing in on Gottingen on the Gulf, feller?"

"Okay, if you insist, Sarg," piloting Corporal Cosetti was quick to agree. "Anything you say. Yeah, that's a good lonely neck of the woods for my kinda air work. See them Navy Catalinas way off there? See 'em? Five. Comin' up from the station. Guess Navy's in on this job too, eh?"

"Wouldn't it be just like 'em?" Small spoke back to Cosetti. "Those Cats are the cat's, though, and if anything can run these pigs ragged it should be them. But those Cats are too high for any kind of useful work. Guess maybe they're just playing for fun—maybe going up to Pensacola for the trap shooting."

"Hey, take a look down there," Cosetti cut in, shaking the ship and pointing down and aft, "here comes four birds that ain't goin' down to the beach to sun themself. Four of our bunch, Army jobs, an' are they down where a gent can see things! Give 'em hell, Army!"

The four attack bombers, blunt two-engined jobs, were hardly free of the cypress stand across which they were flying, and, headed due west, they were within a mile or so of the Gulf shore. Small and Cosetti were only carrying five hundred elevation, and those wild guys had breezed past almost below them.

"They thought they'd get a raise out of us," Small called back, still watching all that speed go to sea. "Look at that speed! Co', I remember the day when a guy hung his head in disgrace when he was sent to fly bombers. Bombers be damned! They're all pursuit now."

"Them must be on a hot tip, Sarg," Cosetti decided. "They know where they're goin'. Look at 'em—halfway across the Gulf already. An' look—there's a flight of P-38s, comin' up outa the south, an' them six is plenty low, too. Aw, this pond's hot today, Sarg. Say-y-y, ya don't know anything, do you?"

"Not too much, Co'," Sergeant Small answered. "But it is plenty hot. Things are happening out there. Three more Gulf sinkings during the past twenty-four hours, you know.

"Hey, you! Watch your engine speed! Want to put us in the drink? And level on that horizon."

"I guess I got me mind off the ball, Sarg," Student Cosetti apologized. "I was just lookin' off there toward that Gottingen on the Gulf dump. I can't get that dump outa my mind, after all that stuff

Gabby and Ginsburg told us. Them dam' Dutchmen should be driv outa that sponge-divin' village."

"An' them dam' Wops, too," Small kidded, "like ol' Poopo."

"Right, Sarg!" Cosetti agreed. "I went to town lookin' for that ol' mope, right after retreat last night, but I couldn't find him. Then I meets Gabby Gall in that juke joint on the edge of nigtown—that out-a-bounds juke—an' Gabby tells me that ol' Poopo Polo has been grabbed an' that he's in the cooler."

"I told you to watch your flying!" Instructor Small yelled into the speaking tube. "Where do you think you are—chewing the fat for the benefit of a lot of wind-shooters on a hangar workbench? Now see where your nose is! Get it up, up! Now let's go to sea. Go ahead, right out over the Gulf. Let's see some water."

XVIII

THE terrible heat of the early fall noon was on the glass-smooth Gulf when the training plane passed out across the shoreline a half dozen miles north of that sponge-diver's hamlet known as Gottingen on the Gulf. Surface activities were, for the most part, lost to view in the heat haze; and Small knew that there wasn't going to be anything much to see out there. But this was, perhaps, going to be the last hop he'd have for a few days, so they'd make the most of it.

They put the best part of a half hour's air work behind them in a northwesterly direction, and when a high smoke cloud appeared way off there above where the horizon should have been, Small once more spoke to Cosetti.

"That's the smoke from your girl friend's city—Mobile," he said. "But you're not going to visit the girl friend today, Co', so maybe you'd best drop that right wing, step very lightly on that right rudder, keep the nose out of the blue, and let me see you fly a nice easy turn for home. *Easy,* I said. Any dam' fool can fly a turn this way! Hell, a good ship'll fly it by itself. Now go round again, and knock that high wing down to within four or five feet of the horizon—and push that nose down too! Go ahead, all the way round—and do it again. Make it a full turn. Now you're flying this ship, kid. Do it some more. Ah, that's the way to slip your nose along that horizon! Now, if you think—

"Hold it there!" Small barked, and he slapped the control stick's top to emphasize the command. The ship was pointing in an almost westerly direction. Small's gaze was off to the right of the whirling prop—northwestward — toward where they'd seen that smoke cloud under which busy Mobile hides herself by day.

"A whole skyful o' ships!" Cosetti exclaimed. "Look at 'em—P-38s, Americans, even Fortresses. An' them's navy jobs way down close to the water—them flyin' boats. We best get t'hell outa the way, Sarge."

"That's only the half of it, Co'," Small said. "Take a good look at that water. See the PT boats? See 'em cutting it every which way?"

"Oh, by hell!" Cosetti exclaimed. "I best get us outa their way. Them PT's lookin' for subs, Sarg, an' no dam' foolin'."

"Let me take it," Sergeant Small sang out, rapping the top of his head for a swap of flying control. "Okay, Co', I've got her. Now let's see what's cookin' here."

Small, still flying his ship headed west, took good care to watch all points of his sky, then, jamming full power to his motor, went into as hard a climb as the ship would stand. And the oncoming wall of flying craft was very close to them by the time his altimeter showed 5,000 feet. Then, swinging in a clockwise turn, he wore away eastward, shoreward, and still took good care to keep clear of all that southbound aerial traffic. Cosetti, having given up the controls, was halfway over

the gunnel of that rear cockpit, watching those PT boats trace their pure-white zigzag wakes on that glass-smooth sea. Then, of a sudden, he was yelling into the speaking tube.

"Get a load of what's comin' behind all them PT jobs, Sarg!" he sang out. "Look, a convoy. Big ships. Am I right? See 'em?"

"Right you are, Co'," Small answered. "They're going out. They're on their way. Man, what a sight!"

"Who's on their way?" Cosetti wanted to know.

"The biggest troop movement that ever left the Gulf," Small spoke back. "This is it. This is what the Axis set out to stop. If this reaches open sea, Co'—all's jake. If she don't—it'll be just too bad for maybe a quarter million Yanks. Man, oh man! See 'em come. Let's get to hell out of their way. We don't want to worry any of these escort pilots."

"Hey, look, look!" Cosetti yelled, and so loud that his speaking tube was not needed. "See them two PTs—they're on a U pig surer'n hell. See them depth bombs lettin' go! An' see that stuff tossin' outa the water. There's ya ol' oil slick, Sarg."

So this was why all training and other flying had been washed out in that corps area? No chance piece of aircraft must get in the way of the well-planned schedule that had been mapped to bring this convoy from Mobile to the point where, no doubt, it would join other units of a mightier convoy coming down from New Orleans and Galveston. No fooling—this was a show worth stumbling upon; but, all of a sudden, Sergeant Small tumbled to the fact that it was also something upon which he —and Corporal Cosetti—were stubbing their official toes. After all, the training plane in which they sat had fine big box-car-sized identification numerals painted in glaring white on either side of its fuselage. Perhaps they had already committed a crime second only to breaking and entering the U. S. mint. And right now wouldn't be any too soon to get away from that busy spot.

"Co'," he said to his fellow noncom, "you sure did wish us in on a cut of grief. We'll sweat for this. I'm going to get us back to where we belong."

"Oh-o!" Cosetti yelled. "An' there goes another U pig back to where *it* belongs. See where that Navy dive-bomber just laid a egg? See it, Sarg? Yeah, ya'd better get outa here before ya get us into real trouble. Hey, do you want that I should do the flyin' now?"

"Guess you'd better. I don't want to be blamed for this mess," Small kidded.

"Okay, Sarg," Cosetti agreed, taking over the air work, "I got it. But it's a dam' sin an' a shame to be quittin' a show like this. Look at them troop transports. You know, I'd like to be in the army too."

"What do you mean—be in the army?" Small demanded.

"You know, er," Cosetti fumbled, "I mean, I'd like to be in the war. Like regular soldiers."

"Get that dam' right wing back on the horizon, and bring that nose down out of the blue, or you'll be in the Gulf like a regular fish!" Small growled through his speaking tube. "You and your dam' old 'be in the army,' be 'a regular soldier'!"

XIX

SO THE young fellow who longed to be a regular fighting man turned his rudder to that scene of battle and piloted ahead southeastward toward the home post. It wasn't difficult for the training plane to leave all that activity behind it, this due to the fact that the escorting aerial umbrella was forced to fly circular courses of surface observation, better to remain not too far afront the eight or ten knot speed of the troop transports. And soon only a few of the far-flung, wide-flying bomber groups were left to occasional view, the occasional view that Small got when he gazed back longingly at a place

in the sky that any real airman would hate to depart.

Nearly a half hour of the toward-shore trip had been made when Small called Cosetti's attention to the fact that he was angling too much.

"Co'," he said, "you can make this one of the longest overwater hops ever tried in a training bus if you keep on in this direction. What's the matter with going ashore—don't you like the looks of dry land under you?"

"Oh, sure, Sarg," Corporal Cosetti said. "I was jus' gonna come in north of Rat Creek an' Gottingen on the Gulf. I wanna spit a cud o' chewin' tobacco down on them lousy Dutchmen when we pass over."

"If that's eating tobacco you've been rolling your jaws on all day," Small said, "make dam' sure that you shoot it far and safe when you do shoot. I don't want the backwash of this slipstream to eddy any of that stuff into my face. But go ahead, your idea is big. Big for a little guy, at least."

"Us little guys don't get much fun," Cosetti lamented. "An' what we gets, we gotta make. Mind if I jazz low over Gottingen on the Gulf an' scare hell outa them Dutchmen?"

"No jazzin'!" Small warned. "That's out. Hell's bells, it's been out ever since the first student hopped the first training plane. And that's why all students still do it. But be careful."

So Cosetti, angling in to meet the shoreline at Gottingen on the Gulf, began looking to his safety-belt, and other items, preparatory to making the usual long, hard, full-power jazz dive at, over and past the small sponge-diver hamlet out front.

"Now pick the spot where you're going to start lifting it out," Small warned, "and keep that throttle full-gun. Get the nose down! She'll do better than this! That looks good but remember I'm in this front sea. Hold it in 'er, kid! Boy, you're going to town!"

"An' see them dam' Dutchmen startin' to crawl under the carpets!" Cosetti cheered. "They mus' think we're regular air-fightin' guys! Look at 'em scatter!"

Sure enough, the few people out and about in Gottingen, during that hot noon-hour, were now doing their best to get under cover. Maybe the guilty conscience had something to do with the haste.

Anyway, when Cosetti pulled out of the hard jazz dive, zoomed and looked down to his right, there were no upturned faces as far as he could see. But Cosetti, keen-eyed son of an ex-fisherman family, saw something else.

Getting out of his zoom, even without the pleasure of "hangin' it on the prop," the flying corporal shoved his ship's nose back to the horizon, then flew his turn and swept out over the Gulf again.

"Where we going now?" Small asked. "This is only a two-hour fuel tank, not a hollow leg we're flying on, you know."

"Jus' a shake, Sarg. I think I saw somethin'. See all that seaweed, right there near-shore, south of the Rat Creek outlet? I was up here three weeks ago, when me an' Lieutenant Self took that ship cross-country fishin', an' we looked all over this neck of the woods for a seaweed bed. They wasn't any."

"So what?" Small asked.

"That's deep water there—right where the rainy season runs a heavy stream outa Rat Creek, an' they couldn't be no seaweed bed grow up there so quick. Anyway, I think I seen somethin' when we jazzed over that seaweed. Wait till we see. Hey, take a look at 'at!"

"What? You mean those drying racks? Maybe the Dutchmen are just drying seaweed for the market. You know, iodine, glass, soap, they collect it commercially."

"Not these babies! An' them ain't dryin' racks. Them's camouflage, Sarg! So help me! Them's sub conning towers stickin' up under all that seaweed camouflage! Look! Two of 'em. An' another! Man, they's half a dozen U-boats under that camouflage! We're on somethin', Sarg, we're in on somethin'!"

Sergeant Small there and then slapped the controls out of Cosetti's hands, stepped heavily on the left rudder, pushed the nose waterward and dived away from what they were in on; and as Small did all that, a burst of machine-gun fire ripped through their tail service and high right wings.

"Oh, boy! Were you in on something!" Small then found time to remark. "You'll never come closer to winning a harp. Co', those rats are all set to quit that camouflage. They're ready to break out. Nearly all hatches were closed. Did you see that?"

"Dam' tootin'," Cosetti agreed, "an' I think that shower o' machine-gun slugs come from ashore. I think I seen the spot where 'at gun is. Hey, what-a hell are us guys gonna do 'bout this? No guns, no radio, no nothin'! An' them transports is comin', Sarg."

"What do you mean 'no nothing,' soldier!" Small exclaimed. "Co', you get all set to do a chute jump. It'll be a lift-off. Start getting out on that right wing. And watch your step, kid. You've got to be good."

Corporal Cosetti had cast off his safety belt before Small finished that brief invitation to adventure. The kid then took one last close look at his chute harness, stepped forward over the cockpit's gunnel, grabbed hard to a center-section strut, then reached a leg for the catwalk of the lower right wing. Then he was at Small's side, leaning into the front pit and asking for the plan.

"We'll go back and find one of those PT boats," Sergeant Small made known. "That won't be hard. When we do find one, I'll fly you so low across its bow that you'll never touch water. They'll pick you out of the air."

"Will I show Navy a jump!" Cosetti enthused.

"As soon as I'm sure you're safe," Small then said, "I'll cut right back here and keep my eye on that sub nest. You tell the PT skipper to follow in on my spotting. We can't miss out. Now remember you're doing a lift-off, not a jump. Pull that ring and don't let go till the chute yanks this ship out of your mitts."

"Ya can count on me, Sarg," Cosetti guaranteed. "I'll hold to this strut an' the strut'll be with me when I land.

"Hey, you ain't got much fuel left in 'at tank!"

"And that isn't flash news, Walter!" Small yelled back. "I've been watching that fuel gage invite the gas out for the last half hour. But there's a few gallons left, Co', and it'll be all we need for this part of the job. Be all ready, kid, and don't turn loose till I give you a yell. We should be heading off one of those PTs pretty pronto now."

Small had less than five hundred altitude under his ship. Holding to one of the half struts at center section, Cosetti was squatting on his heels, gazing ahead into the heat haze that snatched out all but a few miles' visibility on the calm waters.

"Somethin' out ahead, Sarg!" he finally yelled. "Yep, it's one o' the fast jobs—a PT. Should I get set?"

Small reached out and put a hand on Cosetti's shoulder. "Hold it," he yelled. "I'll let you know. I want to make sure that this PT crew doesn't get us wrong."

And so saying, Small flew wide of the oncoming PT boat, fishtailed his craft by way of attracting the crews' attention, then came around in their wake. Then, with only four hundred feet altitude, he began stalling his power, fishtailing some more, and by the time his ship was within a quarter mile of the PT's stern not more than two hundred feet of reading remained on his altimeter. And the crewmen aboard the speed job were giving him the come-on wave.

"Step out, Co'!" Small yelled. "Guess they savvy."

Corporal Cosetti reached for a handful of flying wires, then relinquished his left-hand hold on the half strut, and made the perilous few steps that brought him to the

outer struts of that biplane trainer. And by then the crewmen, down there below and ahead, were all-eyes. They guessed that this was going to be something. Army, perhaps, was going nuts! Doing chute lift-offs, just for the hell of it, at a time when Navy was trying its damndest to get a troop movement down to the sea.

XX

THE PT'S skipper guessed that this, maybe, called for full speed ahead—and no more zigzagging for the time being.

Small, with Corporal Cosetti in position, came right up along the PT's foamy white wake, and there was no longer any cause for fishtailing, or even a greatly reduced throttle, for the water craft's rate was hardly less than his own. For a few passing seconds the training plane looked directly down on the crowded deck of the small hell boat, then crept ahead out front. And all hands on the surface craft were on their toes — whatever this was, they were for it.

Small finally guessed that a two-hundred-yard lead was enough. So, when he estimated that that distance stood between his rudder and the PT's water-cutting bows, he gave Cosetti the office.

"Don't stand there, soldier!" he sang out; and Cosetti made his pull. And the chute bloomed and made its pull. Then Cosetti was sitting on air watching a training ship go away from him. While down below, a busy PT skipper, getting the idea fully now, was very much on the job. It took some ship handling, but, as Small had promised, Cosetti never touched water.

Small, circling in a heavy bank the moment Cosetti was off the wing, saw the PT men reach up, grab the corporal outa thin air, collapse his silk, then carry on without a hitch. The thing couldn't've been smoother if it had been rehearsed.

Still watching, Small could see that Cosetti was doing all the talking, plus all the pointing. And when the PT turned suddenly eastward from its previous course, he knew that the situation was well in hand — or getting that way fast. He guessed that by then the airwaves would be carrying the news from PT boat to patrol planes; and he had an idea that it was up to him to set the table for the big party ahead. So Small—trying to avoid paying too much attention to that fuel gage — started back toward that U-boat nest at the mouth of Rat Creek, just off Gottingen on the Gulf.

Small circled wide when he came back to that seaweed-covered area. Now, as he took another good look, there was plenty of real breaking-out activity down there. Fact is, one of the U-boats, free of the camouflage, was just turning seaward in the deep blue cut that was Rat Creek's outlet to the Gulf.

Small's heart must have missed a few shots. There was just a chance that this pig would slide into deep offshore water before the PT could get into action. Just a chance!

Small circled out over the Gulf again—as if he could herd that nosing-out U-boat back to the nest. As though he had any chance of helping the cause at all! No bets! It looked like an easy getaway for that one. And the others—there were five others—were also casting off their seaweed coverings and beginning to work upshore toward that lead-out blue-water cut made, as Cosetti had said, by the rainy-season run-off from Rat Creek. *Damned if that Wop doesn't know everything,* Small found himself speculating.

Small wondered whether he could make a fast run out and meet the oncoming PT, just to see if he could hurry it along. Then his quick gaze hit that fuel gage again. Lord! It was low. There could be no more than a wet inside—a wet bottom—to that tank. But the last few quarts, if used to the full extent, might prove to be the best two quarts in the whole fuel supply. Lots of guys before Small had found that to be

true. They always say that there's lotsa fire in those last two quarts—if an outa-luck pilot can only scrape it off the bottom and burn it all.

Burn it all! Man, there was an idea worth considering!

Small headed his ship back toward shore, right back along that blue-water cut wherein the conning tower and superstructure of the moving U-boat had now lined themselves true to the course—the course that could put it out under the Gulf waters whereon floated a unit of the greatest troop transport movement in Southern history.

Small could see that all hatches were closed, and that the pig's back was free of crewmen, with no deck guns ready for action. But there were three apes in the conning tower, and one of these was manning a tommy-gun. Small heard something whistle shrilly, and he guessed that a slug had ricochetted off his motor. He knew that time was crowding him closely, and, perhaps, running out on him, too.

Small reached down and unsnapped his safety-belt, also his chute's harness; and while doing that, he shoved the nose of his ship down on a line which, if his bow carried guns, would have put the aim of said guns right on the sub's conning tower —and the three rats therein. And Small held to that aimed dive—right at 'em. Full gun!

It called for a crash. Small had been through so many plane crashes, complete hospital-bed-filling washouts, that he knew just about all there was to be known along those lines. Yet, as he knew from the split second that sent him into that aimed dive, this was going to call for everything he had. But he was there to give.

He'd have to hit the top of the conning tower with a hit-and-lift zoom, a smash that would lift his own motor free of its moorings, plow that red-hot motor back through the fuel tank, and hang all such quick wreckage right there where the three Nazi rats were now showing signs of getting gone from there.

It was a program that specified fine timing, and if Small failed to hit within a few inches of the exact spot picked, then Small might lose two legs, at least, to say nothing of life itself.

Yes, he'd have to see to it that he went along with the part of the wreckage that wasn't supposed to stay atop that conning tower, a conning tower that should be under a smother of hot flame as soon as the hot motor had touched off the few gallons —or few quarts—of high-test fuel that was bound to be splashed hither and yon when the job was complete.

Small, from the first, had his eye on the sub's fore cable, and when he began to zoom—for the hit-and-lift act—he felt his landing gear start sliding up that heavy wire rope— And that was all that Sergeant Small remembered, for the time being.

Next thing he knew, he was fighting water, fighting his way free of a familiar incumbrance—the wreck of a plane about his neck and shoulders. And this wrecked mess seemed to be pretty deep. Well, Small had been under water with wrecks before this; and he knew that a man must take his time. Take his time and figure it out, even though a wrecked man, no matter how strong he be in natural life, is always cat-weak in those first few minutes after a crash. But Small was getting out of that tangle. He was beginning to see plenty of bright light overhead—up there where the bubbles were going. Up there where he'd go or know the reason why!

When he broke surface, he could hear powerful motors singing, chugging water, powerful units that were perhaps working against a reverse gear; and something told him that it must be the PT boat in close. How close, he didn't know. But there were other guys in the water with him, guys that seemed anxious to help, and one of them was talking like Cosetti.

"I'll be damned!" one of the guys was saying. "Look at the man! He took time out to rescue his chute."

"An' why not?" Cosetti was demanding.

"Ain't the sarg signed up for that chute? Sure. Only the plane's expendable."

"Well, it's sure as hell written off," another of the helping men stated.

"Ahoy, on deck! Take him up!"

THEN Small was really shaking the old cobwebs out of his brain. He could see that he was being handed up along the slick side of the PT boat, and he could feel the deckhands dragging him over the hard gunnel. Then those other guys—and Cosetti—were being pulled aboard, bells were jingling, more power was being crowded onto those singing motors, and he realized that the crewmen were poking long boathooks against the side and conning tower of a sub. And there was fire there too! Fire that came up out of a chimney-like opening and licked and lapped its tongues of yellow-red flame and cloud of dirty-black smoke through the remains of his own training plane's motor-end.

"Did the guy put a seal on that conning tower!" somebody was saying. "Hear them dam' yellow-bellied sons yellin' in there like caged rats in a barn afire! Ain't Uncle Sam gonna get a chance to pick even one little teeney-weenie Heinie prisoner out o' this war?"

As the PT boat worked its way clear of a submarineful of pent-up fire, a subful of potential explosion, Small could hear a new burst of sound.

"Here're the Cats!" somebody said. "Let's get t'hell back out of here and watch them blow this rat's nest off the East Gulf coast."

All the time, the PT had been pulling out toward deeper, safer water sternfirst; and when the craft was a fair half mile offshore, the Catalina boats really went to work on that rat nest under the camouflage.

"Damned if they ain't blowin' the coast right off the coast!" somebody remarked. "Say, Air Force, you guys sure found what we've been looking for. How come?"

"Just an accident," Sergeant Small remarked. "Just a couple of stumble bums stumbling lucky, Navy."

"Oh-oh!" the PT's skipper, standing over Small, remarked when one of the Cats dropped its load inshore among the permanent buildings and docks of Gottingen on the Gulf—and then that small Nazified hamlet was no longer there. "Guess a mine must have washed up on the beach and destroyed Gottingen. Now who can pick a prisoner of war out of that mess? What—no prisoners!"

The PT was getting under way, bringing its bow around and heading out into the Gulf again, and Small was clear of head enough to see that the five strafing Cats were still clawing the debris against the danger of one living thing ever reaching shore. It was a job to avenge a hundred Yank merchantmen sent down in cold blood.

"We've got to get back to the escort patrol," the skipper said, "but first we'll have to make a run for the station—about nine miles south—and land you in sick bay, Sergeant."

"Hold that sick-bay call!" Sergeant Small warned. "Just put us ashore at the station. That'll be jake. They can give us transportation back to the post. I've got a white bed all set aside for me there. They expect me every so often. And, hell, sir, I'm not half bad. Old Major Marying'll have me all wrung out and ready to go in no time."

"Sure, skipper," Corporal Cosetti added, "the sarg is right about that. 'Nother thing, skipper, he's got a girl friend in one of them beds at the post hospital."

"Here, here, here! What the hell, Air Force!" said the PT's skipper. "Don't let these Navy men hear that—you and all the fancy fittings!"

"Let me explain that, sir," Small started to say. "The—"

"Why explain it? Just don't advertise it, Sergeant," the Navy man advised. "Ye gods—that you should explain!"

—War of 1812—and Even Then There Were Those Who Hadn't Got Over the "Old War"

THE COW WITH THE CRUMPLED HORN

By ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH

Author of "A Ruby for Solita," etc.

THE long line of militiamen slouched wearily in and out of the State Muster Master's office, one after the other scrawling his signature or mark against his name on the discharge rolls, and receiving in sullen silence the meager wad of shinplasters shoved across the desk to him.

Their green uniforms were faded and worn. Their shakos were dinted and lusterless. When they spoke they whined. As a group they showed interest in life only when a whiff of cooking smells drifted from the kitchens of Fort Orange Street to give notice it was Albany's noon hour.

A knot of officers, standing, smoking and gossiping in front of the General Armstrong Tavern, regarded them with contemptuous disfavor.

"What regiment are you men?" snapped a Captain of Regulars, a little cockahoop of a man.

The militiamen stared back at him, apathetically silent. Sergeant Dirk van Houst swore under his breath, took a step out of ranks and ported his piece.

"Van Zandt's Rifles, sir," he answered. "Schoharie militia."

"Where's your Colonel?"

"I don't know, sir."

"No officers with you?"

"No, sir."

The Regular expectorated very un-Regularly into a mud-puddle.

"Damn' militia," he commented. "All right, my man. At ease."

The tallest officer in the knot of by-standers—the tallest man Dirk had ever seen; he looked to be seven feet from bootheels to the top of his chapeau bras—frowned at Captain Cockahoop.

"I wouldn't say that, Captain," he objected. "The militia are the same stuff as our men. All they want is training and the right officers. You can't make good troops in three months' field service. I never saw men stand better than Wadsworth's New Yorkers at Queenstown Heights, with the woods full of Indians and Redcoats around 'em."

CAPTAIN COCKAHOOP was promptly placatory. "Of course, Colonel Scott, *you*"—but Dirk van Houst paid no more attention to him.

"Know who that was?" Dirk prodded Tom Little Bear next to him. Tom grunted in sign that he did not. "Winfield Scott," Dirk continued. "They say he's the best young officer on the Northern frontier. Second Artillery. He'd have beat the British last October, if our militia hadn't skulked."

Tom Little Bear grunted again.

"Our turn for pay," he remarked dispassionately.

The pair went through the rigmarole of being discharged, and paid for one month of three, the harassed Muster Master peering up in surprise when Tom inscribed a legible, copperplate signature. Outside in the street, Tom handed over his shinplasters to Dirk, who pocketed the two wads, nothing being said by either as to the transaction.

"A joint military chest, men?" drawled an amused voice.

BOTH Dirk and Tom were big men, but they had to crane their necks to meet the twinkling eyes of Colonel Scott. Instinctively they came to attention, although within the past moment they had become civilians again.

"Don't bother," Scott acknowledged approvingly. "But I'm glad to see two such soldierly militiamen. You're an educated man, Sergeant?"

"I was the schoolmaster at Watervliet, sir."

"Ah! And your friend is an Indian?"

"Tom is an Oneida, sir."

"I could use both of you in my regiment," Scott said, almost wistfully. "If you ever care to try the Regulars, Sergeant—"

"Van Houst, sir."

"Thank you. And don't be discouraged." Scott's voice deepened. " 'Twelve was a bad year. We weren't ready. I hope 'Thirteen will see us deep into Canada, but we'll need plenty of lads like you. There's too much disloyalty on this frontier. Some of our people don't seem to know there is a war, and others would rather sell beef cattle for twenty dollars gold the hundred pounds to the enemy than to our commissaries—yes, and military information, besides. I wish I had a corps of scouts to watch that traffic. Think it over, Sergeant. It might be worth a commission to you."

He nodded, and strode off, his saber clanking, seeming to fill the wide street with the sheer bulk of his personality.

"Like lightning, Colonel Scott," commented Tom. "He crackles. We eat?"

Dirk laughed.

"You must have liked him to talk so much," he answered. "Shall we take his offer?"

"Plenty of time for that. First, we eat. Then we go to Watervliet, and you see Elspeth. After—we think some more."

"Maybe I'll see Elspeth," Dirk corrected him unhappily. "More likely, I'll have a session with her grandfather. Black Dugald won't have any more use for a discharged militiaman than for one in service. The hard-fisted, disloyal, old scoundrel! Why couldn't he have emigrated after the Revolution, along with the rest of Johnson's Greens? He hates the country, but by God, he's perfectly willing to make money out of it! Elspeth says he's gone into business with Harker, the drover, shipping cattle up to the Niagara front."

"If Black Dugald had emigrated, you wouldn't know Elspeth," Tom pointed out. "Now, we eat."

AN HOUR later they were tramping the Watervliet road, Dirk van Houst setting his feet down solidly like the Dutchman he was, his blue eyes roaming from side to side, Little Bear's gait the loose-kneed stride of the forest, his one indication of interest in his surroundings an occasional flick of his close-set ears as they registered some sound, near or far. Except for height, and a certain quality of contained energy, there was no similarity between them. Indeed, on all that stretch of road there were no two men more different in appearance—where the Dutchman's features inclined to chubbyness, under a tow thatch, the Indian's were gaunily aquiline, and the coppery glint on his cheekbones was set off by his straight black hair and the stony hardness of his beady eyes.

FEW people—Elspeth Campbell was one—knew how close they were in mental sympathy, closer than most brothers.

Dirk's father, old Jacob van Houst, who had served on Herkimer's staff at Oriskany and afterward established the Watervliet school in a corner of his barn, had taught them both, as he had lovely Elspeth, whose gray eyes and ivory skin bespoke the misty hills of Lorn. These also had bred her cantankerous, wrong-headed grandfather, one of the few Tories who had refused to leave the state in 1783, his sneering acceptance of the oath of allegiance tolerated by his neighbors because of Jacob van Houst's kindly advice.

"It is a new country," old Jacob had said. "We must forget the war's hatreds, and grow up together in peace and understanding. He learns, Black Dugald. Now he is bitter because his poor wife is dead, and his son is against him. But give him time, and he learns and grows one with us."

But Black Dugald was not a man to learn new ways or to forget that he had been on the losing side. He was a human catamount. The men who had fought him whispered that he had taken scalp-bounties, and so come by the money to pay his fine to the state. He hated the United States, and all who believed in the infant nation. He had worked his son and his son's wife to the grave—Elspeth he could not harm, for she had in her the same steely strength which made him exult in his own blind disloyalty. And it was typical of the perversity of his nature that while he grudgingly respected her tenacious independence, his overriding purpose was to balk the match she and Dirk had arranged on their own initiative.

Thinking of all this, as he strode along, Dirk gritted his teeth. If it weren't for military duty, he'd show Black Dugald in a week!

TOM grunted.

"The man who gets mad loses his hair," he said unemotionally. "There is Campbell's smoke."

A belt of trees stretched from the roadside to the bank of the Hudson, rolling in spate. Above their tops spiraled a feathery plume. Tom wrinkled his nose.

"Black Dugald has many cattle," he announced.

Beyond the trees lay the fields and pas-

tures of the Campbell farm, a brown-and-green frame for the white rectangles of the house and outbuildings. The warm, bovine smell in the moist air was accounted for by a herd of twenty or thirty head, grazing in an enclosure by the road, under the supervision of a shambling brute of a man, who leaned on a staff and chewed tobacco as dumbly as the cattle he watched.

"Jesse Thumbetty," exclaimed Dirk. "Harker's here." He scowled. "That means Elspeth's being pestered again. I've a good mind to give that fellow a licking, Tom."

"You don't lick Harker," the Oneida replied mildly. "You kill him. Maybe Thumbetty, too—he does what Stan Harker tells him."

"He has just that much sense," agreed Dirk. "But we're not carrying a red axe today. Lord knows, all I want is to make sure Elspeth isn't unhappy."

They turned in the farm gateway, the herdsman, Thumbetty, staring at them dully out of great, lifeless, brown eyes. "H' be ye?" he vouchsafed, in response to Dirk's greeting. And without waiting for further questioning he went on, as if rehearsing an oft-taught lesson, "Goin' to Niagara—beef-cattle for sojers—goin' to shoot a Redcoat, I be."

"That's fine," laughed Dirk. But Tom's eyes focussed on the cowherd's blank stare. "What's that you say, Thumbetty?" he prompted.

"H' be ye?" Thumbetty repeated mechanically. "Goin' to Niagara—beef-cattle for sojers—goin' to shoot a Redcoat, I be."

"You are not the only teacher in Watervliet, Dirk," commented the Indian.

"Harker has to instill into the poor idiot everything he says," assented Dirk. "But he's a master hand with animals. Look!"

The cattle had bunched on a patch of clover. Thumbetty raised a hand, a guttural, inarticulate sound issued from his throat—and they lurched apart, spreading over the pasture, each beast for itself, save one cow, an ancient creature with a damaged horn, which continued to browse on the clover.

"He likes that cow," said Tom. "She can't fight for her grass."

"Not much meat on her," Dirk replied casually. "And her udder's dry. Only an idiot would worry over a beef like that—and only our damnfool commissaries would buy her." He glanced around the farmyard. "Wonder where Elspeth is," he remarked, more to himself than to Tom. "I'll bet Black Dugald is sizzling the skillet for someone."

The house door stood open in front of them. Voices droned in the direction of the kitchen. Loud voices. Dirk detected the boom of Black Dugald's chest-tones, the twang of Harker and once the cool accents of Elspeth, level and controlled. He scuffled his feet, but nobody heeded him, so he thumped his rifle-butt on the doorstep and hailed her:

"Elspeth! Ho, Elspeth, are you within?"

"Dirk!" her glad voice answered. "I said you—"

A bellow from her grandfather echoed through the house.

"Hauld ye, lass! Bide, I bid ye!"

But her feet drummed lightly in the shadowy passage, and she hurled herself like a beam of light across the threshold into Dirk's arms. Tom, grinning for the first time, snatched the rifle from his sergeant's slackening grip.

"Oh, Dirk, Dirk, Dirk! I said you'd come! I told grandfather—"

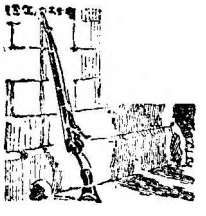
"Aye, a braw dither o' talk I hae listened to!" Black Dugald stamped after his granddaughter, a wisp of a man, with hot angry eyes, burning like coals in his swart face. Above his massive head, too big for the body which arrogantly supported it, towered the saturnine visage of Stanley Harker, little parrot's mouth tight-lipped, predatory nose jutting out between vigilant green eyes.

"And for why do ye come spying and trouble-making on my ground?" Black Du-

gald roared on. "Yourself and Indian Tom, wi' loadit rifles and axes tae your belts? I'll hae nae truck wi' ye nor shall Elspeth, puir, seelly, feckless loon that she is! Be off, and see tae your ain farm that is gone tae nettles and cockleburrs, even as I tauld ye it wad when ye insistit on playing soldier in this widdershins war."

"I'm only spying for Elspeth," Dirk answered, too happy for resentment with her arms still linking his neck. "And I don't see that this is a wrong-way-round war for you—and Harker. You seem to be making money out of it."

Harker showed yellow tushes in a snarl. "That's none of your business, Schoolmaster." The nasal rasp of his voice held an underlying note of menace. "But 'tis my business ye should unhand Elspeth."



"Why?" demanded Dirk, aware that her embrace was tightening.

"Because I'm fixin' to marry with her. We was fixin' it when ye busted in just now. And me and Dugald Campbell will thank ye to stop unsettlin' her mind from the serious thoughts she should be puttin' it to."

ELSPETH slipped a hand under Dirk's arm, and swung around to face her grandfather and the drover.

"As long as there's a knife in the kitchen, you won't make me marry Stanley Harker, Grandfather," she said. "I'm going for a walk with Dirk and Tom, and I'll come home after the herd has taken the road. So if you want a hot supper—"

"I'll disown ye, ye besom," shouted Black Dugald.

"It doesn't matter," she cut him off. "I'll be Dirk's wife, and I'll go north with him and stay with Aunt Nettie at Lewiston."

Her dark head was proudly poised; her gray eyes, ignoring Harker, met her grandfather's, unafraid.

"Come, Dirk," she said. "Come, Tom." She paid no attention to a strangled bellow from the doorway. "If I could tell you how glad I am to see both of you! It's been so lonely. Grandfather hasn't a friend left, except Harker and some men who ride out from Albany to see him nights. They sit and talk until all hours, about the war, I suppose. And when he's alone he sits in the kitchen and figures his profits from the beef contracts. And sometimes he laughs to himself horribly!" She shuddered. "The other night I was upstairs, and I heard him screech out so you could have heard him in the road, 'There's mair siller in meat than in hair!' Oh, Dirk, I never used to believe those stories the other children told about him, but now—"

She dashed a tear from the corner of her eye, and Dirk put his arm around her waist; but it was Tom Little Bear who grunted sympathetically:

"Everyone took hair in the Old Days."

"You come with us into Albany to Aunt Katje's," Dick proposed. "She'll be glad to have you, Elspeth dear. We'll be married there, and—"

She shook her head decisively.

"I can't leave grandfather. I don't know how old he is, but he's at least seventy, although he won't admit it. And he's been failing lately, Dirk, more than anyone knows but me. He hates this war so, he hates America— Oh, it's terrible! It's like a fire in him, burning him up. You can see it in his eyes. Nobody can hate so much, and stay in health."

"But you said you'd come north with me!"

"I wouldn't unless he forced me to, and I don't think he will, with Harker out of the way. I can't understand the influence that man— Oh, they're taking old Bossy

again! What a shame! She's worn to skin-and-bones."

She stopped by the pasture fence, where Thumbetty leaned on his staff and the cow with the crumpled horn grazed, undisturbed, on the clover patch.

"Why are you taking old Bossy again, Thumbetty? It's cruel. She'd better be sold at any price."

The huge cowherd turned his blank, cowlike eyes upon her. He paused, with an appearance of concentration, and then replied monotonously:

"No critter like ol' Bossy to toll 'em."

"Bossy!" Elspeth protested incredulously. "A cow toll a herd? I never heard of such a thing."

Thumbetty's hairy brows knitted together. He gasped from the effort, and brought forth as monotonously as before:

"No critter like ol' Bossy—"

"You can't get any sense out of him," Dirk said. "He only knows what he's heard. It beats me, using a cow to toll a herd, but maybe they trust her because she's traveled the road before. Anyhow, what are we to do about you? Tom and I feel we ought to join the Regulars. Colonel Scott spoke to us in Albany today. He said he could get us into his regiment. The soldiers think well of him, and this war is never going to be won by the militia. Tom and I learned that with Colonel Van Zandt, if we didn't learn anything else."

Elspeth patted his cheek.

"You must forget about me, Dirk. Of course, you and Tom are going to reenlist. You are Americans, and I am an American." She flushed. "I'd have to make you go, if it was only because of grandfather. That's the best reason why you and I—and Tom, because he's our friend—have to give everything."

"Yes, but Dirk gets himself back a nice girl," said Tom.

All three laughed. They had passed the strip of woodland, running between the road and the Hudson, and Tom suddenly turned serious.

"We'll go in the woods," he suggested. "You two can talk. I will watch, and tell you when Harker leaves." His implacable black eyes were fixed on the way they had come; his ears twitched receptively to a distant throbbing of voices. "Black Dugald is still angry," he reflected.

"He is always angry," sighed Elspeth. "But Stan Harker is angrier. He would have been on the road hours ago if I hadn't told grandfather I'd run away after you, Dirk, before I'd marry him. Ugh, he makes me crawl with his clammy, twitchy fingers, and the way his Adam's apple slides up and down his throat."

Tom paused to glance over his shoulder at her, his hand bending a bough in his path. There was a peculiar effect of remoteness in his manner. He seemed to have withdrawn into himself. The planes of his face looked more angular in the slanting light.

"Harker is all bad," he said throatily. "I think he makes mischief. Perhaps we—"

HE CHECKED himself, and slipped out of sight as the bough rustled into place. Dirk and Elspeth scarcely noticed his departure. There was so much they must tell each other—she, how good a job the hired man was doing on the Van Houst farm, despite her grandfather's gibe; he, in response to her feverish questions, reciting the drab routine of a militia regiment on winter duty, with the north country snowbound. It seemed no time at all before Tom called softly from the edge of the timber.

Dirk lifted his rifle from the crotch supporting it, and helped Elspeth to her feet. In a dozen paces they were crouched beside Tom in a thicket of locust saplings, the Campbell farm plainly visible beyond the fields. The cattle already were in the road, Thumbetty and three or four dogs, quietly efficient mongrels, at their heels. Harker had mounted his horse, and was exchanging a last word with Black Du-

gald, an excitable last word, if appearances meant anything.

"Why should we hide?" growled Dirk.

He started to rise, but the Oneida's hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"It is better Harker does not see us," Tom said in the same throaty tone. "What goes on I do not understand." Harker trotted out the farm gate after the cloud of dust mantling the plodding herd. Black Dugald walked briskly within doors, as if he had an important engagement awaiting him. "You see?" Tom gestured toward the westering sun. "It is late to start trailing a herd. They are in a hurry to be off. And why did they take the bell-cow back into the barnyard, and afterward bring her out again?"

"Bossy?" exclaimed Elspeth. "The cow with the crumpled horn? I can't imagine, Tom.

"This is the third time she has been sent north, but Harker never can sell her. If he weren't Stan Harker, I'd begin to believe he was fond of the old thing."

"Maybe so," Tom grunted to himself. He lapsed into thought, his slitted eyes studying the farm and the cloud of dust dwindling in the distance. "I tell you," he said, unusually loquacious, "we make sure for you, Elspeth. I smell something bad. Today I am an Indian. Dirk will tell you it happens."

"Yes, the redskin has the scalp-itch once in so often," Dirk assented. "But there's nothing wrong here, Tom. Harker will have to keep pushing his herd along—he'll pick up more beefs, of course. As for Black Dugald, why, he's Black Dugald and he'll be nasty until Elspeth and I are married. There's just nothing to be done about it."

"We wait," Tom answered decisively. "Elspeth, you go home, get your grandfather's supper. After dark, we circle through the river fields, and come in by the barnyard. If you hear an owl hoot twice, you come out to us. Tell Black Dugald you left us on the Albany road."

"What on earth—?" began Dirk.

"We don't talk," Tom grunted. "Tell Elspeth good-by or her grandfather thinks too much."

SHE laughed a little nervously, offering her lips for Dirk's kiss; but there was an expression of relief on her face which neither man missed as she left them.

"What do you suspect, oh, Royaneh of the Great League?" Dirk asked lightly, watching her swing up the road toward the farm.

"If I knew, we should not wait for trouble to happen," retorted the Oneida. And he lapsed into a thoughtful silence he maintained, despite Dirk's mutterings, until the Campbell house had been obliterated by the night and a bare glimmer of candlelight revealed its inmates' wakefulness.

Then he touched Dirk's arm, and they stole in the shadow of the wood to a point out of sight of the house. Here, they cut to the left across turf and furrow, and gained the shelter of the barns, teeming with restless life and burdening the air with a moist, ammoniac smell. Directly opposite, a kitchen window was an oblong of yellow radiance. Tom peered about him, made sure they were unobserved and led the way to it.

Inside, a dying fire smoldered on the hearth, and Black Dugald sat between two candles at an oblong table in the middle of the floor. He seemed to be playing a game, shifting, diminishing and adding to stacks of shiny counters, his absorption in this task such as might have been expected of one gambling for high stakes against a mighty adversary. Yet no adversary confronted him, no hands but his moved the tokens of the game, which Dirk and Tom were startled presently to identify as golden guineas, broad, fresh-minted Geordies, tinkling musically when they clashed together or skittered upon the board in pranksome efforts to escape the lone player's eager fingers.

IT WAS after such an interlude that Elspeth entered the room, and leaned over the old man, obviously urging him to bed. But his response was to huddle forward on the table, scooping the coins within the circle of his arms and glaring up at her, cannily alert, as though he feared she intended to filch his treasure. She straightened wearily, something in her attitude which made Dirk think she was listening for Tom's signal. But in the same instant the Oneida breathed in his ear:

"Horse coming."

The wind was blowing out of the southeast, and behind them the river mumbled at its banks, but with his senses aroused Dirk heard faintly the pounding of hoofs, approaching from the north. He looked questioningly at the Indian, and shrugged and motioned toward the protection of a woodshed which jutted past the kitchen door.

Stars shimmered in the sky, and wan tendrils of river mist writhed amongst the dim shapes of the farm buildings. A taut stillness locked the valley, blurring the natural voices of the night to an insoluble content within itself, emphasizing the rhythmic hoofbeats to a subdued loudness like muffled kettledrums on the far side of a parade ground. Then it was as if the drum major lifted his baton, and the drummers advanced, nearer, nearer, louder and louder.

Tom was immobile, only the twitching of his ears testifying to his attention, but Dirk shifted uneasily, straining to catch the significance of the horse's progress. Involuntarily, he released a gasp of excitement as the hoofs checked at the entrance to the farm, and resumed their tempo at a slower pace inside the gateway. A horse whinnied in the barn, and was answered from the farmyard. A saddle creaked, bootheels stamped on the ground, a bridle rattled on the hitching-post, the kitchen door banged open.

"Herer I be, Dugald," Harker's voice proclaimed, hatefully triumphant. "Elspeth ready? She got her sense back yet? She better or by tarnation I'll carry her, roped and tied. There's a knowledgeable parson to Niskayuna—"

"Oh, Grandfather—" That was Elspeth. And Black Dugald, suddenly old, answered him querulously:

"Aboot time, Stan. The lass is daft. Ye maun take her as ye can. But ye wullna fail tae fetch me anither bag of they jinky Geordies? Heh-heh-heh! Meat comes high, but there's that comes higher. Look to the map, Stan! I hae worked it oot e'en as Colonel Guy or Walter Butler wad hae done. There's nae need for our friends tae cover Montreal. 'Tis on the Niagara the foolish Yankees wull strike."

"Don't consarn yourself," Harker assured him. "Sir George Prevost's a generous man. He knows what ye've done. Ye can have yer pick of the best lands in Upper Canada, into the bargain. But the herd's moving, and here's Elspeth actin' like she wants extry wooin'—"

Dirk rose up from the ground, with a clatter of equipment, his body tensed in anger.

"Now, Tom," he said.

THE Oneida raced after him the few steps to the kitchen door. Harker, standing by the hearth, spun around as the pair leaped the threshold, Tom close on Dirk's heels. Elspeth, on the opposite side of the room, a chair outthrust in front of her, sank back against the wall, with a sigh of relief: "Oh, Dirk!" Her grandfather, huddled over his stacks of golden coins, simply turned his head, deepset eyes glowing redly in the light of the guttering candles. "Ye damn Yankee scum," he growled. "Oot o' my door!"

Harker snatched at his coat-tails, but before the pistol came free Dirk took quick aim and pulled trigger. The rifle's flint clicked futilely, and in the same motion Dirk hurled the heavy Deckhard at the drover. Harker's pistol exploded as it struck his chest. He reeled and pitched

headfirst into an andiron, lying sprawled across the hearth, heedless of the embers which showered him. And when Dirk, aghast at the effect of his violence, darted forward and hauled the limp form out of the coals the bloody skull rolled lifelessly on the floor.

But he forgot Harker at a scream from Elspeth.

"Grandfather! Oh, he's shot, he's dying."

Black Dugald had sagged down in his chair. His hands gripped the table's edge so firmly that the hairy knuckles showed white.

"Dinna fash—yersel's," he croaked, his voice seeming to come from a distance. "They Continentals canna stand tae ye. Greens. Bide 'till the Senecas take 'em in flank. Aye, there's the scalp-yell!" Of the three in the room only Tom did not shiver at the eerie screech which brought a crimson tide flooding from the round hole in the breast of his sober grey coat. "For the King—for'ard!"

His fingers relaxed their grip. His head drooped. Dirk put an arm around Elspeth's quivering shoulders.

"He's dead," Dirk said, and she began to weap softly. It was Tom who spoke first.

"You see what he was doing?" prompted the Oneida, pointing to the table.

There, beneath the piles of yellow guineas, was a large-scale map of New York and Upper Canada, and looking closer, Dirk realized that each pile marked a fort or cantonment on either side of the frontier.

"Count them," suggested Tom.

Dirk obeyed, and it came to him abruptly that each coin represented a battalion—on the American side, at least, and so far as he knew, had a parallel connotation on the Canadian side.

"Bring a candle," Tom said. "We see what this snake, Harker, was carrying."

But the Indian's methodical search revealed nothing extraordinary in the drover's pockets—a considerable sum of money, as was to be expected, a knife, a package of chewing tobacco, meaningless memoranda of sales and trivial errands.

"There must have been something on paper," he said, rising. "Elspeth, of course, you did not know anything of this."

She joined them by the hearth, drying her eyes.

"I never saw that English money until tonight," she answered. "But I am not surprised. Grandfather was very bitter. And you both know Stan Harker would do anything for a price."

"Could he have given it to Thumbetty?" Dirk asked. "Nobody would suspect poor Jesse."

"Perhaps," agreed Tom, "but it seems strange."

"Why?" urged Dirk. "Jesse wouldn't know what he carried, and he wouldn't willingly give it up to anyone but Harker. Elspeth, you'll lend us a horse. We can soon overtake the herd."

Elspeth linked her arm in his.

"There are two horses in the barn," she said. "I'm going with you. I couldn't

bear to stay here alone—and I don't want you to hurt Thumbetty, if you can help it. He'll do things for me he wouldn't do for you. But first, I want you to take care of grandfather. He wasn't all bad, Dirk. He just never got over the Old War."

Dirk kissed her.

"Don't you worry, dear heart," he told her. "Tom, you fetch the candle."

He lifted the inert clay that had been Black Dugald in his strong young arms, and carried it easily across the hall to the room Elspeth indicated. Fumblingly, because he was inexperienced, he closed the

eyes that had lost their savage glare and drew a sheet over the hard features. Then, boyishly, he came to the salute.

"Captain Campbell, of Johnson's Royal Greens," he said softly. "Perhaps it was better this way. Suppose we—"

The Indian grunted contemptuously.

"Bad flesh! He took plenty of hair from your people and mine."

BUT Dirk wasn't convinced. The Old War had been a wicked war for everyone concerned, he knew from his father's tales. No use saying that to Tom, though. An Indian remained an Indian, even if he could write his name in copperplate and read Caesar.

In the kitchen they doused the candles and banked the fire. Afterward, they saddled the horses in the barn by lantern-light, mounted Elspeth on Harker's horse, the smoothest gaited, and headed northward on the river road, leaving the farm dark behind them, the drover's body the only guard for the stacks of guineas which continued to glitter evilly in the dull glow from the hearth.

It was about midnight when they heard the shuffling of hoofs in the road, and a pair of dogs sprang out of the shadows, silently menacing. They rode wide, and trotted past the plodding cattle to where Thumbetty's giant figure loomed in the starshine beside the lead cow, Bossy.

"H' be ye?" he greeted them. "Goin' to Niagara—beef-cattle for sojars—goin' to shoot a Redcoat, I be."

Elspeth motioned the others to be silent.

"It's Elspeth Campbell," she answered. "Something's happened to Stan Harker. He wants you to give me those papers."

Thumbetty wagged his head dumbly.

"Don't know," he stammered. "Beef-cattle—not papers—sell 'em—don't give 'em."

"Nonsense," interposed Dirk. "You know what she means. The letter for Sir George Prevost."

"Don't know," repeated Thumbetty.

Dirk pushed his horse alongside Bossy, and Thumbetty squared at him, staff in air.

"You leave Bossy be!"

"Nobody's going to hurt Bossy," said Dirk. But the cowherd dealt him a powerful blow, which slid off his rifle-barrel onto his horse's crupper and sent the maddened beast plunging into Elspeth's. Almost unseated, Dirk's bridle-hand groped instinctively for support at the object nearest him, which was Bossy's crumpled horn, and she mooed protestingly as he bore down on it to shove himself back in saddle. The night was raucous with frantic horses, frightened cattle and snapping dogs, Thumbetty silently wielding his staff against everything and everybody save Bossy. But the confusion was ended as unexpectedly as it had begun by Tom's appearance in Thumbetty's rear. One skilful tap of the Indian's rifle-butt laid the half-wit low.

ELSPETH slipped from her saddle almost as rapidly as Tom.

"You haven't killed him?" she asked fearfully.

"Head too thick," Tom grunted, his fingers probing beneath Thumbetty's smock. A look of disgust clouded his features. "Nothing," he said. "I don't understand." His gaze, straying upward, chanced upon Dirk. "Ho," he exclaimed, "what you got in your hand?"

Dirk's eyes followed the Indian's forefinger to his bridlehand. Entangled with the reins was a small, cylindrical chunk of wood.

"Dratted if I know," he answered.

His puzzlement grew. It was Elspeth, who vaulted erect from her inspection of Thumbetty's head and ran to his side.

"Why, that's part of Bossy's crumpled horn," she cried. "You must have broken—But It's wood!"

Tom was on his feet, now, and Bossy mooed again, bewilderedly resentful, as he

seized the crumpled horn and extracted from its hollow interior a tightly-rolled bundle of paper, encased in oiled silk, which he silently held aloft.

Elspeth unhooked the stable-lantern from Dirk's saddle-bow, and he struck flint-and-steel to the candle. The superscription on the sealed and wafered packet, revealed when Tom stripped off the silk wrappings, told the whole story:

To
Lieut.-Gen. The Rt. Hon. Sir George Prevost,
Gov.-Gen. & Comder.-in-Ch. of
Upper & Lower Canada.

Elspeth choked a sob.

"I'm glad grandfather is dead," she said. "Please find some water, Tom. We must bring Thumbetty to. He'll have to get the cattle back to the farm. Oh, Dirk, Dirk, there's so much to do."

COLONEL SCOTT finished the last page of Black Dugald's dispatch, and laid it on the table in front of him, next the little bags of clinking guineas Elspeth had insisted must accompany it. His long, preternaturally solemn face was warmed by a pleasant smile.

"If I applaud the unusual quality of your patriotism, Miss Campbell," he said, "I am nonetheless conscious of your bereavement, and I shall take pleasure in urging the major-general commanding to make certain that no opprobrium may be visited upon the name you so worthily bear. The information intercepted by you and Sergeant van Houst and Private—ah—Little Bear would have been of the utmost importance to the enemy. It apparently consists of a detailed list of our troops on the frontier, together with a shrewd analysis of our plans for the coming campaign and an approximation of the reinforcements we may anticipate. It is of equal importance to our country as a warning that we must take steps to curb the activities of enemy agents."

The pompousness of his manner—and Colonel Scott, good soldier though he was, could never forget that he was the youngest colonel in the army—became tinged with geniality.

"And that is where you and your friend can be useful, Sergeant van Houst. I suggest that you both enlist in my regiment. I will warrant you sergeant immediately, and request the Secretary of War to brevet you lieutenant. As Adjutant-general of the Army of the North, I shall assign you to command of a picked detachment detailed to secret service work, under my personal supervision, in which capacity, I assure you, you will have every opportunity of distinction and advancement in proportion to your merits."

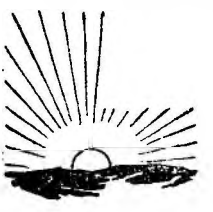
Dirk didn't bother to consult Tom, but he exchanged one look with Elspeth and his hand enclosed hers.

"If I might have a week's leave, Colonel?" he asked.

"A week?" Scott frowned, and then a twinkle kindled in his somber eyes. "Ah, a romance. I see! Certainly, Sergeant. I will appoint a rendezvous with you at Lewiston." He stood up, and bowed gallantly to Elspeth. "My congratulations, Ma'am, and if I have not the pleasure of meeting you again—"

"Oh, but you will, Colonel Scott," she assured him calmly. "I shall be at Lewiston, too."

"B'gad, an army wife," he applauded. "Double congratulations to you, Sergeant."



The Army Surrendered "at Eight Precisely," but the Planters Were Yet to Be Heard From

THE JAPS AREN'T SO SMART

By WARREN HASTINGS MILLER

PINK WILLIE looked rather frazzled and worn. He had three days' growth of beard, but the braided gold staff circlet around his left shoulder proclaimed the authority of his commanding officer. He ignored George Minot, the big American plantation owner, and sought out the only man resembling an officer left on Bukit Tanah. Sergeant Payne, that hard-bitten old iron dog of an Aussie, saluted him respectfully.

"We surrender at eight precisely, Sergeant," Pink Willie told him. "We had hoped for terms; but it's unconditional I fear. That means your men will stack their arms at eight. Form your command and wait for the Japs to take over."

"Understood, sir," Payne said woodenly.

Pink Willie turned to George Minot.

"You civilians will have to do the best you can for yourselves. It's every man for himself, what? I fancy the Japs will treat your natives well; it's their policy, y'know. He included in his glance Tunku Ganem, the young Malayan prince of Kota Lima, the Five Towns, and his retinue of warriors. All of them carried the forbidden kriss, abolished by law long ago in Malaya. There were fistfuls of javelins, an occasional horse pistol thrust in a gaudy girdle. Yet these ancient weapons had been far more deadly to the infiltering Japanese than the organized military resistance. Tunku Ganem scowled at the Major, meaning that he did not intend any friendliness with the Japs, now or any other time. Pink Willie surveyed Minot's group of native tappers, one white but Irish steam engineer, and Tembak Merah, the wrinkled old plantation hunter.

"You chaps had best hide somewhere if you know of a place. I hear the Japs are brutal with white civilians. You have" —he glanced at his wrist-watch—"twenty minutes to get on with it."

George Minot cracked a craggy and sun-burned grin. His blue eyes twinkled frostily. "We'll take care of ourselves, Major," he said. "They've got my plantation, but it cost them plenty."

He gestured with a bare right arm over the sea of young rubber trees—five thousand of them—below. The smoking ruins of the coagulating vats and latex sheds still smouldered. George himself had tied down the safety valve of their boiler before setting the processed rubber afire. It had blown up, with a screaming timeliness, when the Japs had swarmed in to salvage the plant. They could have his steam engine if they liked.

"Their main line is down there in the rubber now," he said. "But their filtering parties seem to have by-passed this hill. I'd rather you'd take away your soldiers, Major, if you are going to surrender."

"Can't do that," Pink Willie said promptly. "The flag of truce has already gone out. We are to hold our present positions till they come. It would invite useless slaughter for us to resist longer, wouldn't it?" he asked apologetically.

"I should think it would," George said dryly. "If you *will* put your men in trenches." He eyed grimly the long line of shallow trench embankments dug along the flanks of the neighboring hill. All day yesterday the Jap dive bombers had been strafing it. Their machine-guns could not miss.

"Looks to me as if warfare had returned to the days of the French and Indian wars, Major," George said. "The Japs filter ahead like a cloud of mosquitoes drifting through the jungles, every man for himself. You form a line anywhere, their air force knows just where to find you. Ever hear of Braddock?"

The major stiffened. The memory of that stupid line of battle in the American wilderness of long ago still rankled. A feller named Washington had saved Braddock from utter massacre by putting his riflemen out among the trees—just like these Japs.

"We shan't discuss that, shall we?" Pink Willie said haughtily over this amature strategy by a civilian. "After all, the line of battle is the thing or where are you? We've done the best we can with it. Our main force retreated twenty miles last night, but these two outposts were somehow forgotten. We can at least surrender with honor. Well, I must be off to report to the O.C. Ten minutes to go," the major added significantly with another glance at his wrist-watch.

After he had gone Tembak Merah grounded his sumpitan spear and demanded, "What said the Tuan Major, Boss?"

George smiled. "He said, Old One, that the Inggriss have stopped fighting. They will give themselves up to the Japanese. It is the way of the white Tuans when they can fight no more."

Tembak snorted. Playfully he rammed

the Tuan Minot in the stomach with the spear blade of his sumpitan. "Ho! Thus will do to them, these monkeys of Japan. They have no *izzat* (honor) and their given word is but a hissing in the mouth. What say you, Tunku?" he appealed to the native prince.

Tunku Ganem smiled silkily. "I trust you have not said that *we* stop fighting, my good white friend," he said to Minot. "My villages have gone up in smoke, but the women and children are safe in the jungle. It is like the raid of the elephants five years ago. The Tuan remembers?"

MINOT laughed. On that occasion a herd of wild elephants had invaded Kota Lima and ate up all the thatch roofs, pulling the houses down to get at the palm leafage. Tunku Ganem's people had simply retired into the jungle till the elephants had gone on. Then they had come back and rebuilt the villages in a week. Meanwhile Minot's rubber trees had work for all the men.

"The Japs, too, will go on," said Ganem. "We will remain. Also thy trees, Tuan."

He pointed at the sea of green rubber foliage below and George nodded. Under that canopy were thousands of little yellow soldiers bent on robbery and destruction. But even they would have sense enough not to cut down five thousand husky trees, even if they had time for it. Minot was reflecting that his trees would, in fact, have a good rest from tapping. Then Sergeant Payne came up to him, his brown and leathery face seamed and drawn with the struggle between his military duty and the dictates of his plain common sense.

"Five minutes to time's up, sir," he said. "Strike me pink if *I* want to surrender! I'd rather die fighting, no matter what Pink Willie orders. We'll all be murdered anyhow."

Payne hesitated a moment. "The boys think we'd like to have you for our officer, Mr. Minot." He gestured toward the small group of grimy infantrymen who had held Bukit Tanah so long. They were the outliers and scouts from several commands who had been overlooked in the general order for retreat. Some Sikhs, two braw Scots, half a platoon of Aussies, some Federated States militiamen.

"You know this region, sir," Sergeant Payne urged. "We'd rather do what *you* say. To hell with orders, if there's a ghost of a chance of our getting our of this muckin' mess alive!"

Minot laughed. "Well, wait and see," he said. "I don't have to surrender; nor Prince Ganem. But giving your men orders contrary to your commander's is no business for a civilian like me."

Payne cursed. "Blast it! We're all on our own now, if you put it up to me. It's fight your own way out or die." He glowered at the trench line on the neighboring hill. "I'm sick of this foolishness, that's what!" Payne declared. "Why didn't he let them dig foxholes like we did? Now he's licked, and we're supposed to take it too—*arrrh!*"

A bugle blew "Cease Firing" while yet Payne's teeth were bared in that bitter snarl. A ragged and scanty company—also from various commands—rose out of the neighboring trench. Wearily they stretched arms and flexed cramped muscles; then stood at attention as an order blared to stack arms and pile trench knives. Their officers took station out in front, swords laid across their left elbows with the hilts outward. The colors were lowered, drooping from horizontal staffs.

Minot scanned the rubber anxiously as a battle line of Japs advanced out of it opposite the surrendered company. No Japs had appeared yet through the border of trees below Bukit Tanah—but he had little time left if he was going to get his people away. An unknown number of Japs had filtered past the hill and were now somewhere in the jungle in their rear. They did not worry Minot much. Two could play at this Indian warfare game,

provided that each man was on his own. He stood watching the Nipponese battle line advancing up the next hill with their rifles at a slant and bayonets fixed. He knew nothing of military ceremonial in taking over a surrendered position, but those bayonets looked ominous for the unarmed men waiting on the trench bank. The Japs never faced bayonets when they were on the receiving end!

It was just then, when that doomed company had not three minutes more to live, that Pink Willie looked across from his rigid posture of surrendered sword to shout:

"You, Sergeant, over there! Didn't you hear the bugle? Do as we do, I say!"

There was no answer. Minot glanced around and saw that each man of Payne's was in his foxhole. Only their tin hats showed. Under them their eyes were all on him. They were waiting for his order; else to die fighting where they sat when the Japs closed in. Minot looked across again—and his eyes stared with horror and a mounting rage. The leading Jap officer had snatched Pink Willie's sword and driven it through his stomach. In a trice the four other officers were down; then the Japanese battle line was glutting its bayonets in the unarmed men of the company. There was a swirl of resistance here and there—men lashing out with their fists — men grabbing up stones, stacked arms, anything—but in a few moments it was all over. A writhing line of soldiers lay beside their dead that were lined in rows on the uphill side of the trench.

Minot turned with his face working. "We'll pay 'em for that some day, you bet!" he rasped. "You want my order, Payne? It is, 'Scram!' Every man for himself. See that white cliff up on Gunong Utan?" He pointed at a tiny white facing of stone, up near the summit of the mountain that was back of them fifteen miles in the jungle. "That's where we all meet —those of us who get through alive. Then we'll cook up something to get even with those treacherous devils yonder. How about it, Tunku Ganem?"

The young Mayalan prince smiled and thumbed the keen edge of his kriss. "*After* we have settled for our burned villages, Tuan," he said.

Minot turned to his plantation help. "Scatter, my children," he said. "Under Batu Putih we shall rally again. Si Payong, you guide Tuan McCarthy. Got your gun and something to eat, Mac?" he asked his Irish engineer.

"Sure, Boss. I don't like the jungle at all at all," said McCarthy, who was fat and florid, "but 'tis better than me throat cut by thim murderin' riptyles. Let me get in just wan good punch, should I meet up with thim monkeys!" He brandished a fist like a knuckle of beef.

"Better let Si Payong get you through, if he can," Minot said with a grim chuckle. "Or kill your Jap dead, if you *must* exercise those fists! We've got to sort of melt through them somehow, with the least possible fuss."

There were angry shouts on the neighboring hill, Jap words that sounded very like taunts. They had killed the men who could have told them whether Bukit Tanah was still occupied or not. The troops below in the rubber were not showing themselves, lest a rifle speak sharply from the hill. They were waiting for unarmed men to appear, at their mercy under the terms of the surrender.

There was more angry colloquy; then the Jap officers began telling off their men into filtering squads. The tactic seemed to be to attack Bukit Tanah front and flank and massacre everyone on it.

"Time to get moving, boys," Minot said. He turned about to find everyone gone. Tunku Ganem and his warriors had vanished like snakes in the jungle. Payne had ordered out his men, so as to give them a good head start for Gunong Utan. The plantation boys were gone. They had no weapons other than their

tapping knives, but the Malay is adept at lying low in the dense brush.

Minot sighed as he looked his last in his trees. He had given them the ten best years of his life. Eight of them in the red, on borrowed money, during the period of burning and clearing the jungle, of waiting for the young nursery stock to grow to tapping age. Then the final struggle to raise money for the processing machinery and install it in good iron and concrete buildings. All his own money, all the banks would lend on his personal integrity as a hard-working man of good judgment. Two years of crawling out of the red into the black, when the latex began to flow and Mac started up the plantation engine. Those had been lean years, years of rigid self-denial, so that the payrolls could be met and the debt written off. These senseless destroyers, Minot reflected, could wipe off those ten years of work in a few hours, if some fool in gold braid ordered it done. They would not be likely to.

Rubber, five hundred and forty thousand tons of it annually—one half the world's supply—was what they had invaded Malaya to take, from those who had raised and cared for these millions of trees. Meanwhile, Minot thought cheerfully, *his* trees would seize the respite from tapping to put on some extra sturdy growth.

A horny paw was laid on his shoulder and Tembak Merah's voice growled, "Hasten, Tuan. The yellow apes be in the valley now. It is not well for us to wait longer."

Minot grinned. "Thou here, old war horse?" he said to the plantation hunter. "Said I not for all to scatter and begone?"

"Not I, Tuan," Tembak said stoutly. "Lo, I have eaten thy rice these many years. Shall I leave thee alone in the jungle now? Nay, Tuan, this good sumpitan at thy side and this kriss to guard thy back are not to be despised."

Minot laughed. "Well, have it your own way if you must, Rapscallion. Let us go, and quickly."

TEMBAK had been with him from the first. It was his sumpitan that had kept the boys in meat when there was no money to buy any; his javelins and traps that had freed the plantation of tigers. The floor of Minot's bungalow—now ashes—had been luxuriant with the skins of that pest, the leopard. Tembak was constantly bringing them in for a "presen'," and Minot saw to it that he was well supplied with that envied article of apparel, his old shirts—the noisier the better, and always worn by Tembak with the tails out.

They started off around the north flank of Bukit Tanah. Its scrubby growth soon thickened to tall trees and tangled undergrowth of creepers and thorn vines and rattan, as their route descended into the valley. This was the real Utan, as yet untouched, almost impenetrable without a keen parang. There was a brawling stream somewhere below—a paradise for cobras, kraits, and Russel's vipers—one of those little rivers of Malaya that flow out of the mountains, grow large enough to attract a village in the lowlands, and empty into the China Sea with a *pantai,* or beach town, complete with proas.

Presently Tembak Merah grabbed Minot's arm. "Down, Tuan!" he whispered. "Yonder is one."

George was some time in discovering him. He did not look happy, that little Jap. Mostly they kept to the rubber, where it was easy to move companies and regiments through the orderly rows of trees, and easy to run tanks along the plantation roads. These scouts, ordered into the jungle to take Bukit Tanah from the rear, were not enjoying it. Their man cursed steadily as he pried at thorn vines with his bayonet and fought his way around the huge buttress root of a giant tapang tree.

Tembak Merah put the mouthpiece of his sumpitan to his lips and filled his lungs. The poisoned dart gave a faint

plop! as it left the muzzle. It soared over in a flat arc and buried itself in the Jap's lean cheek. He plucked at it; then gave a hoarse screech as he saw what it was. It was answered by anxious calls here and there in the forest; then the bark of some officer further down in the valley.

Their man did not answer. He was staggering, his knees giving under him as he pawed at the cheek and fumbled for the first-aid in his hip pocket. Then he

slumped down over the buttress root. Tembak chuckled.

"Lo, the venom of the krait is quick, Tuan," he said. "He is so little, look you, that his enemies must not live long." He drew another dart from the leather quiver at his girdle and pushed it into the sumpitan.

"Come, Tuan," he said cheerfully. "I marked the voice of another over this way."

Minot stopped him. "Nay, leave him to the others," he said. "Our business is to get straight ahead. There's one less in our path now."

Tembak stopped to frisk the corpse as they passed around the tapang roots themselves. The jungle below was full of little soft noises, all of them sinister. A strangled groan and the thud of a bayonet hilt. The swish of a Sikh tulwar and a crash in the bushes. The unmistakable *chunk* of a kriss driven home through the ribs to a man's heart. The *blop!* of Tembak's sumpitan from where he was scouting some paces ahead of his Tuan. And more than once Minot heard the prolonged, menacing hiss of a king cobra disturbed by this invasion of his fastnesses. He knew that one more Jap would never disturb anybody, since the King attacked on sight.

There seemed to be at least a battalion of these hardy little yellow soldiers that had been sent to surround Bukit Tanah. They were now jumpy and on edge over this discovery of silent and mysterious death all about them in the thick bush. Frequent sharp whips from their small-bore rifles, the bullets slashing aimlessly through dense foliage, told Minot that they were firing at anything, at nothing. He lay low as three Japs passed him close by, all bunched together for protection. He longed to do something to them himself, but his business was to keep alive, not to give away their show by any heroics with the revolver in his holster.

He had not much longer to wait. After a time the Jap officer passed by his place of concealment. He was herding along the stragglers with bitter oaths. Those wretched Japanese peasants were plainly scared green. Minot choked back a laugh to see them stepping high and wide for fear of cobras, their rifles pointing every which way, their bayonets poking suspiciously into trampled tangles and torn leafage. Death seemed to lurk everywhere in this dense jungle!

Then Tembak Merah's ugly face materialized out of a screen of betel vine leaves. An impish grin exposed his betel-stained fangs. "Ho, Tuan!" he said. "They be all gone—may dogs defile their graves!" He held up four horny fingers. "Ampat, Tuan. 'Twas good hunting. Thy servant found one of these on each. For what purpose I know not."

HE HANDED George a shiny, nickel-plated ring about six inches in diameter. It had a wing-nut for clamping it around a tree, and a little cutter traveled along the ring when you turned its handle, very like a circular can opener such as housewives struggle with.

Waves of dismay surged over Minot as he examined this contrivance. All his dreams of the plantation trees being reasonably safe vanished. It was a diabolical little gadget. In less than two minutes a man could clamp it on a rubber tree and the little cutter would gouge through the cambium layer to the wood, girdling the tree completely. A hundred men could—

"Tree demolition cutter, I suppose they call it," he said wearily. "Damn these military people. They lie awake nights thinking how to destroy what others have created. Call them all in, Tembak," he ordered the plantation hunter. "Hasten! We'll not go to Gunong Utan today. This wants talking over. You found one on all of them?"

"Yeah, Tuan; and on others that our people have slain. Nay, I go in all haste." Tembak went trotting off like a leopard through that jungle whose intricacies were no difficulty to him. Minot could hear his voice calling—"Tuan wants! Tuan wants! At foot of the aren palm he waits. Hasten, ye owls!" Then Sergeant Payne's voice, "Wot's up? A bawth in that brook'd be more my style just now."

They had all got through the attacking wave, Minot hoped. Tunku Ganem was the first to report. The sarongs of his warriors were gory, but their faces were placid, not a trace of that sudden ferocity that springs into a Malay's eyes when provoked to combat. They seemed well pleased with themselves. Each man had appropriated a rifle and a bandolier of cartridges from the victim of his kriss. The sight of those weapons added to an idea already half formed in Minot's mind.

"It is but to wait now, Tuan, till the yellow men have gone on south," Ganem said complacently. "Man-man says that they wish to destroy Singapura. Let us camp on Gunong Utan, where our women and children may come."

"No. We won't have any trees if we don't do something right now," Minot said. Payne had come up with his platoon following him in single file. "Two of us lost by rifle fire, sir," he reported briefly. "We accounted for eight."

"Did you notice this thing on any of them, Sergeant?" Minot asked. As Payne nodded, he went on. "Tree demolition is what this gadget is for, all of you. Look well at it! In a few hours a hundred men could ruin our entire plantation. That means poverty for you and your people, Ganem. Not for a short time, but for years to come. Want to fight for it?"

The prince glowered and laid hand on his kriss hilt. Payne said, "Another go at 'em? I'm game if you lead it, sir! You think they really mean to kill those trees?"

"They might. For revenge. Or for pure spite. But the point is, some Jap sorchead could order it done, if he just doesn't happen to be feeling sweet. My hunch is that most of their demolition men are in that mob that just passed over us." Minot's eyes danced. "They've sure got buck fever bad, if those I saw were a sample! Meanin' that if we sort of did a hit-and-run, between them and those back there on Bukit Tanah, we'd have them all shooting at each other and maybe collect a few more of these souvenirs."

Minot fingered the gadget so that its sharp cutter moved along the ring. "Each dead Jap is one less of these, if we manage it right," he said. "How about it, boys? They're not two hundred yards beyond us, even now. Tembak can show us a way around."

"I got it, sir," Payne said with enthusiasm. "We come around in between them and open fire, that's wot! No one can see ten yards in this jungle. We scram when those Bukit Tanah chaps come into the fight. Leave them to shoot it out with each other, eh?"

Ganem and his courtiers cackled with delight. It tickled their subtle Malay sense of humor, this plan. Tembak put in that he knew a game trail over to their right that would take them around the south flank of Bukit Tanah.

Minot led off with the old hunter by his side. Presently, over to their left, they could hear those jittery Japs still advancing slowly up those gentle slopes of jungle that led to the rear of the hill. Then all was silent for awhile. Minot stopped when the sound of voices ahead warned him that they were near the Japanese command now occupying the hill. He glanced back over the long file strung along the game trail behind him, the eight Malay warriors, some fifteen of Payne's mixed command of infantry.

"In there, Tembak?" He gestured to his left. "You stop here, my esteemed frisker of corpses. You catch'm all you can of these gadgets. You sabbe?"

"Can do, Tuan."

MINOT led the line into the thick jungle. "Space out, men," he ordered. "About ten feet apart. When I stop, you lay low and wait."

He had a line about two hundred and fifty feet long across the Jap advance, Minot judged, when he dropped down behind a thin clump of bamboos that gave a brief vista into the tall forest. He could not see any of his men. A short time later he heard swishings in the jungle, the staccato chatter of the Japanese tongue. Minot drew his revolver and cocked it. It was a long-barreled .38 that had often been his life-saver with leopards and king cobras. He had pulled a reload of six cartridges out of his pocket when a bunch of three Jap soldiers came bayoneting their way through the tangle of creepers around a huge lagerstromia tree. Minot aimed with care and fired.

The three jumped apart as if stung by bees. One crumpled and turned around in the grip of a thorn vine. Minot saw the flash of a hated gadget that was hooked in his belt. He fired again and once more, grimly hoping that Tembak Merah could manage to collect those scalps. A racket of rapid fire had broken out all along his line, the bellow of Payne's Enfields, the sharp cracks of Ganem's Jap rifles. There were urgent shouts of command downhill in the jungle, more and more groups of three hurrying up and deploying.

Minot emptied his revolver and reloaded in haste. Behind him, uphill, he could hear excited shoutings, barks of command with a note of exultation in them. The defenders of Bukit Tanah had been located at last, those accents of glee seemed to say. And they were between two fires. Down on them for the massacre!

When bullets came thrashing downhill through the brush all around him, Minot raised his head and shouted, "Scram, everyone! Back to the game trail and down to the brook!"

His voice could scarce be heard above the racket his boys were making, some firing uphill and some down as the Japs closed in, never stopping for losses. On hands and knees Minot crept out of the trap, reached Tunku Ganen, and passed the word along from man to man. Leaving the Japs firing industriously at each other in the dense bush, Minot's party assembled on the game trail and trotted down it for a much-needed wash. The Japs were now industriously slaughtering each other but Minot was depressed and filled with exasperation. That the Jap demolition squads has been issued this tree killing device argued that they were not at all sure that they could take the Malayan peninsula. Enough Empire troops had been sent to hold its narrow breadth, but Ganem had reported that the Japs were seizing every proa and sampan along the coast and moving their troops by water south of the British lines. No naval force could stop it. Small armed craft sent up from Singapore would simply be bombed and machine-gunned out of existence from the air. How long before the Imperial lines would have to retreat clear to Singapore, handing over to the Japs all the rubber plantations?

No; they would not use the demolition gadget until driven out of the peninsula

some future day. And then? Nothing, for eight years, until new trees could be grown.

Si Payong, He-of-the-Umbrella, foreman of Minot's tree tappers, was waiting for the Boss at the brookside. He eyed the gadget that Minot was fingering moodily and demanded: "Vat dat for, Tuan?"

"For killing trees, Si Payong. Our trees. Like this."

Minot selected a husky young jack-fruit tree growing by the brookside and snapped the ring around it. Clamping it fast, he turned the cutter. In less than thirty seconds it had cut a gouge through the bark clear to the wood. That tree, girdled, would inevitably die.

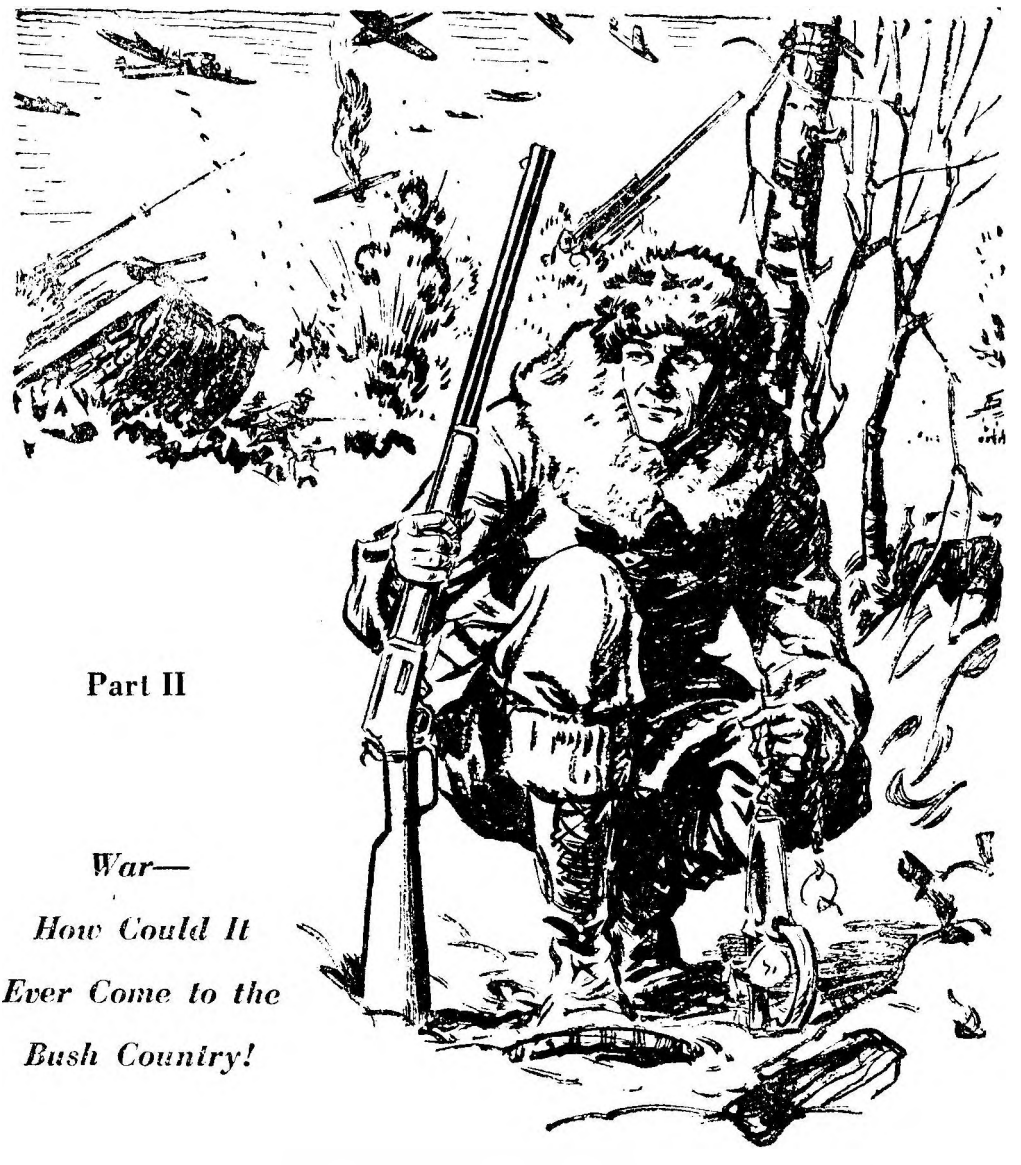
Si Payong did not seem impressed. "White man make him?" he inquired, with a slow, contemptuous grin.

"No. Little yellow man. They'll kill every rubber tree in Malaya before we ever get them out of here. When they get good and ready."

Si Payong laughed. "No dam' good, Tuan. Him who make dat t'ing never tapped for *getta* (rubber) in hees life. Tree yust heal himself. In one-time week, two-time week is make hard rubber ring over cut."

Minot whooped. The gadget, like all gadgets, was someone's bright idea that wouldn't work. Not on rubber trees anyhow. He thought of the Japs wasting precious time in girdling millions of rubber trees when driven in full retreat out of Malaya and he laughed loud and long. Si Payong added his cackles of merriment.

"Dem Japs no so smart, Tuan!" he said.



Part II

War—

How Could It

Ever Come to the

Bush Country!

NEW RIVERS CALLING

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

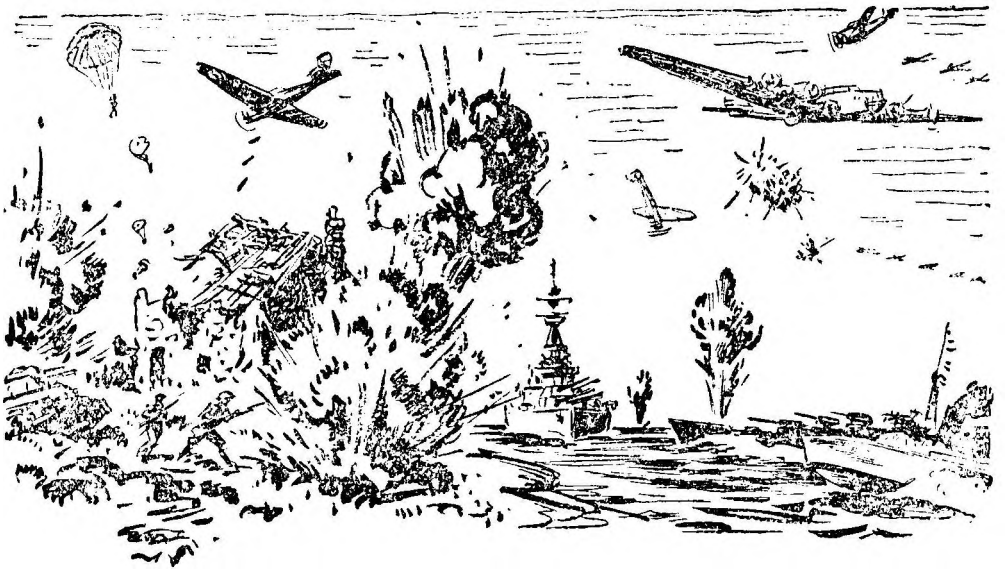
Who Now Writes a Story of the North of Today

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

THE story opened in the Blind River Country; that great tract of timber land in Ontario north of Lake Huron.

Stan Klaska who has been driving a truck for the lumber company, rattles into the little town of Blind River, late. For this he can blame Joe Bedore—the Frenchman had a loaded truck ahead of him on the narrow road and blandly ignored Stan's wish to pass.

Stan didn't want to be late, for there



was to be a dance in town and he had a date with Rose Brady. He was afraid Rose might get tired waiting and go to the dance with Jack McVane, brother of Jimmy McVane of the Provincial Police. Rose waited for him, but they quarreled over Stan's decision to give up his job with the lumber company and go to guiding for the summer. Rose thinks this is not ambitious, but Stan says if the bush and rivers call you, you can't stick to a job in any mill.

Rose insinuates that Jack McVane will be around for the summer, and after some heated words Stan leaves her. He has a few drinks, meets up with Joe Bedore and there is one terrific fight. In the morning Stan can't remember much of it, but takes his truck out for his last day's work. Then he learns that Joe Bedore is dead—knifed—and that several men swear he is Joe's murderer. Stan comes to the conclusion that he cannot prove his innocence and takes to the bush. Jimmy McVane of the police goes after him, and has an accident in which he breaks his leg, Stan finds he cannot leave him, so manages to get the policeman to safety, thereby jeopardizing his own chances of escape.

He manages to outfit himself at an isolated trading post, but just when he thinks he is clear of pursuit, he finds himself confronted by Pussy Hare, a fat new member of the police who is very smug at having headed off a suspected murderer.

CHAPTER IX

OFFICER HARE MAKES AN ARREST

SECONDS passed as the officer stood there on the portage trail, his automatic leveled. Stan Klaska, his hands high in the air, took his eyes off the gun and glanced about him. Noting the glance the officer scowled.

"Don't go makin' any break! One more outa you an' I'll blow yer guts out!"

Stan grinned. "I'm not moving. I was just looking around for the camera. You look like you're posing for a snapshot."

"Yer name's Klaska an' you're under arrest fer murderin' some guy name of Bedore down to Blind River the night of June 10th an' anything you say will be used agin you."

Stan nodded. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Stick yer hands out so's I can git these here handcuffs on 'em—an' don't try no monkey business, neither. Jest because you put McVane in the hospital is no sign you can put me in one." Stan thrust his arms forward and submitted to being hand-

cuffed. "Jimmie McVane didn't pull his gun. I guess he didn't figure I'd jump him," he said affably. "I'm not damn fool enough to risk getting shot."

"That's right," Hare said. "You come along peaceable an' do like I tell you, an' you'll git along all right. Fact is, what with the drag I've got, if I fetch you in after McVane had fallen down on the job, they'll prob'ly make me a corporal."

"Sure," Stan agreed, "and they ought to. You treat a man decently—don't start abusing him and kicking him around, like McVane did. You use your head, instead of your fists and your boots. Cripes, if McVane had used me right, I wouldn't have jumped him."

The other nodded. "What I claim a policeman ought to use his head."

"You use yours, all right. I can't see how you figured out I'd come this way, an' then were smart enough to lay for me here at the portage."

"Oh, that's easy. I got me a map. An' I saw where if a man knew the country this here's the way he'd come. So after I did like the inspector told me, an' ordered all the storekeepers along the line not to sell you an outfit, I hopped off at Nemegos an' got me an outfit from Slim Taylor an' loaded it in a rowboat an' came down here. That's a damn tough trip down the lake—five, six mile of rowin'! Jest got here about an hour ago. Haven't had time to set up my tent yet. Jest threw the stuff out on that flat rock there at the landin', an' was havin' me a bite to eat, when I heard some one choppin', down the trail a piece, so I drew my gun an' snuck over behind that spruce there an' waited."

"A tree had fallen across the trail and I chopped it in two," Stan explained. "I might better have left it there and walked around it."

"Wouldn't have made any difference. I'd have nailed you when you got to the landin'. I guess the inspector's goin' to grin out of the other side of his mouth when he finds how I nabbed you, after McVane had fallen down on the job. Guess he won't be givin' me the kind of jobs any more like he's be'n givin' me."

"Been getting a little the worst of it, eh?" Stan asked sympathetically.

"Well, in a way. Fact is, I got a drag an' the inspector knows it. My uncle's an M. P., an' that's how I got in the police. You see, I got shoved in ahead of a lot of guys that was waitin' to git on the force—friends of the inspector, I guess, an' the like of that. So when I got in, the inspector didn't like it much—but there wasn't nothin' he could do about it.

"I be'n in about eight months now, an' I've never draw'd any detail that some damn kid couldn't do—like patroling the roads fer traffic v'ilations, an' makin' folks take down signs they've stuck up where they didn't have any right to, an' the like of that. I've had no important work to do.

"'Course ridin' around in a car is all right, too. But every chance the inspector gits, he gives me hell, or laughs at me—like that time I arrested some guy from the Soo fer drivin' drunk an' rollin' his car over on a curve an' knockin' down two sign posts that was there. How the hell did I know he wasn't drunk? It looked to me like no one but a drunk would run a car off the road in a place like that.

"The way it turned out, some other guy had been drunk an' come hell-bent up the road on the wrong side, an' crowded this guy off into the ditch. But this first guy was gone. This guy I pinched told me he never drunk no licker, an' that this other guy musta be'n drunk, the way he was drivin'. But what I claim, if a guy was drunk an' tipped his car over, he would try to lie out of it an' claim it was some other guy that was drunk an' not him.

"Come to find out, the guy I pinched was some preacher, an' McVane picked up the other guy. He really was drunk because he ran into a road grader about four mile further on. So I caught hell, an' McVane got credit fer the arrest. But what I claim, McVane didn't have to use his head any be-

cause anyone would know a guy was drunk if he smashed into a road grader goin' fifty mile an hour on a straight road.

"An' look at this here job the inspector sent me to do—notifin' them storekeepers! Hell, any kid could notify a storekeeper! But I guess he'll know now who uses his head, an' who doesn't. Me fetchin' you in, after McVane couldn't. Trouble with the inspector, he thinks him an' McVane an' three, four others is the only ones that's got any brains."

"He'll sure know different now," Stan announced. "Listen—if you use me all right, I might even put in a good word for you with the inspector—sort of drop a hint that it took a man with a real head on him to do what you did. It might do you some good if the inspector found out that it's policemen like you who know how to use their heads, that we criminals are afraid of."

"Say—by gosh—would you do that?"

"That's according to how you use me."

"Oh, I'll use you good. Like I said, if you don't try no monkey business, we'll get along okay. An' one good turn deserves another, as the feller says. If you don't give me any trouble, I might git up on the witness stand at yer trial an' put in a good word fer you—like tellin' the judge how I don't believe you done it."

"Swell," Stan said. "Where's your outfit?"

"It's over there to the landin'. I dragged the front end of the boat up on a flat rock that's jest about six-eight inches above the top of the water. Hell of a place fer a landin', looks like. If someone like me that can't swim only a couple of licks would tip over there he'd git drowned sure as hell. It's a good twenty foot deep right off'n the rock."

THE officer motioned his prisoner to go ahead and presently they reached the landing where an open packsack lay on the flat rock beside the folded tent. A half empty tin of beans with a spoon sticking out of it stood beside the packsack. The bow of the boat was, as Hare had said, drawn up onto the rock whose sheer edge rose only slightly above the surface of the water.

Stan grinned and pointed to the tin. "It looks like a can of cold beans would make a hell of a supper," he observed.

"Oh, I figgered on cookin' me some more after I got the tent up. I was so damn hungry after rowin' down the lake, I had to eat somethin', an' I figgered the beans was handiest. Fact is, I ain't no hand at settin' up tents an' cookin', an' the like of that."

Stan glanced at the low-hung sun. "There'll be a couple of hours of daylight yet. If you'd throw this stuff back in the boat, we could make the railway before dark."

"What! You mean me row that damn boat clean back up the lake! Me, I'm damn near starved, an' tired as hell, to boot! An' my hands is all blistered from those oars. I wouldn't row that boat back tonight, fer a million dollars."

"I could row it, if you'd take these things off my wrists," Stan suggested.

Constable Hare hesitated. He glanced at the sun, at the boat, and returned his eyes to the manacled man before him. Then he shook his head. "No, a policeman hadn't ought to take chances. Once he's got his man, he'd better hang onto him."

"You could sit in the stern there with your gun on me."

"No—s'pose we couldn't make it before dark? I couldn't watch you in the dark—an' you might tip the boat over, er somethin'. We'll camp here, an' wait till mornin'. I could watch you in the daylight."

Stan shrugged indifferently. "Okay. You're the doctor. But if you'd take these handcuffs off I could make camp an' cook supper, an' save you the trouble. I'm a guide—used to makin' camp and cooking."

Again Hare considered the proposition. He evidently had no stomach for the work, but remembering McVane's experience,

feared to unlock the cuffs. "No, I don't dare take chances. You can stand around an' mebbe show me how's the best way to do it, an' mebbe help a little, here an' there. The cuffs give you room enough to use yer hands a little."

"All right. I just thought I could save you some work. I know how it is when a man's tired. I don't suppose you'd mind giving me a drink of water, would you? It's a hot day, and that's a long portage I just came over. I'm thirsty as hell."

"Sure, I'll git you a drink. Wait till I git a cup. Like I said, I'll use you right. An' don't fergit to say a good word to the inspector. He'll have you in fer questionin'."

"Don't worry," Stan replied. "You'll get all the credit that's coming to you from the inspector."

The officer found the cup, carried it to the lip of the rock, and stooped low to dip the water. Stan leaped forward and the next instant with a mighty splash Constable Hare plunged head foremost into the lake. He came up sputtering and coughing, his arms and legs thrashing wildly.

Kneeling at the water's edge Stan waited for the terrified constable's frantic struggles to bring him to the rock which he reached up and grasped by hooking his fingers over the edge.

"Pull me out!" he cried, raising his face to Stan's and rolling his eyes in mortal terror, as he coughed water from his lungs.

Stan grinned down into the upturned face. "Sure, I'll pull you out, all right. But first you've got to do something for me."

"I can't do anything where I am. Pull me outa here! I can't even hang on much longer. My fingers is gittin' numb, an' I'm damn near frozen. Pull me out er I'll drown!"

Reaching down, Stan twisted the fingers of his manacled hands into the man's hair. "If you do as I say you'll be all right—but if you don't, you'll drown sure as hell. Reach into your pocket and get the key and unlock those cuffs. And be damn sure you don't drop it in the lake, because if you do you'll sure as hell go down after it—and stay there."

"I—I can't! I don't dare leggo."

"You can let go with one hand. I'll hold your head out of water. And be damn sure you come up with the key and not that automatic. This water's clear, and I can see what your hand is doing down there—and if it starts up with that gun, down goes your head—like this." As he spoke, Stan shoved the man's head beneath the surface, and jerked it out sputtering and coughing.

"Don't do that, don't do that! I'll git the key. My God—you'd drown a man!"

"I sure would. Listen—I'm wanted down in Blind River fer a murder I didn't commit. I'm not going back and stand trial because with the evidence they've got against me, I'd be convicted, and I'd either hang or spend the rest of my life in prison. So you're not taking me back—see?"

"I'll git the key—an' it can't fall in the lake. It's on a chain."

REACHING into his pocket he produced the key, and after much fumbling and maneuvering, managed to unlock the handcuffs which Stan held close before his eyes as he maintained his grip on the man's hair.

"All right—now reach down and pull that automatic out of its holster and drop it in the lake. And mind you don't bring it out of water—or down you go."

The man obeyed without hesitation, and as the gun sank from sight, he rolled his eyes upward. "Pull me out! Fer God sake, pull me out! I'm numb all over. I'm damn near frozen."

Stan raised the man until he could hook his elbows over the edge of the rock, then grasping him by the belt, finally succeeded, after much tugging and hauling, in dragging him onto the flat surface of the rock where he lay, his lips blue from the cold, while water drained from his clothing and ran back into the lake in tiny rivulets.

Tossing the handcuffs into the lake, Stan

picked up the policeman's axe, walked back to where his pack lay, and leaving the axe, returned and placed the pack and his rifle in the boat. Then he knelt and, unlacing the man's shoes, drew them off and tossing them in beside the pack, stepped into the boat and shoved off.

On the rock Constable Hare suddenly sat up. "Hey, where you goin'?" he cried.

Stan grinned. "What do you care? You're not going to follow me—not right away you're not. I've got the boat—and I've got your shoes, just in case you might try to follow me afoot. No man living could make it from here to Nemegos bare foot, through the brush, and over these sharp rocks—and have any feet left under him when he got there. Especially a big tub of guts, like you."

"Hey—who you callin' a tub of guts? I'll have you to know my uncle's an M. P."

"He'd have to be either that or God to keep a guy like you on the force."

"An' damn you—you shoved me in the lake, too!"

"Sorry," remarked Stan, "but when you wouldn't unlock the cuffs it seemed the only way to handle you."

"You can't go off an' leave me here without any boat an' with no shoes! An' you've got no right to interfere with an officer in discharge of his duty, either!"

"Who's going to stop me?"

"But what'll the inspector say? He's goin' to be mad as hell when I show up without a gun an' no handcuffs, an' my uniform all shrunk up!"

"Is he a profane man?" Stan grinned.

"Is he what?"

"I mean, does he cuss when he's mad?"

"I'll say he does! Cripes, he cussed me out somethin' fierce when I fetched in that preacher, that time."

"Then you can figure out for yourself what he'll say."

"But I'll lose my job! My uncle made 'em give me one more chance. When I go back like this the inspector'll figger it was my fault. He's got it in fer me, anyhow."

"It was only a little while ago that you were figuring he'd make you a corporal—when he found out how you outsmarted me."

"How the hell did I know you'd shove a man in the lake when he was gittin' you a drink of water? You double-crossed me—that's what you done."

Stan fitted the oars into the locks and headed the boat up the lake. "So long," he called. "And next time maybe you better just stick to the inspector's orders, and not try to figure things out for yourself. If Jimmie McVane couldn't take me in, you ought to have known a damn fathead like you couldn't."

"You can't go off an' leave me like this!" There was a note of fear in the voice. "You even took my axe."

"You can get your axe when you want it. I left it back there where my pack was—just in case you might try to use it on me before I got started."

"But I've got no gun! What if a bear would come along?"

Stan laughed. "Don't worry—he won't have a gun either."

"But how'm I goin' to git back?"

"I'll tell the storekeeper at Nemegos where you are. Day after tomorrow's Sunday, and maybe he'll lock up his store and come down after you. I'll send your shoes back by him, too. But if you're in a real big hurry, my canoe's at the lower end of the portage—if you can follow the trail, barefoot. It's only three or four miles. The canoe only weighs about ninety pounds. You might pack it up here and paddle on up to Nemegos."

"Now how the hell could I walk six, eight mile, barefoot, an' pack a ninety pound canoe the half of it? What with the sharp rocks, an' the black flies an' mosquitoes, an' all, I couldn't ever make it. An' even if I could, I couldn't handle any canoe after I got here."

"It's your problem. Figure it out to suit yourself. I'm shoving along—want to make Nemegos by dark."

CHAPTER X

SLIM TAYLOR

THE afterglow still lingered in the western sky as Stan Klaska made the boat fast to a stake at the little landing, shouldered his pack, picked up his rifle, and walked up the foot trail. A light showed in a window and streamed from an open door that gave onto a screened porch of a cottage beyond the dark store building. Caching the rifle and pack behind a pile of cedar poles, he surveyed the cottage warily. Its proximity to the store and the well-worn footpath between the two buildings indicated that this must be Slim Taylor's house. He remembered Slim as a capable young fellow who had bought a run-down store in Thessalon a few years before, worked up a good business, and sold out. He had married Ella Gordon, from over Sowerby way. Smart girl—Ella—used to go to school with her—good-looking, too. But not as good looking as Rose Brady. Rose Brady. As he stood there in the semi-darkness the events of that last night in Blind River crowded his brain as a fantastic nightmare. Oh, well—that was water over the dam, now. What was done, was done. He must think of what lay ahead of him, not what was behind.

A woman stepped to the doorway and stood for a moment limned distinctly in the yellow lamplight, and he recognized Ella Gordon—Ella Taylor she was, now. A feeling of aloneness gripped him. Here was Slim Taylor, with his own house, and his wife, and maybe a little kid or two by now—they'd been married going on three years. And here was he, Stan Klaska, disgraced in the eyes of the girl he loved—hunted by the police for a crime he'd never committed—standing there in the dark—headed for God knew where—with nothing ahead of him but to keep going on, and on, and on.

He wondered if Slim realized how lucky he was. Probably not. When things are going well with a man he doesn't realize he's lucky—just takes it as a matter of course. He wondered how Slim would receive him. Reid Ainsworth had said that Slim would put him right when he reached Nemegos. But that fat policeman had got here first. Suppose Slim believed him guilty of murder? He had outfitted the policeman to go after him. Would Slim help him? Or under orders of the policeman, would he refuse to sell him the supplies he needed, and put the police on his trail? Even if Slim should believe his story and take a chance—there was Ella. A man can't tell what a woman will do. They don't think like men. They've got a different slant on things—like Rose Brady ordering him not to fight Joe Bedore, with Joe bragging all over town about holding him up on the Mississagi road. And then ditching him because he did it. If Ella believed he was guilty of murder, she'd probably squawk her head off. Women are hell to talk. Maybe she'd order Slim not to sell him the supplies. She might even threaten to tell that damn fat policeman if he did, and that would get Slim in bad with the law. Slim wouldn't dare sell him the stuff, then.

He thought of abandoning the idea of hitting out into the back country. He could hop a freight without the Taylors knowing he had been here, and somehow manage to get across into the States. But the policeman had said that all train crews had been notified to keep an eye out for him. No—he must keep to the bush. It was his only chance. But he couldn't go on without supplies. There were things he needed—things he must have in order to live in the bush.

Stan clamped his jaw, and stepping onto the footpath, walked toward the house. As he approached the door a voice sounded from a dark corner of the porch. "Hello, Stan! Decided to take a chance, after lookin' us over, eh?"

"That you, Slim?"

"Sure—come on in."

"How'd you know I've been looking the place over?" Stan asked, as he stepped onto the porch and closed the screen door behind him.

"Be'n settin' here watchin' you fer ten minutes or so. What was you 'fraid of?"

"Well—I didn't know—that is, I was wondering how you folks would take it—me showing up here after that fat policeman had been talking to you."

"Oh—Pussy Hare? There's a chair. Set down. Ella'll fetch 'nother'n d'rectly." The man raised his voice. "Hey, Ella—friend of yourn come to call."

The young woman stepped from the doorway and whatever doubt lingered in Stan's mind vanished as she stepped quickly

forward and offered her hand. "Stan Klaska! It's sure good to see you. We've been wondering when you'd come."

"What!"

"We read about it in the Sudbury paper, and we figured you'd come this way—that is, if that darn Pussy Hare didn't run onto you first."

Stan grinned, as he thrilled at the friendly grip of the firm brown hand. "Oh, he ran onto me, all right."

The woman shot an apprehensive glance into the darkness. "You mean you got away from him—that he's following you?"

"I got away from him, but he won't be following me—not very fast, he won't. You see, I came up the lake in his rowboat—and brought his shoes along. Figured it would be kind of tough going barefoot—for a man of his build."

"But—Stan, he had a pistol! And he told Slim that if you tried any monkey business, he'd blow your head off."

"Yeah—that's what he told me, too. But I made him drop his pistol in the lake."

From the corner came a loud guffaw, and Ella Taylor warned her husband. "Not so loud, Slim—you'll wake the baby!"

"Made Pussy throw his gun in the lake an' take off his shoes! Gee—I'd give a year of my life to have seen that. Come on, Stan—tell us about it."

"Wait till I bring a chair. I'm dying to hear about it, and I know Mildred will be, too."

"Who's Mildred?" Stan asked, with a swift glance toward the door.

"Mildred Goss. She's a Blind River girl. Teaches the school, here. She knows Rose Brady, and Jack McVane. Says she knows you, by sight. She's all right, Stan—we none of us believe you killed that man."

"Thanks," Stan said, as she disappeared into the house to emerge a few moments later followed by another young woman, each carrying a chair.

Stan acknowledged the introduction with a smile. "I've seen you a good many times, Miss Goss—live up there next to the church, don't you?"

"That's right. And I remember you, too."

Taylor shuffled impatiently in his chair. "Well, now yer acquainted, set down an' tell us about Pussy Hare."

THEY seated themselves, and Stan rolled a cigarette from the tobacco Taylor tendered. "There isn't so much to tell," he said. "But first, I want you to know that I didn't kill Bedore. I was in the fight in which he was killed—but I certainly didn't kill him. I didn't have a knife on me, in spite of what anyone says. I didn't know he was dead till late the next afternoon."

"You don't need to tell us that, Stan,"

Ella Taylor said. "As I told you—we none of us believe you're guilty."

"That's right," Taylor agreed. "Go ahead an' tell us what come off."

Stan began with Bedore's refusal to turn out on the Mississagi road, and detailed the events as they had happened.

"I know damn well, Jimmie McVane couldn't ever of got back to the road unless you took him back," Taylor interrupted. "I said so when I read that piece in the paper— didn't I, Ella? Not with a busted arm an' a wrenched knee, he couldn't. By God, you done the square thing, Stan—not leavin' him there on the island, the shape he was in. Damn few men would of took the trouble, an' the risk of takin' him back to the road. They ought to know a man that would do that wouldn't knife anyone."

"And the paper said you were known as a hard drinker, and were considered a dangerous man when you were drunk," Ella Taylor added. "We knew that wasn't so."

"I was drunk that night, all right—just as I told you. I'd never been that drunk before. I was a fool, of course—but—well, the way things were going, and all—"

"Hell, I'd of got drunk, too!" Taylor exclaimed, and grinned across at his wife. "So you see you better not go tellin' me not to fight some guy that needs a good lickin'."

When the laughter that followed the recital of his encounter with Hare had subsided, Taylor asked, "Where do you go from here, Stan?"

"Jimmie McVane tried to talk me into going back and standing trial. But with Jack and Bill Crossby swearing they saw a knife in my hand during the fight, I'd be convicted sure. He told me I could never get away—that all the trains would be watched, and that the Provincials would turn over my description to the Mounted. And then Hare told me that he'd notified the storekeepers along the line to be on the lookout for me, and the train crews, too. McVane told me that even if I'd cross the railways and hit into the back country I couldn't get away with it for very long—that the Indians would talk, and sooner or later word would get to the trading posts, and it would only be a question of time till either the Mounted or the Provincials would pick me up. He said he would keep on my trail till he got me—but it will be quite a while before he'll be able to travel. And by that time my trail will be cold. It looks like I'd better keep to the bush, and shove on north of the railways. Reid Ainsworth told me that you knew this country, and could put me right from here."

Taylor nodded slowly. "Yes, I know the country—was born and raised at Hearst. Your best bet is to hit the Little Missinaibi an' follow it down to the Missinaibi. I'll draw you a map tomorrow that'll put you onto the Little Missinaibi. There's quite a few portages in there. When you hit the big Missinaibi slip on past the first railroad, an' keep to the river till you come to the main line at Mattice. I'll give you a letter to a fella there who'll outfit you, an' tell you how to get over onto the Kabinakagami, an' you can follow that on down to the Albany. A man should be able to keep away from the police a hell of a while in the Albany River country. I know I could—an' you ought to be able to live in the bush—you've be'n guidin' fer quite a while."

"Anyway," remarked Stan, "I'm going to find out whether I can or not. But this fellow at Mattice—are you sure he won't turn me in when I show up there?"

Taylor grinned. "You don't need to worry—he's my brother. Just watch your chance, like you did here, an' slip in on him when no one is lookin', an' he'll fix you up. He's got a store there. You can't miss it. It's painted red. He lives up over it."

"That's right, Stan," Ella supplemented. "You can trust Joe. He's a peach."

Stan frowned. "The trouble is—I haven't got much money along. I figured on quitting the truck job the day I had to

skip out—but after I talked with Reid Ainsworth I was afraid to go back and draw my pay. I thought maybe you'd take a chance on me. I'll pay you sometime, Slim—unless they hang me."

"They won't be hangin' you. You can have anything I've got in the store. An' as fer Joe, I'll go good fer anything you get from him."

"A man's lucky to have friends," Stan said, a catch in his voice that he was not entirely able to conceal.

"But, Stan," Ella asked, "what do you intend to do? In the future, I mean? You can't just go on living in the bush—like an Indian—all the rest of your life."

"A man in my fix can't be looking too far ahead. He's got the present to think about. The future will have to take care of itself. Maybe if I lay low in the back country for a while—a year or so—until the police and the train crews have time to slack off on their watchfulness, I could take a chance on hitting out for the States, or some place where I'm not known, and starting over. I'm only twenty-five.

"Oh, maybe the police will get busy and find out who really did kill Bedore. Then I wouldn't have to skip out. Jimmie McVane's no fool. He might get the right man, yet."

Slim Taylor agreed. "That's the way I'd look at it. An' I've got a hunch that if you can keep away from 'em for a year, the police are goin' to have a damn sight more on their hands than they've got now—an' there ain't goin' to be so many police."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I wouldn't be a damn bit surprised if most of the police would be soldiers in a year's time."

"Soldiers!"

"Yes, soldiers. I be'n sorta watchin' how things has be'n shapin' up over there in Europe fer the last couple of years—an' it don't look none too good. Hell, I've got some of the prettiest pulpwood limits you ever seen lined up fer next season—but I won't be able to git the stuff out. There won't be a man left in the country that's worth a damn. They'll all be in the army."

His wife smiled. "Slim subscribed to an American news magazine, and he reads it from cover to cover, every week. He's got an idea that Germany is getting ready to start another war."

"They ain't doin' nothin' else—you mark my words. I ain't got no hell of an education. But I think over what I read."

"But, Slim—how could they?" Ella exclaimed.

"How could they? Jest like they done it before—that's how could they!"

"But they were beaten! Surely the German people are not fools enough to start another war. Why the whole world would be against them!"

"Yeah? That's what you think. But how about them Dagos? This here Mussolini would throw in with Hitler at the drop of a hat. An' like as not the Roosians would, too. An' the damn Japs."

"But the German people won't let this Hitler get them mixed up in another war! Why he isn't even a German. He's nothing but a little Austrian paperhanger."

"But you must remember, Ella," Mildred Goss said, "that Napoleon started out as a corporal—and Abraham Lincoln was once a lowly rail-splitter. And both of them turned out to be very powerful men. I'm not convinced, as Slim is, that there's immediate danger of war. But there's certainly seething unrest in Europe—and where there's unrest, there's bound to be trouble."

"You bet there's bound to be trouble!" Slim agreed. "Look what's happened already in the last two, three years. Paperhanger, or no paperhanger, Hitler has horned his way into power over in Germany—he gets back the Saar—he puts German troops in the Rhineland—right plumb agin the Versailles Treaty. An' then, last year, what does he do but grab off all of Austria!"

"But," Ella said, "Mr. Chamberlain went over, last fall, and reached an agreement

with Hitler. France and Italy were in on it too!"

"Chamberlain!" snorted Slim, in disgust. "Him an' his umbreller! I'm tellin' you what the British Empire needs is an up-to-date army! An old man with an umbreller is a hell of a thing to fight a war with! They might better kep' Anthony Eden on the job. He's got guts, at least."

"There isn't going to be any war," Ella insisted stubbornly. "The Munich Pact fixed everything. And Mr. Eden would only have stirred up trouble."

"Munich Pact—another scrap of paper to tear up whenever Hitler's ready! Hell—he moved into this here Sudetenland on a fake election only a couple of days after signin' the pact! An' this spring he stole the rest of Czechoslovakia, didn't he? An' then he grabbed off Memel—an' he's makin' a pass at Poland. An' look at the Dagos! This Mussolini's gittin' chesty as hell because he sent his army down to Africa an' licked a lot of niggers, an' grabbed their country. An' this spring he grabs off Albania! An' how about the Japs invadin' China? I'm tellin' you they're all on the grab—every damn one of 'em! An' when Hitler gits ready he'll try to grab off England an' France—an' all the rest of Europe. An' by God, if we don't wake up, he'll do it, too!"

"The way I look at it," Stan said, "why not let those European nations fight each other all they want to. Look at Spain—civil war's been going on over there till the country's bled white. Our part of the Empire and the United States better keep out of it altogether. What happens over in Europe is none of our business, over here."

"The hell it ain't none of our business!" Slim exclaimed. "You'll be findin' out damn soon whether it's any of our business, or not!. I'm tellin' you that within a year this part of the Empire is goin' to be at war. An' it ain't goin' to be no little war, neither. An' no short war. It's goin' to be a tough war—an' a long one. It's goin' to be tough because Hitler's ready an' we aren't —France settin' there behind their Maginot Line suckin' their thumb! What the hell's to prevent the Germans from walkin' around them forts? That line ain't no good till it's built clean to the sea. It's like tryin' to keep cows out of a cornfield by fencin' off half of it. If you build yer fence strong enough the cows can't git through it—but by God, they kin walk around it! Even a cow kin figger that out.

"An' look at England—settin' in back of the channel, an' lettin' that damn Hitler build tanks an' planes an' guns till hell won't have it. An' what are they doin'? Settin' there swillin' tea, an' playin' golf, an' goin' to races—an' sendin' an old man over to Munich to shake an umbreller in Hitler's face an' tell him not to use them tanks an' planes an' guns he's buildin'—to keep 'em jest to look at.

"An' look at the United States—layin' back an' listenin' to guys like Wheeler, an' Nye, an' Lindbergh tellin' 'em that what happens in Europe ain't none of their business. But wait till the trouble starts—they'll damn well find out it's their business. An' the damn fool pacifists, an isolationalists talkin' appeasement! There ain't only one way to appease a tiger—an' that's to kill him—er by God he'll kill you.

"Instead of holdin' conferences to talk about disarmament, we ought to have been backing England up to build planes an' guns an' tanks an' ships—an' mostly ships! An' so would the Americans have be'n—if their congressmen wasn't afraid of the pacifist votes! Why—they muffed the chance of a lifetime to train an army right there in their C.C.C. camps! Why? Because the damn pacifists wouldn't stand for it! An' when the war comes they're goin' to be caught with their pants down—jest like the rest of us. An' they're goin' to lose the war for the first two, three years—it'll take 'em that long to train an army, an' ketch up on production. An' every soldier an' sailor, an' marine that's goin' to be killed before their country kin git ready, will be killed because the pacifists an' the isolationists

had their way. They could have be'n ready —if they'd listened to the men that know'd what the score was! If they'd be'n buildin' tanks, an' ships, an' planes an' guns, instead of messin' around with World Courts an' League of Nations!"

"But, Slim, it would certainly be better for countries to settle their differences peaceably than, by fighting a war."

"Sure it would—if they could do it. But how they goin' to do it? Not with Hague peace conferences, an' World Courts, an' League of Nations they can't. We've tried it, an' look what's happened. The countries go ahead an' do what they damn please, an' if the League of Nations tells 'em they can't do that, they thumb their nose at the League, an' withdraw from it—an' go ahead an' do it anyway. We ought to know it wouldn't work in the first place. What good does it do to issue an order unless you've got the power to enforce it? It jest like some city—Toronto, or Montreal, or Chicago passin' laws or ordinances an' expectin' folks to abide by 'em without no police force to back 'em up. Folks ain't built that way. They go ahead an' do what they want to do. An' if someone tells 'em they can't, they'll do it anyway—unless they know there's a policeman with authority to arrest 'em, backed up by a court with authority to sentence 'em, an 'a jail strong enough to hold 'em. An' nations ain't nothin' but folks."

"I'd hate to believe that way, Slim," Ella said. "That people only do right through fear of punishment."

"I never said that no one would do right unless they was forced to. I believe that most folks is on the up-an'-up—an' prob'ly most nations is, too. It's the ones that ain't that raises all the hell. An' they're the ones that don't recognize no law but the law of force. An' if the good countries expect to survive they've got to gear theirself to the speed of the bad ones. If they don't, it's jest too damn bad."

"It seems a sad commentary on civilization, and on the teachings of all the various religions," Mildred Goss said, "that the moral perception—the ethics of enough people to throw the whole world into a turmoil—has remained much the same as the ethics of the cave-man."

Slim Taylor snorted. "Religion! Civilization! Religion ain't done the job it could of done—an' should of done, by a damn sight. They build million dollar churches in one part of a city, while thousands of folks in another part of the same city ain't got enough to eat—some of 'em actually starvin'. How do they make that jibe with the teachin's of Jesus Christ, an' Mohammed, an' Gantauma Buddah, an' Confucius? 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' Christ said. An' the way they do it is to dress up in a thousan' dollars worth of clothes on Sunday, an' praise God in a million dollar church—an' let their neighbor starve."

"But that isn't the fault of religion," Mildred said. "It's the fault of those who profess the religion, and of the people who administer it."

"Well, who else besides *people* kin ever profess, or administer it—wild cats? An' you was dead right, Mildred, when you said that the ethics of the human race ain't advanced much beyond the ethics of the cave-man.

"Fer as I kin see they ain't advanced any. When one tribe of them cave-men wanted the huntin' grounds of another tribe, they whetted up their spears an' got out their stone-headed clubs an' went an' killed the other tribe, er drove it out an' took the huntin' grounds. An' the same thing goes on now. The only difference is the tribes has grow'd bigger, an' calls theirselves nations, an' they use guns, an' tanks, an' planes, an' poison gas instead of spears an' clubs—that's all. Fer as I kin see, the only advance civilization has made is along scientific an' mechanical lines—an' that's purely selfish. Men make cars because they can git rich makin' 'em, an' folks buy 'em because ridin's easier than walkin'! An' they wire their houses an' pay electric bills,

because it's easier to turn on a light than to fill a coal oil lamp."

Stan smiled. "You don't think much of the human race, do you, Slim?"

"Sure I do. Once it gits waked up to the facts of life, it ought to do pretty well," he grinned. "But I'm afraid it's goin' to take one hell of a war to wake folks up—the way things is shapin'. You mind what I'm tellin' you—war's comin', an' it's comin' fast. An' it's goin' to be the damndest war the world ever seen. Maybe it'll be all us Empire people an' France, an' the United States agin the world. We'll win it in the long run. An' believe me, we better do a job, this time—not half a job, like we done last time. A snake ain't never dead till his tail quits wigglin'. An' the sooner all us Britishers an' the United States quits listenin' to the damn pacifists an' isolationists, an' listens to men like Winston Churchill the sooner we'll begin gittin' ready fer what's comin'—an' the quicker we'll win the war."

"Maybe you're right," Stan said. "I'm not posted like you are. I'm no pacifist—but I do figure that we ought to let Europe settle its own squabbles without horning in on it. If war should come, maybe that will be my way out.

"To change the subject, you said you'd draw me a map tomorrow. I sort of figured I'd better pull out in the morning before daylight—before anyone but you folks could find out I was here."

"There won't no one know you're here. You stay right here in the house tomorrow, an' leave next mornin'. Make out yer list of stuff tonight, an' I'll put it up tomorrow. You don't need to hurry. McVane is in no shape to travel. An' Pussy Hare sure as hell ain't—with no boat an' no shoes. I'll take the kicker an' run down an' get him Sunday afternoon."

"If the black flies an' mosquitoes don't eat him up before that," Stan remarked.

"He took some mosquito bar along," Slim said, "but chances is, he won't know enough to rig it right to keep out the bugs, even if he kin set up his tent It won't hurt him none to git bit up. It'll show the inspector he tried to git his man."

Stan retrieved his packsack and rifle and was made comfortable for the night on a cot in the little living room.

THE following evening Slim returned from the store carrying a new packsack. "That one of yorun is pretty well wore. It wouldn't last no hell of a while. I put in a pair of pacs. Them shoes ain't much good in the bush. An' a pair of H. B. blankets, too. That sleepin' bag won't be enough this winter, where you're goin'."

"But I've got an extra pair of blankets that Jimmie McVane gave me."

"Log camp blankets. They ain't as good as H. B.'s. Besides, I figger you better leave them shoes, an' blankets, an' a couple of old shirts an' socks, an' such as that, in your old packsack, an' I'll cache it over by the track where Pussy Hare kin find it. I'll tell him you must of ditched your stuff an' hopped the freight. He kin take yer pack back with him to show the inspector. It might sort of make up fer him losin' his gun an' handcuffs. There's a light takedown .22 rifle in the pack, an' five hundred shells, an' a couple of shirts, an' some heavy underwear an' socks, an' a gill net, an' some fishin' tackle, an' plenty of grub an' tobacco to last till you git to Joe's. He'll fix you up from there. I wrote him a letter. It's in the bottom of the pack."

"Thanks, Slim," Stan said. "I don't know when it will be, but I'll pay you for this, sometime. How much does it come to?"

Slim frowned. "How the hell do I know? Be'n too busy to figger it up. It'll be plenty—don't worry. I'll let you know when I see you."

Stan grinned. "I've not enough coming, down in Blind River, to pay for it. But if I should give you an order on the company, the police would find out that you'd sold me the supplies."

"I wouldn't touch an order with a ten-

foot pole. I ain't sold you no supplies. Pussy Hare don't know we know'd you back in Thessalon. I'll tell him a stranger did show up here wantin' to buy some supplies, an' I turned him down, like he told me to.

"An' then the freight pulled in, an' I had to git busy, an' after it pulled out the stranger didn't show up no more, so I figger mebbe he hopped it. Then, when he finds that pack of yourn where I'll cache it right near the track, he'll figger you must of hopped the freight, an' the police will be huntin' you along the railways, an' not in the bush."

"That's okay," Stan said, "except that he'll wonder how you happened to go down after him if I hadn't sent you."

"Cripes, I'll tell him that, come Sunday, I got to wonderin' how, if this stranger was the murderer, he'd managed to git past the portage.

"An' when I seen how the boat I'd loaned him was down at the landin', I got kinda worryin' about it, so I put the kicker on the boat an' run down to see if he was all right."

"But, Slim," Ella said, "he'll think it's mighty funny you didn't worry about him as soon as you saw this stranger. You knew he'd gone down there to arrest him."

Slim grinned. "Yeah, he might, at that. Hell—if he says anything, I'll tell him I worry slow." He turned to Stan.

"You kin pull out at daylight in the mornin'. I slipped a canoe down to the landin' after dark. Here's the alarm clock, an' here's a map I draw'd, over in the store, that'll set you onto the Little Missinaibi.

"Good luck. We'll roll in early so you kin git a good-night's sleep."

The two women wished him good luck and retired. Stan slept soundly that night, and early next morning, slipped the canoe into the water, paddled into the mouth of the river that flows southward into the head of the lake, passed under the railway bridge, and shoved on up the river.

Chapter XI

MATTICE

STAN was able without much trouble, to follow the crude map Slim Taylor had drawn him. And one evening three weeks later, as his canoe shot down the Missinaibi under the strong strokes of his paddle, he heard in the distance the whistle of a train. This would be the main line of the C. N. He had slipped past the southern division near Peterbell unobserved. Now for Mattice—and Joe Taylor.

A half mile farther down he beached the canoe on a strip of shingle. Better stop here, cook supper, and wait for darkness. There might be houses along the river close to town. The appearance of a lone stranger might excite curiosity, and a word or two might be dropped in the wrong place.

Stan wondered as he boiled his tea and fried a fish, whether Joe Taylor would be anything like Slim. Slim was all right. He had known him only casually back in Thessalon, yet when he had showed up at Nemegos with the police on his trail, Slim had treated him like his best friend. "Guess they are the best friends I've got now," he muttered, "he and Ella, and maybe Reid Ainsworth and Phil Billips. They don't believe I knifed Bedore—even if everyone else does."

Finishing his supper Stan washed and repacked the dishes and rolled a cigarette. From a marshy bayou across the river sounded the deep-voiced bellow of frogs. A solitary raven flapped past, croaking hoarsely. From the direction of the railway a dog barked. Stan estimated the distance to be a mile. Here within a mile of him were people—people who could carry on their daily affairs without worrying about the police.

Once again a feeling of loneliness obsessed him—as it had obsessed him that evening at Nemegos when he stood in the darkness and saw Ella Taylor standing in the doorway of her home.

The mill would be running full tilt down at Blind River. The fellows would right now be dressed up in their good clothes, walking the streets with their girls—dropping in at the taverns and the soft drink parlors, talking and laughing.

He wondered whether Rose Brady and Jack McVane were among them—whether Rose would marry Jack now that he was out of the way. A scowl darkened his features. He tossed his cigarette onto the coals and rolled another. Damn Jack McVane! Lying the way he did about seeing a knife in his hand during that fight. Jack had things his own way now—but sometime he would even up the score. Sometime—a year—ten years from now—his chance would come. A man couldn't pull a trick like that and get away with it.

A whippoorwill wheeled out of the gathering darkness, settled upon a dead stub and began his incessant whistling. In the towns—thousands and thousands of towns all over the world—people were enjoying themselves with their kind while he, Stan Klaska, must avoid the towns and the people, and lurk in the bush with the frogs, and the ravens, and the whippoorwills.

Daylight faded into darkness. Stan swung the pack into his canoe, sloshed water on the coals of his fire, and shoved off. Swiftly he slipped downstream, and when the railway bridge loomed ahead of him, he landed, cached his canoe in a thicket of cedars, and slipped unobserved into the little town. Dull squares of light showed in the windows above the red painted store. Unobtrusively ascending the wooden stairway that slanted up the outer wall, he stepped into a small box-like hallway, and knocked on a door. A woman answered his knock, and as the yellow lamplight shone on him through the open doorway, Stan became awkwardly conscious of his month-old stubble of beard.

"Good evening, mam," he said, "is Mr. Taylor in? I've got a letter for him from his brother in Nemegos."

The woman stepped aside. "Yes. Come in. Joe's been expecting you. You're Mr. Klaska, aren't you? Slim wrote that you'd be here."

Stan followed the woman through what was evidently the dining room, and as he stepped into a large square room toward the front a man rose from a desk and extended his hand.

"So you're Stan Klaska, eh? Slim wrote that you'd be along. Says you got a tough break down in Blind River."

Stan instinctively liked this man—liked the firm grip of his hand, and the hearty boom of his deep voice. "Yes," he said, handing over an envelope he drew from his pocket, "here's a note from Slim." As the man tore open the envelope and held the square of paper to the light, Stan noted that he was a larger man than Slim, and apparently much older. His thick black hair, shot with silver, was decidedly gray at the temples. He tossed the note onto the desk and nodded.

"Yeah. How is Slim? Ain't seen him in a couple of years. We was down to his weddin' in Thessalon. I knew damn well Slim wouldn't stick in no big town. Us Taylors belongs in the bush."

"Oh, Slim's fine. Got a good layout there at Nemegos. Seems to be doing all right. Says he's got some good pulpwood limits lined up, but he's afraid he won't be able to get the stuff out."

"That's what I was tellin' him the time he got married—when he had that store in Thessalon. A store's all right fer a side line, but it ain't worth a damn fer a main

business—not when a man can git holt of some timber er pulpwood limits, it ain't. 'Sell out, here,' I told him, 'an' git into the back country. Find some place where there's timber er pulpwood handy to the railway, an' start a store that'll make you a livin' whilst yer gitting holt of some limits.' That's a likely country around Nemegos, he ought to do all right there. But what's this about him not bein' able to git the stuff out? Hell, if he's cramped fer the money to work it, all he's got to do is holler. I kin let him have all he needs."

"He didn't say anything about being short of money. It's the war, he's thinking about. He's afraid that, when he's ready to start taking the stuff out, he won't be able to get any men."

"War! What war?"

Stan grinned. "Slim's sure that Germany is ribbing up to start another war. Says we'll be in it within a year. Ella told me he takes some American news magazine and reads it every week."

"War—hell! Them damn Germans ain't in no shape to start another war! They tried it once—an' look what we done to 'em. Not only we licked 'em, but we busted their country so damn flat that their marks wasn't worth a dime a million. That's the trouble with Slim—always readin', an' always ponderin' over things that ain't none of his business. He's be'n like that ever sence he was a little kid—always had his nose stuck in some book, er magazine, er newspaper. Cripes, if he'd be'n able, he'd of went to high school, an' like as not to some college an' learnt to be a lawyer, er somethin'. Look at it sensible. How could Germany finance another war—even if she wanted to start one? Why, the whole world would be agin 'em!"

"Slim figures that maybe, Italy and Japan might throw in with 'em. He thinks this Hitler's hell-bent on stirring up trouble."

"Who's this here Hitler, anyway? Fer as I kin see he ain't nothin' but a little poop-seed politician. An' what if the Roosians an' Eyetalians would go in with him? Who the hell have they ever licked—either one of 'em? The Germans knows a damn sight better'n to trust them Dagos, anyhow. They was all lined up to go in with Germany in the last war, an' at the last minute they double-crossed 'em an' throw'd in with us—an' they wasn't worth a damn, at that. This here Mussolini sticks out his jaw an' bellers like a bull-frog—but when the guns begun to pop you'd have to poke him out from in under the nearest lily-pad. Cripes, if a war's all that's stoppin' Slim, he better go ahead an' git out his pulpwood!"

"That's what I think. I don't believe there's going to be any war. Ella thinks like we do, too—and she was always pretty smart in school."

Mrs. Taylor, who had taken no part in the conversation, paused in her knitting and looked up. "You knew Ella before Slim married her?"

"Oh, yes—we went to school together in Thessalon. Her father, old man Gordon, has a farm over near Sowerby."

"How's their baby? Joe an' I've be'n fixin' to do down to Nemegos an' see 'em, but seems like we don't never get around to it."

"Fine big boy. Slim and Ella are mighty proud of him."

Taylor smiled. "That's right, ma—we got to go down an' see 'em one of these times. Ought to go down an' tell Slim to quit worryin' about a war that ain't started yet—an' ain't likely to. The way I look at it, if this here Hitler, er whatever his name is, wants to stir up a stink amongst them European nations over there, let him go to it. I don't see no call fer England to git mixed up in it, one way er another. Canada sure as hell don't want no part of it. A man, or a country either, is better off if they don't go hornin' in on somethin' that ain't none of their business."

"That's what I tried to tell Slim—but he says we'll soon find out that it is our business. And he's pretty well posted—to hear

him rattle off what's be'n goin' on over there in the last couple of years."

"Posted—hell! How does he know what's goin' on over there—except what he reads? What I claim—the fellas that runs the newspapers an' magazines has got to be printin' somethin', an' the worser they kin make things look, the more papers they'll sell. Slim, he don't know nothin' about a war—he was too young to git in the last one. But by God, I was in it—us two oldest boys, me an' Henry. I was lucky, but they got Henry. I know what war's like. An' the German's damn well know it. They ain't fools enough to start another one. If they do they'll never git me into it. Once is enough. What do I give a damn what happens over in Europe? I've got troubles of my own. An' speakin' of trouble—accordin' to what Slim wrote, you've got plenty of it on yer hands. What kin I do fer you?"

"Slim said you know the country north of here, and could set me right. He thinks my best bet is to hit for the Albany River. He says a man ought to be able to keep clear of the police up the Albany country for a long time."

TAYLOR nodded. "That's right. If it was me I'd keep away from the Bay. What with two lines of railway runnin' to the Bay now, the police kin git back an' forth pretty handy. If I was you I'd drop down the Missinaibi about fifty mile, an' then hit over onto the Kabinakagami, an' on down to the Albany. There's two H. B. posts—one on the Missinaibi, an' one on the Kabinakagami above where the Drowning River flows in. You better slip past them posts unbeknownst. Them traders might slip the word to the police if a strange white man showed up in there. I'll draw you a map that anyone that's bush wise kin foller. There's one long portage—eight, ten mile, that'll put you onto the Kabinakagami."

Stan nodded. "Jimmie McVane warned me that any Indians I ran across would tell at the posts that there was a strange white man in the country. But I've got to take that chance."

"Indians is about like other folks. Some would talk, an' some wouldn't. There ain't no hell of a lot of Indians in there—a scatterin' of 'Jibways, an' Crees, an' Montagnais. If you git on the good side of 'em they'll shut up—same as white folks would. You kin live off the country. There's plenty of game in there—moose, an' bear, an' caribou—an' the small stuff. An' all the lakes an' rivers is lousy with fish. I'll go downstairs an' fix you up a couple of packsacks of grub, an' throw in a lot of fish-hooks an' files."

"I got all the fish-hooks I need from Slim—and a whetstone and file to keep my knife and axe in shape, and what clothing I need."

"Fish-hooks an' files don't take up much room—an' the best way to git on the good side of an Indian is to give him a file or a couple of fish-hooks. You stay up here till I git the stuff put up. Someone might see the light in the store an' come in. If they seen a stranger around they might drop a wrong word somewheres. What folks don't know, they can't pass on."

Stan chatted with Mrs. Taylor and at the end of an hour her husband reappeared. "All set," he announced. "I slipped in an extry belt knife, an' an axe head. You kin fit in a handle, if you need it. Some copper wire fer snares, too. A line of snares will save a lot of ammunition. An' you'll be buildin' a pole shack to winter in so I put in a pair of hinges an' a couple of pounds of spikes, an' some heavy white paper you kin grease up fer winders. You can't see through 'em, but they'll let in light. I threw in a light line that might come handy, an' a calendar. You better mark off the days as they come, er you'll lose some shore as hell."

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you for what you've done for me," Stan said. "How much do I owe you."

"Comes to eighty-six dollars."

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, Stan

drew out an envelope from which he produced some bills. Taylor waved them away.

"Yer money ain't no good here," he said. "Slim wrote in his letter that you ain't got much with you, an' you might be needin' it."

"I didn't have much—when I got to Slim's," Stan answered. "I ran my face for what I got from him—told him I'd pay him sometime—and I will. But after I'd been gone from there several days, I found this envelope in the bottom of my pack, along with that note to you. When I opened it I found these bills—a hundred dollars. Slim had slipped them into the pack—and never said a word about it. It's things like that a man can never forget. But now that I have the money I want to pay you for this stuff. I'll feel better if I do."

Taylor shook his head. "Nope. Sorry—but you've got to keep on feelin' bad. Slim figgered you'd be needin' that money, er he wouldn't of put it in. An' I figger the same. What I claim, if Slim kin take a chance on you, I shore as hell kin. Sometime, if yer able, you kin pay me. If you don't, it won't bust me anyhow. Don't be a damn fool. Stick it back in yer pocket. If you should need it, you'll need it damn bad. If you don't, you kin give it back to Slim."

STAN KLASKA swallowed hard, and when he spoke his words sounded low and throaty. "I—I only hope I'll get the chance to repay you two some day for what you've done."

"Forgit it," Taylor said gruffly. "A man would be in a hell of a fix if he couldn't help someone out when he needs it. An' there's been times when I've needed help myself. Like one time a few years back I took a timber limit from old J. J. McFarlane over on the White River country. Long before spring I seen where I was losin' money on the deal, an' I went to a couple of banks an' they turned me down. You know old J. J.'s reckoned a hard man—even if he does keep all his relations in jobs, whether they're worth a damn, er not. Well, the long an' short of it was, old J. J. could of busted me flatter'n a pancake. Did he do it? Not by a damn sight, he didn't. But he shore as hell had me worried fer the last couple of months before the drive. I went to him along in March an' told him how things was, an' he laughed at me—told me a contract was a contract, an' I'd have to live up to it. I did, an' it wiped me out, all right. Then, when the logs was in the boom, he turns around an' hands me another limit, at a figger that let me out at a damn good profit on both deals. An' when I tried to thank him fer it he told me to go to hell—that he liked to do business with a man that stuck to his contracts."

"There's worse men than old J. J., Stan said, and glanced at the clock. "Gosh, it's midnight. I'd better get going."

Mrs. Taylor, who had stepped from the room, returned. "You won't be startin' out this time of night," she said. "I've got the spare bed all made up."

Her husband shook his head. "I figger he'd better git goin'. He's got a moon, an' I've got a crew loadin' pulpwood on the sidin', that stirs around pretty early of a mornin'. It's better they didn't see him packin' supplies to the river. They might say somethin' where the police er a train crew would pick it up, an' that wouldn't do Klaska no good—nor me either. He'd have to git out before daylight if he slep' here—an' that's only three, four hours. He'd do better to drop downriver a few miles an' camp tonight. Then he could git up when he wanted to." He turned to Stan. "It's a good two hundred an' fifty miles to the Albany. I told you about them two tradin' posts you'll pass before you git there—an' I told you to keep back from the Bay. But don't go too far up the Albany, neither. There's tradin' posts up in there, too. Come on, I'll help you to the river with them packs."

CHAPTER XII

FIRE

WITH civilization behind him a sense of contentment possessed Stan Klaska's soul. As each passing moment, each stroke of the paddle carried him farther into the North, farther and farther from the haunts of men, the contentment increased. Always, ever since he was a little boy, he had loved the bush. And every hour that could be spared from school or work found him in the bush. The discovery of a new lake, or the exploration of a new river thrilled him as nothing else could thrill him. Upon the death of his mother, a few short years after the great war, he had gone to live with his uncle and aunt in Thessalon, where his uncle was a sawyer in the mill. Off and on, he, too, worked in the mill and under the careful tutelage of his uncle, became a first-class sawyer. But his heart was not in the work. As soon as he was old enough he qualified as a guide, and from that time on his summers and autumns were spent in the bush, guiding tourist fishermen and deer hunters among the innumerable lakes that comprised the Mississagi and White River watershed.

He knew the country as a man knows his own dooryard. His great regret was that these excursions into the bush were limited by the short vacations of the people he guided. A couple of days to a couple of weeks accounted for most of them. At rare intervals a party would stay out a month—but even a thirty-day trip only meant the Kindiogami or the Bark Lake country, at the outside.

It was his firm belief that women should stick to the resorts. A woman in the back country was as useless and as out of place as a crutch in a foot-race. A few of the men he guided he liked, but most of them he held in tolerant contempt.

When the season was over, he worked in the woods, or in the mill, or drove truck on the supply road. And always he had dreamed of a trip beyond the railways, far into the outland, exploring rivers no white man had ever seen, fishing in lakes into which no white man had ever dropped a line—a trip where he could go on, and on, without thought of turning back.

And now he was beyond the railways. The whole north was his. He could do as he pleased—go where he pleased. There was no one to say "turn this way, or turn that." And for once in his life there was no time limit. He didn't have to turn back. He didn't dare to turn back. He could go on, and on—for a year for ten years, forever. And the thought served only to increase his sense of contentment.

It was the middle of August now—the 14th, according to his carefully checked calendar. He had slipped past the two Hudson's Bay posts unobserved, and had passed the mouths of two rivers that flowed in from the west, the Drowning, and the Little Current, according to Joe Taylor's crude map. Soon he would reach the Albany—one of the great rivers that flow into Hudson Bay. Not once since leaving the railway behind him had he had a recurrence of the sense of aloneness that had oppresed him as he stood there in the darkness at Nemegos and seen Ella Taylor silhouetted in the doorway of her home, and again when he had heard the dog bark as he waited for darkness just above Mattice.

THE journey had been an easy one—all downstream, except for the ascent of one river whose source was in the lake from which he had made the long portage to the Kabinakagami. There had been many portages, short ones, for the most part, around rapids or falls. He had reduced his packing to a system—first two packsacks, back for the canoe, then back for the other pack. It was hard work—but there was satisfaction in the thought that the stuff was his own and he was packing no unnecessary ounce. It was different

from packing for tourists who insisted upon taking everything they owned except the office safe into the bush with them—camp chairs, folding tables, iron tackle boxes, cases of whiskey, and grub enough for a regiment. He had often wondered when one would show up with a brick tent.

The spruce spires were casting long shadows across the river as he beached his canoe on a blunt point covered with aspen and stunted white birch. A covey of spruce hens scuttled aside and stood stupidly watching him as he lifted the packs from the canoe and drew it ashore. Two of them flew to a low limb of a nearby aspen and he knocked one of them off with his paddle, and killed two others on the ground with stones. He built his fire, hung his tea pail over it, skinned and cleaned his birds, and cutting bark from a nearby birch, fashioned a small basket with which he filled with luscious red raspberries from a nearby thicket. When the blaze died down he fried his birds over the coals and dined sumptuously.

The meal finished, he rolled a cigarette and leaned back against his sleeping bag. A sense of well-being possessed him. Here was a country teeming with game and fish, and berries, where a man could live well without much effort. The days were warm and the nights cool. For the past week there had been a skimming of ice on his water pail nearly every morning. The hint of autumn was in the air, though the leaves were still green on the poplars and birches. In a month they would be falling, and within six weeks the geese and the ducks would begin to wing their way southward. He would follow Joe Taylor's advice, build a little pole and mud cabin in some sheltered spot back off the big river, and put in a month or so before snow came, drying berries, and fish, and smoking meat for the winter.

The season had been dry and the rivers were low as indicated by the water marks along the shores. For several days a gray haze had hung over the land, and tonight he could distinctly smell smoke. Somewhere in the bush a fire was raging. But it was far away. Somewhere in this vast solitude a dead stub had been struck by lightning and smouldered for days maybe before crashing to earth and scattering fire in the tinder-dry bush. Or an empty bottle, carelessly discarded by some passing trapper, had concentrated the sun's rays at just the right angle to start a fire in the dead leaves or grass. Or the unextinguished fire left by a careless Indian had flared up in the wind and started a conflagration that might burn for weeks—destroying wild life, denuding hundreds of square miles of every living thing.

The next day at noon his canoe shot out of the Kabinakagami onto the broad surface of the Albany at the apex of the great south bend which is that river's southernmost reach. The Albany flows here without perceptible current and Stan headed northwestward, away from the Bay. The gray haze was heavier now, hanging like an ominous pall over the land, almost obscuring the opposite shore. And the motionless air was sharp with the odor of burning spruce and banksian.

Stan slanted across to the northern shore of the lake-like river and for hours paddled steadily westward, passing the mouths of several small streams.

Late in the afternoon he headed up a small river. He remembered Joe Taylor's advice to keep back from the Bay, but not to push too far up the Albany, as there were trading posts along the river to the westward. This seemed a likely river. He would push up it for a few miles—far enough so the smell of his smoke wouldn't reach the Albany and disclose his whereabouts to a chance traveler on the big river, locate a suitable site, and build his cabin.

HE CAMPED that evening on the gravel close against a spruce thicket, and with his tea pail hung over his fire,

cut a government pole, tied on a line, and baited his hook with a strip of bacon rind. Almost the instant the bait struck the surface there was a heavy swirl and a mighty tug that bent his green birch pole to the snapping point. The fish fought deep and stubbornly. But the pole was tough and the line strong, and a few minutes later Stan looked down upon the big speckled trout that flopped on the gravel at his feet. "Six pounds if he's an ounce!" he breathed, as he picked the fish up and disengaged the hook. "What wouldn't he have done on a fly rod! If only some of these tourists could tie into one of these boys they'd go nuts. But you'd never get 'em this far back—them and their ton of outfit. Anyway," he added, with a grin, "I'm not going to starve, this winter."

At sunrise he pushed on. A breeze sprang up from the north, and quickly freshened to half a gale. The smoke haze thickened until the sun's disc above the spruce tops glowed a dull angry red. So—the fire was to the northward—and not too far away. The smoke was pouring down the narrow valley now—and billowing overhead in great rolling clouds. It bit into his lungs, and he coughed. A high flat rock looked ahead at a bend of the river. He would climb it and take a look. With this wind the fire might get bad—too damn bad for a narrow river like this, with the spruce growing thick along the banks.

As he gained the summit of the rock a sight met his eyes which, for fearsome grandeur eclipsed anything he had ever seen or imagined. A spruce-covered ridge, through which the river had cut a deep gorge, stretched eastward and westward as far as he could see—and as far as he could see, vast clouds of heavy smoke were billowing over the ridge—smoke black as night, torn and rent along its length by explosions of red fire, as vast pockets of superheated gas burst into flames that writhed and twisted to the very sky. Tears coursed down his cheeks from his streaming eyes, and even as he looked red flames topped the ridge in a hundred places as the fire leaped through the spruce tops, filling the air with a dull terrifying roar. That ridge, Sam realized, was a scant two miles away, and he stood directly in the path of the fire! There was not a moment to lose. He must hit back downstream. Once he gained the broad surface of the Albany he would be safe.

He turned to scramble from the rock, and suddenly froze in his tracks, straining his streaming eyes toward a rocky point, not two hundred yards upstream. There were people there! Four of them—two women and two little children! One of the women carried a bundle, while the other, grasping a child with each hand, was stumbling toward him across the boulder-strewn point. Even as he looked, the woman with the bundle fell down, struggled to her feet, and recovering her bundle, came on.

Stan slid down the rock, shoved off his canoe, and paddled frantically upstream. The cobbled shore narrowed and slanted steeply to the water this side of the point, and he saw both women stumble and go down almost at the waters' edge on the uncertain footing. But they were up again, staggering among the boulders. They saw him, now—the one with the bundle was pointing.

The first blast of heat caught them as he brought the canoe broadside to the rocks, just as the four, an old Indian woman, two Indian children, and a young half-breed woman, reached the spot.

"Hurry up! Pile in!" he commanded. "There's no time to lose."

The young woman's eyes took in the canoe at a glance. "Wait!" she cried, motioning the others back, "I fix!" Stooping swiftly she shoved the three packsacks aft, placing the sleeping bag and blankets on top of them. Then, helping the old woman and the children in amidships, snatched up the other paddle, took her place in the bow, and shoved off.

"Good work!" Stan approved. "Now paddle like hell!"

The current of the river was fairly swift. The half-breed girl proved a master hand with the paddle, and the heavily loaded canoe shot downstream with heartening speed. But the heat increased. The smoke pall grew blacker, and the voice of the fire became an ever increasing ominous roar. Sparks and bits of flaming bark and twigs dropped hissing

into the river all about them. The children coughed and whimpered, and crowded against the old woman's knees. Stan and the girl missed paddle strokes as they slapped at live coals that bit into their necks. The old Indian woman drew up her knees, making a tent of her skirt, and pushed the heads and shoulders of the children beneath it.

A slab of burning bark lit on the blankets, and Stan knocked it off with his paddle. He called to the girl. "I'll keep her going, if you can manage to turn around and slosh the blankets in the river. Throw one of 'em over the old woman and kids, and wrap the other around yourself. But for God's sake be careful! If this canoe tips over, we're goners!"

The girl turned and spoke to the old woman in the Indian tongue, then when the blankets were passed to her, she dipped them in the river, spread one of them over the contents of the canoe, old woman, children, sleeping bag and packsacks without disturbing the balance of the canoe by so much as a hair. Then, deliberately, she drew a belt knife from its sheath, doubled the other blanket and slit its edge.

"Hey—don't cut that blanket!" Stan cried sharply. "Wrap it around you, like I said!" Dipping his hand into the water, he slapped at his shoulder. There was a ripping sound as the girl deliberately tore the blanket in two. "I sew," she said shortly. "Your shirt on fire." And tossing him half the saturated blanket, she threw the other half over her shoulders, turned, and picked up her paddle.

"Well—I'll be damned," Stan grinned, as he threw the half blanket over his shoulders, and plied his paddle.

CHAPTER XIII

HELENE

THE heat became intense. Moisture from the saturated blanket soaked Stan's shirt. Sweat rolled in rivulets down his chest and belly, and he felt as though he were being slowly stewed in his own juice. But breathing became easier as a current of cool air, induced evidently by some vortex of the raging furnace behind them, flowed upriver to meet them, while high above their heads the black smoke continued to roll southward, sprinkling the surface of the river with ashes and bits of blazing bark.

Thanks to the swiftness of the current and the unflagging work at the paddles, but more to the fact that the thick stand of spruce and banskian thinned considerably on the ridges of outcropping rock, they outran the fire and shortly after noon shot out onto the broad surface of the Albany. Crossing to the south bank, they beached the canoe and took stock of themselves. The children, a little boy of four and a girl a year older, seemed to have suffered no damage whatever. The old Indian woman, seemingly tough as whale bone, with a face withered and wrinkled as the skin of a dried apple, had got off with a few bruises. The young half-

breed woman had suffered a deep gash in her knee from falling among the boulders, and like Stan, numerous blisters about the neck and shoulders caused by falling sparks and bits of flaming bark.

Stan applied iodine and bandaged the knee as the old woman looked on with stony indifference. The two youngsters crowded close, their eyes, bright as jet beads, missing no slightest detail of the procedure. When it was finished, the little boy, after searching his chubby legs diligently, pointed to a tiny scratch just above his ankle—a bramble scratch that showed the faintest trace of dried blood. Stan laughed and touched the scratch with iodine, and at the look of pained surprise on the youngster's face, even the old woman smiled as he crowded against her and babbled some words in the Indian tongue. She replied, and the half-breed girl smiling broadly, interpreted:

"He says 'bad man got fire in bottle,' and Sister Marie says 'better to have fire in bottle then fire in bush.'"

"Sister Marie?" Stan asked, with a glance at the old woman. "Is that her name?"

The girl nodded. "Yes. She is my grandma."

"But—how did she come to be named Sister Marie?"

"Oh, long time ago my grandma born at mission, and her mamma name her Sister Marie because she liked Sister Marie."

"And what's your name?"

"My name Helene Bovee."

"And the kids, here—whose kids are they?"

The girl shook her head. "We don't know. My brother found 'em."

"Found 'em!"

"Yes. Two summers ago my brother go north to look for trap-ground. Far beyond Nelson River he found cabin by lake. On bunk in cabin is dead Indian man which stink very bad. My brother follow trail to spring, and find Indian woman in shelter tarp very sick and two little babies, very hungry. And my brother feed babies fish soup and berries, but woman can't eat, and next day she died, and my brother bury her and burn cabin and man which stink, and bring babies home and give 'em to my grandma."

"Where is your brother now?"

The girl pointed northeastward down the river. "He hunt seal."

"Seal! You mean down to the Bay?"

"No. Spotted seal. Make warm coats for winter. Spotted seal come up and catch fish in rivers and lakes."

"How come you to be up that river? Do you live there?"

"Yes. But cabin burn up now. When fire come we put babies in canoe, and clothes, and grub and blankets and come down river. But in rapids where river come through ridge we run on rock and smash canoe. Sister Marie grab babies and I try to grab grub. But grub is gone, clothes are gone, and I grab blankets. And we try to run away from fire, but we fall down on rocks and then you come and take us in canoe. You good man. If you do not take us in canoe we burn up. We cannot get away from fire."

"That's nothing. Forget it. I had plenty of room—of course I'd take you."

The girl eyed the canoe, and shook her head. "It is not nothing. You have seen the fire. You know you have not much time. You can go downriver fast and save yourself. But you see us, you come upriver and take us in canoe. Most men would say 'too many people—too much load!' You know maybe you die, too. But you come and get us. I do not forget that. Sister Marie does not forget that. And my brother will not forget that when he knows."

Stan grinned and pointed at the two children, who were at the water's edge sniffing at the packsack like hungry puppies. "Look—the poor little cusses are hungry. We'll throw the stuff out of the canoe and feed 'em. I could eat a good square meal myself—and I'll bet you and Sister Marie could, too. I've got plenty of grub."

"Plenty grub for one is not plenty grub for five," the girl replied. She turned and spoke rapidly to the old woman, and stepping to the canoe, began to lift out the packs. As Stan joined her she asked, "You got fish line?"

"Sure."

She pointed to the mouth of a creek that flowed into the river a short distance downstream. "You catch trout," she ordered. "I fix bark basket and make babies pick berries. Sister Marie make fire and put on water. I take stones and kill spruce hens, and maybe ptarmagin, or rabbit. All work. Get plenty grub."

"Well, I'll be damned," Stan grinned. "You've got it all worked out to a system, haven't you?"

When he returned twenty minutes later with four fine speckled trout he found the tea pail bubbling merrily over the fire, while at the water's edge the girl was skinning and cleaning a rabbit and half a dozen spruce hens. Beside the fire, the old woman was fashioning plates and cups from birch bark. In a nearby raspberry patch the two tots were industriously picking the red berries from bushes higher than their heads.

The light line Joe Taylor had added to Stan's equipment had been stretched between two trees and his own blankets, and those salvaged by the girl from their overturned canoe were drying in the wind.

When the meal was finished and the last bone picked clean, Stan turned to the girl. "Where do we go from here?" he asked, and pointed across the river where the fire still raged among the ridges. "We can't go back there—that's a cinch."

THE girl shook her head. "No. We stay this side. Fire not cross Albany River. North side no good no more—no good for hunt and trap." She pointed upstream. "Many years ago white trapper built cabin four miles up small river and he is dead because of the great sickness. It is a good cabin. We live in it one winter. We go there now."

"How far from here is this river?"

"Not far—two, three miles. We call it Cabin River. But first I take canoe and cross river so Pierre know where to find us. You got pencil?"

"Yes. Can you write?"

The girl nodded. "Read and write pretty good. I went to school at mission. But not so good as Pierre. He studied at mission ten years and then two years in Toronto."

"Pierre's your brother, eh? When do you expect him back?"

"Yes, my brother. He come back when he kill four, five seal. But if he see smoke he come back quick to see if we burn up."

"How far downriver does he have to go for these seals? That's a new one on me. I didn't know seals could live in fresh water."

"Many kinds of seals in Bay—only spotted seal come up the rivers. Sometimes come here—one hundred and fifty miles from Bay. Pierre go downriver till he find seals." Picking up the axe, the girl cut a twelve-foot sapling, which she peeled with her belt knife, and with the knife cut a square of white bark from a nearby birch tree. With the pencil Stan handed her she wrote in studiously formed letters:

"We all right. Gone Cabin River.

"Helene."

And splitting the top of the sapling, she placed the note firmly in the slit, and stepped to the canoe.

"I'll go with you," Stan said. "Two can make better time than one, and we want to get to that cabin before dark."

The girl spoke a few words to the old woman, and they shoved off. The fire had burned to the river in a dozen places, and over the whole country hung a heavy pall of smoke. Heading into the mouth of the river down which they had come, the girl thrust the sharpened sapling firmly into the sandy bottom in midstream where it would

be safe from the fire, and where the brightly gleaming peeled pole could not fail to attract the attention of anyone heading into the river.

They returned to the south shore to find the packs all in order, the damp blankets neatly folded, and Sister Marie seated upon a rock, placidly contemplating the scene of destruction that stretched along the opposite side of the river as far as the eye could reach. On a nearby grassy slope the two children lay asleep, curled together like a pair of puppies.

THE abandoned cabin was reached just at sundown, and proved to be in fairly good condition. Helene removed the dry branches from the bunks, and fashioning a broom from a sapling and a bundle of spruce twigs, swept the floor clean of its litter of dead spruce needles and the droppings of innumerable rabbits and porcupines, while Sister Marie collected armfuls of fresh boughs for the two bunks. When she finished this task she deftly dressed out a fat porcupine she had knocked over with the axe, while between them, Stan and Helene managed to kill four spruce hens and three ruffed grouse with stones. In this knocking over birds with stones the girl proved an adept, rarely missing her bird, and laughing heartily at Stan's rather sketchy marksmanship.

Supper was cooked over an open fire, and when it was over Stan set up his shelter tarp at the edge of the tiny clearing.

Helene protested. "Plenty of room in cabin," she said. "Babies can sleep on floor."

"No, let 'em have one of the bunks. I'm all right out here. My sleeping bag's dry. But how about the blankets? They're still pretty damp. The kids might catch cold sleeping in wet blankets—you and Sister Marie, too."

The girl shook her head. "Not catch cold. Wet blankets warm as dry blankets. Must not put wet blanket down and lie on it. When blankets get wet, leave clothes on, and sleep on boughs. Put more boughs on top of you, so blankets don't wet clothes, then pull blankets over you—you sleep warm and not catch cold. When Pierre comes we go back and get stove and dishes."

"You mean back up that river—to the cabin you just left? Cripes—that stove won't be any good, nor the dishes, either! A burning cabin makes a hot fire. The heat would warp the stove all out of shape—might even melt it down."

Helene smiled. "Stove all right. Dishes too. Before we go away, Sister Marie and I put dishes in oven and put stove and stovepipe in river where fire can't hurt."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Stan exclaimed, a look of frank admiration in his eyes. "You sure know all the tricks, don't you?"

Did the girl flush under his words of commendation? Or was it a trick of the gathering dusk? Stan wondered. She looked away. "We save dishes and stove, but we do not save ourselves. You know best trick. You save people." They had strolled to the bank of the river as they talked and were seated on a huge moss-covered rock about the base of which the water purled and gurgled. After a moment of silence she returned her glance to his face. "Where you going when you found us running away from fire?"

"You trapper?"

Stan smiled. "I wasn't going anywhere in particular—just happened to head up that river. I figured on building a shack and wintering in there, if I found a likely spot."

"Well, no—not exactly. I've trapped some." He suddenly remembered the words of Joe Taylor—Indians are about like other folks. Keep on the good side of 'em an' they won't talk—any more than white folks would. Surely these people felt kindly toward him. Maybe it would be best to tell the girl frankly why he was here. Yes, decidedly it would be best—for if they did not know there was a reason against it, they might casually mention his

presence to other Indians, or to some passing trapper, or trader. He leaned forward. "You see, Helene," he began, "I came here to get away from the police. They think I killed a man in a fight. I did not kill him—had nothing to do with the killing. But the police believe that I did. So they tried to arrest me and put me in jail. But twice I got away from them and I came here. If they catch me they will hang me, because two men lied and said they saw a knife in my hand—and the man was killed with a knife. But I had no knife."

THE dark eyes of the girl gazed steadily into his own, and her ears drank in every word. "But what you do here, in this country, if you do not trap?"

"Why, I figured I could kill enough game and catch enough fish to winter through on."

"But—after winter comes spring, and summer—and then more winters and springs and summers—many more, for you are not much older than I. Surely you do not want, all your life, just to eat."

"Well—no, of course not. But that's all I've got to worry about, right now. In the spring, after the police get tired of watching all the trains, I figure I can slip out and go back—not where I came from, but some other place—down in the States, maybe."

"Why did you come into bush? Why not go down to States at first?"

"I like the bush—that's why. I like to explore new rivers and new lakes—like to find out what lies beyond the next ridge—like to smell spruce smoke—not like we're smelling it now," he added, with a grin, "I mean the smoke of a campfire. I like to hunt and fish. And I like to lie and look up at the stars at night, and dip water out of a cold spring, and paddle a canoe, and—oh, I like everything about the bush—guess I'm just made that way."

"Then," persisted the girl, "why go out of bush in spring? You cannot do these things in States."

"Well, cripes—a man's got to do something! Like you said, he can't just eat all his life."

"But if a man who loves bush country would learn to trap, he could live in bush country all his life. He could marry—someone who also loves bush country, and who knows how to live in bush—and those two could go far away and find new rivers and new lakes, and go on and on to new places where police never find them."

The girl was not looking at him now. Her eyes were upon the spruce spires beyond the little clearing. As Stan glanced at her silhouetted against the lurid red sky to the northward, he suddenly realized that she was beautiful—with her black hair caught up and tied with a beaded band of red cloth, her complexion, the rich, creamy brown of weathered ivory, her half parted lips, and the strong full column of her throat rising from the open collar of her shirt to meet the delicate curve of her chin.

"They would have to go to the posts to trade," he said. "And then the police would hear about the man, and would come and take him away. And without a trapping license, he could not sell his fur."

"But woman could get license, and go to posts and trade—and factors and police would never know."

Stan laughed. "You're all right, Helene! You figure everything out, don't you? I'll bet you could live in the bush from now on, without any trouble at all."

There was no answering smile on the lips of the girl. "At first we live at mission, long time ago Pierre and I go to school. Then my mama die in the great sickness, and I go live with my grandpa and grandma on Albany River, but Pierre stay and work at mission and go to school. My grandpa is good trapper and then bear kill him."

"A bear!"

"Yes. Bear is in trap. When my grandpa does not come home Sister Marie and I go look for him. We find bear in trap and my grandpa is there on ground. He is clawed and bitten very bad, and he is dead.

We think he go too close to kill bear and bear kill him. So Sister Marie kill bear, and we bury my grandpa, and factor sent word to Pierre, in Toronto. And he came to us. And now Pierre is good trapper, too. We have warm clothes, and plenty to eat. And we have credit at post, and not debt, like most trappers. And I trap and hunt, too.

"And in the fall I help Sister Marie dry berries and smoke much fish and meat for winter. So you see I can live in bush country very well."

"That's swell. I'll bet you can. You use your head. But how about your father? Is he dead, too?"

"Yes. But I never saw him. He is French —name Jules Bovee. He work for Company, and he marry my mama at mission. Then, when Pierre is very small little boy my papa go away to fight in big war, and I am born after he is gone, and he don't come back because he is killed across the sea."

The girl ceased speaking and Stan nodded, slowly, his eyes on the lurid sky to the northward. "My dad was killed over there, too," he said. "And I don't remember him. I was a baby when he went away. And now," he added, "some think there's going to be another war."

The dark eyes sought his face. "Another war! Why do they have another war?"

"God knows, I sure don't! Maybe there won't be any I only said that some folks think there'll be one. Some folks that seem to be pretty well posted think the Germans are getting ready to start something over there again."

"They must be terrible people—those Germans," the girl said. "It was Germans who killed my papa. War is not good. Thousands and thousands of men are killed. British, and French, and Americans won the great war—they beat Germans. What good did it do—if Germans who were beaten can start another war?"

"I don't know. Maybe they can't. I don't pretend to keep posted about what's going on over there in Europe. I can't see any good in war, either. I claim we ought to keep out of it, and let Europe settle its own troubles."

The girl nodded. "Yes, here in bush country we do not care what happens so far away. My mama was very sad when my papa did not come back. And other women at mission were sad, too, because their men did not come back either. War cannot be good, if it makes only sorrow and sadness. Germans must be like wolves —always wanting to kill. I am glad there are no Germans in bush country. If I would see one I would shoot him—because they killed my papa."

STAN laughed. "Might be a good idea, at that. This is God's country. We sure don't want 'em over here. Why, jest looking at this country makes a man feel that it's good to be alive."

"Yes," the girl said somberly, "it is good to be alive. But if war comes, Pierre will go, and you will go—and in bush country will be only sadness."

A twig snapped somewhere behind them and Stan turned and peered into the blackness. "A porky, I guess. I've got to go and hang up my packsacks."

The girl smiled, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Not porky. Sister Marie."

"Sister Marie. What's she doing, prowling around in the dark?" Stan whispered.

"She hear what we talk about. She savvy English. But she won't talk English. If a man and a woman go away in the dark she think maybe that is not good. She know you good man because you save us from fire. But—I know she love me very much.

"She is afraid. She has seen many white men in bush country, and most of them no good."

Stan nodded. "So that's it, eh?" he said aloud. "Well, you can tell her she don't need to worry. I don't claim to be so damn good—but there's some things a man won't do."

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUCK HUNT

STAN slept soundly that night, and when he awoke the following morning the sun was an hour high. He drew on his shoes and trousers. Soap in hand and towel thrown over his shoulder, he started for the river. Midway of the clearing he was met by a tall young man of about his own age. It needed no second glance to tell him that this was Helene's brother—a trifle darker in color, but the same finely chisled features.

"I am Pierre Bovee," the man announced. "Helene and Sister Marie have told me of how you saved them from the fire."

Stan grinned, and held out his hand. "My name's Stan Klaska," he said, as the other took the hand. "And as far as saving them goes—all I did was to bring them down the river in my canoe. Hell, anyone would have done it, if they'd had the chance."

"It is easy to say that," the other replied gravely. "But I chose to believe it was the act of a very brave man." He paused and pointed toward the cabin, before the door of which the girl was busy over a fire. "Helene is making breakfast. When you return from the river you will join us. Helene has told me also of your trouble, and that you will winter here on the Albany. That is good. We can make our plans after we have eaten."

"Thanks," Stan said. "I'll be with you in a few minutes." As he proceeded to the river he marveled at the half-breed's manner of speech—entirely different from the idiom used by the girl, until he remembered that she had told him that her brother had spent many years in the mission school and had studied in Toronto. "And he made good use of his time, by the way he talks," he muttered, as he dried himself with his towel. "They're a damned smart pair."

At the conclusion of the meal both men rolled and lighted cigarettes. "You will not be bothered by police in this country," Pierre said, "unless one has followed you in, and there are no white men except those at the posts, one about thirty miles up the Kabinakagami, one a hundred and twenty miles up the Albany, and Albany Fort, on the island at the mouth of the river. There are some Indians—but these will not mention your presence after we have spoken to them."

"I don't believe the police followed me in," Stan said. "I got past the railways with the help of friends. And I slipped past the Kabinakagami post in the dark. I don't think anyone saw me."

"Then we could not do better than to winter here on Cabin River. The fire has ruined the country to the northward, so there should be good trapping here. There is much to be done. Helene will go to the

post for clothing and supplies to replace those lost in the fire. She will return in five days. I will take your canoe and bring the stove and dishes that she and Sister Marie cached in the river. This cabin will not accommodate all of us, so we will build a small one for you. While we are gone you can be cutting the poles for the cabin. The babies will gather moss, and Sister Marie will rechink this cabin, and then work on the seal skins I brought from downriver. When we return we will build your cabin, and also a meat cache and a smoke house. Then you and Helene and I will hunt and fish and lay in a supply of meat which Sister Marie will smoke for the winter. She will also dry the berries that

the babies will pick. Helene will bring a pair of hinges for your door. You will need a stove and some pipe, but I will get those later."

"I brought a pair of hinges, and some heavy paper to grease for a window, and a couple of pounds of spikes," Stan said.

"All right. Then let's get to work. I'll be back in a couple of days and by that time you should have the poles cut. A small cabin will be best—about eight by ten. There is a stand of good spruce around the next bend. Green spruce is heavy. We will save much time and work by building your cabin there."

STAN grinned to himself as he shouldered his axe a few minutes later and struck out for the spruce grove. Already Helene and Pierre had departed in the canoes, the two children were collecting moss in a blanket, and with a hand-axe Sister Marie was fashioning a chinking wedge from a piece of green spruce. "What a camp boss he'd make," he muttered to himself. "Got everybody busy doing the thing they can do best without wasting a minute. No wonder they've got credit at the post, instead of debt. By God, he's smart—and Helene's smart! They know what it's all about—those two."

With the cabin completed, the hunting and fishing began. Gray trout and doré and northern pike were netted in the lakes, brought in to be split and smoked by Sister Marie in the smokehouse that had been built behind the cabin, and stored for the winter on the meat cache.

One evening as Stan and Helene were returning from a nearby lake with their packs of fish, they shot a moose. While Stan dressed it out, the girl cut and peeled a half-dozen saplings which she arranged about the carcass. "Too late to pack in. Too heavy to hang up," she said. "Wolves think we make trap. Tomorrow we cut him up and pack him in."

That evening when supper was over the girl turned to Pierre. "We kill moose. Tomorrow we cut up and pack in. You go to post get two bags of flour. Nights get cold now—bring stove and pipe for Stan's cabin. Bring two barrels and some salt. Ducks and geese soon go south. We salt some down for winter."

Pierre nodded. "I want a few more fox traps, too, and a couple of nets."

Reaching into his pocket, Stan tossed some bills onto the table. "I'm paying my share," he said. "And you'd better pick up some traps for me. I'm not going to sit around all winter. I'm going to trap, too—that is if there's room in the country without bothering you."

Pierre smiled. "Plenty of room," he said. "But keep your money. You can pay me later. I have credit at the post. If I offered them money someone might wonder where it came from. And that might start talk that would get to the police."

"All right," Stan agreed, pocketing the money. "Get five or ten pounds of candy for the kids. They've worked like the devil—picked enough raspberries, and blueberries, and gooseberries, and saskatoons so we've got thirty or forty quarts after they're dried—and now they're picking cranberries."

Helene shook her head. "No candy. Bad for babies teeth. No dentist in bush country. Got to keep teeth good."

"Guess you're right, at that," Stan agreed. "Fetch me out three or four pounds of tobacco, though."

The next day, under Helene's expert direction, the moose was cut up. Stan smiled as he surveyed the pile of bones to which clung not an ounce of edible flesh, and the array of meat cut into strips ready for smoking. "I thought I knew something about cutting up meat," he said. "But this has got me beat."

The girl laughed. "No good to pack bone home to throw away. You love the bush—you learn. You learn to trap, too. Maybe you stay in bush country."

Despite her laughter Stan detected a wist-

ful note in the girl's voice. His eyes swept the panorama of spruce spires and sparkling water and came to rest upon a distant ridge bathed in the soft haze of early autumn. "Who wouldn't love the bush country," he said, more to himself than to the girl. "Maybe I will stay—who knows?"

"And if we get tired of one place," the girl said, falling into his mood, "always there are more rivers beyond."

He nodded gravely. "Yes—that's the bush. Always new rivers calling."

As they packed the meat into the sacks, Stan stayed the girl's hand. "That's enough in yours," he said. "It's a good four miles to camp, and we've got three trips to make."

"Ho! Yours is more full—and I can pack as much as you!" And pack it she did. Three trips they made that day, and in the evening, with no slightest hint of weariness in her movements, she helped Sister Marie string the meat on the smoking wires.

Pierre returned with the supplies, and the following morning he said, "We'll go for ducks, today. I stopped to look in a marshy lake three or four miles downriver, and there are thousands of ducks."

"I wish I had a shotgun," Stan said. "I've got plenty of shells left, but it's going to be slow work picking them off one at a time with the twenty-two."

Pierre smiled. "I like the shotgun, too. It is fine sport to shoot ducks on the wing. But shotgun shells are costly and heavy to pack, and in the bush we must get ducks for meat, and not for sport. You can leave the little rifle home, too, and save the ammunition for rabbits and ptarmagin in the winter. We will take both canoes, and the nets."

As Pierre said, there were literally thousands of ducks on the marshy lake that lay just over a ridge from the river. The birds rose in clouds, as the three reached the shore of the lake, wheeled and circled about and settled back onto the water. The lake was shallow, only a few inches of water covering the muck bottom which furnished an ideal bed for a lush growth of the water plants that are the natural food of the surface-feeding ducks. Patches of open water, black with ducks, were connected by natural channels through the wild rice and cat tails and rushes, varying in width from a few feet to several yards.

As Helene cut two slender saplings, Pierre slipped one of the canoes into the water, and turned to Stan. "Wait here and you will see how we set our trap," he said.

The girl took her place in the bow, facing aft. Pierre poled into a thick stand of rice, and as the light craft moved slowly forward Helene bent the straw over the canoe with the sticks, and beat the grain from the heads, causing it to fall into the canoe. When some twenty-five or thirty pounds had been collected they returned to shore, cut ten or a dozen more saplings, took the nets aboard, and paddled across the open water to a channel probably six feet in width that led off through a thick stand of round rushes. Thrusting the saplings into the muck they strung the nets upon them in such manner as to form an enclosed tunnel of netting with its open end flush with the entrance to the channel. Then they strewed rice the length of the tunnel, and scattered it before the entrance where it lay plainly visible on the black muck scarce six inches below the surface of the water.

A PORTION of net to which was attached a string some thirty yards in length, was neatly folded above the entrance in such manner that a jerk of the string would cause the net to drop and imprison any ducks within the trap.

Paddling to shore Helene stepped out and Pierre shoved off, picked up the end of the string, and shoving into the rushes at a point that afforded a view of the mouth of the trap. Then he stretched himself in the bottom of the canoe with the end of the string in his hand.

"Now," the girl said, "we paddle to

other end and ducks come down here and see rice on bottom and swim in trap."

Stepping into the canoe, the two moved slowly up the lake. Ducks swam lazily out of their way, some almost within paddle's reach, making ever widening V's on the mirror-like surface of the water. Others rose into the air in flocks, circled, and settled onto the water behind them. Stan noted black ducks, mallards, blue-, and green-winged teals, pintails, and widgeons.

The lake was nearly a mile long, and as they neared the upper end of it, Stan trailed his paddle. "Just look," he said, "the water's black with ducks, and I'll bet we can't see the half of 'em, what with all that are hid in the rushes. If a man would fire a gun in here he'd scare up ten thousand ducks!"

"I scare 'em, you count 'em," the girl smiled, and raising her paddle brought it flat down on the water with a resounding crack. There was a roar like the thunder of surf on a beach, as the birds took wing, and the air above the lake filled with circling wheeling bodies. A few flocks circled higher and higher, and left the lake, disappearing into the blue beyond the spruce tops, but for the most part, they settled back onto the water toward the lower end of the lake. "Now we hide and pretty soon Pierre spring trap and kill ducks, and set trap again. Then we scare 'em up again."

Shoving into the rice, the two waited. A family of coots, their ivory white bills contrasting sharply with their black heads, moved jerkily about busily snatching bits of food from the surface. A tiny grebe swam close, cocking his head to eye the two intruders with mild suspicion, then without so much as rippling the water, sank beneath the surface. Somewhere back in the forest a pileated woodpecker hammered loudly on a dead stub.

Idly Helene gathered a few heads of rice and shelled them out in her palm. "Rice is good, this year," she said. "We will come back next week and gather some before ducks and mud hens and blackbirds get it all."

"What do you want with wild rice?" Stan asked.

"Why—to eat. Have you not eaten it? It is much better to eat than white rice you buy at post. It is very good in winter with meat. We will get many bags of it."

"We'd better lay in some more meat, too," Stan said. "I noticed some fresh moose sign as we came in."

"We have meat enough," Helene said. "If we kill more meat now, we must smoke it or salt it. Smoked meat and salt meat is good, if you cannot get fresh meat. But fresh meat is better. We will wait till cold weather comes—then we will kill moose and caribou, too. We keep it frozen on cache."

Stan smiled. "Gosh, I thought I knew something about the bush—but I don't know the half of it. Why—a man can live like a king and never see another town!"

Slowly the girl nodded, her dark eyes on his face. Yes, and you will learn—because you love bush country. Tell me—would you like to never see another town?"

"Why——" He hesitated, as visions of Blind River—Thessalon—the Soo—Rose Brady—Jack McVane—the dance, with big "Moose" Sanjon thumping away on the drum, and the blare of the saxophone—Spikey's place—the fight in the fog—and Joe Bedore lying there, half on the sidewalk, half in the street. "Why, I—I don't know, Helene." The parting words of Rose Brady seemed suddenly to sear themselves upon his brain: "Go to the bush! Men like you don't belong in a town!" "Maybe she's right," he said aloud. "Maybe I don't belong in a town."

"Who is right?" the words cracked like a pistol shot upon the silence, and Stan saw that the dark eyes were boring into his own.

"Oh—a girl I knew—a girl, back in a town."

"And—you will go back to her?" the

voice sounded suddenly dull and toneless.

Stan shook his head. "No, I can't go back. The police would put me in jail."

"But — if there were no police — then would you go back?"

Stan smiled. "If there were no police I'd never have been here in the first place."

But Helene did not smile. The dark eyes seemed to glow with a peculiar intensity. "This girl—is she beautiful?"

Stan nodded. "Yes, she's—"

The words were interrupted by the thunderous roar of wings, and once again the air above the lake was filled with ducks.

"Pierre has sprung trap and is now killing ducks," the girl said, in a dull, flat voice. "He will set it again, and again we will scare ducks down to him."

Three times the performance was repeated. Each time more and more ducks left the lake and went winging away over the treetops. But in the waits between, no word was spoken in the canoe. Stan drowsed in the warm sunshine, while Helene sat in moody silence.

CHAPTER XV

WAR

WINTER passed. It was a good winter. There was plenty of meat on the cache, and the fur-bearers were plentiful along the lakes and the streams of the bush country. Each of the three maintained their own traplines, and there was much good natured rivalry between them. Sister Marie attended to the cooking and looked after the two children. Not once during the winter did Helene bring up the subject that had been interrupted on the little lake, nor did she again inquire about Stan's plans for the future—albeit, they were thrown much together, and from her he learned many a trick of the trapline.

The break-up came in April. By the end of May the last of the snow had disappeared and the Albany ran free of ice.

Early in June, Pierre made up the packs of fur to be taken to the post for the spring trading. On the eve of his departure, he stepped over to Stan's cabin.

"I'll take your fur in and trade it for you," he said. "There will be many Indians at the post for the trading, and a sprinkling of white trappers. It is better that you do not show up there. I have spoken to those Indians we have seen during the winter—and they will say nothing. Better make out your list of supplies tonight, because Helene and I will be starting before daylight."

"Helene! Is she going too?"

Pierre smiled. "Oh, yes. There is much feasting and dancing and gaiety at the post at the time of the trading, and Helene loves it. She is a funny girl—Helene."

"She's a damn smart girl," Stan said.

"Yes, she is a good girl—and smart. She is much smarter than she appears to be. She can speak as correctly as I do—but she will not. Many half-breeds are ashamed of their Indian blood — but Helene is proud of hers. For myself, I do not consider it, one way or another. It is but an accident of birth. Helene is proud of her Indian blood—and of her white blood, too. She speaks with Indians always in the Indian tongue—but with white people she speaks in a peculiar clipped idiom of her own. It is as though she were deliberately flaunting her Indian blood in their faces."

"You have a good education," Stan said. "I went through high school, but I can't talk like you do."

Pierre nodded. "I had two years in Toronto—beyond high school," he said simply. "It was my wish to become a doctor—but circumstances did not permit." He paused and smiled. "At least," he said, "I am a good trapper."

"How long will you be gone?" Stan asked.

"Three weeks. Possibly a month. The spring trading is something more than just a time of barter. It is a time when the

people of the bush country gather at the posts to learn what has happened during the past year—this one has died, to that one a baby was born, those two were married. Old acquaintances are renewed and new ones are made. The people from far and wide camp at the post, and in the daytime they talk and listen to the news of the outside world that issues from the factor's radio. And in the evening there is feasting and dancing as the radio blares out music until far into the night."

"We could get a portable radio," Stan said.

PIERRE shook his head, "I bought one two years ago. They are not practical so far back in the bush. The batteries soon go dead, and there is no means of recharging them."

In the chill half-light that preceded the dawn the following morning, Stan stood with Pierre beside the loaded canoe. The door of the cabin opened, and Helene came toward them across the clearing. He gasped.

Never in all his life, he thought, had he seen a creature so lovely. Never before had he seen her except in the rough clothing of the outlands—woolen shirt, coarse denim trousers, and pacs or moccasins, according to the time of year. But now—her short skirt of plaid wool set off her shapely legs clad in flesh-colored silk stockings. She wore low-heeled shoes of brown leather, and about her shoulders was thrown a cape of dark blue cloth. She wore no hat, and through the high-piled mass of raven hair was thrust a huge eagle feather dyed a flaming red.

He took a sudden step forward, as she paused beside him. "Helene!" he said. "I—why do you go? I didn't know you were going."

Her lips smiled, and there was a sparkle in the dark eyes, "Oh, I like to go to post for trading. I like to buy things. I like to dance. Do you like to dance?"

"No," he growled, "I hate it!" And turning abruptly, he strode away into the gloom.

With the passing of the days Stan was conscious of a strange restlessness. Pierre and Helene had taken both canoes for the transportation of the supplies. He chopped and split many cords of firewood for the coming winter, piling it in neat ranks to dry.

He tramped up and down the banks of the river, snatching big speckled trout from the deep pools. The ducks and the geese had returned to the northland, and he varied the fish diet with the birds he shot with the .22 on a little lake a mile back from the river. Upon these excursions he was accompanied by the two children who adored him, and with whom he had learned to converse in a peculiar home-made jargon—half English, half Indian.

Sister Marie had washed out one of the barrels in which the ducks had been salted, and in the long evening he would sit by the hour beside the smudge and watch her meticulously examine each winter garment, mending a tear here, sewing on a button there, before packing it away in the barrel between layers of the cedar twigs that protected it from the moths. Sister Marie spoke no word—nor did Stan make any comment when he noticed that his own winter clothing was mended and placed in the barrel along with the rest. Often, as he glanced into the inscrutable black eyes of the ancient crone, he would wonder what she was thinking. And often as he returned to his own cabin he would turn aside and throw himself down upon the huge rock that overlooked the river—the moss-covered rock upon which he and Helene had sat the night the twig snapped behind them—and lie for hours, staring down into the star-dappled water.

Two weeks passed and one day Stan looked up from his woodchopping to see Pierre standing beside the pile of split wood. "What!" he cried, sinking his axe into a stump, and wiping the sweat from

his forehead. "Back already! I wasn't expecting you for another week."

Pierre's face was grave. "We returned sooner than we expected," he said. "I am going to enlist."

"Enlist! Enlist in what?"

"In the army—to fight the damned Germans."

"You're crazy—the Germans won't start another war!"

Pierre smiled grimly. "It is not I who am crazy. It is this man, Hitler. He has lighted a torch that has set the whole world a-fire."

"I'll say he's crazy! Why, the whole world will be against him! The damn fool will be licked before he can get started!"

"Unfortunately, he is not alone—and it is the rest of the world that is getting licked before it can get started."

"What do you mean?"

"There was no dancing at the post, and no gaiety. Many of the young men are already in the army. Day and night the radio is blaring out the news—and it is all bad. I can give you but a brief summary of what has been happening in Europe—on the first of September Germany invaded Poland—one week after signing a peace pact with Russia. On the third of September Britain and France declared war upon Germany. The German army swept through Poland, bombing the cities, sweeping everything before their onrushing tanks. Warsaw fell after a desperate but futile defense — and at the end of the month Germany and Russia divided Poland between them. And since then the Germans have murdered thousands of Poles, some by starvation in stinking concentration camps, and others by standing them up before a wall and shooting them. In November Russia invaded Finland, and in March Finland surrendered. In April Germany invaded Denmark and Norway. In May Winston Churchill succeeded Mr. Chamberlain as British Prime Minister."

Into Stan's brain flashed the words of Slim Taylor. "An old man with an umbrella is a hell of a thing to fight a war with. How about the Munich pact?" he asked.

"Just another scrap of paper for Germany to tear up," Pierre replied. "But wait—you haven't heard the half of it. On the tenth of May the German army swept into Belgium and Holland—and on the twenty-seventh the Belgium army surrendered, and left the British army that had crossed into Belgium, unsupported, trapped, and facing utter annihilation between the onrushing German army and the sea. It was the first contingent of an expeditionary force, and in no way capable of facing Hitler's hordes.

"Those soldiers fought bravely, valiantly—desperately. But it would have been a futile fight had it not been for the people of Britain, and the navy. Transports, cruisers, destroyers, mine-sweepers, corvettes—every ship the navy could summon, rushed to the coast to evacuate them. But it would not have been enough had it not been for the people of Britain—the lawyers, the doctors, the shoe-clerks, the cab-drivers, lords, earls, and what have you, who piled into small boats, private launches, tiny motor boats—anything and everything that would float with a few soldiers aboard — and dashed across the channel in the face of gun-fire and bombs and machine-gun bullets from the air—and they got those soldiers off to the last man, except the dead and wounded. My God, man!" Pierre cried, his eyes alight, "It was the damndest—the grandest thing that has occurred in all history—that evacuation of Dunkirk! It was completed on the fourth of June—and on the tenth, Norway capitulated. On the eleventh, Italy declared war on France and Britain—and on the seventeenth France quit cold, and surrendered almost without a fight. And on the twenty-second, that's night before last, it was announced over the radio that France and Germany had signed an armistice. And Hitler is threatening to invade England."

The man paused, as Stan stood there, half stunned by the news — unable to grasp the magnitude—the horror of it. "And so, you see," Pierre continued, "how Germany is being licked before she got a chance to get started. And you will also see, why I am enlisting. Maybe I, a half Frenchman, may be able, in the Canadian forces, to do my bit in helping to atone for the shame of the people of my father. Sergeant Bliss of the Mounted was at the post urging men to enlist in the army, or the air force, or the navy."

"A policeman—there at the post?"

"Yes—but he made no mention of you. Nor did anyone else. I believe that your presence here is unknown to anyone except ourselves, and the few Indians with whom we came into contact during the winter —and they will not talk."

STAN stood there, his eyes fixed on a beetle with yellow spots that crept slowly up his steeply slanting axe handle, came to the end, and fell off to disappear among the dead leaves and twigs upon the ground. When he looked up Pierre was gone. He sat down on a stump and stared at the neatly piled wood. His brain seemed numb and hopelessly incapable of grasping the import of what he had heard. It was impossible! It couldn't be! Germany might invade Denmark and Norway, and overrun Belgium, and Holland, maybe —little nations, and nations not given to fighting. But not Poland. His grandfather was born in Poland, and he had often told him of the hatred of the Poles for the Germans. Why, the Poles would fight them to the last man! And France—with her Maginot Line, and her seventy-fives. Surely France hadn't quit cold. And England—if Hitler had done his damndest he could never have driven the British army into the sea! It didn't make sense. Nothing that Pierre had told him made sense. Pierre must be wrong. But—Pierre was smart—a man of education. Not a man in whose mind the things that he had heard would become garbled or confused. He recalled the man's straightforward recital of the sequence of events.

No, Pierre could not be wrong.

The words of Slim Taylor flashed into his brain: "It's going to be a long war—and a tough one—because Hitler's ready and we're not."

"Why the hell weren't we ready?" The words leaped from his lips as a surge of anger swept him. The picture Slim Taylor had painted recurred vividly to his mind —France sitting smugly behind her Maginot Line, and England sitting complacently beyond the Channel, and letting Germany arm! Pinning the faith of an Empire on an old man with an umbrella! To hell with 'em! To hell with 'em all! They got themselves into it—now let 'em get out the best way they can! What the hell has war got to do with the bush country?

But—Poland wiped out. It was a fine country. The Poles were a great people. He remembered his grandfather—an admirable old man. Those damned Germans! They had killed his father in the last war. Stan didn't remember his father —he had gone to war the year after he was born—and the next year he had been killed. But his mother had never tired of talking about him—what a wonderful man he was.

And now Hitler was threatening to invade England—to conquer the British, as he had already conquered the rest of Europe! Why, if they licked England—and the British navy—they would come over here! This was part of the British Empire. And hell, the Americans would never let them cross the Atlantic—the Canadians would have the Americans to back them up in their fight as part of Britain's Empire. They'd fight 'em till there wasn't an American or a Canadian left big enough to cock a gun! But—were the Americans ready? Was Canada ready? Maybe we on this side of the ocean have been sitting back sucking our thumbs, too. Maybe Hitler would catch us with our pants down

—like he caught those other countries. Mechanically Stan felt his beard. It was a thick beard, curly, and of a rich chestnut color. Deliberately he got to his feet, walked to the river, and stared down at his image reflected upon the clear surface. He smiled down at the reflection of the bearded face and the long hair curling about the collar of his shirt. He looked old—forty, maybe. No one who had ever known him would recognize him. Jimmie McVane wouldn't recognize him — nor Rose Brady. Rose Brady. "Go to the bush. Men like you don't belong in a town." And then—coming toward him across the little clearing in the early morning half-light was Helene—Helene with her plaid skirt, her blue cape—and the bright red feather in her hair.

He got to his feet and started for the cabin of the Bovees. Turning aside, he ascended the huge rock and sat down on its mossy surface. And Helene came to him there.

HE GLANCED up at her as she stood beside him, beaded moccasins on her feet, coarse denim trousers, bloused shirt open at the throat—and thrust through the high-piled raven hair, the feather of flaming red. His glance met the dark eyes squarely. She said no word—stood there gazing silently down into his eyes. He cleared his throat roughly. "I'm going away, Helene," he said, a bit gruffly. "Pierre and I—we're going to the war."

The girl nodded.

"Yes. I know. I knew that you would go."

"Sure I'll go! We've got to lick those damned Germans—stop 'em from coming over here—to the bush country."

Again she nodded. "The Germans killed my father," she said. "And maybe they will kill Pierre—and you. I would not stop you if I could. I will stay here and fish, and hunt, and trap, and take care of Sister Marie and babies."

"God—Helene—you—I hate to think of you—here in the bush alone."

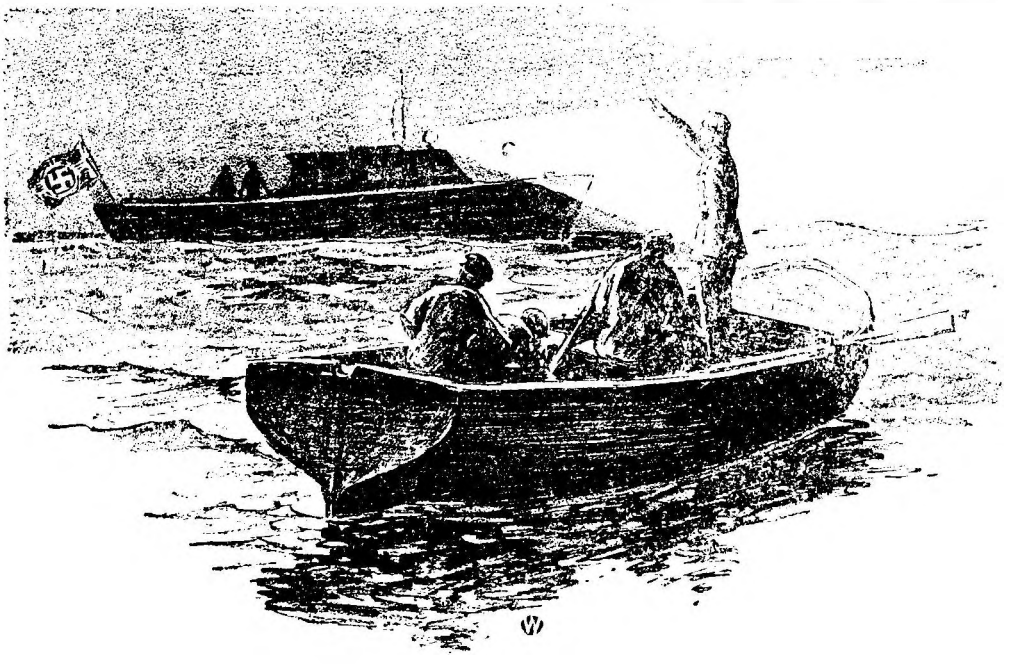
"I will not be alone. We are safe, here. War will not come to bush country."

"You're a grand girl, Helene—and a brave one. I'll be thinking of you—over there."

"It is all that I can do," she said, and her voice sounded somehow strange, and wooden. "But you can go and fight. You will think of me—sometimes. And when war is over—if you are not killed—you will go back—to girl in town—who is beautiful——" the words ended in a half-stifled sob, and the next instant she was gone.

(*Part III in the next* SHORT STORIES)

". . . . Also We Had Our Desperation. For One Cannot Live Among the Boches Without Growing Desperate"



THE MUSKETEERS AND THE SERGEANT

By C. P. DONNEL

THAT day, Monsieur, as on other days, Petit-Jean and Christian and I labored with the men of Auxelles, carrying sand to the gun emplacement the Germans were building on the hill that looks toward England.

At noon, as we sat in the shade and chewed our sawdust bread and potatoes, none speaking, the *sous-officier* of the Boche guard strutted among us.

"The tomorrow, at dawn," he bellowed in his pig's French, "you will foregather in the Place Napoleon. Motors will take you where you are needed for other work." And he departed to his own *dejeuner*.

Baptiste, once notary of Auxelles, who has a wife and children, called after him, "Where do you send us?" The Boche did not answer. Baptiste let fall his bread and stared out across the gleaming water. Petit-Jean recovered the bread and held it out, but Baptiste did not see it.

I looked at Petit-Jean. His big eyes and thin face reflected my own thought. We two eyed Christian, seated apart. He glanced quickly away; he, too, was afraid. His cheeks were as gray as the bread he

was crumbling between his thick fingers.

I had little fear for Petit-Jean, Monsieur, but Christian— And he was indispensable to us, because of his strength. We could not do without him.

So that afternoon, as we were passing the most brutish of the Boche guard, I tripped Christian, who was ahead of me, and he fell forward, the sand spilling from his pannier. The guard, furious, ran up and struck him across the face, braying "Saboteur!" When Christian regained his place in line I saw the bruise along his temple, and his square face was red as a signal of danger.

"Tonight," I whispered, turning my head, that he might not see my lips trembling. Circumstances had made me the leader, Monsieur, because I have attended schools and read books and speak English and a bit of German. A leader must inspire confidence. This I read in my uncle's book concerning the great Bonaparte.

"*Bien*," growled Christian.

No need to inform Petit-Jean. As we straggled downhill to load more sand, he edged up beside me, his great eyes burning in his pinched face.

"Tonight, Etienne?" he breathed, and I nodded. He smiled, and I pretended not to see the sudden ague which seized him. It was but a weakness of the body, Monsieur. Petit-Jean has the soul of fire, as you shall hear.

I take no shame for our fears, Monsieur. The hand of the Boche, swift and heavy, does not distinguish between man and boy. I have but sixteen years, Monsieur; Christian eighteen, and Petit-Jean fifteen, but we knew with a dreadful certainty what would be done if we were apprehended in an attempt to escape to England.

AN HOUR of daylight remained when, the work over, we three trudged silently back to Auxelles. Like Bonaparte, Monsieur, I tried to weigh our chances without emotion.

Our deficiencies were many. Our boat was ancient. Moreover, we must smuggle our food and water and our sail aboard, for to be seen provisioning a small boat tells its own story to any Boche on the coast of France. And sails are forbidden to Frenchmen. And all this must be done at the Quai Municipal of Auxelles, where all craft not in German service must be kept. Moreover, there was the E-boat patrol outside the harbor. Pass beyond this patrol, even by accident, and there is no warning. Oh, no! They race up shooting from a machine-gun. That was how the fisherman Guilette and his two nephews died.

In our favor, Monsieur, I counted our youth, since they would be less likely to suspect boys. We had eight loaves, for which Petit-Jean had stolen the ration tickets, and two tins of water—concealed, with our sail, between the stones where the Quai joins the breakwater. Also, we had our desperation, since one cannot live among the Boches without growing desperate. And each evening when the water was calm we had gone fishing, openly and never more than a demi-kilometer beyond the harbor's mouth, returning always by full darkness, laughing and singing. Several times we presented fish to Boche soldiers on the Quai.

ADD to this the one great advantage which I prefer not to mention, Monsieur, and you see, we had a chance.

Greatest of my worries was our morale, especially that of Christian, who has a mother.

These were my thoughts as we tramped down the narrow street to the Quai-side. As we turned the corner by the café and came upon the harbor, my heart began to pound as though it would burst. The Quai was ours—for the moment! It was deserted. Not a Boche in sight. God was with us.

Christian commenced to sniff in his nose. That meant he was afraid. And he is a stubborn animal, that Christian.

"TO THE boat, Christian!" I spoke before apprehension could render him useless. "Prepare the oars and unfold the tarpaulin to cover the sail and provisions. *Allez vite!*"

He walked slowly ahead to the Quai, dragging his big feet as though they were stones. Petit-Jean and I dropped over the side of the breakwater. In a few seconds we were back on the Quai, I with our sail, bundled small, and a tin of water, Petit-Jean bearing the loaves and other tin before him so that his body would hide them from the land. I made Petit-Jean walk slowly as we followed Christian. I, too, wanted to rush to the boat and speed miraculously beyond pursuit, but that was not the way.

The Quai was still deserted when we climbed down into the *"Cadet de Gascogne."* My uncle named it after the romance he used to read me. Hastily we shoved the bread, water tins, and sail under the square of tarpaulin in the bow. Then there was a maddening delay while Christian fumbled with an unruly thole pin. Petit-Jean remained in the stern, easily visible from shore, ostentatiously unwinding a fishing line.

Christian drove the thole pin into place with a sudden pressure and turned his head. He was breathing quickly, and before he spoke I read in his face what he would say.

"I must bid farewell to my mother," he said, almost angrily, and reached out to pull himself on to the Quai. This was not good.

"Wait!" I begged. My brain was in a turmoil, Monsieur. Our morale was breaking. I could read it in Petit-Jean's eyes as he watched Christian. Christian's mother took another husband after his father died—Boncocur, the hotelier, who is too friendly with the Boche. Should Christian go into his mother's presence, those red eyes, that not-subtle face would surely betray us.

"Wait!" I pleaded. Without Christian's powerful arms and shoulders our expedition was doomed. And tomorrow we would be transported far from Auxelles and the *"Cadet de Gascogne."* Frantically I searched my mind for one word that would hold us together and make us again the three who had so grimly planned to join the General De Gaulle in England.

"Cadet de Gascogne!" Three men as one!

"Christian," I said, "leave us now and you toss glory away."

He paused. "Glory?" He shook his brown head. "You and your romances, Etienne. Besides"—his eyes avoided mine —"I shall return. I go only to——"

"Glory," I repeated firmly. "You could have been our Porthos, just as Petit-Jean will be our D'Artagnan."

"Porthos?" said Christian, still clinging to the Quai. But he was curious.

"He was the strongest and gentlest of the Three Musketeers," I related. "The boldest and most loyal. His strength served them in time of need. Never did he fail them."

"Romance," sneered Christian, but he was pink with pleasure and made no move to climb upon the Quai. "What has that to do with us, here, now?"

Petit-Jean tugged at my sleeve. "Etienne, who was D'Artagnan?"

I was catching fire from my own words, Monsieur.

"He was the most daring and cunning of the Musketeers," I said, reminding myself I must juggle the legend a trifle, "just as he was the smallest and youngest."

I attacked Christian again. "Porthos is a hero of France, remembered for five hundred years," I lied. "Never did he accept a blow without striking in return. Never was he influenced by fear. Never did he desert his friends."

"And D'Artagnan?" clamored Petit-Jean, squaring his narrow shoulders.

"He risked all for loyalty," I narrated, thrilling in spite of myself. "The motto of the Three Musketeers was 'One for all

and all for one.' " I hesitated deliberately. "Your father did not run away at Sedan last year, Christian."

Christian flushed. "You talk too much," Etienne," he grumbled, letting go the Quai. "Be silent. I am a hero. Petit-Jean is a hero. You are a hero. Shove off—" He seized the oars as I sprang into the bow. "Let us hasten to be heroes. Sit down, Petit-Jean, and balance the boat."

I freed the bow line. The dying sun struck warm across the nape of my neck. Before us the water stretched away to England. "Hurry!" I urged over my shoulder, exulting.

"Yes, hurry," repeated Petit-Jean from the stern. "We shall lose our fish. Hurry, Christian"—his tone was shrill and strange—"before the light is gone."

"Fishing?" This from the Quai above, Monsieur, in poor French. The voice was hard with suspicion, and an icy hand drew itself over my heart. I looked around. Christian and Petit-Jean were staring upward.

"Without bait?" The voice came from a short, square man with cropped pale hair.

Behind his thick-lensed spectacles, Monsieur, his eyes were the eyes of all Nazis—sardonic, overbearing.

He was a German sergeant, Monsieur—a breed my uncle told me has made the German armies greater than their generals. His mud-colored uniform fitted him badly, but it was neat. His right hand rested upon the butt of his pistol.

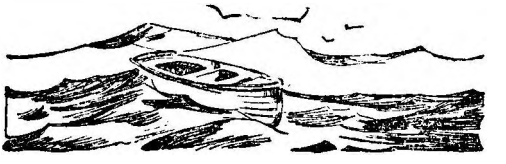
THE eyes of Christian and Petit-Jean appealed wildly to me. I drew breath, pulses thumping in my ears. I reminded myself of our one great advantage over the Boche, and it gave me courage.

"Imbecile!" I addressed Petit-Jean. "Did you forget the fowl's entrails?" I quickly raised a corner of the tarpaulin, in such fashion that the sergeant might see the tin container but not its contents. I laughed, as with relief. "*Voila,* Monsieur," I said, pointing and allowing the tarpaulin to fall back.

The sergeant gazed out across the water. I thought I saw his glance soften, like a man who is fond of the sea.

"Have you a spare fishing line?" he asked Petit-Jean. Before Petit-Jean could reply I answered gaily, "But certainly."

The Boche looked back toward the setting sun as though estimating the hour. A half smile passed his lips and he muttered something that I could not understand. Then he said, in his guttural French, "Make room for me. I shall fish with you."



He sat on the Quai edge and lowered himself into the *Cadet de Gascogne,* which tipped sullenly. Petit-Jean shrank away from him in a fashion that nearly betrayed us. I could sense Petit-Jean's extremity of fear communicating itself to Christian, who sat as though paralyzed with his hands on the oars. From the *Cadet de Gascogne* rose the odor of deceit and fear, and the Boche scented it. He pointed to the thwart on which sat Christian.

"Sit there," he commanded me. "One to each oar. We have not too much time." Then, as I obeyed, "I remind you," he said, "that I swim expertly. No accidents, understand? *Allons!"* Mechanically Christian and I threw our weight into the oar-stroke and the Quai of Auxelles slid away behind us. The meaning of his disposition of us was all too plain. He was taking his pleasure on guard. Christian and I were facing him over the oars, making a surprise assault impossible. Petit-Jean, an emaciated, terrified child, he could afford to ignore.

We had gained the harbor mouth, with its little lighthouse on the north promontory, before the Boche spoke.

"What fish do you catch?" he inquired. He was relaxing now. The hand which had been near his pistol lay on his knee.

"Les marmaux, Monsieur." It was Petit-Jean who replied, and amiably. "They are small, but as cooked by Christian's mother, good."

"Bien." The sergeant smiled. His eyes were on the calm water ahead. "Thou art the great fisherman, *hein?"*

He spoke as though to a young child, but Petit-Jean gave no sign of his resentment as he answered, "For small fish only, Monsieur. I am not good for anything else. I am too weak." There was a profound sadness in his voice and I looked curiously at him. His eyes were deep and staring straight into mine. The first chill of evening was upon us now, and the water darkened as the sun sank.

"But I know the fish, Monsieur," said Petit-Jean, craning his neck that is no larger than Christian's wrist and scanning the water. We were beyond the harbor now, not a kilometer from the inner path of the E-boats. Soon the German would discover that we had no bait—only loaves and tins of water and a sail.

PETIT-JEAN peered into the water close to our stern, rising on his knees to see better. The current was offshore and we were moving out at a good pace. He pointed suddenly.

"See!" he cried. But his voice, high and piercing, did not excite me. No, Monsieur, I felt ill.

"See!" shrilled Petit-Jean. *"Des marmaux!"* Which was absurd, because the marmaux swim deep. The Boche turned and stretched his neck to see. His back was toward Christian and me now. I kicked Christian's ankle.

We were not needed, Monsieur. Petit-Jean flung his arms around the Boche's neck and hurled his thin body over the stern, dragging the man with him. They splashed into the swirl at the stern and we saw Petit-Jean's legs twining themselves about the Boche's body. Just before they sank there was a choking cry as though Petit-Jean had called *"Adieu!"*

Christian, open-mouthed, loosed his oar, and the handle, levered by the water, beat against his chest. I sprang up, a terrible tightness in my throat. I must have become hysterical, Monsieur, for I seem to recall striking Christian on the shoulder and screaming, "Turn the boat! Turn the boat!"

Christian recovered his senses quickly, for he is a good boatman. He thrust me down on the seat. Five seconds, and we were plunging back through the thick dusk. Half a dozen strokes, and I passed my oar handle to Christian and scrambled into the bow, straining my eyes.

What was that in the water a few meters ahead?

"Gently, Christian," I whispered, almost afraid to speak. The drift of the boat would take us to it.

It was a head, Monsieur, and when I saw whose head it was a great dizziness swayed me. "An oar," I shouted. Christian wrenched one free and, climbing up beside me, put it into my hands.

A white hand groped upward from the water and its fingers gripped the gunwale. The Boche had lost his cloth cap, and his pale blonde head was a good target, even in the darkness. I hardened my heart against those upward-looking eyes as I raised the oar handle, for unless the sacrifice of Petit-Jean was to go for nothing, Monsieur, I must not miss that head.

"Wait, 'Tienne!" Christian's push threw me off balance. He dropped to his knees, reached over the side, and pulled something over the gunwale. It was not the German. It was Petit-Jean, very limp. The German must have been supporting him in the water.

I threw aside the oar and took Petit-Jean's thin arms from Christian. Christian bent over the German in the water. From them came a queer sound—one I recognized immediately, Monsieur, although I

had never heard it before. The sound was that of the German strangling between the very powerful fingers and thumbs of Christian. Christian was grunting as he squeezed, as though applauding himself. "Porthos," he kept repeating. "Porthos."

I KNOW now, Monsieur, that one does not turn into a savage abruptly. Otherwise why should I, who seconds before had been swinging an oar to crush the German's head, now be tugging at Christian's fingers, tearing at his wrists with my nails? Christian was puffing through his nose, Monsieur, like a man drunk.

"Stop!" I cried. "Stop!" Then I flung up my elbow and needles shot along my arm as it struck bone and flesh. Christian loosed his hold on the German and tumbled backward, dazed. I seized the sergeant's wrists and pulled with all of my strength. He came sprawling over the gunwale, Monsieur, like a giant fish, and I was propping him up on a thwart, and he was gasping and retching, when the blinding beam of light crept over the water and suddenly bathed us in its brilliance.

Were I an artist, Monsieur, I could recreate that scene for you to the most insignificant detail: Petit-Jean in the stern, head on his knees, being sick into the boat; Christian immobile, blood trickling from his mouth where my elbow had lacerated him; the sergeant, pale hair dripping, spectacles gone, chin up as he sucked down the moist night air. Little waves lapped the side of the *Cadet de Gascogne*. It was weirdly quiet. The light hurt my eyes.

Only for a second was it quiet. Behind the light boomed a voice, speaking German. "What is the trouble there?" It was a hard voice and as suspicious as that of our sergeant when he had asked us if we were going fishing without bait. "Who are you?" it demanded harshly. "Explain yourself, and swiftly." It was an E-boat, Monsieur, its powerful motor idling, gliding closer to us.

Our sergeant roused himself at the hail in German. I remember his eyes glistening in the searchlight beam as he stood up.

I wished to be beside Petit-Jean at that moment, so I stepped into the stern. Christian hunched himself nearer us, his staring eyes ghastly in that pitiless light. How did I feel, Monsieur? One is mixed at such a time. Had I let Christian finish off our Boche, then at least we might have had a chance; they might have believed a tale that we had unknowingly drifted out while fishing. Still, as I touched Petit-Jean, I felt no regret—rather a vague relief that we were at last face to face with what we had so greatly dreaded. Our German knew that we had tried to drown him. The smallest child in Auxelles, Monsieur, knows the penalty for such an offense.

I GLANCED at our Boche. His mouth was set, his face severe. The E-boat was quite close now, and we could see two forms at its rail.

"Turn off that light," directed our sergeant loudly. "Are you a beacon for every English bomber from here to Boulogne?"

The soldiers on the E-boat must have spied our sergeant's insignia. The light winked out instantly. The darkness was like a blanket about one's head. Against my shoulder Petit-Jean, his nausea over, shivered violently.

When the voice came again, it was very respectful. "Would the Under-officer explain his presence here—just for our report? It is our order to investigate all suspicious craft, and we must make a report, or——"

"I shall report it myself," called our sergeant irritably. "I have been fishing with these French youths and this clumsy little fellow fell overboard. It was necessary to plunge after him. We are returning at once to the harbor. Continue your patrol." Our sergeant's voice rang with authority. The motor roared, and we tossed in the wake of the E-boat as it sped away into the blackness.

Still standing, our sergeant watched it disappear. In the *Cadet de Gascogne* was a silence such as I have never in my life known before, Monsieur. Petit-Jean had ceased shivering and was now rigid. Christian was as one dead. Me? I wanted desperately to say something, but the silence held me by the throat. My heart was racing and the breeze blew doubly cold on the sweat on my face.

Said our sergeant, in his awkward French, "Any one of you speak English?"

The cords of my throat loosened slightly. I managed to stammer, in English, "I—I do, sir." Then, in explanation, "I was two years at the Ecole Bellminster near London, when my uncle was employed at——"

"Why'd the little feller try to drown me?" asked the sergeant softly, in English.

"Why lie?" I thought. Then, "We were going to England," I answered simply.

Our sergeant exploded under his breath —an English oath, I believe. Standing there in the rocking boat, he began brandishing his arms. Something heavy and wet dropped into my lap. It was his jacket.

"Wring it out and wrap it around your little fire-eater there," he ordered. He shook Christian. "Row, strong man," he commanded in his poor French, and Christian, like a sleeper, obeyed. "We are going to England," said our sergeant, taking the other oar.

It was Petit-Jean who erupted in questions—questions I could not answer until —I admit it without shame, Monsieur—I had wept a little. Being a general—or, if you prefer, an admiral—had been more of a strain than I had anticipated.

Before I explained to Petit-Jean, I said to our sergeant, "You are of the British Military Intelligence, sir?"

Our sergeant grunted against his oar.

"Something like that," he replied. In the darkness I thought I saw him smile. "Y'know," he said, "next time I come over I think it'll be as a major. A little gold braid, my young friend, and I could have bluffed those Jerries into running us across the Channel in style. This"—here he heaved again at his oar and sighed—"is tiring."

A remarkable man, our sergeant. Do you not think so, Monsieur?

The rest, Monsieur, you have already heard. Crossing the Channel was not easy. The next morning was gray and stormy, and Petit-Jean and our sergeant were ill from their immersion of the night before. Christian and I navigated the *Cadet de Gascogne* as best we could.

Christian, Monsieur, was magnificent. He had become a man again. In his eyes, as we labored with sail and oar, I could see that he visualized himself as Porthos.

The great flying boat that landed and took us aboard did not come an hour too soon. An odd thing, Monsieur. We three —Christian and Petit-Jean and I—were given rum, which I can still feel blazing in my throat. But our sergeant asked only for a cup of tea, which they made for him on a little stove. Rum for boys, tea for a man. Eccentric, eh, Monsieur?

At this hospital all persons have been most kind, and we are honored—oh, beyond words, Monsieur—that a busy official of government like yourself should make a long journey to visit us. One thing, Monsieur——

You see, it will be a sad blow to Petit-Jean to learn that he will have to attend school in England now—he who so boldly attempted to drown our sergeant and comported himself like a man full-grown.

Could you not make some reference, as though you had thought of it yourself, comparing him to D'Artagnan? And Christian, Monsieur — a mention of Porthos will repay you many times in his face. Thank you very much.

What was the great advantage I counted upon always in planning our escape?

Please do not think I am boastful. But you see, Monsieur, those wretched men, those Boches—after all, they are only Boches. We, Monsieur, are Frenchmen.

BUZZARD WATCHER

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Sons of the Wind," etc.

"Have You Ever Seen the Wind, Son? It's Got Power."

I RECKON you might say he was crazy. They tell me most hermits are. Not that he was a sure 'nough hermit. Once every so often he used to drift out of them foolish little mountains of his and ride a burro across the flats to Esperanza. "Hope," that means. Not much of a town in them days, just some windmills and a couple dozen plank wind busters called houses; but the stage had to stop somewhere, and that was it. Nothing to look at but the stage dust arriving and departing. And, of course, them Dos Pisos Mountains setting off to themselves like the ruins of one of them old castle forts of the Crusaders I once saw a picture of.

Dos Pisos means Two Stories and two-storied they was: two rusty red cliffs stair-stepped straight up from the desert floor, maybe two hundred feet apiece, sheuldered off more gradual on the north, but all in a tumble-jumble of smaller cracked-off cliffs, over-lip caves and boulders. Didn't cover over three sections altogether, but mighty rough. No way to get up on the lower stair-step at all.

About where the desert flats took holt again on the north side was a seep of water —God knows where it come from—and somewhere in that garbage dump of busted geology ol' Eagle Ike had a cave. We found it afterwards.

Joseph I. Markham was the name he give the day the westbound stage dropped him off at Esperanza. But "Eagle Ike" was what we got to calling him. Because of the way he used to perch up on the rim of that second story cliff, watching the buzzards take off and glide away out over the flats without the flap of a wing. Eagles, he called 'em. Maybe some of 'em *was*

eagles, I don't know. They fly purty much alike. Anyhow "Eagle Ike" was what popped into Doc Wainly's mind to call him, and it stuck. Maybe it was the beaked shape of his nose; or that high look you sometimes caught in his deep-set eyes.

Doc run a two-by-six saloon and store in Esperanza. Used to give the hermit a job swamping out for him whenever the old man drifted to town. Paid him off in groceries—and joshing.

"What you set up there watchin' them birds for, Ike? Think they're goin' to lay gold eggs for yuh?"

"They might at that!" Eagle Ike's comeback was non-committal.

Of course it was just a joke about the gold. Plenty prospectors had combed them Dos Pisos over long before Eagle Ike took squatter's rights on 'em. Everybody knowed it wasn't gold country. But what else would an old fool want to hole up there for?

HE WASN'T so awful old, either, I reckon, but I was just a button then, and his face was bushed all over with whiskers. Used to make me wonder what'd happen if a redhot spark should happen to light in 'em. Times when work was slack with Doc Wainly, he used to come and sweat a few days helping my Pa blacksmith for the stage line. That's how he made out to live: hirin' out a day off and on in town until he'd earn enough grub to go hide out in his rockpile again.

Pa always said ol' Ike was a heap handier with tools than many a man with twice his gumption. For a small man of sparrow-leg build he had the longest arms I ever saw, and a heap of power in 'em. No wonder, the way he exercised 'em. Many's the time I've seen him step to the door, like for a breath of fresh air, gaze off into the sky for a minute or so, then jump up and chin himself a couple of dozen times with just a finger holt on the lintel over the smithy door. Or stand with them long arms stretched out from his shoulders like both hands had holt of something he couldn't let go of, straining and tugging till the brow sweat trickled plumb down through his beard.

"What you think you got holt of, Ike?" I asked him once.

Them pale, deep sunk blue eyes of his got a look in them like rising smoke on a faraway mountain.

"Have you ever seen the wind, son?" he says. "It's got a power!"

It was a crazy question, so I give him a crazy answer.

"Sure," I says. "It's a wolf with six legs and a corkscrew tail. You better let go of it or some day it'll bite you!"

You know how crazy folks are. He didn't even act like he'd heard me. Just went on shadow tusslin', like—like a man trying to tear himself loose from a cross. You could see how come them muscles in his arms all right.

Everywhere else they paid him in grub, old clothes, money, or even once in awhile a bottle of whiskey. But from Pa he mostly liked to comb the scrap pile for pieces of wire, old scraps of gutter tin, the slats of a horseshoe keg, a strip of old wagon sheet—most anything he could lay his hands on that wasn't too heavy to tote back to Dos Pisos on his burro.

Pa said he bet that cave of his was a regular pack-rat's nest of junk.

Maybe it was. Nobody around Esperanza had seen it. One day me and Lody Hanson, the stage tender's boy, decided we'd like to. As we rode out we could see him skylighted up there on the cliff, watching the buzzards; but as we came closer he disappeared, and when we started scouting into them tumble rocks to look for his cave, damned if he didn't pop up and throw a shotgun down on us.

"Go back," he says. And we went. Several others tried it, just out of curiosity, with the same results. But Pa said:

"If he's got a secret, let him keep it. It ain't hurtin' nobody, is it?"

So folks let him alone. In spite of the

eagle-fierce look of his eyes, he was generally so mild acting and quiet that everybody liked him. He give them something else to look at, too. With old Captain Mooney's spyglass you could see him up there on the cliff, plumb from town.

Then one day he wasn't there no more, and when he didn't come to town, kind of a posse got together to go see what had happened to him. It took a heap of searching even to find his cave. It was a pack-rat's nest of junk, just like Pa said. But he wasn't in it. Nor anywheres a man could get to to look. But the second day they discovered where he was. The buzzards told 'em.

Evidently he'd fell off the upper cliff. It seemed funny that the wind or gravity or whatever it was would have sucked him in under the overhang to where you couldn't even see him from above. But it had.

And as nobody knowed of any way to get onto that first story cliff that's where we left him.

You know how it is; after while we got used to seeing his "eagles" sailing off the top story again without Eagle Ike to watch 'em.

IT WAS forty odd years later that a new kind of eagle come sailing over Esperanza flats, and this big airline company decided to plant a beacon on the top story of ol' Ike's foolish little mountain, with a powerhouse and landing field off a piece to the south. They run their light wires up the shortest way, which meant right up the stair-step. With the riggin' they got nowadays they climb anywheres they please.

I was with their crew when we come onto this skeleton on the bench under the overlip of the upper cliff. But not only a skeleton. Laying with it, plumb spread out like it had been fastened onto his arms, was the damnedest riggin' of wires and horseshoe keg slats and tatters of old wagon sheet canvas that you ever laid eyes on.

Somehow it made a heap of old recollections come clear all of a sudden; ol' Ike watching the eagles; exercising his arms thataway in the door of Pa's blacksmith shop—like wings.

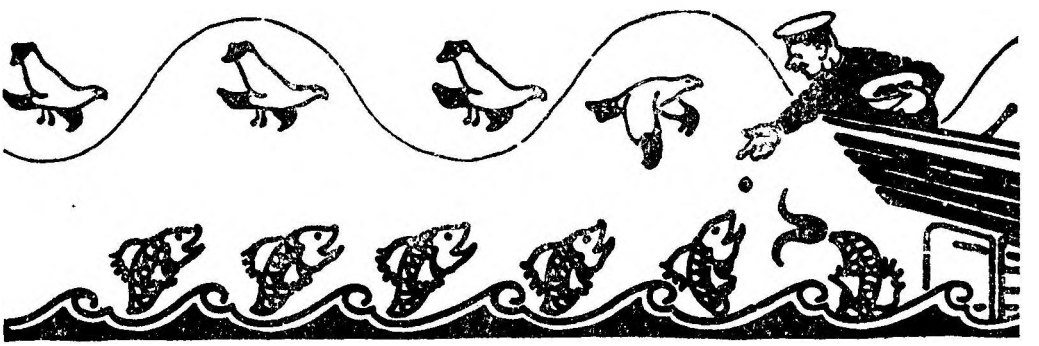
"The wind," he'd said, "it's got a power!"

This airline engineer asked me who he was.

" 'Eagle Ike' we called him," I says. "His right name was Joseph I. Markham. I don't know what the 'I' stood for."

"Icarus, I expect," this young feller says, giving me a funny look.

Maybe so. But I don't see how he knowed.



More Vengeance in His Heart

By CHARLES L. CLIFFORD

Author of "The Luck of the Scouts," etc.

MALIMOT crouched in the thick, quiet dark. He shifted the pistol to his left hand, wiped his right hand against a taut rice bag, one of many stacked in the gloom about him.

For hours, it seemed, he had stared where he knew the heavy plank shutter lay close against the thick wall of the *bodega*. So long had he watched that strange, distorted images swam before his mental sight.

They were long overdue—O'Hara and Beribas. Perhaps, hours back, they had been taken by the Japanese; were even now lying stark, stripped, their brave bodies stiffening from brutal bayonet thrusts, like the poor bound body of Dulay.

Sweat broke out, cold, like melted frost on grass, on Malimot's forehead. Suppose his message had not reached the besieged army on Bataan? Suppose the carrier pigeons had been shot down, or faltered from some bird weakness and fallen exhausted within the Japanese lines?

O'Hara — That Hard-Faced American — Was Regarded by the Filipinos as a Fierce Angel of Reprisal

There was a faint sound and Malimot lifted the pistol muzzle. His heart caught, paused in its beating. The shutter was moving, slowly, without sound. Malimot knew that because the rectangle of lighter dark grew, its background the night sky.

"Tsst!"

Malimot drew breath again. He answered the sound with a like one and he saw the head and shoulders of a man briefly against the outer sky.

"Carlos-compadre!"

"Juan!"

They moved toward each other, their bare feet making no sound on the stone floor. Malimot spoke with the quick eagerness of a deadly fear suddenly assuaged.

"O'Hara? He is with you?"

"Outside, on the alert. Covering my movement in here. Perhaps Japanese—eh, Carlos? Instead of you waiting here."

"God forbid! So far, I think, all is well. The pigeons? They brought my message?"

In the gloom Malimot could see the gleam of Beribas' white teeth. So well he remembered, he could imagine the rest of that ugly, triumphant smile.

"Both the little brave ones. Mercurio, of course, came in first. But only by a few minutes. The gallant little Florita was hot on his trail. They are with the captain. Safe in their little basket."

Malimot touched Beribas almost as one would touch a relic of holiness.

"You have become one of the great ones, *compadre*. You and O'Hara. Think—in years to come Filipinos will say your name as they now say that of the martyr, Rizal. How did you come this time?"

"Not as a martyr, I hope," Beribas said

with a low laugh. "Some two hours back had you been in Eguia or the *barrio* of Dasol you might have heard an airplane. But the chances are not, because we flew to its maximum height out over the sea and glided toward land. And the good God was with us to a great extent. Our parachutes opened neatly, we landed within a hundred yards of each other. In a wide field of rice paddies. Not even a bamboo scratch. We hid the chutes in the deep mud by a dike and, knowing this country as I do, it was simple to make my way here."

"You had great luck—boldness, too," Malimot said admiringly.

"The luck and the boldness of O'Hara," Beribas said softly. "Without him, I would be put a simple *tao*."

"You are modest, Juan."

"—and a waster of time. Wait—"

Beribas slid back to the shutter, raised it slightly. Malimot barely heard the hiss that he sent out into the night. He waited, watching the shutter. He had a feeling of curious eagerness to see this man, O'Hara. For months he had heard of him, as had everyone in the Philippines. Now—he would see him.

Malimot lifted the heavy trap door in the floor, after pushing aside the concealing rice bags. He watched until once again the shutter closed softly, then led the way down the rude stone steps, deep underground. He heard Beribas behind him whisper and, as the trap settled softly down, he turned on his flashlight. He stood in the small, earth walled cellar, the light splayed out against the far wall and, for the first time, he saw the face of the legendary O'Hara.

MALIMOT looked with frank curiosity at this tall, hard-faced American. All the people of the *barrios* talked of him as a saint of war. A fierce angel of reprisal. They even gloated over the Japanese broadcasts naming him as an evil genius of true Philippine independence. The Japanese called him a murderer, and they put the price of a murderer on his head. Ten thousand *pesos* for that head. And for every Japanese he killed from now on, one thousand *pesos* more. He was no hero, as the ignorant were led to believe; no soldier of daring. And, unless the misguided Filipinos behind the Japanese lines who sold him information for a few *gantas* of rice didn't cease their connivance, ten, a hundred of their innocent people might be executed for every murderous act of his. And that, too, applied to his Scout dupe, the soldier Beribas. Their description had been widely broadcast. From now on there would be no excuse that either of these two criminals had not been recognized.

"O'Hara, too, looked keenly at Malimot. Was this man to be trusted? Ten thousand *pesos* was five thousand dollars gold; and gold was the bribe the Japanese dangled before the people's eyes. Gold, and anonymity. And, of course, their eternal gratitude and protection in a country fearful now of permanent occupation.

"You were a soldier of the Scouts, Malimot?" O'Hara said quietly. "On our last trip to Dagupan, I did not have the pleasure of meeting you. But your friend here, my friend, Beribas, has told me of your meeting at Agoo."

Malimot smiled. "You were busy that time, truly. From what I have heard."

"Your information proved of great value. It meant the loss of two enemy ships by our Q boats, Malimot. The General, your president, have asked me to thank you. And to tell you that later—when the Japanese have been driven from your country—the honors due you will be forthcoming."

Malimot felt a great leap of his heart. Words caught in his throat. He had been about to tell of the news he had. What he had seen across the Lingayen gulf through his powerful field glasses; what he had learned from supposedly stupid *taos* who helped unload the Japanese ships at San Fernando, pile stores at Dagupan, watch

the truck convoy down the Manila road, piling dust on their simple nipa houses—But O'Hara was eyeing him keenly, speaking:

"Your message arrived by the carrier pigeons. The General himself sent us in response. But," he paused, his eyes like a hawk's eyes on the steady eyes of Malimot. "Not merely, as your message suggested, so that we might bring back the information you already had and might pump out of your dinner guests tonight. More than that, Malimot!"

Malimot ran his tongue over his lips. The burning eyes of this mad O'Hara frightened him, but they excited him to a wild pitch of daring, too. He could see now why Beribas, whom he had always thought of as an average soldier of the Scouts, had achieved the heights he had. Now he nodded, not caring, not guessing what might be demanded of him, but filled with a wild eagerness to accomplish it for this American officer.

"You remember Dulay, Malimot?"

He remembered Dulay. All Filipinos did. Always would. He could feel the blood pound in him, the burning of his eyes as he looked back at O'Hara. But he said in a quiet, low voice, "Dulay served with me in the Scouts. He was in the same company as myself and Beribas here. He was a nice young fellow. Just a private then."

Beribas smiled, his teeth bared like those of a fighting dog. "But—as you would say, Malimot—a martyr now. Like Rizal. Tonight we avenge Dulay. Not perhaps as you and I would wish. It must be as the General orders. They must be treated in a— Do you understand? Begin to understand, *compadre-mio?*"

Malimot felt the sweat break out all at once. All over him. My God— "Captain O'Hara—?"

O'Hara nodded. "We will try to have no killing. But, Malimot, you must listen to me now very carefully. And when I am through you must decide. Not only whether you wish to go through with this, but—far more important—whether or not you *can* go through with it. You are an actor; I have heard you are considered a great one."

"Explain," Malimot said simply. "You will have all my art—all my heart. I swear before God!"

O'Hara looked about the narrow chamber before he answered. "Is this close to your house? We must have a hiding place, close, safe until the time."

"This is it," Malimot said. "There are just the bamboos, a garden between here and the house. Food and water is here." He indicated a covered box in a corner and O'Hara nodded.

"Then listen—" he said.

IN THE shadow, Beribas squatted, listening to O'Hara's quiet, incisive voice, but listening only as he might listen to a story he had heard many times before. As the low words fell in the quiet place, his mind worked back, reviewing the simple things that had led at last to the fantastic events of the present. He looked at Malimot's handsome face, his steady eyes fixed on O'Hara as he drank in each important word. Malimot—who had served with Beribas, whose father had served with Beribas, in the Scouts. Malimot the actor; the leading figure in many a soldier play. Malimot had been at his best in the tragic parts, a born actor. And, though for six years he had been a soldier in the Scouts, he had been lured away by a traveling road company from the States and been an instantaneous success as a professional actor.

Malimot had acted in New York, in Chicago, everywhere. Great tales had come back to the Islands; the leading Filipino actor of America. Of the world, then.

Beribas had been chilled when he first heard all this. An *actor!* The shame of it that Malimot had ever worn the honored uniform of the Scouts!

Thinking that now as he squatted, watching Malimot's sensitive face, Beribas

knew what a fool he himself had been. How unjust. For the Scouts had many soldiers—but there was only one Malimot. Only one man smart enough to get by with the Japs as Malimot had. To live unmolested, unsuspected so close to the Lingayen Gulf; so lucky as to have married a Japanese woman.

The Japanese woman had lived at Parang. Close to the Scout post and near the village. But not of the village.

Malimot had met Maria-san one payday night with friends. Quite a crowd of them. Well Beribas remembered that night as he looked back on what had happened as a result of it. Maria-san had worn a beautiful kimona, with the bunchlike thing they called an *obi* at her back. Her thick black hair was heaped high, pinned extravagantly on her small, proud head. Her face was dusted white with powder and her lips were painted a deep red. She had small feet, far smaller than the feet of even an *illustrada* woman of the Philippines. And on them she wore tiny clogged wooden shoes, gaily beribboned.

She was very beautiful.

Incredibly, within a day or two, Malimot married her. The company was amazed. A corporal of the Scouts! But they were even more shocked when, his enlistment up, a few days later, Malimot did not reenlist. That, in the Scouts, was unheard of. Attended in a way by suspicion, a hint of shame.

"Is it all clear?" O'Hara said.

"Yes," Malimot said.

"You can do it? You *will* do it as it must be done?"

Malimot nodded; in his eyes was a light that was stronger, burning with a greater meaning than any words that could be said. O'Hara wrote on the thin paper swiftly.

Beribas stroked the birds in the small basket beside him, staring down fondly at their red, watching eyes.

"Send the little one," O'Hara said. "In case we have to change the message at the last minute, the big fellow stands a better chance of getting through in daylight."

Beribas nodded and fastened the message in the capsule. Softly he padded up the steps, the soft wing of the quiet bird held against his cheek. As he raised the shutter, held the bird out, he spoke softly:

"Fly true, Florita! Fly true for your country, little one!"

The bird pecked at his hand and Beribas laughed softly. "Had I found a woman with such love," he thought, "I should have married her. As did Malimot his Japanese woman!"

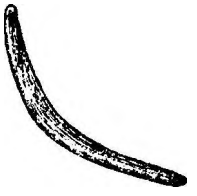
He opened his hands. The little bird shook itself. Gently he tossed it out toward the close sea.

I HAVE the soul of an artist, Malimot thought, and he sighed heavily. He stared out at the deep sunset colors over the wide Lingayen Gulf. The shell-paned windows of his room were slid aside, the sweet, cool air from the sea touched his face.

Malimot thought of Maria-san. As he stared at the heavy sunset he saw deep into it, all, it seemed, that had happened to him—all, perhaps, that might be about to happen. Fascinated, he stared and he remembered — Maria-san. The beautiful girl of Japan who, incredibly, had loved him as he had loved her. Instantly and fiercely. Who had thrown in her lot with his—a mere corporal of the Scouts. She had chanced with him a new road; a wild gamble of a road. First—the cheap road company, precariously tramping the East. The China Coast. Australia. And at last, by some gaudy whim of fate—America. She had become an actress. A beautiful compliment to himself. It was her fragile, strange beauty that gave them their first real start. From cheap stock, cheap vaudeville, they went to the top fast. At last the big thing, the movies. They were going like fire in the pictures when the talk came about Japan fighting America. She

had laughed at it—just propaganda. But Malimot had known. His heart told him. And he had talked with many Filipinos on the Coast, and they said it was going to happen. He must go back. That awful pull kept at his heart. Homesick, he told Maria-san. He was homesick for that little town by the sea. On the Point that looked over the great Gulf, over the China Sea. As a boy he had lived there and then moved away to Manila. But he had always remembered it with a sweet sort of sadness. Always wanted to go back.

With the money they had now they could live like *illustrados* in Pangsanan province. They could enjoy the life of the gentle Islands they both loved; for one reason Maria-san married Malimot was because she said she hated to return to Japan. War there—with the Chinese. Letters she received from home told her of the hardships, the death of relatives. And now, Malimot pointed out, they were trying to get the Americans into the European war. America, too, would be bad. The only peaceful place left was the quiet, slow moving, beautiful Philippines. And Maria-san agreed with him.



They arrived in the Islands in September; built a handsome place near the beautiful Gulf. It was hardly finished, Malimot's sloop barely bought, the sails and motor installed, when the Japanese came.

"It's not going to affect us," Malimot told Maria-san. "I gave up soldiering because I hated it. And in any case, it is between the Americans and the Japanese. You and I are Filipinos, Maria. We have worked hard for what we have and we are still young. We will live in peace and let the war go by us. We are on no side but our own. We have no children; just the two of us, with some of the best of life before us. We have the house; the boat. We have the warm Gulf water, the fine beach for our swimming. We have the good fish almost at our door. We have the rice paddies our work has bought us and the garden, the best breed of pigs, of chickens, the fighting cocks of royal breeding. Why, then, should we be a part of this political quarrel? Whatever the outcome, we still live here at peace with all. But one thing, you are a woman of tact, of sense. Here the neighbors know me only as Malimot the actor, since it is not the *barrio* of my birth, and all our friends are new ones. None knows me as a one-time soldier. I am not proud of that folly of my youth before I found my true loves —you and the stage. So, the Japanese people coming here, questioning—you understand!"

Maria-san understood. She was happy. She liked the things her husband liked. And well she knew the feeling of these Filipinos, with their strange, bigoted sense of morality. With their priests who said it was wrong for a girl to live as she had lived.

But Malimot had defied them, been put out from his church because of his marriage with her. And she was deeply sensible of it. It made her love only a part of the deep gratitude, of the loyalty she felt for him. So, when the Japanese came, her own people with their guns and their planes and their belching warships, she stayed close by her home. In her way, she prayed. She avoided talk with the neighbors, most of whose sons were fighting to the south; dying. But the neighbors turned still, cold faces to her. Some spat as she went by. Little boys threw stones at her, called insulting names. They were more bitter when they came from the soft mouths of the little children.

Hate had grown in her then, and Malimot had comforted her. "They are children. They do not know. It will all be

forgotten. To them you are a woman of an evil country!"

"My country!" And then her eyes had gleamed and she had said, looking straight at Malimot, "But soon we may be a part of that country, Carlos. The Japanese are driving the Americans south. They are running. All is lost for them."

It was like a cold knife thrusting into Malimot, hearing those clear words, with their touch of triumph, coming from his wife. "Who said that? We have talked with no one!"

She gave him an odd, pleased smile.

"An officer. Of the Imperial army. A gracious man who came into the barrio yesterday with a patrol. He was at the market, heard the insults of the young there. He came to me, concerned. He saw that I was of his race. He spoke to me in our tongue. Proudly. 'This you will not have to endure long,' he said. 'You will have your revenge.' Then he asked me other things."

Malimot wet his lips. His heart was hammering deep in him. "What things, Maria?"

"Oh, don't worry, darling." She touched him gently with the tips of her slim fingers. The nails were highly polished, the wedding band gleaming.

"I remembered your wish. Your words. Though I would have said the same had you not spoken so. He was very sympathetic. Eager to meet you; you who have been so kind and good a husband to a woman of Japan. But you were at Eguia that day about the rice marketing. We were not to worry, he said. As a matter of form, only, you would be checked by the military police. And also, he said that any complaints we might make would bring swift punishment on our attackers."

Malimot breathed easier. He even smiled. "There will be no complaints. It is only natural that these simple people, in the heat of their sorrow for loved ones, act as they do. It will die out. And we love this place. When it is over and peace comes, we must remedy it all. With our neighbors. For I am one of them, too."

"Of you they say, why does not he fight? With his people? Older men are in MacArthur's ranks. It is his dirty Japanese wife who makes a traitor of him. He is a spy of the Japanese!"

"Spy!" Malimot's eyes gleamed and his mind began to work swiftly, touching here and there at bits of things he had heard, had remembered, had wished.

"Let us forget it all," he said then, and he patted her hand and walked out of the house to think, alone.

MALIMOT sighed deeply, staring at the red sunset, remembering his incredible life.

It may be the last time, that sight out there!

Malimot remembered a play he had been in, a sell-out on Broadway. It was called Bali. The sets were by Bel Geddes and there was a scene of sunset over the tropical sea; palms, the sound of the gentle wash of the sea on the coral beach. The lighting, the low music had deepened the nostalgic choke in his breast. And now, remembering it, the feeling came back. There was a Balanese girl in the play, high breasted, sweetly rounded, and the cunning lights picked out her exquisite silhouette as she leaned, lost and forlornly dreaming against a coco palm. Her man had gone, her reckless, handsome American. Madame Butterfly of Java.

Madame Butterfly!

Malimot shook the sight from him, shook the sight that replaced it, the real beauty before him, from him. But he couldn't shake the thought of Madame Butterfly—

At this very moment Maria-san would be waiting. Dressed and waiting. Busy with the last little touches that all women, Japanese or any other, must perform before honored guests arrive. *But she might come up the stairs.*

Malimot turned swiftly, picked up the

heavy field glasses that lay on the sill by his thigh. Quickly he slid the floor-board from the corner where the baseboards came together, dropped them in, slid the board back over the hiding place.

He turned to the wide dresser mirror. He admired the room as he surveyed himself. It, too, was like a stage set, for he and Maria-san agreed on a manner of living. It was a handsome compromise, Malimot thought. Not Japanese—not Filipino. It was American. In the best tradition of Fifth Avenue. They had both loved that street. Many a night they had window-shopped, staring often and long at the displays of interior decorators. "We will have a room like that," Maria would say. "A garden set like that. My boudoir—it will have the best of each."

"And my study," Malimot would say. "Panelled." And then he would laugh. But not at the absurdity of the idea; they were then in the beginning of the big money and they were putting most of it in the bank.

MALIMOT paused at the entrance to the dining room. Yes, another stage set. But more so now than he had ever seen it. The long, hand-rubbed *narra* table shone like rich wine under the candle lights. The crystal gleamed, the gold-enamelled dishes lay warm in the night, like lovely shells of the sea. Already the papaya was set out in its ice-filled gold bowls, the wine glasses clustered, ready. Muto, the dwarf boy, was shaking the cocktails in the kitchen. It was a pleasant, happy sound.

Malimot watched Maria-san. As yet she had not noticed him; she was busy touching, caressing into place the trailing *cardena de amour* that tendrilled out from the mirrored centerpiece. She looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her look.

For the first time in years, except in a play or on the screen, she was dressed as a Japanese woman.

I asked her to do that! And it pleased

She turned, saw him. She came toward him with little running steps. The stage steps of a Japanese. She laughed childishly. She was delighted with herself.

She clicked to a halt before him, swung out her arms in a graceful gesture, made him a bright curtsey.

Her eyes—larger than the eyes of most Japanese women; wider, deeper with meaning, sweeter.

"All Japanese tonight. You must talk Japanese, too, Carlos-san. It will please the generals. We will be very gay. And—" a troubled look came into her dark eyes—"for us, Carlos-san, very important. You understand?"

He nodded, smiled.

They still are in doubt. Of me. I see the fear of that in her eyes.

She spoke it:

"Carlos-san, it is not so much the general from the base at Dagupan. For he is merely the head of supply. And the last time—he seemed to like you. Trust you. But the fighting commander from Manila—it is said he is very close to the supreme commander. You will be careful? Not too much champagne—please!"

Malimot laughed and took her in his arms. Tonight he was playing the part of his life. His heart beat heavily against her supple body. The lines of his face hardened. For the first time in their life together he would be unfaithful to her.

His face was smiling again when he looked down into her eyes, kissed her again. He reassured her with his smiles, his gay words. And when they heard the sound of the car, the dwarf Muto announcing the arrival of their guests, Malimot laughed at the grotesque face of the boy. He looked over his shoulder at the two general officers. They stood just inside the big *sala*, each with a hand on the heavy sword by his side, and Malimot thought with savage gloating:

"What an entrance! For me. My lovely Japanese wife in my arms. Caught in the wings. Now—my cue!"

With his wife by his side, he advanced to meet the bowing men by the door.

NOT often had Malimot gone into the "Japanese Sala." As an artist he had appreciated its fragile magnificence; as the lover of a Japanese woman he had learned a sympathy, an understanding of the delicacy of association that must be accorded Maria-san in this more of the soul than of the heart link with her past. It was a serene room, rich in its essence, in all detail. Its *rama*—the tinted carving over the door—its exquisite screens, the sleek wood of the great low table and the silken cushions on the shining floor; each was perfection in its way. When the moon was bright, the translucent walls formed a screen of lovely patterns; for the garden outside, the cunningly planted trees, their very branches seemingly trained for the ultimate effect in transcription. The moon itself seemed in poetic conjunction to project their eerie beauty on those paper walls.

But it was in the tokonoma, that lares and penates, that niche of honor which is the soul of the Japanese home, that Maria-san insured her permanent reminder of Japanese culture. On its sacred shelves Malimot had seen appear and disappear treasures, priceless, honored above all possessions, of Maria-san. At times there were simple things; trinkets, almost, little jade figurines, bits of carved ivory, perhaps a simple water color from her own brush. Then there were days—holidays of her homeland—when the shrine became a living symbol of that day. Figures of animals, dressed with flowers; a pattern of leaves, a mirror; a scroll of great value inscribed with a great man's words. The *tokonoma*, Malimot learned, reflected a mood as well as a sentiment. It could proclaim sorrow, serenity, gratitude, humility, triumph.

Tonight it proclaimed triumph.

Malimot looked at Maria-san. She knelt in a corner of the room, her long white fingers caressing the strings of the harp; the harp, too, was beautiful, light, gracefully wrought, its slender strings vibrating her mood into that still room.

The two Japanese generals, elbows on their cushion rests, stared enchanted. Hard men, these, and for the past weeks worn with the strain of fighting, anxious with the desire for perfection in their success in war. For the first time in tumultuous weeks they were completely relaxed. This woman of their homeland, this music, this room; the mellow glow of the rich wine they had absorbed, warmed them gloriously.

The general of supply was the more practical of the two. The fighting general, for the moment, was a poet. As a young man he had scrolled many bits of "beautiful sentiment"; secretly, but with flashing pride. He was then a scholar, his soul touched with the eternal glory of the ancients. That was long ago—but this slim woman before him, with the pale face of a *Kyoto* girl, brought him back to that past; stirred in him again the hunger for beauty that had so completely possessed him then.

Kyoto beauty with her white face, her stark black hair. Hair shining in the low light, the light shining, flashing from the rings on her slender white fingers.

HIS hand touched the cold sword, unloosed from his side. His eyes left the woman's hands, left her great black eyes, went to the *tokonoma*, to the dagger of Japan. His eyes gleamed and his heart beat sharply. Here was a woman.

The dagger gleamed, standing on its point, straight down. Behind it, a bright background, was a bold, single painting done with a delicate, a strong hand. A tiger, teeth bared, eyes alight with savage triumph, sprang. Sprang through a screen of young bamboos, tearing it ruthlessly, ripping it aside as an impatient gesture only. The bamboo thorns touched, tore trivially at the tiger's flanks. Philippine bamboo—Japanese tiger!

I understand this woman, he thought.

And the beauty, the fierce beauty of that symbol. Of that tiger of Japan thrusting aside the tritely thorny Philippine people, its eyes alight with savage anticipation, eagerness to get at the snarling prey. Real prey. At the Americans—

I understand this woman, the beauty, the fierce beauty of *her*. If her eyes, of the savage beauty of her slender body. The man is nothing. An incident. A vehicle, to be used for present ease only.

A Filipino. A savage. But without the light of the savage, the simplicity, the ultimate value. A hybrid. A form of man, low man, with a coating of brightness, of gilt. False sheen. American sheen. It would be like removing the cat from the house, the Pekinese dog of a Chinese. And it will be simple in that it can be made by me a minor virtue. The man is to stupid to be dangerous; but—*I can* be a little stupid, too. How simply stupid to confuse him soon with those misguided men of his race who, behind our lines, stab in the back through American engendered hate!

The music stopped. Maria-san arose gracefully, smiled at the two generals of Japan. They bowed, almost humbly, and the fighting general made a gentle gesture with a hand. They congratulated, flattered, praised Maria-san.

Malimot poured generously from the magnum of wine, proposed a toast. There was laughter then, gay words, and Malimot held high his bubbling glass.

When the moon was bright, the translucent walls formed a screen of lovely patterns. From the garden, outside—

But now there was no moon and the light behind Malimot formed the pattern —*for* the garden outside. The pattern of his upflung arm, the fragile glass bubbling. Still bubbling when the paper wall toward the garden slid noiselessly; when the two watching men stepped into the beauty of that Japanese room,

O'Hara stood silent, his pistol covering the two officers; Beribas disarmed them. Maria-san made a low sound, deep in her throat. She stood, one hand on the harp, the other on a shelf of the *tokonoma* for support. Malimot played his part with his usual smoothness. He protested—but not too much. He warned :

"There are Japanese guards outside. You cannot hope to get away with this."

Beribas said softly, "One soldier. In the car. He is disposed of. Come now, both of you. Unless you desire to die here." He held out the keen blade of a bolo as he spoke. Fatalists these men were, but he knew enough of the Japanese to be certain that their choice of death would never be in the place of hospitality he now found them.

The fighting general spoke. He spoke in a low, smooth voice to O'Hara. In English.

"Who are you?"

The supply general ran his tongue over his thick lips—watching.

"It is the American, O'Hara. I know from the pictures they have circulated."

THE fighting general gave him a dark look. He, too, had seen those pictures. Face was lost admitting it. But not admitting to yourself that this man was dangerous. Hideously efficient. In a way the Japanese could understand.

The scheming mind that had brought him high in the army worked swiftly. He looked from face to face. The woman was innocent. He knew Japanese women.

The man. The stupid, vain, moneyed man. He had everything to lose.

He looked at the man; at Malimot. Beribas interrupted his thought:

"Come on! Hold out your hands. Behind you."

The fighting general looked at those cold blue American eyes. At the still pistol muzzle staring him in the face. This man was O'Hara. What the Americans called a "killer." This man would kill. And when he had killed, he would bring back the two bodies. His hard one and

the soft one of the general of supply. And he'd take the papers from that hard body; the papers that, foolishly, he now realized, never should have been in the inside pocket of his tunic. Whatever he did, those papers would be taken. Except—time was of the essence here. Japanese lines must be passed. However deadly this man's persistence, efficiency, familiarity with danger, there was always a chance.

He stiffened his hands behind his back and felt the steel of the bonds the Filipino snapped on him.

The woman spoke then. Spoke in a still, clear voice. In steady English. He saw now that in her hand she held the symbolic dagger that had stood, point down, on the *tokonoma.* She held it as an actress would hold it a play of tragedy —gripped fully, angled toward her breast. That white breast, he thought; and the heart in it beating, now with glorious sturdy meaning.

The woman's eyes were on her husband.

"Carlos-san—do you want me to die? It is sharp, this dagger of Japan. It will go straight to my heart in a single thrust. Do you want me to die?"

The man stared back at the woman. His handsome face paled. The scenes they had played, the tremors of voice, the flash of eyes, the tempo of breathing—none was here. But here was more; here the message of the sincere heart changed the color in the faces, not painted faces for a paying audience.

For once, Malimot blew his lines. Desperately sought them. Feverishly, he said:

"I— Maria-san, I don't understand. What is this wildness?"

She gave him a clear, cold look. Nodded her head slightly toward the rigid generals.

"They are released, or—! They are guests in *our* house!"

The fighting general gave her a keen look and she answered that look proudly.

Beribas prodded the generals with the keen end of his bolo. He looked once at the woman, at his friend, Malimot. It was hard to say the words.

"Come. We must go." And to Malimot, as a last, loyal act, he said, glaring:

"You dirty Quisling! We should take you, too, you lover of the vile Japanese. But, instead, we will see that our own people here behind the lines deal with you!" For, by the love of the Virgin, he thought, Malimot must remain behind. He is of little value to us on Bataan.

The fighting general spoke, quickly but in steady, pointed words. He spoke to O'Hara. He wanted time. It was a long way to where they would carry him. For he knew what this was. What triumph if accomplished; two generals of the Imperial army delivered like sacked geese to the commander on Bataan.

And he ended saying, "You have no chance of success. Patrols swarm the shores, the road between here and Bataan. If you go now, leaving us here, no alarm will be spread. You have the word of a general of the Imperial army. Otherwise—" his little eyes grew smaller, "I will see to it that you die cruelly. With great loss of face for your people. For you, O'Hara, have forfeited by your crimes the privileges of a prisoner of war."

O'Hara, his strange, light blue eyes like clear ice, said in his strange, cold voice:

"And you, General Oyama, have likewise forfeited that right. You remember Dulay? Sergeant Dulay, of the Scouts? He floated down the river to us—what you left of him—his hands bound, his legs bound, his poor body torn with a hundred bayonet thrusts. Japanese bayonet thrusts. He was used as sport by your men. Our Intelligence has a complete report from Filipinos behind your lines. It is for that, General, that you come with us. With your two bodies in our hands, we can prevent like outrages. And we can make what you call your 'face' a laughing stock to the world."

"You swine!" the general said.

They were all watching the general as he spat at O'Hara. All except Malimot. Except the woman Malimot was watching. Malimot uttered a shocked cry and he leaped toward her. But already she was falling, falling against the shivering harp. Her fingers sliding down the harp touched the strings, sent quivers along their bright lines; a chord vibrated in that still room.

Blood was on the harp, on its ivory and pearl. Blood was on the floor, on the gay kimona of the woman. Malimot took her slender body in his arms, his eyes from hardness, fright, turned soft. Tears dimmed them and when he tried to speak no words would come.

Impulsively, Beribas went to him, touched his shoulder with a gentle, compassionate hand. He tried to speak to him, but Malimot's eyes were on the dying eyes looking up at him, his ears attuned to the dying words from that soft, painted mouth.

"I love you—still love you—Carlos-san. But—I am a woman—of Japan."

"Come, Carlos—" Beribas said, forgetting all save the eyes of his friend. "There is nothing more. You must come with us."

The woman was still now, her last breath gone. O'Hara looked down at Malimot, at the still figure in his arms. He had thought there was no feeling in him—not for years had there been sentiment, love for anything in him. But now feeling came to him.

"You have given all you had to your country, Malimot," he said, and he was ashamed that there was no quality that he could call on to make his voice in any way softer.

"He must come," Beribas said. "He has nothing here now but real danger."

Malimot looked up then, into the eyes of each of them.

"No, Beribas, *compadre*. I have *more* here now. More to do, more vengeance in my heart. Go quickly. Your time is important. But not mine."

MUTO, the dwarf boy, reported all clear to the high rocks on the beach where the cave, naturally camouflaged, was ready for them. They moved swiftly, each almost carrying a gagged Japanese.

They followed Muto's wary movements through the dark scrub. They arrived at the cave, wading carefully in from the beach. The small boat was there, the skiff that Malimot had hidden the day of the Japanese invasion. The slow surf washed in and O'Hara and Beribas crouched near the entrance, the water curling about their legs. In the dark behind them, the dwarf boy held a shining bolo before the Japanese, now jammed into the boat. He grinned wickedly. "Your car and the dead man in it will be over the cliff, in the sea, when I return. Your bodies, they will think, are washed into the sea. Until—MacArthur speaks."

O'Hara looked at the glowing hands of his watch.

"We are late. But in the dark the ship could lie out there almost safely for some time."

Carefully he aimed the flashlight so that its beams would show only in the cave. It flashed from wall to wall.

"Now we trust to luck."

"To the Virgin Mother," Beribas said softly. "And next—to my brave, swift flying pigeons; that they made their goal once more."

O'Hara looked down at the squat, serious little soldier. He almost smiled. He marveled at the love Beribas had for the two birds.

"Let's go! We'll be safer out there. Waiting."

They ran the boat along the hard sand into the sliding surf, one on each side, the dwarf, chuckling low, at the stern.

"*Adios, po!*" the dwarf said. He turned and was gone.

Beribas looked at O'Hara as they stood steadying the boat in the water.

"Why did the woman kill herself?" O'Hara said softly. They might never

reach the patrol boat. Or one of them might not. He must understand.

"It was said, but, as the saying goes, it is an ill wind that blows no good," Beribas muttered, shaking his head slowly. "Now Malimot is truly in the clear. It will appear that the fiend, O'Hara, and the monster, Beribas, have murdered again. That Malimot barely escaped with his life. To hate the enemies of Japan. With such an actor it will be simple. We are doubly strengthened in that quarter."

O'Hara was still staring at Beribas, his eyes gleaming strangely in the dark.

"I repeat the question!" he said in a hard, low voice. "The woman suspected? Why?"

Beribas sighed. How precise in everything this man must be!

"The woman *knew,* my Captain. But I swear that not once, how stupid, did it occur to me that she might remember this ugly, pocked face of mine. I apologize. You see, we were very young, Malimot and I. Maybe I was not so ugly then. For I was a great hand with the ladies. I introduced them. With Malimot it was love at first sight; with me it had been a slight and very brief infatuation. So, naturally, after all these years—with a face like mine, and the added scars of combat—" Beribas shrugged. "You understand, Captain?"

"I understand had the woman not died, she would have telephoned the Japanese. You would never have guessed that she knew you. By now—"

Beribas sighed. "An ill wind—as I said. Who would think that she would remember such a slight acquaintance!"

"Slight! I thought you were 'infatuated'?"

Again Beribas sighed and he shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"A figure of speech, my Captain. You see, I was one of so many suitors. *Psst! Mira!"*

A pinpoint of light flashed on and off, far out, low in the heavy darkness. They thrust the boat into the low surf, climbed aboard and each seized an oar. The two Japanese lay like awkward dummies in the boat bottom, thrown this way and that as the incoming rollers heaved and shook the craft.

They bent to the oars and the skiff slapped through the waves, gathered way, settled to the outer ground swell.

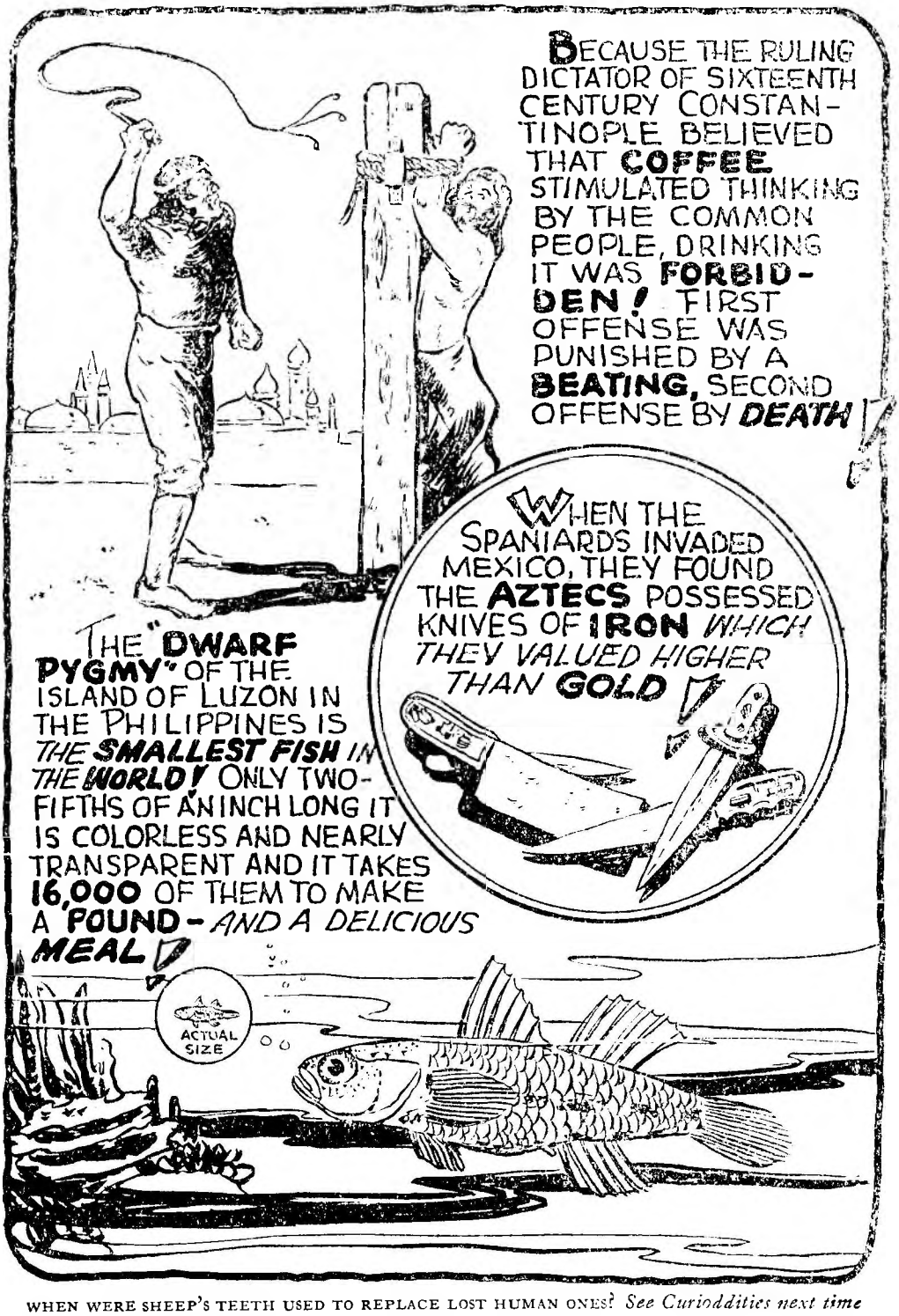
Once, only, before they came to the waiting patrol boat, did O'Hara speak. He said harshly, as if once and for all to close this scene, a victor:

"And how would a woman of such beauty and atttainments come in contact with a poor private of the Scouts?"

Beribas grinned in the darkness, looked sideways at the captain's hard-set face. Then he bent to his oars, having almost missed the cadence of stroke.

"That, Captain, was also a bit of ill wind, that did much good. For at that time Maria-san lived in that first little house between the barrio and the post at Parang. The Japanese houses. Perhaps the Captain remembers it?"

Curioddities By Weill



WHEN WERE SHEEP'S TEETH USED TO REPLACE LOST HUMAN ONES? *See Curioddities next time*

LAYING THE GHOSTS AT BURNT RANCH

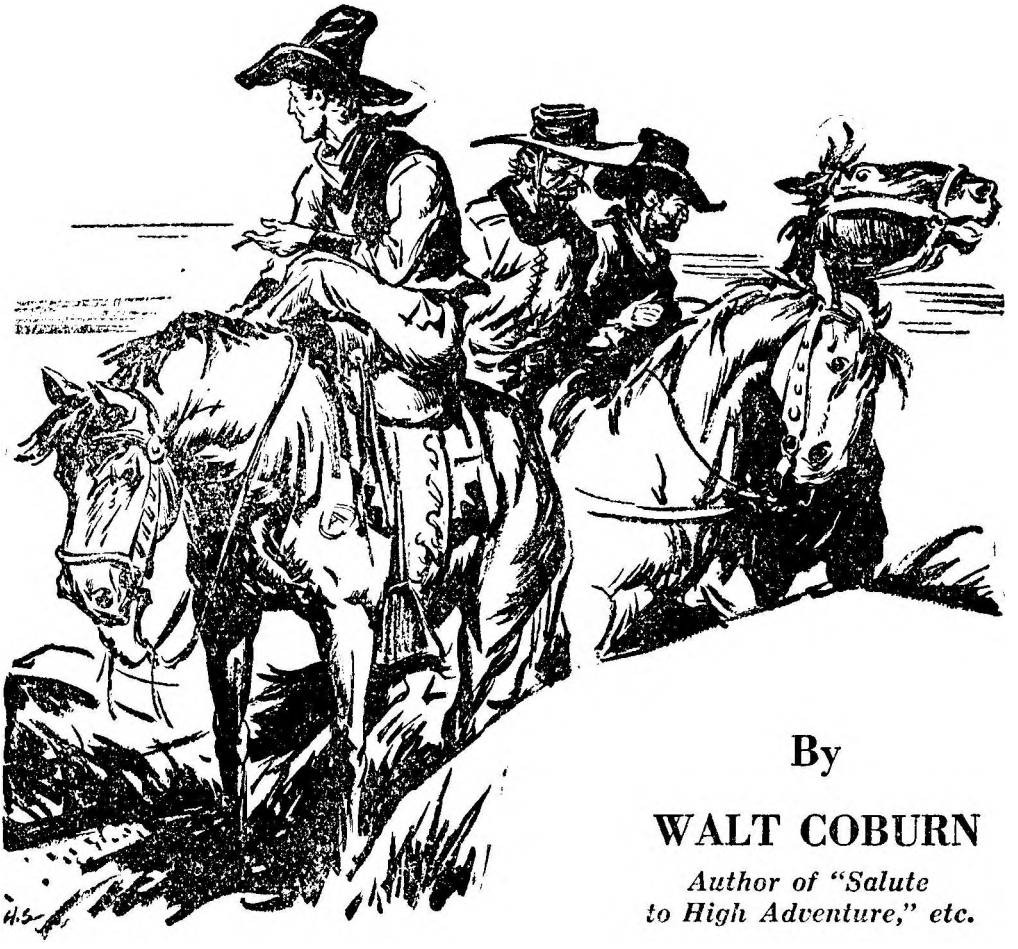
I

IT WAS a cold, cold trail. More than ten years had passed by since the last men who counted had made tracks there. Those three men had died with their boots on and their guns smoking. Their unmarked graves were there at the end of that trail. And somewhere well hidden was the bulk of the loot of a dozen bank and train robberies.

That was the story that came out from behind the thick sun-baked rock and adobe walls of that hell hole called Yuma Prison on the banks of the muddy Colorado in Arizona. Whispered and coughed out in a final scarlet hemorrhage by a lifer convict whose name on the prison books was simply John Doe.

The warden at Yuma Prison told it to Jeff Macklin for what it might be worth. He seemed to think that the twenty-five-year-old Jeff could fill in some of the gaps. That Jeff might have known that the lifer who called himself John Doe was none other than outlaw John Macklin, Jeff's father.

But Jeff said he had nothing to add to it from his boy's knowledge of an outlaw father he had hardly known. The warden



By

WALT COBURN

Author of "Salute to High Adventure," etc.

let it go at that. But when Jeff Macklin rode away from Yuma that night he had a notion he was being cold trailed. True enough, those men who had broken the law had paid the extreme penalty. But the law would never quit hunting for the lost loot from those bank robberies and train hold-ups. The banks and the big railroad companies had range detectives who were human bloodhounds. Robbing the mails is a federal crime. The United States Government would have a man trying to smell out something. And so be it.

Jeff Macklin, cowman, had been called to Yuma Prison to identify the dead convict. His gray eyes had turned bleak and the color had drained from his lean tanned face when he looked at the dead man. A lifeless, horrible and grisly skeleton of bones and yellowed skin. Outlaw John Macklin had been a six-footer. Broad of shoulder and lean flanked with the slightly bowed legs of a cowboy. With a swagger to his gait and a reckless grin and a bantering sparkle in his gray eyes.

The heat and stench and close black solitary confinement at Yuma's hell hole had done its work. Prison plague is a horrible death.

Jeff Macklin had turned away. He had the tall, wide-shouldered, lean-bellied build of his father. The same wiry black hair and steel gray eyes set under thick straight brows.

"You expect me to identify this poor devil as the man I remember as my father?" he said bitterly. "Your damned slow murderin' law has got a hell of a nerve, Warden."

The warden at Yuma Prison was a large

man. Big hearted beneath his hardness. Even now he was working hard to get a new prison built. Abandon this hell hole. He understood something of young Jeff Macklin's bitterness.

"Your record up till now," he told Jeff Macklin, "has been as clean as a hound's tooth. Don't let any part of this make a change in your ways."

The man called John Doe had said the prison graveyard would be good enough for his bones. Let his fellow convicts dig his grave and bury him there on the hillside bank of the muddy Colorado.

Jeff Macklin did not stay for the burial. Nor did he go back to his cattle ranch in Colorado. He bought the best horse he could find and rode away from Yuma as soon as the darkness had lessened something of the day's terrific heat. Traveling light. A man needed no bed in this weather. Grub and water was where you found it along the trail.

He traveled eastward, following the long dry trail that would take him to where he wanted to go. The warden had been plenty right about Jeff's keeping his record clean. But his ranch in Colorado was near enough to the old Outlaw Trail for him to hear the rustling of the leaves that told strange stories that he never forgot. The rustling of the leaves had said there was a place in the mountains along the Mexican border in the southeast corner of Arizona. It was called the Burnt Ranch. And it was in that vicinity that the old outlaw John Macklin gang had made their last tracks. There, beyond the reach of the law's long arm, those renegades had split up, quarreled among themselves, fought it out to the death with six-shooters and saddle guns. Shot it out to the last man.

But the rustling of the leaves had said that four outlaws had ridden to the hideout called the Burnt Ranch. And that there were only three graves there. One of the four renegades, then, must have survived to bury the others. And that lone survivor had disappeared. Vanished as if the badlands had opened up and swallowed him. Which one of the four outlaws had survived was anybody's guess. The Outlaw Trail guards its secrets mighty jealously.

What had caused this violent and final gun quarrel among the four outlaws who had shared all manner of danger and riotous fun and gruelling hardships together, nobody knew. Whiskey? A greed over the division of their stolen spoils? Jealousy on the part of the other three against the outlaw John Macklin who was their leader? Or was it, as the leaves sometimes rustled, a woman who had caused it?

Ten years of unsolved mystery. Then a lifer at Yuma Prison who gave no name but John Doe, had died of prison plague. In his fever-racked delirium he had talked. And that rambling death whispering had identified the convict as outlaw John Macklin. Or had it? The law did not know. If Jeff Macklin knew, he was saying nothing.

Jeff Macklin traveled his own gait. If some range detective was trailing him, then let the man follow along. When the time came, when the sign was right, Jeff would lose him. There was no hurry. He needed time to think things out. He would think back as far as he could remember and dig up the bits of the past, sort out the conflicting stories told him by the rustling of the leaves. Like panning a few grains of gold from worthless sand and gravel.

Jeff Macklin had no memory at all of his mother. He had been too young when she died. And he had seen his father only half a dozen times in his life. Months and years in between those hasty and brief visits outlaw John Macklin paid to the little ranch a day's ride from Brown's Hole where the corners of Utah, Colorado and Wyoming meet. The little ranch where a crippled, old close-mouthed cowhand known by no other name than Uncle Ike looked after the cattle and horses and

raised the boy Jeff to a cowman whose record, as the warden at Yuma Prison had said, was as clean as a hound's tooth. And when Uncle Ike had died, Jeff Macklin had stayed on alone.

There had never been a lock on his cabin door. Any man was welcome there and no questions asked. Horses were "borrowed" and returned in time. Cowpunchers who were strangers to Jeff would help him on his round-up. Grub-line riders helped him put up his hay and keep his pasture and corrals and log buildings in good repair. If some of those drifting cowboys were outlaws, it made no difference one way or another to this easy-going, quiet-spoken only son of outlaw John Macklin. If, now and then, one of those drifting grub-line riders had a badge pinned to his undershirt, he left after his brief stay, no wiser than he had been when he rode up.

When the law had summoned Jeff Macklin to come as quickly as he could to the Arizona Territorial Prison at Yuma, Jeff had drawn out all the money he had in the bank and turned his little outfit over to a neighboring rancher. He had sacked his saddle and taken it along. The pouches of the money-belt he wore under his shirt were well filled. There was a Winchester carbine in his saddle scabbard. He wore a wooden-handled six-shooter in an old open holster and the loops of his cartridge belt were filled.

If any man was trailing him, Jeff Macklin lost him during the next few weeks. It was more than a month since he had looked at that dead skeleton of a man called John Doe. He rode alone into the little border cowtown called Pintado, which is the Mexican name for Painted or Spotted.

II

PINTADO, a small town of adobe buildings, straddled the Mexican border. Most of its residents were Mexicans. But there were some *Americanos* on the Arizona side. The Border Patrol kept a couple or three men stationed there. There were the Mexican and U. S. Customs offices. There were some squalid little Mexican *cantinas*. And there was the largest adobe building in town that was built in a hollow square around a patio. It was the one building that was half in Mexico, half in the United States. And it was called the International. It had rooms to let. A long bar that served bonded American liquor and Mexican liquor of all kinds. A stringed orchestra of Mexicans dressed like *charros*. Some young and astonishingly good-looking senoritas who would dance with you if you had money to buy drinks. Or they would sing and dance for the customers who sat at the little tables in the big tiled patio. And there were the gambling rooms where a man with money could get any kind of a game he wished to play and no limit to the stakes.

Jack De Sanchez owned and operated the International. He claimed to be a square gambler. And with the help of both Mexican and Arizona law, a picked crew of men he called "trouble shooters," he managed to maintain order.

Jack De Sanchez was tall and straight-backed and handsome. He was in his fifties, his thick straight black hair graying at the temples. He spoke both border languages with the ease of a man who has learned them since childhood. His voice was flat-toned, quiet. He had what might be called an excellent poker face. The straight, thin-lipped mouth under a carefully trimmed black mustache smiled often enough. But the smile never traveled as far as his eyes that were yellowish gray and deeply set on either side of a hawk-beaked nose. He dressed always in cowpuncher clothes that were tailored. He spent a lot of time in the saddle. A range dude and gambler. His well-kept hands were gloved when he rode and he was as fast with a gun or rawhide *reat*

as he was with a deck of cards or a pair of dice. His gun was silver mounted and its handle was made of Mexican carved gold and silver.

Jeff Macklin stayed a week at Pintado. Pintado, that took its siesta after its noon meal. Pintado, that came alive with the evening star. Jeff fell into the life at Pintado without an effort. He drank enough but not too much. He gambled every night but never for high stakes. He listened to the music, bought drinks for the musicians and dancing girls. He waltzed with the young senoritas. He got acquainted with the Border Patrol men and the Mexican and U. S. Customs officials. And he sat often enough with Jack De Sanchez over a drink. And by the end of the week he had made friends with a tall, lean, tow-headed, blue-eyed cowpuncher called Steve Flynn. It was an open secret that Steve Flynn was an Arizona Ranger.

It was a week or ten days, and the little border town of Pintado had begun to accept him, before he even mentioned the Burnt Ranch. And even then he so managed it that Steve Flynn would be the one to bring up the name of that ranch back in the mountains.

"Jack De Sanchez owns the Burnt Ranch, Jeff. Has he tried to unload it on you?"

"Not yet," grinned Jeff. "What's the matter with the place?"

"It's as good a ranch as a man would want to buy. Good feed and plenty of water. A man could take a small crew of good brush-poppers and gather enough remnant cattle and mavericks to pay for the outfit. I'd call it a good buy if I had the money."

"You said 'unload' like Jack De Sanchez figgers it a burden."

"He'll tell you he hasn't time to monkey with a cow outfit," Steve Flynn's grin was flat-lipped. "But the Mexicans say it's haunted and bad luck. You can't hire a Mexican to work on that range."

Jeff waited for the real reason. He let the Ranger take his time about it. They sipped their watered whiskey and smoked.

"I wouldn't want to kill a sale for Jack De Sanchez, if you're lookin' around for a ranch to buy."

"If I saw the outfit and liked it, I'd buy it, Steve. I don't take much stock in 'haunts'."

"Then mebbyso you and Jack De Sanchez might git together on the deal," said Steve Flynn. "But don't jump at it. That's as much as I aim to tell you. The rest of it would sound silly comin' from a growed-up white man that don't believe in ghosts."

Jack De Sanchez crossed the patio to their table. The light from the candles that furnished the only light, threw shadows across the tall gambler's handsome face. His white teeth bared in one of his rare smiles. But his yellowish gray eyes were not smiling.

"I hear you're looking around for a ranch, Macklin." Jack De Sanchez sat down in a chair between Jeff and the Ranger. "One of the bartenders said he heard you makin' inquiries. I've got a haunted ranch that's no use to me. The night ridin' spooks I'll throw in free. Or has Steve Flynn told you about the Burnt Ranch.

"Only that it's haunted, Jack," grinned the Ranger. "That the Mexican vaqueros ride clear of it. But if I had the money and a crew of cowhands that was real brush poppers, I'd be willing to dicker with you."

"I got the Burnt Ranch," said the gambler, "in a poker game. Land, cattle, a little *remuda*. I sold the horses. But I've never tried to get a clean work on those mountain cattle. And I haven't been to the Burnt Ranch for more than a year. Since you and I went out there, Steve."

"To bury the last man that bought the Burnt Ranch from you, Jack," said the Arizona Ranger quietly.

The gambler nodded. "Horse dragged him to death. There in the corral. What a hell of a way to die!"

A MEXICAN waiter brought them fresh drinks. Jeff Macklin tried to read the quick look that had passed between the gambler and the Ranger.

"Just one more ghost," Jack De Sanchez's white teeth flashed in a mirthless smile. "Let's drink. Take the taste of that memory away. The man's foot had hung in the stirrup—head kicked off. *Salud!*"

The gambler downed his straight whiskey at a gulp. Steve Flynn watered his and drank.

"If Steve will come along, Macklin, the three of us will ride out to the Burnt Ranch tomorrow."

"I'd like to see it," Jeff tried to keep his voice casual.

"I'd be proud to go along," said the Ranger quietly.

"We'll eat breakfast at daybreak then, and pull out." Jack De Sanchez got to his feet and went across the candle-lit patio toward the bar.

"The feller's name was Jim Loftus," said the Ranger. "He'd taken an option on the place. Went out there to live. Couldn't git any gringo cowhands as they was all workin' on the round-up. And he couldn't hire a Mexican for all the money in Arizona. So he was alone there. Batchin'.

"I never could figger why he was ridin' a broke gentle cow pony inside that corral with the gate tied shut. I was the one that rode by there and found him—hell of a thing! Horse ga'nt and spooked. Been there a day an' night. In the corral. With what was left of that feller hung in the stirrup.

"The feller's head mashed and busted and buried in the corral dust. I couldn't swear that it was a bullet that had helped smash the skull. But there was a law badge pinned to the feller's undershirt. That was the first that I knowed about this feller Jim Loftus bein' a range detective. There's no way of findin' out whether or not Jack De Sanchez knowed it was a range detective that'd taken an option on his Burnt Ranch—"

Ariozna Ranger Steve Flynn's voice trailed into silence. His puckered blue eyes watched Jeff's face through the haze of tobacco smoke that drifted from the speaker's mouth with his grisly tale.

"I haven't got a law badge pinned to my undershirt, Steve, if that's what you mean."

"Then mebbyso you'll have better luck than Jim Loftus had; it ain't my game. Or it wasn't, till Jack De Sanchez dealt me in just now. I figgered it was only fair to tell you. And Jim Loftus wasn't the first man that had bad luck there. Feller named Art Carmody got gored to death by a bull in that corral. Another feller named plain Joe Smith hung hisself. Or so it looked. Haunted? Mebby."

Steve Flynn's voice had lost something of its lazy drawl and as he leaned forward a little in his chair, his half-finished drink in his hand, his puckered eyes were as hard and bright as clear blue glass.

"This Art Carmody," Jeff Macklin held his voice down to a level tone, "and the one called Joe Smith. Did they wear law badges pinned to their undershirts?"

"Art Carmody had worked for the railroad companies once as a cowboy detective. Till he got fired for bein' crooked or careless."

"And Joe Smith?"

"Had done time in the pen somewhere."

But they had all three met with bad luck at the Burnt Ranch. Art Carmody had contracted with Jack De Sanchez to gather the remnant cattle in the mountains behind the Burnt Ranch. Carmody had claimed to be a fast brush-popper and he had hired this Joe Smith to help him. They had been catching wild steers and leading them down to a trap-pasture at the Burnt Ranch, working together as a team. Branding mavericks, Joe Smith had come to town for grub and horseshoes. When he got back to the Burnt Ranch it was about midnight, he said later.

According to Joe Smith, he had heard a commotion out at the corral. He had taken a lantern and gone to investigate. Inside the big corral he had found a big three-year-old maverick bull. Joe Smith's horse, a broken catch rope with its tie-knot on the saddle horn and the broken rope trailing. And trampled in the dirt was the gored and mangled body of Art Carmody.

"But why didn't Art Carmody wait till his partner Joe Smith got back from town," Steve Flynn said in a low tone, "to help him rope and brand that maverick bull?"

Steve Flynn and Jack De Sanchez had gone back to the ranch with Joe Smith when he fetched the news of his partner's death to Pintado. The bull was in the trap pasture, still unbranded. Joe Smith had pointed out the dried blood on the bull's horns. A bull's horns could have ripped a man's belly as the dead Art Carmody's belly was torn. But a charge of buckshot from the shotgun in the cabin could have done the job. Jack De Sanchez said he had left the shotgun there at Burnt Ranch when he had gone quail shooting. But in the box of shotgun shells left there with the shotgun Steve Flynn had found one shell that was loaded with buckshot instead of birdshot.

Joe Smith had elected to stay on at Burnt Ranch, regardless. De Sanchez had promised to send out another brush popper cowhand to help Joe Smith finish gathering wild cattle.

The man whom De Sanchez sent out to the Burnt Ranch to help Joe Smith came back to town with the news that he had found Joe Smith's dead body hanging from the high cross log that braced the tops of the two twenty-foot gate posts.

"So I went out again with Jack De Sanchez," said the Ranger, his grin twisted and mirthless. "Jack said it looked like suicide. That Joe Smith had done time in the pen and couldn't stand bein' alone with his bad conscience. That the man had sneaked out a jug of likker from town and the likker got him to broodin' and so he'd hung hisself with his own ketch-rope. Could be. But inside the cabin it looked like there had been a ruckus. A busted chair and things messed up—"

"I'm obliged for the warnin'," said Jeff Macklin, 'but I'm goin' out to the Burnt Ranch with Jack De Sanchez and you tomorrow."

"So be it, Jeff," said the Ranger. He lifted his drink. "Here's luck!"

III

THE Burnt Ranch, for all its evil reputation, was all that any cowman might wish for. Tall sycamores grew along the banks of a big creek that in the Southwest was large enough to be called a river. Its corrals and buildings were at the wide mouth of a canyon in the foothills and were built high enough above the high-water line in the rainy season. Adobe buildings and corrals built of mesquite. A horse pasture and the trap-pasture with a high, tight fence to hold wild cattle. There was a horse corral near the adobe barn. Then two bigger corrals that were joined together by a gate. The corral gates were made of pine poles with high gate posts with a pole spanning the tops of the gate posts.

Jim Loftus had been killed at the horse corral. Art Carmody killed inside the biggest of the two cattle corrals. Joe Smith hanged from the pole that spanned the high posts of the horse corral.

Beyond the corrals and low-roofed adobe ranch buildings that were all in need of repair, Jeff Macklin sighted the little cemetery on a small knoll. Even before Ranger Steve Flynn pointed out the graves.

It was quiet here. And knowing the grisly reputation of the Burnt Ranch, that quietness seemed sinister rather than peaceful, even in the glaring mid-day sun-

light. And the mountains behind the ranch took on a forbidding and mysterious vastness.

The long ride from town had been uneventful. They had sighted scattered bunches of cattle that were bushed-up in the shade of mesquite and catclaw brush. De Sanchez had pointed out the distant boundaries of the range that belonged to the Burnt Ranch. And as they neared the canyon the gambler said that the place got its name, the Burnt Ranch, because back in the Indian days the Apaches had raided it and killed the Mexicans who lived there and burned the corrals and left only the fireproof adobe walls of the thatched-roofed buildings. The old fire scars, he said, showed on the adobe walls. The weatherstained crosses yonder on the little knoll marked the graves of the massacred Mexicans. Men, women and children. The beginning, he said, of the little boot-hill.

Steve Flynn had fetched along a small sack of jerky. Jack De Sanchez had brought a quart of whiskey. But until they reached the clear cold water of a little spring here at the Burnt Ranch, they had not eaten any of the dry jerky or uncorked the bottle. They rode on past the buildings and corrals, past the little graveyard on the knoll, to the small adobe house that protected the spring.

Steve Flynn said with a faint grin that a shot of booze would taste all right, even if the whiskey was hot, if there was cold water to chase it.

"Because," he said, "this is one time I've come here with you to the Burnt Ranch, Jack, that we didn't find a dead man."

Jack De Sanchez smiled thinly. "We haven't looked around yet, Steve. So don't feel too disappointed."

They had reached the spring house when they heard the sound of shod hoofs coming down the brushy, boulder-strewn canyon trail.

Jeff Macklin watched with interest the way his two companions reacted. At the first sound of approaching riders, both the Ranger and the gambler had slid carbines from their saddle scabbards. Jeff Macklin followed suit without quite knowing why. And until the riders came into sight neither Steve Flynn nor Jack De Sanchez had spoken a word. They sat their horses, their saddle guns ready, their mouths tight-lipped and their eyes hard and dangerous.

Then, as the riders came into sight along the narrow canyon trail, it was the Arizona Ranger who broke the tense silence.

"Keep your shirt on, Jack." His voice was grim sounding.

"Take your own advice, Steve," was the gambler's flat-toned reply.

Jeff Macklin stared with frank curiosity at the little outfit that came along the trail.

Two men rode in the lead, side by side. One of them was larger and older looking than the other. His skin was weathered to a dark mahogany color and while

his lower jaw was clean shaven, his upper lip was hidden by a black mustache that dropped down across the corners of his mouth. A carbine barrel glinted as it lay across the front of his saddle.

His companion was younger looking and his face was marred by a week's growth of sandy red whiskers. There was a six-shooter in his hand.

Both men wore faded denim brush jumpers and brush-scarred chaps. Their saddles were rigged with breast straps for

roping. They looked like brush popper cowpunchers.

About fifty feet behind them came another rider. Until Jeff caught a glimpse of a mass of coppery hair, the rider looked like a tall, slim boy. It was a girl in cowpuncher clothes. Her light-colored leather chaps and buckskin jacket were brush scarred. Her saddle was rigged with breast strap and her stirrups covered with snub-nosed *tapaderos* like brush-popper cowpuncher saddles. Her saddle horn was rope-marked. And she rode like a cowboy.

Behind this girl trailed a little bunch of saddle horses. Then a string of Spanish pack mules. Four mules were packing tarp-covered beds. Two other mules were loaded with pack saddles and rawhide kyack boxes and tarps to protect the grub and camp outfit in the kyack boxes.

Hazing along the loose horses and pack mules was as queer a looking man as ever Jeff had seen in his life.

The rider was dressed as the other two men, in service scarred jumper and chaps and a battered sweat-stained hat. A wide, squatty-built man with a paunch and thick shoulders. But his beardless face was a bluish-gray-black color. His nose was flat and splayed. His gray-lipped mouth seemed to stretch from ear to ear in a fixed grin that showed two pointed yellow tusks, like boar tusks. He was the most inhuman and repulsive-looking human Jeff had ever seen. Some breed of Negro. His eyes were pale yellow like an animal's. He had a carbine in the crook of his arm.

As this strange cavalcade came on without a pause, without a hail of any kind, Jeff heard Steve Flynn's quiet voice describing who they were.

"The long-geared feller is Tondro, ramrod of the Quien Sabe outfit. Quiet and dangerous as a coiled rattler.

"The red-whiskered gent is called Paco. Paco De Sanchez, nephew of Jack De Sanchez. Or mebby a cousin. I never got it straight. Hot headed and reckless, drunk or sober. Tondro is kinda bodyguardin' Paco wherever they go. Paco needs it.

"The girl is Paco's sister. Carmelita De Sanchez. She makes a hand in any brush popper outfit. If Paco had half his sister's brains there'd be no job for Tondro. Or would there be? Quien sabe? Who knows?

"Hazin' the change of horses and the pack mules comes the one and only frog-faced Blue. Nigger Blue. They claim he files his teeth sharp thataway like boar's tusks. As fast a cowhand in the roughs a ever crowded a pony down a mountain slant. His clipped hair is white. His yellow eyes kin see in the dark like a cougar's eyes. I'd hate to have Nigger Blue hatin' me and meet him of a black night. Wherever Carmelita De Sanchez rides, there behind her rides Blue. And Carmelita rides where she wants to go, night or day.

"There's another De Sanchez. Mother of Carmelita and Paco. The most beautiful woman in the world. Deadlier than any male of the species. She never leaves the Quien Sabe ranch—"

Jack De Sanchez made a noise that was like a low whispering snarl. Steve Flynn quit talking.

THEY sat their horses, their guns in their hands, as that strange little outfit rode past. They had to ride within fifty feet of the spring house where Jeff and the gambler and the Ranger sat their horses.

Paco De Sanchez started to rein up his horse. His red whiskered lips twisted back.

"Damn you, Jack De Sanchez, you can't——"

"Let it go, Paco!" The man Tondro's voice cracked like a whip. As he rode between Paco and Jack De Sanchez, Jeff saw the man's eyes. They were black and opaque and glinted redly in the sunlight. The eyes of a killer.

The two men rode on. As the girl rode

past Steve Flynn pulled off his hat and mumbled something. The gambler's Stetson lifted in a mocking salute.

The girl did not give the gambler who was her uncle or cousin, whichever Jack De Sanchez was to her, so much as a flickering glance. The look she gave the Arizona Ranger was brief and contemptuous.

Then Jeff was looking straight into the eyes of Carmelita De Sanchez. They were dark gray, almost black in the shadow of thick black lashes. Smoky gray. They looked at Jeff and through eyes into whatever he was thinking. Cold, curious, appraising. Then she rode on. Her tanned face had not changed its masklike expression that told him nothing. Her red lipped mouth had not moved. She had not even seemed to notice her brother's quick flare-up or Tondro's brittle warning that had dampered Paco's hot tempered attempt at a quarrel.

Jeff felt his face grow hot and red as he put his hat back on his head. Sweat matted his thick wiry black hair and trickled down his face.

Then he got his first close up look at Nigger Blue. And something like a shudder slid along his spine. That blue gray black face with its gray lipped wide mouth and sharp yellow tusks. The glinting, bloodshot pale yellow eyes. Then a flat grayish black tongue flicked out and wet the grayish blue lips between the tusks and slid back out of sight. Jeff had nearly flinched at that odd, animal-like gesture. Then, like the others, Nigger Blue rode on, slapping at his old chaps that were scabbed by old dirt and grease and dried blood, with the doubled end of his rawhide *reata.*

They rode on past the corrals and adobe buildings. While the gambler and the Ranger and Jeff sat their horses in silence. Jack De Sanchez's handsome face was drained of blood, the color of old ivory.

Then they saw Nigger Blue lift his ugly head on its thick, stumpy neck. Twisting his head sideways and upwards like some animal sniffing. Then he reined his horse off the trail and loped over to the largest of the adobe buildings that would be the main ranchhouse. There he pulled up and leaned across his saddle horn to peer for a long time into the open doorway of the adobe house. Then he touched his horse with his huge rowled silver mounted Mexican spurs and caught up with the others.

Tondro and Paco De Sanchez twisted in their saddles. Tondro called out some brief question.

"Tally one more ghost, Tondro!" Nigger Blue's voice was as deep and clear toned as an old Spanish bell, without a trace of Negro accent.

Paco's voice broke out. "The hell you say!"

He would have pulled up but Tondro shook his head and said something in a low tone.

The girl Carmelita De Sanchez had not even turned her head. It was as if she had heard nothing. As if she were riding all alone along the trail. And there was something about her silent indifference that chilled Jeff Macklin's blood.

So they rode on out of sight, without stopping. They had undoubtedly drunk their fill and watered their horses farther on up the canyon. They might even have camped at the head of the canyon at noon. Now they passed on out of sight, headed along the trail that led only to Pintado.

There was a worried, puzzled scowl on the face of Ranger Steve Flynn. When he looked at the gambler, Jack De Sanchez bared his white teeth in a flat-lipped grin.

"I told you, Steve," he said in his toneless voice, "that we hadn't looked around yet."

Ranger Steve Flynn's lean tanned face had lost its healthy color. He started to say something. Then his mouth clamped shut and without another word he rode over to the adobe house.

Jeff followed close behind the Ranger. The gambler took his time.

Steve Flynn swung from his saddle as Jeff rode up. The Ranger stepped past the

heavy door that sagged on rusty hinges. Across the log threshold into the shadowed adobe house.

As Jeff dismounted he saw what Steve Flynn was looking at. What Nigger Blue had sniffed at and stared at, then ridden on.

Sprawled on his back in the middle of the floor was a dead man. The man had been shot through the chest and the blood that stained his soiled flannel shirt was dried and beginning to blacken.

Jeff went into the cabin. He stood beside the Ranger, staring at the dead man's face. Staring wide-eyed for a second. Until he forced himself to get his nerves under control.

He had seen that brutal, coarse, pockmarked face before. About a month ago, at Yuma Prison. And he recalled now the warden's words as he introduced the man.

"This is Bull West. One of the prison guards. He was with the prisoner called John Doe when the man died—"

IV

JEFF MACKLIN did some swift thinking in the next few seconds. Before the Ranger could catch him off guard, he fired a question that forestalled one of a similar kind.

"Who is the dead man, Steve?"

Ranger Steve Flynn shook his head without even looking at Jeff. He pointed toward the bedroll and rawhide kyack boxes that held grub and a skeleton camp outfit. The man had been killed before he had got his kyacks unpacked.

The Ranger squatted on his heels beside the dead man. Jack De Sanchez had ridden up and dismounted. The gambler stood in the doorway now, a thin smile on his mouth, his yellowish gray eyes hard as agate.

"No bronc drug this 'un to death." The Ranger's tone was quiet. "No maverick bull kin be blamed for hookin' him in the belly. And not even a picked coroner's jury from Pintado would have the crust to call it suicide. Because this feller was shot in the back while he was fixin' to unpack his outfit. He never had a chance to go for his gun."

Steve Flynn pointed to the dead man's holstered six-shooter. Then he straightened up on his long bowed legs and looked straight at the gambler.

"Who is this dead feller, Jack?" he asked bluntly, unconsciously repeating Jeff's question.

Jack De Sanchez shrugged his shoulders in their well-tailored flannel shirt.

"Never saw him before. Ugly lookin' brute, whoever he is, or was."

The Ranger went through the dead man's pockets. The search brought forth nothing but a jackknife, matches, a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers and a partly gnawed plug of chewing tobacco. Nor was there any kind of a law badge pinned to his shirt or undershirt.

"This," said the Ranger bluntly, "is murder. Cold blooded murder."

Jeff Macklin said nothing. He wondered if it was really murder to kill a human brute like that prison guard whose name was Bull West. He remembered the dead convict called John Doe. The faces of other convicts at Yuma Prison. If ever he had seen brutality in the eyes and face of a man he had seen it stamped there as it remained stamped, even in death, on that pockmarked, heavy jawed, ugly face. It wasn't murder to kill a man like Bull West —any more than it was murder to kill a mad dog.

"Well," said Jack De Sanchez, twisting his mustache, "this kills the sale of the Burnt Ranch."

"Not if it's priced to fit my bankroll," remarked Jeff Macklin. "Just one more ghost to keep a man company here of a lonesome night."

Steve Flynn took a blanket from the dead man's bedroll and threw it over the corpse. They went outside and the Ranger stood for a long minute in the doorway, then walked in a straight line to the horse corral about a

hundred yards away. He spent several minutes looking around for tracks. Stooped and picked up an empty brass .30-30 shell. Then he joined Jeff Macklin and the gambler at the little adobe springhouse.

They took a drink of whiskey and chased the raw warm liquor with cold spring water.

There had been something almighty efficient and business-like about the manner in which the Arizona Ranger had gone about his work. When he had taken a drink he broke the silence.

"It looks like a one man job. Some gent hid over at the corral till he got a good shot at that feller's back. Then used only one shot to git the job done. Then he rode off with the dead feller's saddled horse and pack mule. A one man job."

Steve Flynn said they might as well dig another grave up on the knoll and plant the dead man. There was no need for any coroner's jury to tell him how that man was killed. It had been cold-blooded murder.

"How about identification of the dead man?" asked the gambler.

"He was a guard at Yuma Prison," said the Arizona Ranger quietly. "I saw him there more than once when I went there on business. They called him Bull and he managed to live up to the name. There'll be no tears shed for Bull West."

THEY dug a grave and buried the dead man, using his bed tarp for a shroud and coffin. And while they were at this grisly job, Jeff Macklin had time to get a look at the other graves here at the little boothill graveyard that was so much a part of the Burnt Ranch.

Ranger Steve Flynn saw Jeff looking at three graves that were side by side and unmarked. The Ranger grinned flatly, his puckered blue eyes watching Jeff narrowly. Then he turned his grin and his hard blue-eyed stare on the gambler.

Jack De Sanchez rolled and lit a cigarette. "Three of the Outlaw John Macklin gang are supposed to be buried there." His voice was toneless.

And in that same toneless voice he spoke directly to Jeff Macklin. As a man might speak of some careless topic of conversation.

"Outlaw John Macklin is said to have a son. That would be you?"

"Outlaw John Macklin was my father." Jeff matched the gambler's tone for quietness.

"A more cunning man," said Jack De Sanchez, "might have changed his name when he came here to smell out the cold trail of the Outlaw John Macklin gang. Or perhaps I should have put it that a man of less courage would have hidden behind an alias. There's a certain boldness to your way that seems to be getting results. Witness the dead Bull West. And consider the little outfit we watched ride past not long ago. Tondro, Paco and Carmelita De Sanchez. The faithful Nigger Blue. News travels fast and by strange channels. Eh, Steve?"

Steve Flynn grinned faintly. "The stakes are big. The risks are bigger. It's a good thing for you and Jeff that you've both got alibis for where you was about dusk last night when I figger Bull West got shot where his suspenders cross."

"And just as well that your own alibi is established, Steve," said the gambler. "Though I doubt if Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez whom you so gallantly described as being the most beautiful woman in the world and far deadlier than the male of the De Sanchez species, would accept our alibis. This seems to call for a drink."

Steve Flynn pointed to the three unmarked graves as the gambler twisted the cork from the whiskey bottle.

"Accordin' to one story," he said slowly, "the men buried there are Outlaw John Macklin, your father, Jeff. Whitehead Flynn, my father. And Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez, older brother of Jack and the father of Carmelita and Paco De Sanchez. Or was Quien Sabe your cousin, Jack?"

"Lon and I were raised as brothers," said the gambler. "But he was really my cousin."

Jack De Sanchez and Steve Flynn seemed to be laying their cards face up. But Jeff wasn't trusting them all the way. He could not afford to trust any man right now. Play one or two cards. Keep his hole card buried until all bets were made.

"I knew there was an outlaw they called Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez," Jeff told them. "Another outlaw called Whitehead Flynn. That four men in that outlaw gang rode to the Burnt Ranch. That there was only three graves. Who would be the fourth outlaw? The one who lived to bury the other three when the shootin' amongst them was all over?"

"Find the right answer to that question," said Ranger Steve Flynn, "and you'll know who killed Bull West and Joe Smith and Art Carmody and Range Detective Jim Loftus."

"Steve is right," agreed Jack De Sanchez. "Four outlaws rode here to the Burnt Ranch more than ten years ago. Three of 'em lie buried in those unmarked graves. One of 'em lived to bury his pardners in crime and ride away. So far as I know the rest of the Outlaw John Macklin gang had been killed off. The fourth man must have been a new and nameless member of the gang. And by that same token we may draw the conclusion that this nameless outlaw did not know where the spoils from the bank robberies and train hold-ups were cached. The Law has the serial numbers of a lot of that stolen money. Not so much as a five-dollar banknote has ever gone back into circulation since the wiping out of the Outlaw John Macklin gang. The natural supposition is that the cache is at the Burnt Ranch. Let's drink."

THE whiskey was warm from the sun and it burned clear into the lining of Jeff's gullet and stomach. Steve Flynn made a grimace as he drank. Jack De Sanchez said that it was better than nothing. He coughed and shuddered as the hot whiskey went down his throat.

"And now that we've had this drink together," the gambler said flatly, "let's talk turkey. I won the Burnt Ranch from Paco De Sanchez in a square poker game. Though my sister-in-law, Guadalupe, will tell you I got the red-headed young fool drunk and dealt from a cold deck. Though Tondro knows the game was on the level.

"The ranch is yours, Macklin, providing you take Steve Flynn as a pardner. Run it to suit yourselves. Gather what cattle you can round up. Cut me in for a third of the profits, if you want to get big hearted. I'll stake you to a remuda. Hire a crew of tough cowhands who aren't afraid of ghosts, dead or living, and take over. You both know what you're getting into. We just buried the last man who moved in here. But if you want the outfit, the Burnt Ranch is yours. There's no price on it."

Jeff Macklin sensed that Jack De Sanchez and Steve Flynn did not trust one another. The gambler suspected the Ranger of being behind the deaths of Jim Loftus, Art Carmody, Joe Smith and now Bull West. Steve Flynn had all but openly accused Jack De Sanchez of having those men murdered. And now they were taking Jeff Macklin into a dangerous partnership that was based on mistrust and suspicion. The Burnt Ranch, even as a gift, was something that even a lot of brave men wouldn't accept under any circumstances.

"It's a deal," said Jeff Macklin. "Want your part of it, Steve?"

Arizona Ranger Steve Flynn grinned widely and reached for the bottle of sunhot whiskey.

"I'm your huckleberry, Jeff. No use in tryin' to git Jack De Sanchez to move out here with us. He's one of them superstitious gamblin' men. Spookier about haunts than Nigger Blue should be but ain't. And the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez has told Jack that if ever he moved to the Burnt Ranch she'd kill him with her own gun."

They all took another drink of the hot

whiskey. Then they rode down the boot-hill and took the trail back to Pintado.

It was while they were riding back to town that the Ranger asked Jeff casually if he'd identified the lifer called John Doe at Yuma Prison.

"We knowed about you bein' called there," he grinned, "long before ever you showed up at Pintado. News gits passed along."

Jeff had been expecting that question. He answered it in his own way.

"Whoever John Doe was, or what he looked like before he went to Yuma Prison, nobody could have identified him as anything but a pore, horrible skin and bones skeleton that turned a man's belly inside out to look at. I met Bull West there. I'd like to shake the hand that pulled the trigger of the thirty-thirty that give that pock-marked devil his one way ticket to hell! Murder? The convicts at Yuma Prison would have a different name for the killin' of Bull West!"

"Amen to that," agreed Steve Flynn. "Bull West trailed you to Pintado. And mebbyso he ain't the only man that's bin follerin' you. I've bin watchin' what strangers showed up at town. So has Jack. So, like as not, has some rep from the Quien Sabe outfit."

Steve Flynn said that it wouldn't have done Jeff Macklin a bit of good to have shown up under an alias. As an Arizona Ranger he had been notified to be on the lookout for Jeff and had been furnished with his description. The Law was watching the son of Outlaw John Macklin. Even as detectives were always cold trailing Steve Flynn whose record was clean enough to get him a Ranger warrant. And all the De Sanchez outfit and Tondro and even Nigger Blue were being watched by detectives. Though Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez had ways of making things almighty unhappy for prowling range detectives.

Jeff Macklin was more than a little curious about the Quien Sabe outfit. About the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez. Her twenty-two year old son Paco. Carmelita, who was Paco's twin. The quick-triggered bodyguard Tondro. The repulsive Nigger Blue.

But whenever he hinted around to that subject Jack De Sanchez cleverly steered the talk into other channels. And tipsy as Steven Flynn seemed to be, the Ranger could be tight lipped.

"Steve and I," the gambler finally put a halt to Jeff's clumsy leads, "want you to meet the Quien Sabe outfit with an open mind, Jeff. Without prejudice. So that you can furnish us with an outside and unbiased opinion of them all. And you'll meet all but the Senora tonight at the International. Their expedition to Pintado is more or less in your honor. Though Paco is due for a spree. And Steve Flynn would like to make himself hope that Carmelita has ridden seventy-five miles of rough mountain trail to dance with him."

Steve Flynn's face reddened and for a second Jeff thought he was going to slap the gambler across the face. Then the Ranger passed it off with a flat-lipped grin.

Jeff Macklin was looking forward eagerly enough now to meeting Carmelita De Sanchez. Though she was not beautiful. And she had eyed him with a cold indifference as she might size up a strange horse. There had been something almost sullen about her mouth and her eyes had been as cold and hard as a man's. And he could not shake off that feeling that she had ridden along as if she were alone on the trail. That she dwelt in a world of her own where no outsider could ever enter. But there was a strange fascination there, a strong attraction, something like a challenge flung in a man's face. As if she masked beneath that sullen coldness a warmth and hunger for the love of a man. But that man would have to prove himself and the proving would take all the courage and bigness and strength that was in a man's heart and body and soul. And only to that one man would Carmelita De Sanchez ever give even the tiniest part of the love of which she was capable of giving to but one man on earth.

That Ranger Steve Flynn was in love with the girl, was plain. It had showed in his eyes and was written on his tanned face when she had looked at him. And when her eyes had cut him with their cold contempt the tow-headed Ranger had been hurt. Hurt far worse than fists or gun or knife would ever be able to give him pain.

The gambler Jack De Sanchez knew that Steve Flynn was in love with this young cousin or niece of his. And he was taunting the Ranger with the utter folly and hopelessness of that love for Carmelita. And Steve Flynn right now was hating Jack De Sanchez because the gambler had been able to gut-shoot him with his thin-lipped taunts.

THE trail back to Pintado seemed endless. Macklin called himself a fool for letting a girl who was a total stranger get under his tough hide.

The stars came out and the air cooled and they rode across the desert with the purple mountains behind them and the lights of Pintado showed in the desert night like stars that had drifted slowly down to earth and were shining there.

In the moonlight the little town lost its drabness and the adobe huts of the Mexicans, with candle lights inside, were like some stage setting. Little campfires burned in front of the scattered adobe huts and around them sat Mexicans with serapes around their shoulders and cigarettes glowing beneath huge sombreros. And somewhere a guitar strummed softly and a Mexican senorita sang a little ranchero song.

Jeff and Jack De Sanchez and Steve Flynn put up their horses. Then the gambler went to his room to bathe and shave and dress.

The Ranger told Jeff that as long as they were going to be partners, that Jeff might as well share his room at the International. So they took their baths together, sloshing each other down with buckets full of warm water. Lathering with soap. Sloshing more warm water that had stood all day in the sun. Then finishing with cold water from the well. They shared the same cracked mirror for shaving. And put on their best town clothes.

The Ranger said he had to write out a report about the death of Bull West and get it into the post office for the stagecoach to pick up. For Jeff to wait for him at the bar and they'd eat supper together.

So Jeff Macklin was standing alone at the bar when he heard his name spoken. He turned around quickly, his hand on his gun. And looked into the pale yellow eyes and the blue gray black repulsive face of Nigger Blue.

"Miss Carmelita wants to see you alone in the patio. Right now. I'll take you to her."

It was more a command than an invitation. Jeff Macklin felt a swift surge of resentment. He looked down at the thick-set paunchy Nigger Blue who stood there on bowed legs like some two-legged animal, his blue gray lips spread in that perpetual ear to ear grin with its two sharp pointed tusks. A squatty built thing with the thick neck and thick muscled shoulders and chest and long arms of an ape. Pale yellow eyes wicked and bloodshot. His grayish tongue licked his lips.

"No need to git mad, Mister," said Nigger Blue. "Men like Steve Flynn would be already hittin' a high lope a-gittin' there. Ain't just any man Miss Carmelita talks to."

Command or invitation, what difference did it make? Jeff nodded and followed Nigger Blue through the open doorway into the candle lit patio.

Carmelita De Sanchez sat alone at a far table, all but hidden in the night's shadows. A single candle burned in the middle of the table and its light threw flickering shadows across her tanned face.

She was wearing some sort of a Mexican dress with green embroidery on its white muslin blouse. Her dark coppery hair was parted in the middle and pulled down across her ears and bunched at the back of

her neck. Her tanned olive skin needed no powdering. Her mouth was as red as a ripe pomegranate and her smoky gray eyes looked nearly black in the candle light.

"Does he lie, Blue?" She looked past him at the ugly squat Nigger Blue. Her voice was cold and impersonal.

"No ma'am. He's the spittin' image uh Outlaw John Macklin."

"Then sit down, Jeff Macklin."

Jeff sat down in the other chair. Nigger Blue stepped back into the shadows and out of sight.

V

THERE was a bottle of whiskey and an earthenware pitcher of cold water and a glass. Carmelita had a glass of amber colored wine, twisting the stem of the wine glass between her thumb and two slim fingers.

"Pour yourself a drink, and smoke. I don't want you to feel awkward."

"As awkward as I look?" Jeff grinned.

Carmelita De Sanchez smiled, then laughed softly. The sound of her laughter traveled no further than across the small table. The sullen look was gone from her red mouth and her dark gray eyes lost their hardness.

"You looked mad enough to walk away. Not awkward. I had to be certain you were the Jeff Macklin whose father was Outlaw John Macklin. So I can call you Jeff and you call me Carmelita and we might even be friends. Quien sabe? Who can tell?"

Jeff poured some whiskey in his glass and watered it. Lifted the drink.

"Salud!"

"Salud!" She touched her glass against his and they drank.

"Before we get interrupted," she spoke in a low throaty voice, "Before anything happens here to spoil our talk, I want to give you a message from the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez. She says for you to stay away from the Burnt Ranch. Or you will be killed. Like other men have been killed there."

"Supposin' I've already made a deal to take over the Burnt Ranch?"

"I've given you my mother's message. You're free, white and of age. You know what's happened to those other men. You found a dead man there today. I was told by my mother to give you that message. I don't know anything about the deal you've made with Jack De Sanchez or Steve Flynn. I'm not here to argue the question."

"It sounded like a threat," said Jeff.

Carmelita De Sanchez shrugged her shoulders. "Call it a warning. The Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez never makes threats." Her smile was gone again and her eyes had darkened.

Then her red lips twisted in a bitter sort of smile. "Has Jack De Sanchez sold you the Burnt Ranch?"

Jeff shook his head. "Steve Flynn and I are movin' there to gather wild cattle. Jack De Sanchez sorta gave us the outfit."

"Jack De Sanchez," said Carmelita, "is sending you with Steve Flynn to the Burnt Ranch to be murdered. Did you ever hear the old fable about the monkey who used the cat to snag the hot chestnuts out of the fire?

"Jack De Sanchez wouldn't spend a night alone at Burnt Ranch for all the supposed loot that the Outlaw John Macklin gang is said to have cached there. You don't look like a thick-witted fool, Jeff. But if you go to the Burnt Ranch with that Ranger, you'll never leave there alive. Or has the cat got the proverbial nine lives?"

Jeff Macklin had rolled a cigarette. He lit it now from the candle flame. Bending across the table so that his face was close to hers.

"I'm not goin' after any outlaw cache. If Jack De Sanchez or Steve Flynn are after it, let 'em do their own diggin'."

"Then what brings you to Pintato? Why do you want to risk your life at that devil cursed Burnt Ranch?"

"Outlaw John Macklin was my father.

Mebbyso he wasn't the kind of a father most kids have had. But to me, he was some kind of a big hero. He's dead now. I'm playin' his hand out. The hand that somebody dealt him from the bottom of a cold deck. I'm not playin' for that outlaw cache. If it falls into the last jackpot, I'll rake it in. But I'm not playin' for money."

Jeff Macklin leaned back in his chair again. He saw Paco De Sanchez coming across the patio toward them. He had shaved off his reddish stubble and put on clean clothes. A tall, slim, long muscled young cowpuncher with his pants legs shoved into the tops of fancy stitched tan boots. And behind him strode his bodyguard Tondro.

Paco De Sanchez walked straight and there was no thickness in his voice but Jeff got the impression that the young redheaded cowhand was a little drunk.

Paco and Tondro halted a few feet from where Jeff sat across the table from Carmelita. His face was a little white under its sun coloring and his light gray eyes were bloodshot. His grin was arrogant, unpleasant.

"Filled your loop, eh, Carm? Now that you've roped Jeff Macklin, you goin' to burn the Quien Sabe brand on his hide? Or turn him into the culls?"

Jeff got slowly to his feet, shoving back his chair. Paco might be this girl's twin brother but he was going to get that sneering grin slapped off his face.

But it was Tondro who grabbed Paco De Sanchez and shoved him aside. And as Tondro's right hand dropped to his gun, Jeff took one quick step and his left fist crashed square into the man's face. Jeff moved in fast as the blow sent Tondro off balance. His right caught Tondro in the center of his belly and just under his briskit. And then he slapped Tondro's gun out of his hand and knocked him down.

Jeff hadn't seen Steve Flynn until the Ranger had Paco's right arm twisted back in a hammerlock and was twisting the six-shooter out of Paco's hand.

Steve Flynn gave Paco a hard shove and tripped him. Paco landed sprawling on his face. Steve stood there with Paco's six-shooter in his hand, a flat-lipped grin on his face.

Jeff's gun was in his hand as Tondro, blood spilling from his nose, gasping for breath, his face yellowish, got slowly to his feet.

Nigger Blue stood back in the dark shadows, a long thin bladed knife in one hand, a gun in the other. His grin seemed wider than ever and his pale yellow eyes glittered like a cougar's.

Carmelita De Sanchez had not moved in her chair. She still held her half-filled glass of wine in her hand. Her face was as coldly calm and mask-like as it had been at the Burnt Ranch.

"Keep out of it, Blue," she said quietly. "Tondro, you'd better take Paco and keep him out of trouble. He came here to gamble Jack De Sanchez out of the Burnt Ranch. See that he gets his chores done. Neither of you seem to be lucky, so far. Keep away from me. Blue don't like you, Tondro."

Tondro picked up his six-shooter and shoved it back into the holster he wore tied low on his thigh.

"Fist fightin' ain't my game, Macklin," he wiped the blood from his face with a clean white silk neck handkerchief. "Try fillin' your hand with a gun next time."

"I'll try to remember that, Tondro," said Jeff.

STEVE FLYNN was still grinning when he ejected the cartridges from Paco's six-shooter and returned the empty gun butt foremost to its owner.

"Why don't you take things easy, Paco?" the Ranger said quietly. "You'll git into trouble one of these times."

Paco's sunburned face had whitened until the freckles on his skin stood out like brown warts. He glared at his sister, breathing like he had been running hard.

"You'd like to get me killed, wouldn't

you, Carmelita? Then you'd have it all? You'd have the Quien Sabe. You're as cold-blooded as that she devil who taught you her bag of tricks."

TONDRO gripped Paco's arm, turned him around and led him back across the patio and through the door into the bar.

Jack De Sanchez materialized as quietly and mysteriously as had the Ranger. Jeff figured there must be a door somewhere in the black shadows that opened and closed on well-oiled noiseless hinges.

"Always play it safe, don't you, Jack?" Carmelita's red lips twisted faintly. "Paco wants to gamble for the Burnt Ranch. Better take your Ranger with you. Jeff Macklin's eating supper with me."

Jeff saw Ranger Steve Flynn staring at him. The Ranger was still wearing his flat-lipped grin but there was something like sudden hatred in his puckered blue eyes. That big tow-headed Steve Flynn was jealous. Insanely jealous of any man to whom Carmelita gave so much as a smile.

Jeff started to say something, then changed his mind. Words would not do anything but precipitate a quarrel. Jeff cut a quick look at Jack De Sanchez. There was a thin, crafty sort of smile on the gambler's thin-lipped mouth.

"Come on, Steve," Jack De Sanchez said flatly. "Keep Tondro off my back while I give Paco his revenge."

When they had gone, Jeff sat down again. Nigger Blue had gone back to his shadows. Jeff took out a pocket handkerchief and wiped some oozing blood from his skinned knuckles.

Carmelita was smiling across the table at him when she poured a stiff jolt of whiskey into his glass and passed it across the table to him.

The Mexican stringed orchestra showed up. Four of the senorita entertainers. The Mexicans in their charro suits grinned and bowed, sweeping off their black silver embroidered sombreros. The four young senoritas flocked around the table like so many fluttering young birds of gay plumage.

"Senorita Carmelita! Senorita Carmelita!"

Carmelita's face lighted up with gay pleasure. Her dark gray eyes danced as she jabbered in rapid Mexican to the four senoritas. While the orchestra struck up a tune that Jeff knew they must have composed especially for Carmelita De Sanchez.

This was a new and different Carmelita. And when they coaxed and begged her to sing she took a guitar and strummed it and in a low, deep throated voice that sent Jeff's blood pounding into his throat she sang her song across the table to him. One of those plaintive, sad, yet gay little ranchero love songs.

When she had finished singing and handed back the guitar there were tears in the four pairs of dark eyes of the little senoritas.

Then waiters came with dishes of hot Mexican food and a bottle of special wine and the orchestra strolled around the patio playing while the four little senoritas huddled together at a far table and whispered and giggled, their eyes rolling always toward the table where Carmelita and Jeff sat.

"Now, for as long as we are let, Jeff, we'll forget ugly things. Perhaps Paco will win back that Burnt Ranch. Then you can't go out there. Anyhow for a little while let's forget everything but you and me. We have music and candle light. Old wine. And overhead are the stars and the moon. Carmelita and Jeff. Drink some wine, Jeff. Then make love talk to me like some moon-struck cabalero. And after a while I might sing you another song, no?"

Jeff Macklin was tongue tied. Carmelita De Sanchez leaned a little toward him so that for a moment the candle light shone in her dark gray eyes.

"Am I teasing you, Jeff? I don't mean to. The Quien Sabe ranch is grim. Like a prison. Even this little bit seems like a lot to a girl whose life seems so barren that

there are times when death would be almost welcome. Pretend with me for just a short hour, Jeff. Help me forget what is back there at the Quien Sabe ranch. What I must go back to tomorrow. I am not teasing you, Jeff. If it were not for the Senora Guadalupe I would be bold enough to ask you to take me away from Pintado, from everything it means. But all I can ask of you is to sit here with me and both of us forget the ugly things that tomorrow will bring."

Jeff Macklin's blood raced through his veins. He was drunk. Drunk with something that had to be love. Love for a coppery haired girl with smoke gray eyes and a voice that tingled a man's spine. Carmelita De Sanchez had removed that cold, bitter, sullenly indifferent mask. She was alive, vibrant, the most beautiful and fascinating girl on earth. Her eyes shining like stars, her cheeks faintly flushed. And when he reached across the table and took hold of her hand he felt it trembling in his.

But Jeff's voice stuck in his throat and he could not say a word. Just look into her eyes and hold her hand and forget the rest of the world.

And after a while his voice came out of his dry throat. His words stumbling and confused.

"I'll take you anywhere, Carmelita. Now. Tonight. We'll go away from here and never come back. This has got to be just us. You and me. I'd kill any man that gets in my way. Let's get out of here now. Tonight. Nobody kin stop us. Nobody!"

Then a shadow moved across the candle light and Nigger Blue stood for a brief second behind Carmelita's chair before he moved on into a deeper shadow. And it was as if a cold icy chill had come into the soft southwest night.

Carmelita's slim tanned hand had tightened in his. And perhaps it was Jeff's imagination but her hand felt cold before it slid free. Her hand trembled as it lifted the glass of wine and some of it spilled.

"Not tonight, Jeff. Perhaps not ever. Quien sabe? My mother sent me here to deliver her message. Then I am to go back to the Quien Sabe ranch. I don't know what love is, Jeff, I don't dare know. But I can tell you this, without knowing you longer than this short time. That if I were free to go, nothing would stop us tonight. Nothing."

"Nigger Blue," said Jeff Macklin, "a hundred Nigger Blues couldn't git in my way if you'll come with me."

"Blue has his orders, Jeff. Like I have mine. Like Paco and Tondro have their orders. Perhaps the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez gives those orders. Quien sabe?"

"What kind of a woman is she, then," Jeff burst out hotly, "to keep you a prisoner at that damned Quien Sabe ranch?"

Carmelita was fingering a gold chain that hung around her neck. She pulled it slowly and a large gold locket came from inside her green embroidered blouse. She snapped it open. Held it open in the palm of her hand.

And Jeff saw a beautifully done miniature painted on ivory.

"It's you, Carmelita!"

"It's my mother when she was about my age. The Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez. You heard Paco call his mother a she-devil. I call her a saint. She was named for Our Lady of Guadalupe. There is a strong resemblance to this artist's portrait of my mother and the image of The Lady of Guadalupe, Patron Saint of Mexico."

Carmelita closed the locket and dropped it back inside her blouse. The color was back again in her cheeks. The look of fear or dread or pain that had darkened her eyes with the shadow of Nigger Blue, was gone. She lifted her glass of wine.

"To our dreams, Jeff. I will burn a candle and say a little prayer to The Lady of Guadalupe. That prayer may come true. Quien sabe?"

From the barroom came a short, mocking, brittle laugh. The voice of Paco De Sanchez.

"Belly up to the bar, hombres! Drink! Jack De Sanchez buys drinks for the house. I just won back the Burnt Ranch!"

"Madre de Dios!" whispered Carmelita De Sanchez. "Poor Paco!"

VI

"POOR Paco!"

At first Jeff Macklin did not understand. Of them all, Jeff was the only stranger here. For a week he had tried to puzzle out Jack De Sanchez and the Ranger, Steve Flynn. And before he had got very far with his calculations, Carmelita and Paco, Tondro and Nigger Blue had ridden into the picture. And behind them all, saint or she-devil, was Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez. She was as yet unseen but her power was all too evident.

"Paco will not go back to the Quien Sabe ranch," Carmelita told Jeff Macklin. "He and Tondro will ride from here to the Burnt Ranch. And that will be the end of Paco. He will be murdered."

"What about his bodyguard Tondro?" asked Jeff.

"Quien sabe? Who knows? Perhaps it is Tondro who has done these other murders."

Paco De Sanchez, with Tondro like a sinister shadow, swaggered across the tiled patio with a bottle in his hand. Before he reached the table where Jeff sat with Carmelita, Nigger Blue stepped out of the shadows to bar Paco's way.

"Let him alone, Blue. Want me to give three cheers, Paco?"

"I won it back, Carm! When you get back to the Quien Sabe, tell the Queen that Paco won back his Burnt Ranch."

"You're drunk, Paco," Carmelita said coldly. "Tondro has seen to it that you've had enough to drink. He's even taught you how to mix marijuana with your tobacco. You're not coming to the Quien Sabe?"

"I'd rather be killed at the Burnt Ranch!"

Carmelita De Sanchez shrugged her shoulders. She looked past her tipsy brother and straight at Tondro.

"May the Senor Dios have mercy on you, Tondro, if anything happens to Paco at the Burnt Ranch. Now get out of my sight before Blue goes broncho."

Paco stood there, swaying a little, his bottle in his hand. There was a wild, crazy glitter in his bloodshot eyes. The cigarette that hung, half smoked, from a corner of his mouth, smelled of the marijuana weed.

"If you'd only come back to the Quien Sabe, Paco," said his sister. "Just for an hour—"

"I'm never goin' back to the Quien Sabe. I've got back the Burnt Ranch. Turned high card on Jack De Sanchez. I'm free! Me, Paco De Sanchez! Adios!"

He swept off his Stetson and bowed. His thick rust-colored hair was damp with sweat and beads of cold sweat glistened on his white forehead and flushed face. His spurs jingled arrogantly as he crossed the patio into the bar, Tondro behind him.

Jack De Sanchez and Steve Flynn came into the patio by another door. The gambler halted at the table, a faint smile twisting his thin-lipped mouth.

"Your brother Paco slipped the ace of spades from the bottom of the deck when I cut a ten spot. It was clumsy cheating. But Tondro was backing his play with a gun. My house rules say that the customer is always right, Carmelita. Paco owns the Burnt Ranch." Then Jack De Sanchez looked at Jeff Macklin.

"That tears our deal, Jeff."

Steve Flynn's face had lost its healthy color and beads of cold sweat moistened his skin. His puckered blue eyes were bloodshot and hard as glass. The Ranger was drunk.

"The deal was off," Steve Flynn's voice had an ugly tone, "before Paco won the Burnt Ranch on a crooked draw. I wouldn't have a pardner like this double-crossin' snake from Robbers' Roost. Listen, Jeff Macklin from Robbers' Roost or Brown's Hole or wherever you come from! From

here on down the line it's every man for himself. And no holts barred. Got that straight?"

Jeff nodded; Steve Flynn was fighting drunk on whiskey and jealousy.

Jack De Sanchez led the Ranger away. Jeff shook his head. He liked Steve Flynn. He could not get mad at the lanky Ranger. There was only sympathy and pity for Steve Flynn in Jeff's heart.

"I'm to blame for that," said Carmelita. "Steve Flynn has tried to make love to me from the first time he ever saw me. When I wanted him for a friend."

Perhaps she lied. She might have led Steve Flynn along, even as a little while ago she had twisted Jeff around her slim finger. But somehow it didn't matter.

"You belong to me, Carmelita." Jeff's voice was husky, unsteady.

"Quien sabe, Jeff? Everything is against us now."

"You're mine!"

"I want to belong to you for always," Carmelita said quietly. "Now I'm going back to the Quien Sabe Ranch with Blue. If the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez sends for you, Jeff, come. I'll be there waiting for you. Adios."

Carmelita De Sanchez moved out of her chair and into the shadows and was gone. The squat bulky shadow of Nigger Blue guarded her going. Then Blue was gone.

Jeff Macklin sat alone now in the patio. There was only the fading odor of gardenias in the southwest night to tell him that it was not just a dream.

Pintado was a dangerous place for Jeff right now. He had made a dangerous and treacherous enemy of the killer Tondro. Paco, drunk and half-crazed from marijuana, was his enemy. Ranger Steve Flynn had let drunken jealousy sever the makings of a splendid partnership. As for the gambler Jack De Sanchez, that hombre played his cards close to his belly, trusted nobody, gave his friendship to no man, and would have a smiled on his handsome face when he killed any man who got in his way.

Jeff Macklin, son of Outlaw John Macklin, sat alone in the moonlit patio. He took his bottle of whiskey and tall glass and pitcher of water and moved his table further into the black shadows. And sat down with his back against the wall, his right hand near his six-shooter. He poured some whiskey into his glass and watered it, then gulped it down. And then he rolled and lit a cigarette and blew out the candle flame. So that now he sat alone in the dark waiting for whatever was to come in the shape of danger.

THERE are times when a stiff drink will sober a man. Clear his brain, sharpen his wits. And as he sat there, pulling tobacco smoke into his lungs and letting it drift from the nostrils, letting the whiskey work, he got a new perspective, a cold-blooded slant on all that had happened.

Jack De Sanchez had told Jeff that he wanted him to meet Paco and Carmelita, Tondro and Nigger Blue, with an open and unbiased mind. So that he could form his own opinions, draw his own conclusions.

He grinned to himself there in the darkness. He had met them. And the meeting was something to remember. And when it was all said and done, if a man wanted to be downright cold-blooded about it, that girl Carmelita De Sanchez had run the show. She had somehow managed to precipitate a quarrel between Jeff and her brother Paco and Tondro. Nigger Blue was an unknown element there from start to finish. But she had certainly split up the friendship between Jeff Macklin and Steve Flynn. And that Ranger was the one man at Pintado Jeff had figured for a friend who would hang and rattle through hell and high water. And so if it came down to real old brass tacks and cold turkey, Carmelita had stirred up an ugly poisonous brew. If it was her game to alienate Jeff Macklin, set him apart, make him a target for the guns of those men, she had played aces all the way through.

Then he remembered the look in her

smoky gray eyes and felt ashamed of his suspicions of her. Damn it all, he was in love with the girl. He hoped to marry her. Take her away with him. Make her the mother of his children. A man didn't blotch and soil the only love he'd ever had for a woman with damned disloyal suspicions.

Jeff Macklin poured himself another drink and downed it. He felt better. He was betting all his chips on Carmelita. And that was that. He'd fight for her, die for her—Jeff's grin widened there in the darkness. He told himself he was as silly as some big old country boy with his first little red schoolhouse sweetheart. Why didn't he take out his jackknife and carve a couple of hearts and an arrow and her initials and his on the table?

Outside he heard the sound of riders leaving town. Carmelita would have changed her clothes and gone long ago with Nigger Blue. And he had heard the noisy departure of the drunken young Paco and Tondro, not half an hour ago.

Even as he was sitting there listening for the chance sound of a voice to identify the riders, he smelled the sweet odor of gardenias. Heard the rustle of silk. Saw a small swift moving shadow. Then a low whisper near him.

"I am one of the girls who sing and dance, senor. The Senorita Carmelita told me to watch and listen." Her voice whispered in the Mexican language.

"She said I was to tell you whatever I saw or heard. Por Dios, I am afraid. The young Senor Paco and that gringo Tondro have gone. Then the Senor Jack De Sanchez and that Ranger they just now go. It is for Paco I am afraid. I love him so much and now those cabrones, those gringo hombres, they are going to kill my Paco. I heard them say, senor. Madre de Dios, can you not do something to help my poor Paco. He is sick, my Paco. Sick from that whiskey, that marijuana. Is like a baby, so helpless, my Paco. Por Dios, senor! As you love the Senorita Carmelita and by her love for you, cannot you save the life of her brother?"

Jeff Macklin got to his feet. "Sure. Where did they go?"

"To that Burnt Ranch, senor!"

VII

IT COULD be a trap. Up until Jeff and Jack De Sanchez and Steve Flynn had drunk together from a bottle of sun-hot whiskey at the Burnt Ranch boothill, Jeff had played his game close to his belt buckle. He had drifted into Pintado under his real name. Let that little border town and those concerned know that his name was Jeff Macklin. Knowing that they would know Outlaw John Macklin had a son Jeff. And he had let them bring the game to him. The son of Whitehead Flynn. The adopted brother-cousin of Lon De Sanchez who had been nicknamed "Quien Sabe" because that had been the favorite expression of that red-headed Mexican-Spanish-Gringo outlaw. Then Paco and Carmelita De Sanchez, twin offspring of Quien Sabe Lon. Jeff had let them all play their cards. Even Tondro who was supposed to be no more than a bodyguard for the wild and rattle-brained, drunken, gambling, marijuana smoking Paco who was traveling his own swift road to a quick eternity. And the repulsive Nigger Blue who must have known the Outlaw John Macklin gang. And the only person who had not shown up was the widow of Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez. The Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez.

The only one of them all who had openly shown his hand was Arizona Ranger Steve Flynn.

"I aim to find out the why and wherefore of that gun fight that killed off the gang and my father," he had said. "I done promised my mother when she was dyin' of worry and a busted heart, that I'd pick up my daddy's trail. And if it's possible, Jeff, I want to git my hands on that outlaw cache. I want to turn every last dollar of

it over to the Law. I'm usin' my Ranger job to that purpose."

That could have been just whiskey talk. Sun-hot whiskey talk. That stuff makes liars out of some men. But Jeff still would not give up his liking for that long geared Arizona Ranger. There was a clean cut frankness about the way that lanky tow-headed gent with the straight gazing puckered blue eyes played his game. Jeff discounted Steve's jealous and whiskey heated fight talk. Hell, Steve Flynn would be plenty ashamed when he sobered up and remembered. Or would he? Carmelita did things to a man's heart and brain.

Save Paco? Save that spur jingling young bonehead? Save him from what? A bullet through his brain would be better than the years to come when he worked on booze and marijuana and his brain was eaten away and twisted into a murderous and treacherous mechanism for killing. Even now the young whelp was maligning and cursing his own mother. The women whom Carmelita had called a saint. Save him! Save him, hell!

Jeff Macklin had a fresh stout horse between his legs. A lone trail to ride. And unless his hunch was wrong the mystery that shrouded the Burnt Ranch would be lifted by sunrise. If a man was still alive at sunrise, Jeff grinned mirthlessly, to tally up the big score.

There was something almighty queer about it all. Until Jeff Macklin had been called to Yuma Prison to identify the dead lifer John Doe, his life had been, as the warden had said, as clean as a hound's tooth. Old Uncle Ike had told him that Outlaw John Macklin was dead. That it was Outlaw's John's one wish that the boy Jeff be kept off the Outlaw Trail. That Jeff stay out of gun trouble. Then at Yuma Prison Jeff knew that somebody had lied. Now Jeff was into the broad middle of it and playing his string out.

It was a twenty-five mile ride to the Burnt Ranch. Jeff Macklin crowded his horse hard. The moon was high when he got within a mile of the place. The trail twisted through the catclaw and mesquite. Jeff's horse shied and whirled. Off in the brush a horse nickered. And lying on the trail lay Arizona Ranger Steve Flynn.

Steve Flynn lay sprawled awkwardly. His hat had fallen on the ground. Blood darkened the Ranger's tow-colored hair and tanned face that looked chalky white in the moonlight. Steve's horse with its empty saddle and trailing bridle reins nickered again.

Jeff Macklin had his gun in his hand as he swung from his saddle. As he bent over, Steve Flynn groaned and moved a little and his eyes blinked open. Then the Ranger rolled over on his side, clawing for his gun. Jeff slapped the six-shooter out of the Ranger's hand. Then sat back on his hunkers and watched Steve sit up slowly.

"Who the hell bushwhacked me?" muttered the Ranger.

"You left town with Jack De Sanchez," said Jeff.

"Me'n Jack De Sanchez split up. Somebody done played you and me for suckers, Jeff. What I told you back at the International—mark it off if you're man enough, pardner. Ever git your hair parted by a bullet? Head aches plumb down to my toes. A miss is as good as a mile, feller, but when it misses that close, oh me, oh my! Hair of the hound dawg, Jeff, that bit me." Steve Flynn found an unbroken and half empty bottle of tequila in his chaps pocket and pulled the cork with his teeth.

Steve Flynn poured some of the tequila into the bullet rip in his scalp, then took a drink. He said he didn't know who had shot him. The last thing he remembered was that he and Jack De Sanchez had agreed back along the trail to split up and slip up on the Burnt Ranch. Jack De Sanchez had told Steve that the dead John Doe was Outlaw John Macklin. That the dying convict had somehow managed to pass on to Jeff the location of the outlaw cache. That all they had to do was hide

out near the Burnt Ranch till Jeff lifted the cache.

"Jack De Sanchez made it sound like the real McCoy, Jeff. Now I got it figgered. The De Sanchez outfit stick together, regardless. Carmelita made a play fer you to rib a fight between me'n you. Jack lost the Burnt Ranch to Paco a-purpose. Bait to git me'n you out here to kill us. With you and me dead, they kin lift the cache. Tondro and Nigger Blue has bin doin' these killin's. Mebbyso Paco had a hand in it. They used Carmelita for bait to trap us."

Jeff let the Ranger talk. Steve Flynn was still groggy from that bullet that had creased his head, still a little drunk. The tequila was giving Steve Flynn some wild notions.

"Who is Tondro?" asked Jeff Macklin. "Where'd he come from? How long has he bin with the Quien Sabe outfit? How come he's bodyguardin' young Paco?"

Steve Flynn said the answer was still "Quien sabe?" Tondro had been here when Steve came from Texas and joined the Arizona Rangers a year or more ago.

"And Nigger Blue?" asked Jeff.

"Quien sabe?" Steve shook his head. "Who knows?"

THEY halted at the creek below the ranch and Ranger Steve Flynn washed the blood from his head and face and then they rode on together. When Steve said something about splitting up, Jeff grinned faintly and reminded the Ranger what had happened when he and Jack De Sanchez had separated.

"And don't be so dead certain it was Tondro that give you a thirty-thirty haircut," said Jeff. "Play the field till you find out how they're runnin'."

They pulled up on a high place that looked down on the Burnt Ranch. Corrals and adobe buildings looked deserted and silent and ghostly in the moonlight.

There were cakes of stock salt inside the big corral, put there to attract wild cattle that came to water at night. Salting cattle got them a little gentler to handle and there was always the chance of trapping ten or twenty head of cows with unbranded calves or mavericks at night by waiting until the cattle were licking salt and drinking, then swinging shut the gate.

Jeff and Steve were both cowhands. Almost at the same time they noticed the peculiar behavior of the wild cattle that slipped down out of the rough hills as far as the corrals. But there those mountain cattle balked. Stood there in the moonlight, sniffing, spooky, ready to whirl and run. There must have been more than a score of cattle outside the open gateway of the big corral, salt hungry but balked.

Then Jeff Macklin made out the thing that was stopping the salt hungry cattle at the gateway. Swinging from the cross pole at the top of the high gateposts was a hanged man.

The Ranger had a pair of binoculars in a leather case strapped to his saddle. Jeff got the glasses. When he had brought the hanged man up closer with the powerful lenses he handed the binoculars to the Ranger.

"Paco," said Ranger Steve Flynn laconicly, as if he were not too surprised. "Or ain't it? My damn eyes—"

"Paco," nodded Jeff. "Paco De Sanchez."

Ranger Steve Flynn's face was grayish and his eyes were slitted, pain seared. When the binoculars slid from his unsteady hands to the ground Jeff realized that the man was half blind and sick with pain. That .30-30 bullet had done more than rip his scalp. Its terrific glancing impact had left Steve Flynn stunned and dazed and it might be hours or days or weeks before the man would regain his full faculties. And the whiskey and tequila Steve had been putting under his belt and into his bloodstream was not helping that skull injury.

Jeff told Steve Flynn to sit down on the ground. He slid the Ranger's saddle gun from its scabbard and handed it to him.

"All you got to do, Steve," said Jeff, "is bush-up here. Go light on the tequila. Try to keep your eye on me while I ride down there. If I git into a tight, use your own judgment."

Arizona Ranger Steve Flynn nodded as he patted the stock of his saddle gun. But his puckered blue eyes were glazed looking and his grin had no meaning. Steve sat down cross legged, the carbine across his lap.

The neck of the tequila bottle stuck out of the deep pocket of his bullhide chaps.

"Herd 'em my way, will yuh, Jeff? I'll beef 'em. Make jerky outa 'em. Can't git a count on 'em because they're too far off. Must be fifty head. Mav'ricks, Jeff. Or stuff in the Quien Sabe iron. There ain't no other cattle on this range, understand? Just them Quien Sabe cattle. Belongs to the De Sanchez grant. Bin in the fam'ly fer a million years. Hellamighty, the law gives no man so much as one li'l' ol' wind-bellied dogie mammyless calf on the Quien Sabe range. I lied like hell, Mister, when I said me'n you could pay-out on this Burnt Ranch.

"Only cowhand that kin git away with so much as a mammyless calf is yonder Paco De Sanchez. Paco's bin driftin' the big 'uns off the Quien Sabe range, brandin' 'em and peddlin' 'em. Stealin' 'em. Rustlin' cattle from his own mother. Peddlin' them dogies fer cash. Gamblin' the money away at the International. Jack De Sanchez rakin' in the dinero. And the Quien Sabe outfit a-scratchin' to git along. Broke. No money to hire cowboys. Carmelita gittin' out and makin' a cowhand, livin' on jerky an' frijoles an' tortillas. Nigger Blue her only crew. While Paco an' Tondro drink likker an' gamble an' swing them senoritas high, wide an' handsome at the International. And the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez too prideful to quit. Too prideful to sell out the Quien Sabe outfit to Jack De Sanchez. Lettin' Paco steal her cattle. Paco an' Tondro. Carmelita an' Nigger Blue out brush-poppin' to gather enough cattle to put grub in the house. And somewhere on the Quien Sabe range, most likely here at the Burnt Ranch, is nigh onto a half a million dollars in outlaw money cached. The Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez would be the only person alive, excepin' mebby Nigger Blue, who could dig up that cache. Now ask me no more questions, Jeff Macklin, son of Outlaw John Macklin, and you'll hear no more lies. Drift 'em past where I'm bushed up an' I'll beef 'em, hombre!"

It was a damn fool thing to do. Riding down the slant in the moonlight, across the open strip, making a target of himself for any bushwhacker gun. With his carbine in the crook of his left arm and his right hand gripping the short barreled saddle gun so that he could shoot it as fast as a man could use a six-shooter.

Along Jeff Macklin's spine ran an icy thread and it took all the nerve he had to keep riding toward the corrals at a running walk.

The wild cattle sighted him. Spooked. Scattering. Breaking brush in their swift getaway from the man on horseback. So that nothing moved now between Jeff and that gently swinging hanged body of Paco De Sanchez. And if a man wanted to let his imagination get loose on him, he could imagine that the ghosts of other murdered men clung to the black shadows. There would be the creak of saddle leather off in the darkness. The noise of a bit-cricket. The scrape of catclaw and mesquite against tough leather chaps.

Cold sweat broke out on Jeff's forehead and his whole body felt clammy with it. But he never let his horse change its shuffling running walk. Until the big gelding sighted the hanged man, caught the scent of fresh blood, and halted stiff legged, whistling through flared nostrils.

Jeff Macklin shoved the carbine back into its saddle scabbard. He opened the blade of his jackknife and with a couple of quick slashes the whetted blade cut the

strands of the hemp catch-rope that held the hanged body of Paco from the cross pole. And his horse jumped and whirled as Jeff held the dead hanged body of Paco in his arms. He got his horse quieted and rode slowly up the slope to the little graveyard.

His taut nerves were pulled almost to the snapping point as his horse halted at the little graveyard.

The woman who knelt there got slowly to her feet. She wore an old-fashioned dark green riding habit with long skirts. A black Confederate Army hat with an ostrich plume. Boots. The big chestnut gelding standing motionless wore a side-saddle.

"Gracias, senor." Her voice was low toned, vibrant. "You are young Macklin. You have brought poor Paco here."

This was the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez, mother of the dead Paco. Mother of Carmelita.

Jeff swung to the ground with the dead Paco. There were no tears in the woman's eyes. Only a terrible grief mirrored in their dark depths.

Over on the little brush spotted ridge where Jeff had left the Ranger, a gun cracked. Down at the adobe ranchhouse a man let out a hoarse scream of pain.

At the little adobe springhouse another carbine cracked and its bullet nicked Jeff Macklin's cheek.

"Down, lady!" Jeff shoved the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez down beside the dead body of her son.

"Jeff! Look out! Tondro! Nigger Blue! Jack De Sanchez!"

That was Carmelita's voice and it came from somewhere in the night. Then Jeff was spurring his horse down toward the corrals and adobe cabins below. And from the other little rise rode Arizona Ranger Steve Flynn.

Jeff looked back across his shoulder and caught a snapshot glimpse of Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez kneeling with a carbine raised to the level of her shoulder. He heard the gun's sharp crack. Saw Jack De Sanchez lurching from the little adobe springhouse, a blazing carbine in his hands.

It was the main house that Jeff Macklin headed for. There seemed to be half a dozen guns inside that adobe house that were spitting streaks of flame. Bullets whined and whistled around his head. One slug scared his ribs with a jolting, burning stab like a branding iron.

Ranger Steve Flynn riding hell bent down the hill. Steve's horse and Jeff's mount almost collided near the open doorway of the adobe ranchhouse. They landed on their feet as their horses slid to a halt. And went in shooting to kill.

Jeff heard Tondro's snarling voice. Heard Nigger Blue's bell-like voice.

"Kill 'em!" Tondro's voice held a note of fear.

"Keep your shirt on, Tondro. We got 'em!" Nigger Blue's voice.

There must have been a lantern in the cabin and some sort of gun flame had ignited the kerosense. Because there in a flash second there was a yellowish white blaze and Jeff saw only that gray-blue black repulsive face of Nigger Blue. The pale yellow eyes, cougar eyes that were supposed to see in the dark, blinded by the glare.

As Jeff Macklin thumbed the hammer of his six-shooter and pulled the trigger, sending bullet after bullet into that gray blue black face until it was a scarlet, bullet smashed smear in the light of burning kerosene, he knew that he was killing the man who had murdered Paco, Joe Smith, Art Carmody, Jim Loftus and the old Outlaw John Macklin gang. That Ranger Steve Flynn was killing the man Tondro who had played second gun fiddle to the murderous tune of Nigger Blue's guns. That the brains of this murder syndicate was the gambler Jack De Sanchez. That the young red-headed Paco had been made a dupe by Tondro. That there were two or three other dead men here in this cabin. Glory hunters. Bounty hunters. Paid bloodhounds who had sold their law badge oaths to the gambler Jack De Sanchez.

That this was laying the ghosts at Burnt Ranch.

The shooting was over and Ranger Steve Flynn grinned at Jeff Macklin through the haze of powder smoke while the spilled kerosene burned itself out. That grin sent a cold biting chill into Jeff Macklin's heart. He looked into Steve Flynn's puckered blue eyes that were slitted and bloodshot and those were the eyes of a killer.

Steve's six-shooter was pointed at Jeff's belly. The hammer clicked back to full cock. Smoke drifted from the muzzle of Jeff Macklin's six-shooter that he had emptied into that grinning blue gray black mask with its pointed tusks.

"Burnt Ranch!" Steve Flynn's voice was a croaking whisper. "I've got it now It's all mine. And what's buried here belongs to me. Me, the son of Whitehead Flynn.

"The rustlin' of the leaves tells it, Jeff Macklin. Tells how Outlaw John Macklin lined-up Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez and Whitehead Flynn and shot 'em down like shootin' beef. And then he rode away with the money. Leavin' nothin' at the Burnt Ranch but graves and ghosts. And the woman Outlaw John Macklin left behind when he hit the trail for South America with a half a million dollar stake.

"But Outlaw John Macklin never got fu'ther than a horse could pack him on a long day's ride. Because she was waitin' there at the first water hole. The beautiful Guadalupe. And she sent him to Yuma Prison to die slow under the name of John Doe. Tellin' him that if ever he told his real name she'd locate his son and send that son to hell in a slow way. And that stopped Outlaw John. Outlaw John Macklin. The man that murdered Whitehead Flynn. And the rake-off from that outlaw gang is here at Burnt Ranch. I'm liftin' it. I'm handin' it over to the Law. Keepin' it outa your hands and away from my damned De Sanchez. You ain't won this game, Jeff Macklin. I got one ca'rtidge in my gun. Your name an' brand on it—"

A gun roared. The six-shooter in Steve Flynn's hand exploded, its heavy .45 slug plowing into the dirt floor of the cabin between Jeff's legs. The Ranger's gun hand was bullet torn and bleeding.

Carmelita De Sanchez leaned against the open doorway, a smoking gun in her hand. Her clothes were torn and blood spattered, her face bruised. But there was a smile on her red-lipped mouth and bravery in her dark gray eyes. Then her face stiffened into its hard mask-like coldness.

"The Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez," she said tonelessly, "wants to talk to you both."

Ranger Steve Flynn had taken hold with his good hand of the wrist above his bullet-smashed gun hand.

"Better let me fix that up, Steve," said Jeff. "Before you bleed to death you'd better git one thing straight. That John Doe at Yuma Prison was not Outlaw John Macklin. My father had an old knife scar across his face. There wasn't any such scar on the face of that lifer called John Doe. Some day when you git well, I'm goin' to slap your ears down, Steve."

It must have been something in the look in the dark gray eyes of Carmelita De Sanchez that made it so easy for Jeff Macklin to forgive a man who had just tried to kill him. And it might have been this new racking pain and the shock of it that brought sanity back to Ranger Steve Flynn.

"It's—like some damned nightmare, Jeff— The only man I ever knowed that I wanted for a pardner. The only man I'd back down for and say, "She's yourn, Jeff. Good luck."

VIII

ON THE little knoll where weather-beaten slabs and crosses marked all the graves but three, Jeff Macklin and Steve Flynn and Carmelita De Sanchez heard the brief, grim, heart twisting story of the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez.

"There is no money," she said in a dead voice. "I built a fire and burned it. There might have been half a million dollars.

Quien sabe? But down to its last dollar it was stained with blood.

"Three men and a woman rode to the Burnt Ranch. Two men, Whitehead Flynn and Outlaw John Macklin were killed and buried. The third man got away. The third grave here is empty. I know because I buried Outlaw John Macklin and Whitehead Flynn. While Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez got away. He had murdered his two partners—and run for it. With all that money."

"Paco and Carmelita were youngsters then. I left them with Nigger Blue at the Quien Sabe ranch. I caught Quien Sabe Lon. I sent him to Yuma Prison—under the name of John Doe.

"Quien Sabe Lon did not dare to tell his right name. If he did, I had sworn to kill Paco and Carmelita and myself. He worshipped Paco.

"But Quien Sabe Lon De Sanchez was not a man to quit easy. He thought I had all that money. He sent men like Jim Loftus and Art Carmody and Joe Smith to get the money. So that they could buy him out of Yuma Prison. He sent Tondro to take care of Paco, promising Tondro a big cut of that cache. He sent Nigger Blue to guard Carmelita. So that way he kept Paco and Carmelita away from me. Paco was taught to hate me. But nobody on earth could make Carmelita turn against her mother—

"Jack De Sanchez was promised half the cache if he'd ramrod the whole game. Quien Sabe Lon had no love for his cousin and foster brother Jack. But Jack had his price. He could be bought.

"I was a prisoner at the Quien Sabe Ranch. So were Paco and Carmelita. I had only one defense. I made Jack De Sanchez and Tondro and Nigger Bue believe that the outlaw cache was here at the Burnt Ranch. Burnt Ranch is well named. I burned their stolen money there in the big adobe cabin.

"Whenever anybody showed up to hunt for the buried cache, Nigger Blue or Tondro would murder them. The last one to try was that prison guard Bull West.

"And when Paco's brain was tainted with booze and marijuana, Tondro and Nigger Blue and Jack De Sanchez had to get rid of him. And Carmelita barely got away alive—"

It was a grim story. Quietly told. Ranger Steve Flynn, suffering in tight lipped silence, his puckered blue eyes now and then cutting a look at Jeff to ask forgiveness and getting Jeff's grin by way of reply.

"I was to blame," said the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez. "I was young, beautiful, vain, shallow hearted. I wanted the attention of men. But I did not want murder. May the Senor Dios, may Our Lady of Guadalupe find forgiveness—"

It is a strange thing to see a person kneel in the moonlight and die. Die with a whispered prayer and tear dimmed eyes. And a strange smile that lingered on after death.

There beside the three unmarked graves, they buried the Senora Guadalupe De Sanchez and Paco. And rode back to Pintado to send back a burial crew for the others.

"It is good," said Carmelita, "to have you for our friend, Steve. We need you."

"A hell of a friend," muttered the Ranger.

"You'll do to take along," Jeff Macklin grinned at him.

"I'll work hard at the job," promised Steve Flynn. "Damned if you two love things don't look shore purty in the sunrise. Will you pull me this cork, Jeff. A lady messed up my shootin' an' cork pullin' hand." And a Arizona Ranger needs soothin' medicine. What's that job, Jeff, once more?"

"Best man, Steve."

"At our wedding," nodded Carmelita.

"And you run the outfit till the honeymoon is done," said Jeff.

"It'll be my outfit if you stay too long. Here's *salud!*"

Ahead showed the lights of Pintado. Like stars drifted down to earth.

All in our next issue—**Short Stories,** Dec. 10th

BLOOD-RED CASH OF KUBLAI KHAN

A Chinatown Mystery Novelette by

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AND ALL IN ONE ISSUE

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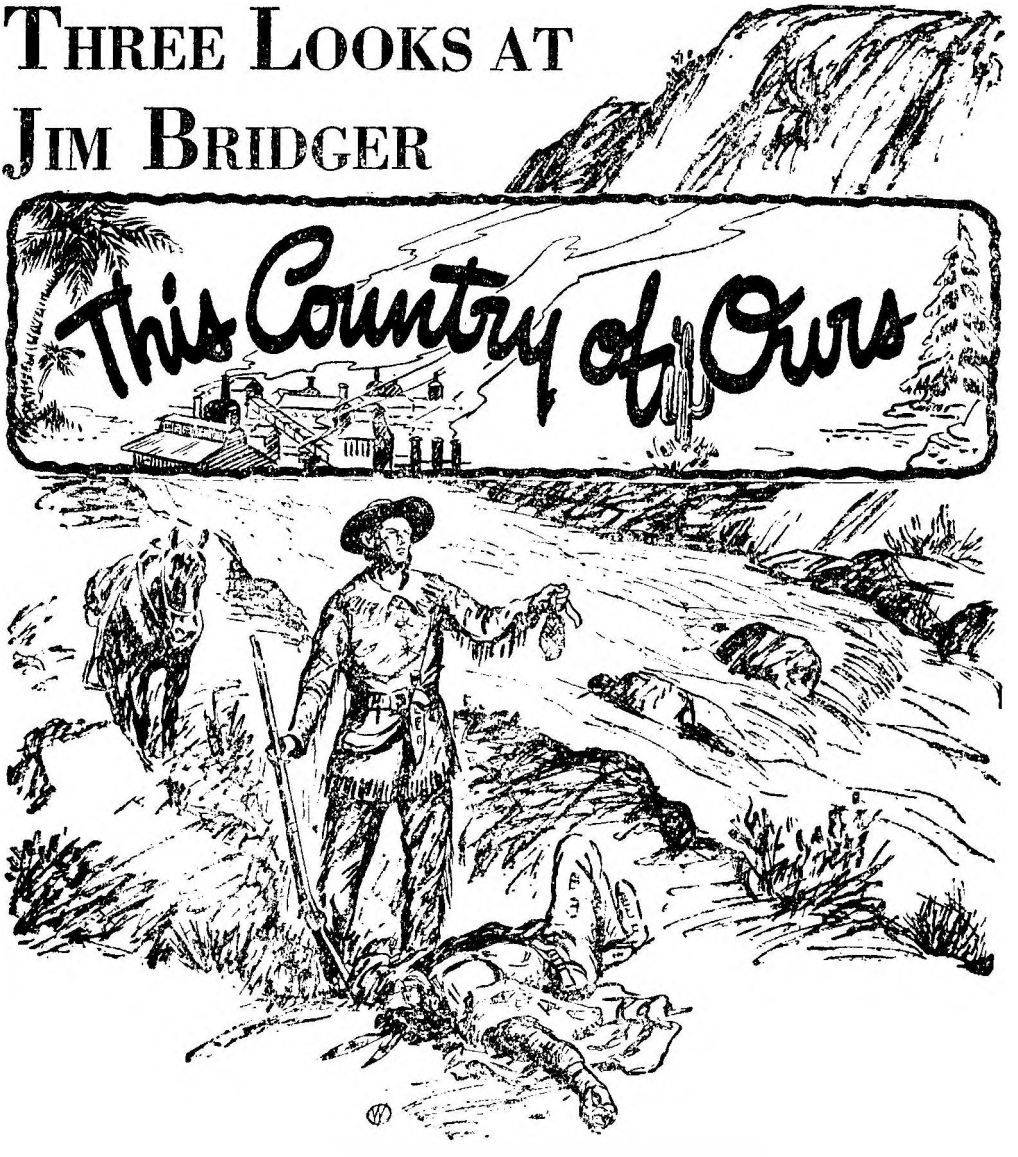
DANGER IN THE NIGHT

by

William G. Bogart

All in our next issue—**Short Stories,** Dec. 10th

THREE LOOKS AT JIM BRIDGER



By H. BEDFORD-JONES

To some the land may promise worth
In terms of growing wealth and trade,
With might of heart and hand displayed
In raising cities from the earth.

And some, who trail ambition's lure
Across the barren wilderness,
Are humble, and content with less—
For after all Lord Christ died poor.

HE WAS a man of twenty—emphatically not a boy. Man's air sat upon him, as he guided his wiry little horse along the ever-deepening mountain canyon, following the rapid and turbulent stream. High and grim peaks towered up before and behind, on every side.

He carried ready rifle over crude saddle-

bow, and his alert, alive gray eyes flickered ceaselessly ahead and around. Vigilance had graven and furrowed his features, darkly browned by snow and sun; vigilance and poverty and hardship. Under his square-boned chin circled a line of brownish beard. Otherwise his face had been plucked clean, Indian style.

DAYS back, uncounted miles back, at the headwaters of this mountain stream, called Bear River, he had made a bet with his companions, beaver trappers. Back of it was a rousing dram of Taos Lightning and a whooping defiance of the unknown. Follow that stream to its mouth? He would, by the 'Tarnal! And here he was in consequence, inching along where no white man had ever been, going he knew not whither, intent to win that bet by virtue of twelve-pound rifle and high heart and young Jim Bridger's luck.

A trifle grotesque, this beard-fringed face under the wide-brimmed wool hat, but resolute and older than its years, and touched with quizzical humor. Leather shirt and shapeless leather trousers carried long six-inch fringes—not for looks, but to provide whangs for repairing moccasins or saddle-thongs at need. Big hunting-knife and tiny whetstone hung at leather belt; over left shoulder passed the strap that kept powder-horn, pouch and firebag convenient at his right hip. His horse's saddle was piled with all other articles of the trail.

Suddenly his sharp eye detected a swift movement ahead and to the right, on the lower slope of the hillside. It was only a magpie darting up from the scattered brush —an abrupt dart up into the clear, not a mere sweeping change of scene.

Instantly he saw it, Bridger was off his horse, throwing reins over head to keep the animal standing. Something had given that Magpie a bad scare at close hand. He himself was out in the open, without cover; but the magpie-spot was a good two hundred yards away, where even a rifle could not make certain. Beyond arrow-shot, at least!

His alert brain was almost automatic in its workings; before moccasins touched ground, he had made decision. No one might be there, but death was the price of a mistake. Without cover, a redskin ambushed there, perhaps a dozen of them, his one chance was to confuse and puzzle the foe, unless he wanted to take to flight. He did not.

Confident that he was still beyond reach of arrows and that no redskin hereabouts would be likely to have a gun, Bridger strode on ahead of his horse and pretended to examine the stony ground. Actually, every sense was vigilantly trained upon the brush ahead. He stooped, picked up a stone or two, advanced a few paces and carefully set them down again. He squatted and stirred the ground with his knife-point; but he kept tight hold of his rifle.

HE PLUCKED a few straggly sprigs of brush and grass and, after another advance, began to place these carefully in a line with several more stones. All the time he was working closer to the magpie-spot where the brush was high and dense. He stuck his seven-inch knife into the ground and laid out more stones on a line with it. He set down his powder-horn, then more stones. He wanted to get within a hundred yards of that spot, and he did it; and never did he catch another indication of ambush.

A wiser man would have gone back, or far around.

Bridger began to think he was making a fool of himself for nothing, but kept on. Now he squatted sideways to that brush, and watching it intently, began to play with stones again. Any watcher would think him absorbed in them.

A leaf of the brush moved slightly; his pulses jumped with it. The branch moved again. Something dark appeared there, cautiously, like the head of a snake; it

was the barrel of a gun, gradually brought to aim at that squatting, almost motionless figure in the open. A long shot, but a possible one—

Bridger moved like a flash. Rifle butt leaped to shoulder; a swift sight down the forty-inch iron, a clasp of the feather-touch trigger, and the rifle gushed smoke. In the very roar, an instant later, powder-smoke leaped from the brush and made response. Bridger's weapon was the quicker. He let himself go flat on his back with the recoil and heard the whining scream of a half-ounce ball above him, so close that he almost felt the burn of it.

He was up and darting back to his powder-horn; leaving it had been risky but was a master-stroke of deception. He poured in the black grains, whipped out ramrod from its pips, patch from recess, ball from pouch, rammed them home, primed pan, stood ready—all in twenty seconds or less.

The smoke thinned to nothing, the echoes were gone, sunlight and silence lay hot on the canyon above the little stream. The brush moved and was still again; the gun lay in plain sight now—not a rifle, but a trade musket. Above it a hand lay motionless, protruding from the green. Seeing this, Bridger advanced. Closer, he saw a body behind the hand; and, assured, he moved in upon it. A painted face came to view, eyes open, glittering at him. Then they shut.

He put down the rifle, took from his belt the tomahawk-hatchet used for killing trapped beaver, and stooped. It was no trick; the ragged blanket-coat of the redskin was dark with blood. Bridger kicked the musket aside and reached for the limp shape, tugged open the capote, and was astonished to see white skin beneath. His ball had gone through that body. White, by the lord—white! A white Indian!

And done for, by the look, but now senseless. Bridger moved fast. He placed the dying thing against a boulder, head up, sped down to the stream and came back with water in his hat, and trickled it into the man's mouth. The eyes opened again and fastened on him; the limp body twitched convulsively and relaxed.

"Smart feller," said the other faintly. "Done for me. Sarved me right."

Already Bridger was getting a compress in place to stop the blood, though it was useless.

"Took you for an Injun," he said, awkwardly.

"I am, you fool," mumbled Painted-face. "Been a Snake warrior four year now—thanks."

He drank again and his gaze settled on Bridger. Under the paint his face, seamed and furrowed deeply, showed nothing of white, but his eyes were a washed-out blue. He was old.

"Sarved me right," he said. "You ain't as old as ye look. How old?"

"Twenty," replied Bridger.

"Smoke. My pipe—last smoke. I'm done for, all right."

About his neck hung a gaudily embroidered pipe-pouch. Bridger opened it and got out a crude bone pipe and short reed stem, filled it, worked with flint and steel till he got it alight, and the dying man's teeth clamped on the stem. This was, of course, some squaw-man who had buried himself afar from his people. Bridger questioned him, got nothing.

His pity for the man was tempered. He had done what he must. The renegade refused any account of himself, but, puffing till the pipe was empty, sighed wearily.

"Feels better. Whar ye come from?"

"Born in Virginia," said Bridger. "Working with a beaver outfit." As yet, he retained his boyhood speech; he had not acquired the almost unintelligible jargon of the mountain men among whom he had cast his lot.

"You got strong med'cine," said the other. "White Owl; that's me. Where ye going?"

"To see where this stream goes."

"Empties into the Salt Sea." White Owl was eased by his smoke. "No white man ever seen it, except me. I was a fool to go for your scalp. You got strong med'cine. Don't do like me and go Injun; ain't no good. Set down. Smoke. Talk. Hundred years from now all this'll be real country. I'm all alone; no need to git skittish."

Bridger called to his horse, who came, slowly. He sat down and to humor the dying man smoked and fell into talk.

"Hundred year from now? Let's see, that'd be 1924, won't it?" he said. "Don't seem possible there'd be such a year. Well, this is pretty good country, leastways back of me is. Plenty beaver."

White Owl smothered an oath of pain.

"That all you can see?" he inquired. "White country, no more beaver; hosses, cattle all over it. That there Salt Sea—that'll be great country, too. There's giants lives on them islands; I ain't seen any but the Injuns says so. And there's a big whirlpool off over acrost the sea, where the salt water gets sucked down and goes out to the ocean—" He broke off and closed his eyes. "Your sayso. Does me good to hear human talk again."

Now, to Bridger this speech was no more than the wandering fancy of a dying man — salt sea, giants, whirlpools! No sense to it at all. He did notice that White Owl showed some evidences of cultured speech, which he himself entirely lacked. His education had not come from books. But he talked, since talk was wanted.

"I duno 'bout hosses and cattle, but back where I've come from, along the Green River, I aim to settle down some day," he said. "I been in the mountings four year now. I'll have a fur company all my own, I reckon, one day. I'm going to build me a fort, a real fort that'll be safe ag'in the Blackfeet and Shoshones. I'll get real rich tradin', too, like Gin'ral Ashley. I'm workin' for him now. This is shorely grand country, and it's mine; ain't nobody to prevent takin' what I allow to take of it, neither—"

He said no more, because he saw that the man beside him was dead.

He hesitated over the scalp, but left it. There was nothing sentimental about Jim Bridger, but after all it was a white scalp. This was no victory to brag about, without producing a scalp as evidence. Best plan, then, he decided, was to keep a shut mouth about it.

Before going his way, he took the renegade's powder-horn, which held diamond-grain English powder; prime stuff. And, from about the dead man's neck, he lifted a medicine pouch of magnificently ornamented doeskin. The medicine had done the late owner no good, so obviously it was of no value; he dumped it out. It was like any other Indian medicine—bits of earth, hair, skin, pebbles.

He wanted the pouch to serve for his pipe. The pipe-pouch was an essential, and he had only a poor one. The decoration on this was of porcupine quills, and as he went his way he felt proud and happy to have thus completed his outfit.

His own words to White Owl stuck in his head. Roaming over the glorious upland region this side of the highest mountains, the dream had sprung full-fledged in his mind; every sight of the valley of the Green brought it alive. A stockaded fort, not a mere winter camp but a home, along one of the streams where the cottonwoods grew thick—why not?

A fort; Fort Bridger, and himself the regal ruler of this rich domain—why not? It would take a lot of doing, but sooner or later he felt that it must come true. It was an ambition now, not just a vague dream. He was almost chokingly in love with this mountain country, with these lush rivers and rich plains, his for the taking. . . .

Thus he followed down Bear River to its mouth, to discover amazedly that White Owl had uttered the truth about a salt sea.

A sea that stretched beyond the horizon westward, with craggy islets projecting from its sullen, sluggish waters. He tasted and spat it out, marveling, incredulous of his own senses. No trapper had ever heard of such a thing existing in these regions!

A salt sea, salt-blasted and whitened country around; no place to linger. No one would believe such a story, either. Jim Bridger was too well known for his fantastic yarns and joking exaggerations; they would call it another of his tall stories. Well, let them! The proof was here, for any who came this way.

HE SAT staring in wonder. The words of White Owl pushed back upon his mind. Giants on those islands? It was more than possible; they looked weird and unreal, like isles of dream. Whirlpools? Why not? What could be more fantastic than this reality? The immensity of this salt sea left him dazed.

Well, his new pipe-pouch was certainly good medicine; it had brought him here, but he did not like the looks of it. No game around. The desert plains, the rim of snow-tipped peaks, the incredible salt sea itself, were all desolate and empty of any life. Not an Indian smoke curled to the farthest horizon.

He got out his tobacco, and fingered the handsomely decorated pouch now hanging by its thong at his throat—the medicine pouch of White Owl, in which his pipe now lay. For the first time, the porcupine-quill design struck at his attention. Arrows. Medicine arrows!

For all his rapidly growing Indian lore, he could only vaguely realize what this meant. A few more years, and he would have thought twice about dumping out that "medicine" so unceremoniously. This bit of doeskin was no ordinary thing, but was touched in Indian eyes with mystic power and meaning. Those sacred arrows, of deep and occult significance, used only in the yearly rites of worship, belonged to the Great Spirit and were not to be lightly considered. This pouch must have a history behind it. Perhaps the renegade had married into some "medicine" family among the Snake people.

Like all mountain men, Jim Bridger was intensely superstitious, and had absorbed more red than white beliefs. Now he looked down at the pouch as he fingered it, and a touch of fear and awe came into his gray eyes, and lingered there.

But this faded; it never occurred to him that the scene beside the mountain stream might ever have a sequel. No one knew about it. And, as the days passed into months and years, the rush of exciting events dimmed the memory of White Owl, and of what this pouch had been before it held his cherished pipe.

Yet twenty-three years afterward, he once more found himself regarding the worn pouch of doeskin with the same feeling of wondering awe and fear.

Now, twenty-three years can be a long time to some, a short time to others. In this land it had changed the whole face of nature. The beaver had vanished, and with them had departed the mountain men. The redskin was still a menace, but no longer a fear; smallpox had broken and wrecked the great tribes. The white wave had pushed on to Oregon, and now were coming the fore-runners of the mighty gold-rush torrent.

Black's Fork of the famed Green River, in Mexican territory still but in southwestern Wyoming as it was soon to be, had become a landmark upon which drew in all the trails west. Here was a Spanish land grant of four thousand acres, centered upon a fort of stout palisadoes and tumbledown log cabins. It was no grand and lordly place, but an outpost of the lonely lands cupped among the high valleys and higher peaks; and, as upon a magnet, red men and white centered upon Fort Bridger.

The spare, lean scout whose name it bore, and who ruled it with his partner Colonel Vasquez, was no figure of ro-

mance like his dashing friend Kit Carson, but one of practical achievement. Peer of all scouts was he, famed for wit and words and worth, the fringe of wispy brown beard still framing the shrewd, square twinkling-eyed features, so much older than his years.

Men came to him in deference these days, seeking his advice, his help and guidance, his unequalled knowledge of those vast horizons westward. First to look upon the now famous salt sea, first to discover and proclaim the wonders of the Yellowstone country, the magic of his name was great. Old Jim they termed him, or Old Gabe, or Casapi, "Blanket Chief"; dusky wife and children adorned his lodge, and at heart he seemed more Indian than white.

THE fort was little more than a trading post. Both Bridger and Vasquez had an itching foot and loved to wander; often they left the place empty and deserted for days at a time. No one would steal the water and cottonwoods or the "plunder" cached inside the palisade.

When it happened, Bridger was far from his beloved fort; he was over on the Big Sandy, heading east with cattle and trade. Curiosity halted him there. Word told of the imminent arrival of a set of wagons heading west, the vanguard host of the Mormons, an army such as the plains had never seen. No one knew whither they were bound, but it was something to see, and all sorts of wild stories were told about them.

First, however, came the Indian; a lone warrior, hollow-cheeked with starvation, bringing his cayuse and pack-pony into camp with the peace sign. No one could savvy his lingo or make out to what tribe he belonged, so Bridger strolled up and took him in hand. He had heard of Blanket Chief, obviously; he was hard-mouthed, hard-eyed, with white blood in him. A halfbreed, most vicious and dangerous of all men on the border.

Bridger tried all sorts of dialects, only to paw his whiskers in astonishment.

"Durn my hide if he ain't a Snake!" he exclaimed. "And I've clear forgot the lingo. He don't speak no 'Rapaho, neither. What's a Snake doin' in this country? Ain't seen one for years!"

Giving up attempts at speech, he plunged into sign-talk, the universally understood language. Little Elk was the warrior's name, belonging to a remnant of the Snake people left somewhere in the western badlands.

It was late afternoon. Bridger, pipe in mouth, was gesturing away with the redskin when one of his men came up at a lathered gallop and plunged to earth.

"Jim! I got powerful news—who's this danged Injun?"

"You'd be s'prised, Pete," said Bridger, who never lost the chance at a tall yarn. "Allows he seen a tribe o' white Injuns 'twixt here and Fort Hall. Yes, sir, white Injuns! Chief's got red hair and blue eyes—"

He got no chance to elaborate on his story. The other broke in hurriedly.

"Never mind, it don't signify; prob'ly one of yore lies anyhow. Listen! Them Mormons are here. I run into nigh a million wagons. Their cap'n is comin' ahead, aims to have trail-talk with you. He ain't fur behind me, neither. Young, his name is. And you ain't seen so many womenfolks, ever! I reckon they got ten squaws to every man!"

Bridger knocked out his pipe, pulled the stem, and thrust them into the pouch he drew from under his shirt. He was about to speak, when a hoarse sound came from Little Elk. The Indian took a step forward, his gaze fastened in amazement and recognition on the pouch. Jim Bridger, who cherished this pouch as strong medicine, had carried it for years. When, now and then, the stained quills had broken, they had been replaced by his squaw.

He grinned at the amazed redskin and held up the pouch.

"You'd ought to savvy it," he grunted. "Medicine arrows of the Snake people, sure! But I ain't got time to palaver with you. Pete, take care o' this feller's trade, and look out fer your ha'r! If ever I seed a mean Injun, he's it. I'll go meet this Cap'n Young."

He bustled off, and the eyes of the Indian glittered after him till he was out of sight.

Bridger promptly forgot all about the fellow.

Wonder was upon him and the others, at sight of the sea of wagons crawling down from the horizon and making camp, falling to work mending wheels and canvas, treating sick beasts and humans, taking orderly turns at the water, children squalling and cattle lowing.

And, above all, this massive, square-bearded leader, this Brigham Young, created a vast impression on him. The man was powerful, pleasant, indomitable. He knew all about the salt sea, had read everything written on the subject, and said frankly that he meant to take his people there and settle down in an empire all their own. Bridger was incredulous.

"Then ye must be plumb loco!" he exclaimed. "Ain't nary a thing can grow there."

"That remains to be seen." Young took off his wide hat, baring his leonine head to the sunset, his eyes fastened upon the distances. "I'd like to employ you as guide; since I can't do that, give me all the details you can about the trail thither. This is a magnificent land, and that around the salt sea will be still more splendid. Here is freedom, and here is empire! An empire for the taking! With work and determination it will become a garden, my friend."

BRIDGER, skeptic of the garden, told what he knew. Captain Young talked freely, told of the minute preparations of his people, even to their seed-crops, and dilated upon his dream of empire. It wakened old echoes within Jim Bridger's mind.

Here was the very dream of his younger days come to life. He painted the folly of the Mormon trek, but inwardly he marveled at it and foresaw its success beyond measure. He knew of the fertile lakes and streams and valleys south of the salt sea; a land for cattle, for farms, for all a hard-working people could desire.

His own dream had gone awry, somehow; took too much hard labor. He was content with what he had; not yet forty-five, vast expenditures of energy had brought age creeping upon him.

"This promised land will be ours!" Young exclaimed deeply. "What a country, what a glorious kingdom for the chosen of the Lord! We shall make it to flow with milk and honey, and the desert shall blossom as a rose!"

"Well, y'ain't goin' to git no crop to grow there," declared Bridger. "I'll give ye a thousand dollars fer the first ear o' corn raised in that salt basin!"

Young tapped him on the shoulder.

"Friend Bridger, you'll live to see the day when that country will be overflowing with riches of the earth. How long since Fort Bridger was built?"

"Goin' on five winters."

"What crops do you raise?"

"Ain't scarcely figgered on crop yet. Keeps me right smart busy tradin' and so forth."

"Give me five years to live, and you'll see an empire founded and growing beside the salt sea!" affirmed Young. "This country here, these vast plains on the height of land, are magnificent; but we seek the promised land, the country that shall be ours and our children's forever. That will we have, and no other, and it lies beside your salt sea. You say no settlers have gone there?"

"Nary a smidge, Cap'n. All aimed for Oregon, some few fer Californy."

"Then that is our country!" Young's features were light in the sunset glow,

glowing with fervor and exultation. "Ours for the taking, beyond the reach of others, ours against all comers! There we may increase and grow mighty and put forth our labor upon the earth, and the Lord will favor us."

With this man, Old Gabe indulged in none of his tall yarns and fantastic stories, and had no heart for any. Here was his own vision come to life, but in another's keeping. He himself had done well; captain of trappers, a partner in the Rocky Mountain fur concern and in a second fur company, a man of note. But working the earth was out of his line. His fort was an emigrant station, and would never be more. Somehow, he sensed an indefinable, vague failure that weighed upon him.

It persisted. That evening after supper he sought escape from it; something wrong in his vitals, he grunted. Maybe spoiled meat. He lit his pipe and wandered over to see the huge Mormon camp, also to avoid importunate visitors anxious to see the famous Cap'n Bridger.

The cool stars and the darkness soothed him. The campfires and the Mormons, many of whom came from foreign lands, interested him. They were a gay lot, these Saints; they even had their own private theatricals, because their grimly powerful and sensual leader was doing everything to keep up their spirits. Yet here at the Big Sandy they could look back upon many scattered graves; here, too, the dreaded mountain fever was enfolding them, to bring Cap'n Young himself within an ace of death.

Old Jim strolled through the camp, an uncouth and saturnine figure, not pretending a friendship he did not feel toward these people. Perhaps the shadow that was upon him came from the premonitory sixth sense of the hunter and Indian fighter. This host, and countless thousands following them, were moving in to bring to fruition the great dream at which he had failed. They were marching to occupy their promised land; to take the country which had been his for the taking; and with it they would sweep away the little he had already taken, fort and cottonwood trees and all. The future was theirs, and was lost to him.

But, whether it sprang from premonition or digestion, his moodiness had a startling conclusion.

He left the tumultuous camp and circled around across the higher ground to regain his own, upstream, cursing at the presence of so many people in his beloved solitude. Suddenly, this solitude gave birth to a shadow trailing him closer and closer; until, with a noiseless pad-pad of moccasins, it uprose from among the rocks and leaped.

An audacious shadow, that would attack this veteran of a score of hand-to-hand frontier struggles! True, Bridger went rolling; true, he had no arms except the knife at his belt, but this knife was worth a dozen rifles in such hands. A blade plunged for his vitals and missed; it plunged for his throat and missed. The familiar Indian-smell was in his nostrils. Death was grappling him.

Hot work there beneath the stars, with grunt and panting breath, blow and scuffle, his own knife slashing like mad; until, abruptly, the long Green River blade drove home and the Indian relaxed, motionless. Bridger leaped up, stooped to finish the work, and recognized the stranger, the Snake warrior. He kicked aside the fallen knife and paused.

The prostrate Indian spoke in fluent Arapaho, which he had previously denied knowing.

"Blanket Chief has strong medicine," came his voice. "Before he takes the scalp of Little Elk, the keeper of the medicine arrows of the Snake people—"

The voice failed. Bridger, aware of warm blood on his knife, was ready enough to take that scalp; but he had finished the varmint and the phrase caught at his mind.

"So you can talk, huh?" he grunted.

"Talk, then! Why did Little Elk go for my hair?"

The redskin replied faintly but clearly.

"Many summers ago my father White Owl disappeared. He carried with him the great medicine of the Snake people. It disappeared with him. Now it is in the keeping of Blanket Chief; that is good. It makes his medicine strong."

Bridger started. For the first time in long years he recalled the name of White Owl. He remembered the encounter now, because it was linked with his discovery of the salt sea; otherwise it was only one of countless such encounters. Yes, the renegade White Owl had carried this as a medicine pouch, he recollected; and he had turned it into a pipe pouch. Maybe that had been bad luck. He should have kept it intact to profit by the medicine. Still, it hadn't done White Owl much good!

"So you were trying to get back the medicine pouch," he said.

"Yes. When I saw it and knew Blanket Chief had it, I knew he must have killed my father, White Owl," came the words faintly and gaspingly.

Sure enough. Was this halfbreed the son of that renegade? Might be, of course. Little Elk had recognized the medicine arrows all right. White Owl had been keeper of the arrows, eh? That was a post of high honor.

Then, all of a sudden, Bridger came to the realization that he had been outwitted. During this while, the redskin, badly hurt but not dead, had been talking to gain time, to divert the white man's attention. Now he moved; it was like the gliding movement of a snake—he was there, then he was not. He was gone, on his feet and away, lost among the scattered rocks like a rabbit or a coyote.

Jim Bridger swore in hearty disgust. He was scratched, not hurt, and his shirt was ripped and torn; but he had lost the scalp he wanted. It was nothing to talk about, either; bad medicine for him. Must be getting old, he thought, as he ambled back to camp. Anyhow, he would have the Snake's two ponies and outfit as plunder.

He was mistaken there. He found them gone. And the varmint must have got away, because morning revealed blood-stains but no dead Indian.

No wonder Bridger sat in the morning light, looking at the beaded pouch with a glint of awe and fear in his eyes. Medicine arrows? The thing was danged uncanny. Yet, these long years it had brought him luck—his medicine was strong. From the day he sighted the salt sea, he had gone ahead notably in the world. Maybe he would have done better to have kept this medicine pouch intact.

His shrewd gaze dwelt upon it now with more practical thought. White Owl's son, huh? And this meeting had been pure happenstance. Now it would be known that Blanket Chief had the Snake medicine. Would others come after it? Bridger sniffed at such a possibility. Let any dirty varmint take up such a challenge if they dare! He would like nothing better than a few more Snake scalps in his lodge, back at the fort.

Yet something about those medicine arrows kept wakening the awe in him, now that he had his mind on the thing. He was not sure what those medicine arrows signified; no one would know, except the Snake medicine men. Well, no matter; plague take all such nonsense! Here came some of the Mormons—big Cap'n Young striding along like a king, durn his hide!

Young wanted some further trail information, and got it. He was not himself this morning; already the fever was stirring in him. There was a flush in his bronzed cheeks and his eyes were bright, and his voice rang with febrile power.

"Still sot on your salt country, be ye?" cackled Bridger.

"The promised land, friend, the promised land!" declaimed Young. What he was really after was certain private information that he could pass on as inspired

knowledge, about the country yonder, and he got that, too. Bridger told him he was a fool to take his people there, whereat he smiled grimly.

"Wait and see, Mr. Bridger! In a few years you shall see a great and fertile country where now is nothing. Sobriety and hard work—those are the things, with confidence in the Lord's leadership!"

"And your'n," said Bridger shrewdly.

The other nodded. "Certainly; and mine. This country of ours will prove richer than Illinois and Missouri; I am convinced of it. Nor shall we stop with tilling the soil. Mines, salt-works, every kind of manufacturing—you'll see, blind man that you are!"

"It's your gamble, I reckon," said Bridger. "If your med'cine's good, you'll likely pull through. Me, I like this here country, this side the mountings, over where my fort is."

That was all. Young strode off to join his followers. Jim Bridger sat warming himself in the sun, sucking his pipe, fingering the pouch at his throat—the pouch with its crossed medicine arrows. Blind, Young had called him, like a prophecy.

Blind! He sighed a little, regretfully. Yes, maybe he had been blind. The fur trade had petered out completely; beaver that used to fetch six dollars a pelt, were worth little. No more beaver hats these days; men wore silk hats, tall stovepipe hats. And the beaver were gone, anyhow, trapped out of existence.

Yes, Cap'n Young might be right. If he had laid out a town instead of a fort, it might have better promise today. Yet his long-cherished dream of a fort bearing his name had come true; it was conditions that had altered and made his dream of small worth nowadays. What had he to regret, after all?

Nothing, by the 'Tarnal! He was the best scout and guide alive, and known as such. Fur might be gone, but he was here, roving ever across these high plains that he so loved; these endless plains west of the mountains that had been his own promised land in days gone by. Of these he was undisputed king, and if he owned little, what did that signify?

A shout summoned him. He rose, waved his hand to his companions, and dismissed these wandering thoughts. Only one thing lingered in his head as he rode the eastward trail past the mighty flowing host of Mormon wagons—the prophetic word Cap'n Young had flung at him in scorn. Blind! "Blind man that you are!" had said the Mormon leader. Bridger chuckled at the thought. Blind, huh? Well, he could see farther than most mountain men!

THERE came a day when he chuckled no longer at the memory of those words, however; when, across the wistful years he could look back at them as a mournful prophecy. For, in bitter truth, the cataracts gradually dimming his sight had done their work, and Old Jim Bridger was indeed old, and blind.

He was something more now than Old Jim. Major Bridger he was, to most, the last of the forgotten breed of mountain men, in this year of 1881. Famed afar as the guide of emigrants and sportsmen, the man who had done more than any to help the wagon-trains to their destination, and put to high use by army leaders; the eyes of military expeditions in Civil War days, adviser to railroad builders and the Union Pacific survey, the opener of trails even after Fort Bridger was no more than a lost memory—

Blind and decrepit in his shabby house on his farm near Santa Fe. Not Santa Fe of the West, but a suburb of Kansas City whence the wagons had once departed in pomp and glory for the Santa Fe trail, and named in memory of it. Blind; his square features a fallen, haggard ghost of the olden quizzical face, with only a bone pipe to suck and occasional visitors who came to peer curiously at the wreckage whose name enshrined all plains' history

and romance. He was a ghost of the fading past, no more.

His thought was dwelling today upon the words of that bluff Mormon leader, gone with all the rest—all dead and gone, except old Jim Bridger in his abode of utter destitution. How truly that man had spoken! Where the salt sea rolled limitless and blasted, a great empire had sprung to life, its sinewy strength extended in all directions; a people had prospered. And his own country, seen for the last time, had given birth to cities and wealth and glory—

A step sounded. A hand lifted the latch; a man had entered. Bridger knew it was a man by the step and the smell of tobacco; his senses were clear, his brain weary but still acute.

"Is this Major Bridger?" asked a deep, resonant voice.

"Yep," grunted Old Jim, mentally damning the curiosity of mankind, yet aware that visitors often meant windfalls that kept him in tobacco and comforts.

"My name's Hank Smith," began the visitor.

Bridger interrupted. "Gimme your paw." He took the proffered hand and felt it with his own. A grunt escaped him. He reached up and touched the stranger's face. Hard face, high cheekbones, straight lank hair. "You got Injun blood!" he exclaimed.

"Right you are," said Smith. "A trace, anyhow. Nothing to be ashamed of, either."

"I reckon not," allowed Bridger. "Set."

Smith pulled up a stool.

"I've heard a lot about you all my life," he said. Something warned Bridger, made his hackles lift, gave him the feel of danger at hand. It was absurd, but it was there. "I've hankered a long while for a gab with you. It's took me a long while to work back east, but I'm here at last."

"Where ye from?" Bridger demanded gruffly.

"Oh, out West," evaded the other. "No

place special, Major. Look here, are you blind?"

"Yep," spat out Bridger. "And crippled up. Got a couple Blackfoot arrers in my back a long while ago. Doc Whitman dug 'em out when he was aimin' fer Oregon, but they was bad med'cine."

"I didn't know all that," said Smith, a change in his voice. "So you can't see me! That's a pity. I want to ask you about something that happened in the old days. Do you remember, oncet when you was camped on the Big Sandy back about 1847, meeting up with a feller by the name of Little Elk? An Injun?"

A slight quiver passed through Bridger's shrunken frame. The name was dimly familiar; only dimly, for time had blurred the sharply etched things of long ago. Thirty-four years is a long time to recall chance encounters. Yet that name brought an echo of peril.

"Seems like I do," he said slowly. "Thar war a heap of Injuns them days. What tribe?"

"Snake," said the visitor. "The Snake nation is all gone now, Major. Gone and forgotten, I reckon. Little Elk was a 'breed. His father was a squawman who married into the tribe. His name was White Owl; mebbe you remember that name."

"Yep," said Bridger jerkily. "Yep. Somethin' to do with med'cine—by the 'Tarnal! I got it now. Med'cine arrers!"

"Right," said the visitor's voice, sharp as a knife. "Right!"

Bridger stiffened a little, as memory opened for him, back across the years to a starlit night on the Great Divide. Back farther still to a sunlit gorge above tumbling waters, and a painted renegade lying dead beside him. He thought of himself as he had been then, stalwart and aflame with energy; a growl came in his throat and died again.

"What's it to ye?" he demanded with a whisper of old arrogance. "You kin to them two?"

He sensed movement on the part of the visitor, and his heart ached for eyesight.

"Yes," said Smith. "Little Elk died long ago, Major; he was my father. I've aimed a long while to ketch up with your trail."

SILENCE fell. The flicker of fire died within Bridger. The desolate tolerance of age crept upon him. Nigh on to sixty year back—it was a terrible long time. But he remembered now and wagged his head and mumbled to himself.

"What ye want?" he demanded suddenly.

Smith leaned forward and tapped his shrunken, bony knee.

"I got a knife under my coat, Major," he said quietly. "When I was a boy I heard about you; a whole lot. All the hopes and miseries and sufferings of the Snake nation, too; all your fault. I come back from white man's school to hear about you again. Some day, says I, the great Jim Bridger is going to lose his hair! I grew up to take your trail and dance your hair in my lodge, Major. Twicet I near found you and missed. Now I'm here."

Bridger sat immobile. He was alone in the house; not even a hound-dog was at hand. Nor did he care greatly. He had long been weary of this intolerable life.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "a man's got to act 'cording to his med'cine. Only," he added, with a faint cackle of mirth, "you ain't dancin' my scalp. I got no ha'r left. If you reckon you're sot on finishing me off, I can't prevent."

"That's what I came for," said Smith. "That, and to learn what became of the medicine of the Snake people."

"Ain't none. Ain't been none since that White Owl laid fer me and kotched it his own self," Bridger replied. "Hand me down that see-gar box settin' on the wall shelf, will ye?"

Smith rose, looked about, went to a wall-shelf, took down a cigar box and

brought it over to Bridger. The latter opened it and fumbled about within it. His fingers brought forth a crumple of tissue paper. From this he took a worn and patched and faded bit of doeskin, a pouch, once decorated with elaborate quillwork which was now broken and spoiled.

"Here 'tis," he said. "This here pouch with the med'cine arrers. About all I got left o' them days. You ain't doin' a lot when you send me on the ghost trail. Here, take it. Reckon it comes back to you."

There was a certain dignity in his slow and careful speech. Smith took the pouch; his voice came softly to Bridger, muttering low phrases in the tongue of childhood, awe and fear breathed in the words. This little worn-out thing, all that was left of the Snake medicine which had been so splendid in legend and story—this old decrepit hulk of a man, all that was left of the famed champion of the old frontier!

"I'd like to keep this," said Smith huskily. "It means a lot to me, Major."

"It's your'n."

Smith leaned forward and tapped the bony knee again.

"I didn't know you were like—like this," he said. "I reckon I couldn't do what I come here to do, Major. Looked like a great thing when it was fur off, but close up it ain't so good. Something I'd powerful like to do, though."

"What's that?" demanded Bridger warily.

"Smoke with you, Major. You know—close the trails."

Bridger fumbled in his pocket and brought out a corncob pipe; the other halted him.

"No, Major. I've got a stone pipe here. Calumet. Will you use it?"

"Yep."

Bridger's senses were still acute. He touched the pipe put in his hand, felt the smooth contours of it—a small pipestone tube, nothing elaborate—and handed it back. He listened, and heard his visitor

produce tobacco and fill the pipe. A match was struck; then he sniffed what he had not savored in long years—the aroma of cut plug mixed, redskin style, with the pungent red willow bark. When the pipe was put into his hand again, he lifted the stem to his lips.

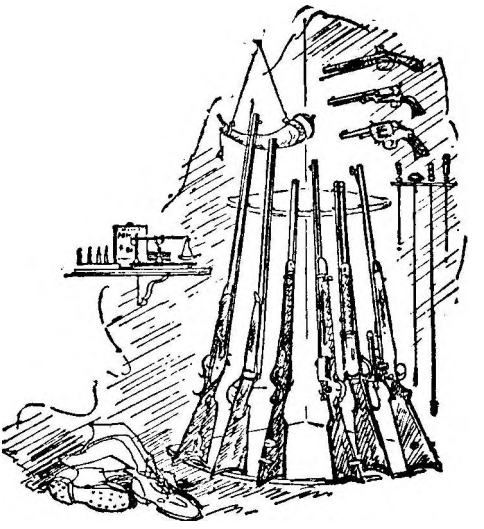
He puffed, slowly, four times, to the four winds of heaven; he puffed again, upward to the Great Spirit. To his lips came long-forgotten phrases in Arapaho and Shoshone. Then he handed back the pipe.

Smith took it, emptied it, pocketed it, and stood up. He reached over and took the hand of Bridger and held it in a firm grip for a moment.

"Trails closed, talk ended," he said in Arapaho. "Goodby, Major!"

"So long," mumbled Bridger.

He heard the visitor go out and close the door again, and walk off. The hound dogs, who had missed his arrival, bayed lustily around him now; then he was gone. Jim Bridger sighed and leaned back. His chin fell on his breast and he sat in the hopeless silence of a blind man, awaiting the opening of the last trail.



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Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Second-Hand One-Fisted Guns

THE average civilian who wants to buy a hand gun is out of luck as far as a new one is concerned. So the only thing to do is shop around and try to get a good used one.

About a year ago I discussed buying used rifles. Since then quite a number of SHORT STORIES readers have written in wanting to know about revolvers and automatics. So being a natural-born efficiency expert (lazy), I figure I can get out of a lot of letter writing by pointing out a few pitfalls to avoid in this interesting chore.

If you are unfamiliar with hand guns there is a good chance of getting stuck, and how!

You know whether you want a revolver or an automatic? Okay, but just one comment here—an inexperienced pistol shooter is a lot better off with a revolver. Most automatics have the hammer concealed which means you can't actually see that the gun is cocked or not, which is confusing to the novice. In some automatics the safety locks the trigger only so there's always a chance that the hammer might slip. Another point is the fact that most people can shoot more accurately with the revolver.

What caliber? Well, for stopping power the .38 or .45 is fine, also the lowly .22 using Long Rifle high speed hollow point bullets. The average beginner can do better shooting with the .22.

What to pay for a used pistol? It's hard to say—today a used hand gun in excellent condition will bring list price of a new one or maybe more. You'll just have to use your own judgment.

REMEMBER the outside finish has nothing whatsoever to do with the shooting qualities of a gun—but, if a pistol is good on the outside, the chances are it has had good care. Of course a lousy gun can look like a million dollars if it has just been refinished. It's a good sign if the factory finish is worn off at holster contact points only.

When examining a hand gun the first thing to do is open it to make sure it is not loaded—if it is loaded, first remove the cartridges; second, carefully place the gun and ammunition in a safe place; third, bust the bird who handed you the loaded gun a good hard smack in the nose, and then hasten away at a rapid pace. Brother, you're in a dangerous spot.

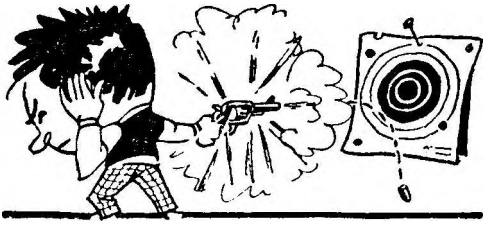
After making sure the gun is unloaded, push a clean patch through the barrel and chamber, or chambers if it's a revolver. Place a small piece of white paper behind the breach end and take a good look through the barrel. Rust and pits show up as streaks. Slight rust or pits near the

breech end affect the accuracy very little even when using lead bullets.

Watch out for a barrel that has a ring in it. A ring is generally caused by shooting a gun with an obstruction in the barrel, such as a cleaning patch, or heavy grease.

ONE fall while out in Oklahoma, I fired a Colt Bisley for a couple of weeks. It was as nice a shooting gun as you'd want. The next year I traded for the gun. Somehow it had acquired a ring. To make a long story short—I never could get the darned thing to shoot for sour apples. So lay off a gun that has a bulge in its barrel, there's no hope for it!

Pits in the chamber of an automatic, or chambers of a revolver will cause extraction trouble and the automatic will jam.



Examine the firing pin to make sure that it isn't broken. The end of the pin should be round and smooth, otherwise it might pierce the primer. Hold the gun sideways so you can see the hole where the firing pin comes through to strike the primer in the cartridge. Cock it and pull the trigger. The firing pin should protrude about 1/16th inch. Examine the recoil plate to see that it isn't cracked.

Cock the hammer (be sure the gun is not loaded) and try to force it. Any handgun which can be forced off of full cock any way other than by pulling the trigger is dangerous.

To test the automatic, remove magazine and see that the chamber is empty. Hold gun in hand as in shooting with the slide in forward position, hammer not cocked. Hold the trigger in the pulled position. With the other hand pull the slide to the

rear as fast as possible and when it reaches rearmost position let it slip from the fingers and return to the forward position. Release pressure on trigger and pull it again. If you hear the hammer fall, it stays cocked. If the hammer doesn't fall it has followed the slide forward and the gun is definitely unsafe. It's a good idea to try this several times.

Check the safeties, some pistols have two or three, and be sure that they all work.

Pull the trigger of the revolver (I hope you checked to see that it's unloaded) for double action shooting and make sure the cylinder revolves. Hold the trigger after the hammer falls and try to revolve the cylinder, it should be locked firmly in position. If it's loose, look for another gun.

Try the ejector, it should work smoothly. If it binds, see that it is repaired before you buy the revolver.

The trigger pull should be at least three pounds and not over five or six. Don't buy a hand gun with a so-called hair trigger. It's unhealthy.

The cartridges are contained in a magazine in most all self-loading pistols. This magazine should be carefully checked, especially the space between the lips at its top. Too much space or too little will cause jams. Compare the used magazine with a new one, or one that you know works. Or better still give the gun a try-out by firing it several times. I know darned well I wouldn't buy a used gun without first trying it for accuracy and function.

Most factory sights are okay for general use unless deformed. If the sights are worn bright, they can always be blacked by smoke or any commercial liquid made for this purpose.

Don't buy any of this foreign junk that has at one time or another flooded the American market.

Most any handgun made by Colt, Smith & Wesson, High Standard, Harrington & Richardson, or Iver Johnson, and in good condition is worth buying!

Pardon me for staring...

BUT JUST LOOK AT THAT

HE-MAN BODY

CHARLES ATLAS
An actual untouched photo of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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