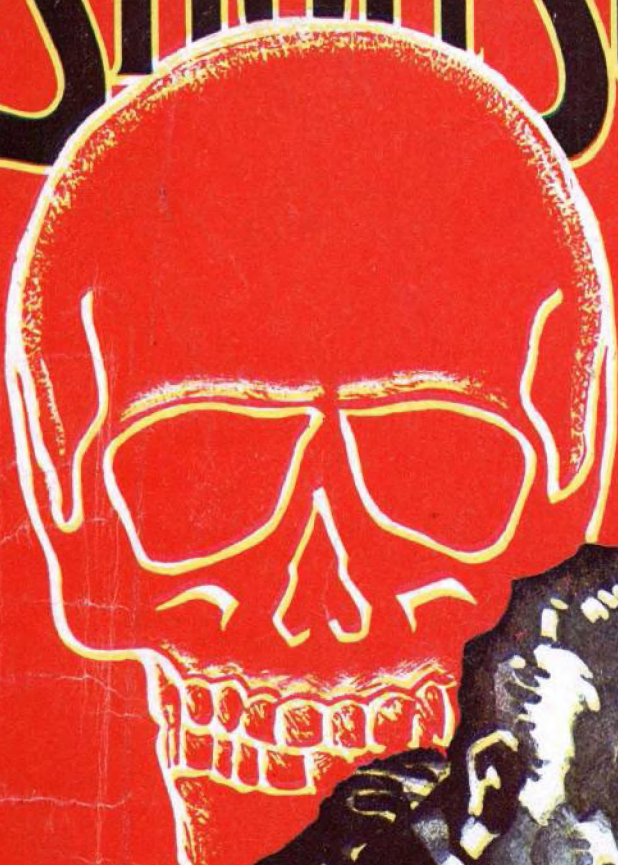


Short Stories

ANC

November

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Walter C. Brown**

MURDER KEY

by
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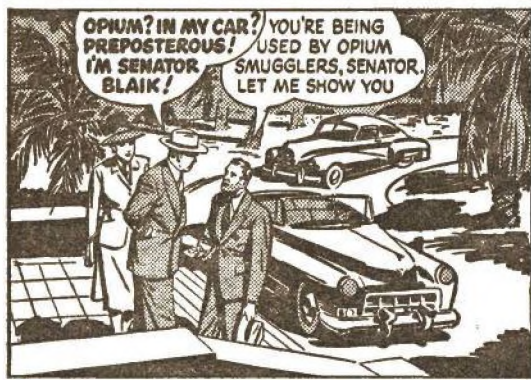
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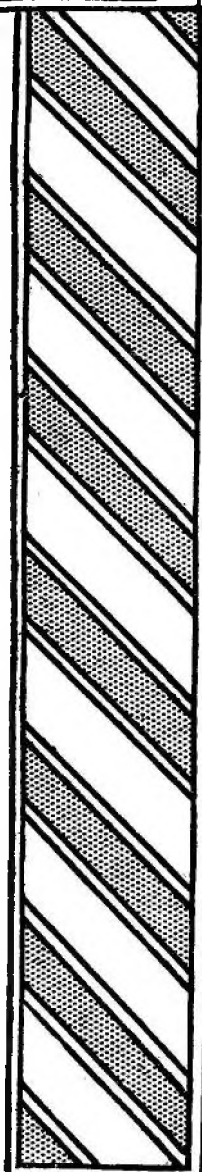
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*The Hungry Mother Lynx Was
Fighting for Her Young*

BROOD CALL

By T. VON ZIEKURSCH

DOWN through Nictau's reaches swept a violent blast, roaring among the leafless branches like a grim breath of some deity of the North. The vast unbroken stretches of white and the icy sheeting of each trunk told their tale of the long overhang of winter.

Looming high over the forest the naked crest of Stillhouse Ridge jutted almost into the low flying clouds, a somber, ominous outpost of the broken country north of the pond region.

At the edge of a bare cliff, a hundred feet and more above the brush-covered base, three pines pointed their naked trunks skyward at grotesquely divergent angles.

Far away in the reaches sounded the booming call of a bull moose. At the sound, something stirred beneath the roots of the three pines and a great round head appeared, turning as if on a pivot to survey the mountainside. The sharp, tufted ears and keen, yellowish eyes reflected the watchful attitude of the old she lynx as she investigated thoroughly before her short, thick body came into sight. Then she leaped up out of the cave formed by the rocks. Near her haunches the barely discernible spots appeared through the soft grayish fur as she crouched and peered down the slope.

Each night she had hunted desperately, driven even to hanging on the scent of stray caribou cows in the hope of finding an early calf. Once a fierce battle with a *carcajon* had furnished her meat for several days; but the crusted surface of the snow had made it extremely difficult to obtain food. To add to the woes of the forest folk it was the "year of no rabbits," as the Chippewyans say, the season which comes about every seven years when a pes-



tilence sweeps the forest and the long-eared kind virtually disappear.

Of late she had taken to hunting during the day, driven by the impelling demand within her body for rich, nourishing food. Now she arose and stalked down the slope, circling along the edge of the cliff where it descended into the thickets. Then she sought the bottoms and worked silently forward, grim, ready to match those curving claws with the razor-like hoofs of a cow moose should chance so ordain. But the forest was silent, seemingly devoid of life. Yet hunger gnawed cruelly and she stalked deeper into the leafless coverts, eagerly following old game trails. At last she halted and her head darted from side to side, close to the snow. Here a narrow path wound through the forest, and quite recently a caribou had wandered down it. She advanced at a slinking trot, and then her ears completed the story. A turn in the path brought her in full view of the tiny stream that flowed down to the chain of lakes below. Cautiously she advanced, but there was no sign of life other than where the ice had been broken through by sharp hoofs. From the hole in the ice where the caribou had drunk came the low gurgle of the water. Already a scum was beginning to form over the hole, but the lynx examined it carefully. There were evidences that it had been broken before. She drew off to one side where, a few yards from the stream, a clump of birch shaded the path. A leap carried her half-

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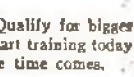
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way up one of the trunks and her sharp claws served to draw her higher until she settled in a crotch where the largest branch emerged, her gray fur blending with the hue of the bark.

Then the hours passed, slowly, seemingly endless as she waited, stilling that demand for food which grew ever more intense. At last came a sound, faint, different from the usual forest noises. She drew her front paws farther back while the muscles of her haunches worked in serpentine fashion as she balanced, ready, and her head sank lower.

Now the sound was plainer; something was coming down that game trail, trod by many generations of caribou and moose. The eyes of the lynx peered back whence the thing must come, and around the bend in the path appeared a man, mackinaw-clad. At each stride the rifle swung ahead and backward in his hand with a motion of easy familiarity, while his high larrigans and general appearance disclosed his occupation. Peter Chadeayne had no secrets; the forest owed him a living and he took it ruthlessly. His French-Canadian father had so taken it before him, as for centuries had his Chippewyan mother's people. He came and went through the forest depths, silent and evasive, merely an animal gifted with exceptional intelligence.

The lynx huddled closer into the crotch, prepared to spring, yet hesitant, and the man passed serenely unaware of the huge cat crouched above. A lithe jump carried Peter Chadeayne across the hole in the ice. As he disappeared down the forest path on the other side the lynx leaped from the branch and her nose sought his footprints. Then she, too, crossed the stream and followed, slinking cautiously along.

At last she came to the clearing in which was the cabin of the man. Another and smaller building stood some distance apart, and from it came occasional rustlings and grunts. The lynx worked about to all sides, her eyes flaming with a greenish light which reflected the hunger lust—yet she waited. At last dusk began to clothe the clearing with dim shadows. The door of the cabin opened and Peter Chadeayne bore a crude bark pail full of dried fodder from the shack to the pen at the rear. Three half

grown shoats, hairy and ugly, fed eagerly, while the man returned to the house, leaving them in the walled pen to finish the fodder before returning to lock them in for the night.

At the edge of the clearing the lynx waited, torn between the impulse for a mad rush and the caution that commanded delay until complete darkness ruled. Slowly she edged closer, drawn irresistibly, fighting down the awful hunger that was conquering every instinct, every lesson of the wild. The urge became stronger, more insistent. A rush, a wild leap and the lynx balanced atop the wall of logs and stone that surrounded the pen. The forest aisles echoed the fierce screech of the killer as she launched out with every claw unsheathed and landed on one of the terrified shoats.

INSIDE the cabin Peter Chadeayne heard that screech and reached for his rifle. Even before he reached the door the lynx had scrambled up the side of the pen, dragging her kill after her, and was disappearing into the forest.

Furious, Chadeayne followed the great cat's trail in the snow, easily marked by the bright red daubs where the life blood of the shoat had spurted. But the growing darkness made it correspondingly difficult, and at last Peter Chadeayne gave it up and worked about like a hound, bending low to peer at the marks.

"Sartain, she ver' hoongry, damn! Breeding season!" he muttered.

His jaw set grimly as he carefully locked the other shoats in the pen; while in the forest the lynx gorged on the delicious thing that had dragged so heavily on her waning strength. Then she rested before resuming her way upward to the cave at the base of the pines. Occasionally she halted as the remains of the carcass of the shoat tired her, and all her caution returned when she neared the rocks. Deliberately she avoided the snow-covered patches where the wind had not cleared away all that might hold some mark of her passing. Carefully she detoured, working slowly higher, and finally disappeared into the hollow, the entrance to which curved inside to keep out the blasts of the wind.

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The next morning Peter Chadeayne fed the other two pigs and locked them in carefully, determined that no marauder from the forest should duplicate the feat of the she lynx. Then he sought her trail. It was comparatively clear and he followed fast until it led up the slope of Stillhouse, where the rocky ridge loomed dark and austere far above. For hours he worked among the rocks with rifle constantly ready, and in the cave the lynx heard him and waited with lips drawn back. He examined every patch of snow within the radius of half a mile of the last clear mark and sought every place that appeared to bear the faintest semblance of a trail among the rocks and boulders. At last he gave it up and started back for the cabin, while in the cave the lynx devoured almost the entire remaining part of the shoat. That night faint squeals came from the cave and three tiny bodies nestled close to the side of the mother lynx, writhing about as she patiently curled close to warm them.

Two days later the last of the shoat was gone in the cave and the drain on the lynx, in the form of three insistent mouths that tugged constantly, called for strengthening food. At dusk she crept cautiously forth and bounded away from rock to rock, balancing nicely and avoiding contact with the ground; for the secret must be kept inviolate from prying nostrils. Now she wasted no time on the hunt. In that pen were other shoats as delicious and tender as had been the first one, and as easy to kill.

She reached the clearing and halted, circling to all sides to test the air. All was quiet, and she stole to the base of the wall about the pen, clambered over and approached the fastened door. From inside came the rank odor of living pig. Her claws caught in the crack of the opening as she scratched vainly, and the pigs inside snorted in fright. Again she tore at the opening, and the snorts became louder, mingling with squeals of fright.

She heard a noise from the direction of the cabin. Those squeals had reached Peter Chadeayne's ears and brought him to the door with the rifle thrown forward. She heard him coming and leaped to the top of the wall. In the dim light from

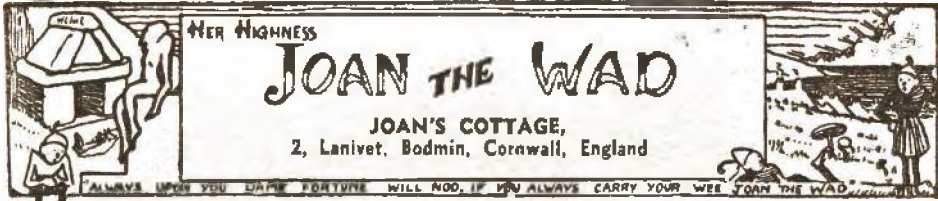
the early moon he saw her tense body poising there a moment, crouching to leap off into the shadows. The rifle's din echoed through the reaches, mingling with the screech of pain from the lynx as the bullet clipped a bit of hide off one foreleg near the shoulder. She raced away into the night, homeward toward the den at the base of the pines.

The leg stiffened and became sore as she sprawled in the cave, licking at the wound and willingly giving her all to the three tiny things that drained her vitality to the utmost. Her whole body fairly ached with the intense hunger that drove her forth the next night to limp down the slope once more in search of the food that Nature demanded. For hours she hunted, slipping through the brush like a silent demon, one thought alone ruling her instinct—to kill. But it was a vain quest. Once she startled a fox, but her attempt at the powerful leap that usually served her purpose was a stumbling thing, and the fox escaped.

AS THE shadows began to recede from the top of Stillhouse Ridge toward the heavily forested bottoms, she turned and retraced her way to the cave to warm and feed the offspring for the nourishment of which she was giving up her very life.

Outside the shadows gave way to a dull, grayish day. Then the overcast sky opened and down came the first flakes of the storm, driving and curling over the ridge. Late that afternoon the white fall ceased and the wind died down. The mother lynx peered out, and hesitated. It was sheer, desperate hunger that drove her forth at last. Her great leap left the telltale marks as far as possible from the entrance to the cave, and throughout the long hours of darkness she padded silently among the depths.

Over the ridges toward the east the sky began to reveal a lighter hue as she came out at the clearing in which stood Peter Chadeayne's cabin, and that tempting shack in which was the food she craved. Closer and closer she crept to the base of the wall, dropping more of her caution at each step. Her eyes glowed cruelly and the long, hooked claws worked forth from the sheathing between the toes. Her



AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

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AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won \$5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his \$5,600 he gave me \$280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

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haunches gathered and she gained the top of the wall like a projectile fired from a mortar. There she crouched an instant and leaped toward the door, unmindful of the heap of brush before it.

As her forefeet landed on that brush there came a wild swirl of branches, a clash of metal and the jaws of the trap caught one of her paws. A sharp pain shot up her leg and she hissed at the thing that had her fast. Tearing and pulling she drew back, tugging wildly in spite of the fresh agony where her toes were clutched by the sharp steel. Back and forth she fought madly, but the staple that held the chain of the trap was driven deep in the pine post at the edge of the door. A bedlam of squeals and grunts came from the frightened shoats in the pen, and desperation was in the heart of the lynx when she heard the grim oath of Peter Chadeayne from the direction of the cabin. Backward she lunged, dragging the trap until the chain was taut. The pain of it was maddening but she struggled on, and at last the flesh gave way. She tumbled in a heap as the toes tore loose, leaving a bit of bloody fur in the grip of the steel trap, but she cleared the wall at a bound, speeding away toward the base of Stillhouse.

Peter Chadeayne regarded the trap with its grim relic of her triumph and cursed eloquently. Then he smiled and returned to the cabin. As soon as the shadows gave way to daylight in the bottoms he returned to the pen and took up the trail in the snow, the rifle swinging eagerly in his hand.

It was plain enough now, where she had stumbled along, limping slowly. Climbing up along the crest of the cliff he followed, emerging at the open spot he had searched before where the rocks now jutted through the snow. And the lynx, forced to halt frequently by the pain, heard him coming.

At the entrance to the cave she stopped and her wonderfully keen eyes saw him far below. But she did not enter. Instead she slunk around the base of the biggest pine and clambered laboriously up, wearily fighting her way to a mass of matted boughs that bent under her weight, but concealed her. There she waited as Peter Chadeayne

came closer, picking his way slowly in the dangerous, snow-covered footing.

SHE had attempted to cross the rocky space without leaving tracks, but her efforts to leap from rock to rock had resulted in a series of floundering tumbles, and all was pathetically plain. Peter Chadeayne's jaws were set grimly as he followed. While he was still some distance from the cave the muscles of the lynx tensed, her claws came out and her lips wreathed back in a silent snarl of hate. At last the man stopped and raised his eyes, looking ahead. Unmistakably there were the marks of her last leap, right in the entrance to the cave. He advanced with the rifle ready and halted, looming above the cavity that wound under the rocks. A smile that was partly sneer crossed his features and he leaned over, grasping the flat edge of one of the top stones. As he pulled it back the soft fur along the spine of the mother lynx in the tree twitched, and her tufted ears flattened.

Even as the man straightened, half bent to one side with the rifle thrust upward, she hurtled through the air, a terrible forty pounds of the very essence of fury.

The bullet sped harmlessly heavenward while the rifle clattered on the stones, and Peter Chadeayne clutched frantically at the base of the smallest pine as he lunged toward the edge of the cliff, overbalanced and thrown backward by the terrific impact of that leap. A fraction of an instant he hung, his arms threshing wildly; then he disappeared over the edge and a cry of terror came back up the side of the cliff.

The mother lynx crouched on the rocks, waiting, then straightened to her full height and surveyed the slope above which old Stillhouse Ridge loomed sombre and forbidding. Again her head went back and the defiant battle challenge of her motherhood echoed shrilly down the reaches. In the forest nothing stirred and she dropped from the rocks into the entrance of the cave. A whimpering cry reached her ears and she disappeared within, while from in back of the eastern clouds the sun's warm rays came with their message of the belated spring's impending arrival.

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*A Mysterious House in the Mountains, Triple Guarded,
and a God Bringing With It the Secrets of the East*



THE SIX ARMS OF SIVA

By WALTER C. BROWN

HAD it not been raining that night, Johnny Carpen would never have met the three little brown men, nor been abducted by that mad and headstrong adventurer, Daniel J. Mellody. And if these things had not happened the world today would know nothing of the unbelievable

nightmare that ran rampant in Colonel Pottermax's house on Pontico Hill, ironically enough named "Dreamer's Rest," nor would we ever have learned the inside story of the Colonel's terrifying adventure with the "Six Arms of Siva."

"Damn!" grumbled Johnny to himself, looking out the pantry window into the

streaming night. To his left the revolving guide-light of the Carillon Flying Field vainly struggled to pierce the heavy atmosphere. The Transcontinental Arrow, crack passenger plane, had come swooping down a few minutes before, over an hour late. It was a bad night for flying.

Just then the door of the "Regal Diner" slid back in its groove, the sound of rain was doubled, and the three little brown men glided into the stationary lunchwagon. Their coats and hats were dripping. They sat down, all in a row, their faces like brown masks. Not one of them was over five feet in height, and, to Johnny's eyes, they were as alike as three peas in a pod.

The middle one, who seemed to be the leader, nodded to Johnny, then gravely studied the menu cards, fastened to the rear wall. The other two stared straight ahead, faces vacant as robots'. "Nasty weather, outside," Johnny remarked cheerfully. "How about something hot—some nice hamburger, with fried eggs, rolls and coffee?"

Three pairs of eyes slid around to him with a curious movement that gave him a queer, tingling sensation along his spine, as if a cold wind had suddenly blown on him. The rain drummed furiously on the tin roof, the lights in the diner seemed to take on an unnatural brilliancy.

"Tea, please!" the spokesman ordered, and the sibilant "s" was like the fabled hissing of the snake. So the three little brown men sat there and gulped down prodigious quantities of scalding hot tea, strong, bitter, unsweetened. Certainly prosaic, if peculiar, nourishment for the avenging messengers of an outraged god to partake of in a little yellow diner near the Carillon Airport on a rainy night in September.

CARPEN didn't know until later that facing him at that moment were three of the dreaded "Six Arms of Siva," come thousands of miles to wrest back from that reckless adventurer, Melody, the priceless thing he had made off with, and fled with half the circle of the globe. Carpen didn't know anything about Siva, Hindu god of vengeance and destruction, and had never laid eyes on Melody, but he *had*

heard stories about Colonel Pottermax and "Dreamer's Rest," and those peculiar, and not very savory.

Johnny's strange visitors, having drunk their tea in silence, rose to go. Carpen's eyes had opened when he noticed that the fingernails on each of the right hands were a vivid scarlet, those on the left hands being of natural color. His eyes opened a bit wider when the middle brown man pulled a handful of gold coins from his pocket and tendered a five-dollar gold piece. He bobbed politely over the change, left no tip, and the three little men went noiselessly back into the night and rain.

Carpen watched them go, with a shrug. Visitors, however strange, aroused no more than a passing curiosity in him. Munching a left-over coffee cake, he counted over the day's receipts. Then he drew a cup of coffee for himself, and was just lighting his pipe when the door slid open again and four men tramped in, cursing the night's weather.

As they lined up on the stools at the counter, Johnny saw the butt of a gun sticking out from a shoulder holster under one man's coat, and, looking over the tough, hard-bitten faces ranged before him, resigned himself to a stick-up. He had been held up before, but he kept no gun in the wagon. He did have a handy weapon in the form of a long wrench hidden under the counter, and had once averted a hold-up by breaking the man's arm with it, but with a quartette of this caliber to deal with, he felt that it would be folly to offer resistance.

These night prowlers were hungry, and gave a substantial order. While Carpen got the stove going, and rattled his pots and pans about, they talked together in low tones over steaming cups of coffee, made more potent by a goodly splash into each cup from a silver hip-flask, passed from hand to hand. From stray words and phrases that drifted into the pantry Johnny gathered that their car had slewed off the wet road into a muddy gully, and they had been obliged to get out in the rain and tow it clear again by hand. Carpen availed himself of the chance to drop most of his money into a trash box, leaving only the coins in his pocket.

When he had served the various orders and replenished the coffee cups he retired to his stool and took up pipe and paper again. If it was to be a stick-up, Johnny knew he was properly cornered, and there would be no sense in giving them an excuse to manhandle him while they were about it. The wrench would not be of much use against four determined men. So he remained outwardly unconcerned, but while they were busy eating he observed them more closely.

THEY were not as poorly dressed as he had at first imagined. Rain-soaked clothing and the struggle with the ditched car would account for that first impression. Nevertheless, two of the four were just plain thugs, strong-arm men with heavy, coarse features, thick hands, hard eyes. The third man had a dash and swagger that the others lacked. He had blond hair, clearcut, intelligent features, and slender hands. His name appeared to be "Sam," but he was also addressed as "Digger."

But it was the fourth man who claimed, and merited, most attention. This was a tall, wiry, partially bald buccaneer, with a face scarred and seamed and weather-worn as an old ship's figurehead. Bushy brows over eyes of frozen blue-gray. A mouth that was nothing but a hard, straight line. There was an intense, coiled poise about him that was like a crouching menace. "Digger" addressed him as "Dan," to the other two he was "Melody." When he turned that frigid gaze of his on Carpen, Johnny felt it drill through and through like an iron hand reaching up into his innermost thoughts. This would be a hard man to lie to, Johnny thought to himself.

"That certainly hit the spot," Sam remarked as he finished his food and drained his second cup of coffee. "Fill it up again." He pushed the cup across the counter, glanced at the clock and turned to Melody. "We've got nearly an hour yet, and with this weather Bull will probably be behind schedule."

The two gunmen were still stolidly eating, but they kept an eye on Carpen, just the same. By that time Johnny had made the additional discovery that every one

of the four was armed. Digger took the refilled cup and pushed it along the counter to a new seat, just in front of Johnny's stool, a little removed from the others. He lit a cigar, and when it was drawing to his satisfaction, relaxed that cruel mouth of his into what was intended for a smile and said, "Thought it was a stick-up, didn't you, young fellow?"

MELLODY, listening, chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound, as he made it. Digger's frankness was disconcerting but not disarming. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time," Carpen answered drily, waiting for the cat to jump.

Sam disregarded his companions, studying the man before him through a haze of smoke. "Been at this racket long?" he inquired abruptly. "You don't look the type. Your grub's good, and the place is clean."

Carpen put his paper aside and hitched the stool closer to the counter. He felt Melody watching him. If this blond fellow wants to yarn a bit, he thought, it won't hurt to humor him.

"I haven't had this place very long," he answered. "I had a job out on the Coast, but I lost it when things started to crash and came back East to get a fresh start. On the way I picked up a little change working in restaurants. That's how I picked up the business, and when I got home again I just naturally stuck to the same line. One night I got lucky in a crap game and bought out the Greek I'd been working for—that is, I gave him a good down payment."

"Are you making out all right?" Digger's smile revealed two gold teeth.

Johnny shrugged. "Fair enough. Money's not growing on trees these days." He waved his hand around with quiet pride. "When I'm all paid up it'll be all right. It's not a bad stand, here at the Airport. When I get tired of it, I can always sell out and move on."

"You keep open this late every night?"

"I didn't feel like going out and getting a soaking," Johnny explained. "It's a long jaunt back to my room in town. Of course it doesn't pay to keep open this late all the time. The Arrow is the last regular

plane to come in—half past ten—but it was an hour late tonight. On account of the storm, I guess."

"Do you get much business from the passengers?" the smiling but insistent inquisition continued. Johnny began to wonder what was the purpose behind all these questions.

"Well, yes and no. My regular customers are the mechanics and field-helpers, and there are quite a few of them, but I do get some of the passengers. This airport's busy day and night, almost like a railroad station. People who never get out here don't know how much air travel there is. All sorts of people use planes nowadays, and think nothing of it. Why just tonight I had three passengers from the Arrow—foreigners of some kind, queer little brown men, not over *so* high. They paid me from a pocketful of gold pieces. Imagine that."

SAM'S cigar paused in midair. Melody was looking with a peculiar intentness, and Johnny was aware that the others had stopped eating and that all eyes had swung around toward him in immediate and unanimous interest, just as had the little brown men's.

"That's—very—interesting!" Melody's jerky, explosive voice made Carpen look. He saw that one side of the man's face was twitching. Melody leaned sideways. "Joe—Bill—take a look outside—see if the rain's getting into our ignition."

The two gunmen turned away from the counter without a word and went out, hands stealing toward the hidden guns. The door slid shut behind them. Sam had recovered his poise, and was calmly drawing on his cigar. "About those fellows you just mentioned," he continued. "Japs? Maybe Mexicans?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Filipinos?"

"I couldn't say," Johnny answered, wondering why the reported presence of those three brown men should prove so upsetting, for these men had been genuinely startled. Johnny could sense the inner tenseness that had sprung up at his casual words.

"How do you know they came by plane?"

Sam queried, with a quick glance at the clock.

"One of them had the ticket stubs sticking out of his overcoat pocket. I see those stubs all the time, and know the different colors. These were from Chicago."

"You say there was something odd about these fellows?" Melody rasped in his unpleasant voice.

"All they drank was tea, bitter tea, and—oh, yes, their finger nails were red, like blood," Johnny blurted out, helpfully.

Digger and Melody exchanged a quick look. "Right or left hands?"

"Right, I think. Yes, right."

Melody nodded gloomily. Johnny saw that his face was twitching again, but not with fear. At that moment the man's stony face looked as deadly as a hooded cobra, swaying for the strike.

Sam sat drumming his fingers on the counter. "Do you know the roads around this section well?" he queried, off on a fresh tack.

Carpen nodded. "I was born in this place. It was just a small town, then."

"Did you ever hear of a house called 'Dreamer's Rest'?"

"Oh, sure. That's Colonel Pottermax's place. It's on the other side of the city, and 'way back in the hills. It's built on the top of one of them, Pontico Hill, and a hard place to find unless you know the roads."

Digger was gazing straight into Johnny's eyes. "We've got to make a delivery up there tonight," he said. "Joe—our driver," he jerked his thumb vaguely, "is supposed to know his way around this section, but he's made a dozen wrong turnings already. The last time he put us in a ditch. We can't waste any more time driving around in the dark. How about closing up and coming along with us to show the way? There'll be a ten-spot in it for you."

Johnny hesitated. It was an easy way to earn ten dollars, but on the face of it there was something more than a little queer about this "delivery" to a remote place like "Dreamer's Rest" in the middle of the night. It was common local knowledge that Colonel Pottermax welcomed no visitors, either by day or by night. He had, indeed, adopted rather extraordinary

means to protect himself against intrusions. Some said it was fear of thieves, "Dreamer's Rest" housing, as it did, the world-famous collection of Orientalia to which Colonel Pottermax had devoted a lifetime of effort and a considerable fortune. Others assigned less reputable motives to the eccentric Colonel.

DIGGER turned to Mellody. "I'll bet he thinks we've got a load of wet goods for the Colonel," he bantered with heavy geniality. Mellody answered peevishly, "Let's cut out the sparring and get down to cases. I'll handle this fellow."

"Take it easy, Dan," Sam counseled. "We don't want the Colonel to do any squawking about the way we handled the last couple of miles of this trip."

"Let the Colonel worry about that," Mellody growled. "You heard what was said. Those fellows beat us here by an hour. That looks bad—looks as if they knew something. If they do, we may have plenty of trouble getting through. Let's get going and get it over with—now. I've no mind for driving around the rest of the night in the rain looking for 'Dreamer's Rest.' A place as lonely as that, and no telephone. The man's either crazy or a fool!"

Johnny Carpen broke in with his objections. "I wouldn't mind making an extra ten-spot," he said, "but even if we rode all the way up to Pontico Hill you couldn't get near the house. There's a double fence of barbed wire all around the grounds, and the wires are loaded with live 'juice.' There are signs all through the woods, warning off trespassers. And they say the Colonel sets loose his pack of police dogs at night."

"Oh, we'll get in all right," Mellody replied, with his mirthless chuckle. Then, with a speed that was entirely too fast for the eye to follow, his gun was out and under his hand, resting on the counter. "Listen, fellow," Mellody continued, "there'll be no more cackling. You're going to show us the road to the Colonel's, and like it. Behave yourself, and we'll throw you a fish. If not—"

Mellody had no need to finish the sentence to make his meaning clear. The eruption of his hot will left no room for

argument. "O. K." Johnny shrugged, reaching for his hat and coat, while Mellody growled and Digger jerked his shoulders in disapproval.

"Wait a minute. What do we owe you for the grub?"

Johnny made some rapid calculations. "Two-forty," he answered.

"Pay him, Sam."

Digger pulled out a roll of bills, counted down three ones, then added a ten-spot to the pile.

"Go fish the rest of your dough out of that trash box," Mellody advised, with a burst of raucous laughter. "We're not after your chicken feed."

Carpen did as he was bidden, then turned out the lights and locked the door of the diner. Hemmed in like a military prisoner, they marched Johnny stolidly and silently over the soggy ground toward the deeper shadow reared by an abandoned tin workshed. It was there that Mellody had parked their car, an oldish convertible model. Johnny glanced around at the desolate fields and the dreary sky. Only a few lights survived in the airport buildings and hangars, but the warning finger of light swept ceaselessly around with mechanical monotony.

MELLODY whistled softly, and presently the two gunmen loomed up out of the night. They came from opposite directions, and Carpen knew that they had been sent out to make sure the three little brown men were not lurking nearby. Mellody held a whispered conversation with them, too low for the words to reach other ears. Every one was glad to climb into the car, out of the driving rain. Sam took the wheel, Joe evidently having been deposed for his blunderings, Johnny was ordered to sit beside him, and Mellody squeezed in on the other end. Joe and Bill sat in the rear seat.

Sam backed the car a few feet, spun the wheel, and curved off onto the high-road. Johnny Carpen, squeezed between his virtual captors, liked the situation less and less. The statement that they had a delivery to make to Colonel Pottermax was obviously a lie, for the car contained nothing besides themselves.

"This isn't the road to the Colonel's place," Johnny protested, after some anxious debating with himself. "You're heading in the wrong direction."

"Don't get nervous, fellow," Digger advised, smoothly. "You've probably noticed by this time that we haven't anything here to deliver. But we will have, my boy—we're going for it now, and the Colonel will be sitting up waiting for it, too. Eh, Dan?"

"Shut up, Sam," Melody snapped. "We're not out of the woods yet, and the less this fellow hears, the less he'll have to talk about."

"He won't talk," Digger chuckled, with such a sinister intonation that Carpen felt the prickles rising on his scalp. This thing was taking on the aspect of a gangsters' ride.

THEY went roaring on through the night, with the full width of the road to themselves. The rain drove against the windshield with spiteful fury, and the wiper slid frantically from side to side. "Tun-hill Road's just over this hill, isn't it?" Sam inquired once, without removing his gaze from the road ahead. They were climbing a long, slow grade.

"That's right," Johnny answered.

At the very crest of the slope Digger stopped the car and turned off the lights. Melody and the two in the rear seat got out and vanished from sight and sound. Sam lit a cigarette, and by the brief flare of the match glanced at his watch.

Carpen sat there, tense with uneasy thoughts, but Sam paid no attention, relaxed, smoking. The car was drawn safely over at the side of the road, and there was nothing in sight, no light anywhere but the tiny red glow of his cigarette. Presently Melody returned, getting in beside them.

"Everything O.K., Dan?" Sam inquired anxiously.

Melody drew a long, contented breath. "Everything's set. The boys are watching. We're near the end of the trail now, Sam, and a mighty long trail it has been." Melody gave vent to his rasping laugh as he lit a cigar. "I guess the Colonel's spent some anxious nights since our last wire. If the old coot had sense enough to keep a telephone

we could've rung him up and saved all this trouble. Well, let him squirm for a few hours more. We've had plenty of that for our share. Remember Hanoi Ghan and that curved knife of his?"

Both men sank into a silent reverie, as if Melody's words had conjured up brimming memories. They diffused the quiet but strained waiting of professional gamblers who have placed everything on one last turn of the wheel.

CARPEN, uneasy and alert, became aware of the noise made by an approaching car, a truck, by the throbbing rumble of it. Sam leaned forward, listening eagerly, then sounded four sharp toots on his horn. Four answering wails came at once from the horn of the unseen truck, laboring up the grade on the far side of the hill. Headlights swept into view, with the rain sweeping in silver strands across the twin beams.

"Here—and ahead of time!" Sam explained. "I knew we could trust Bull to bring it through." He leaped out of the car as the truck halted abreast of them. The two gunmen appeared. Melody and Carpen got out and joined the excited group gathered at the tailboard of the truck. Melody was joyfully thumping one of the arrivals on the shoulders, a big, broad shouldered fellow, "Bull." Digger was flashing a light inside the truck, and Carpen had a glimpse of a large box-crate, massive, bound with strips of metal.

Sam came over to Melody. "What'll we do with this old boat, Dan?" he asked. Melody looked around into the enveloping blackness. The red light on the rear of the truck showed his glistening eyes. He beckoned to Johnny. "What's over there?" he queried, jerking his thumb toward the left.

"There's only a steep slope down to Tun-hill Creek."

"Anybody live down there?"

"No."

"Any trees?"

"Some, I think. Near the bottom. But plenty of rocks. Big ones. You couldn't drive a car down there," Johnny advised.

MELLODY turned away. "All right, boys, lend a hand here. Joe—Bill—rip off those license plates. That's it! Sam,

let her out of gear." Heedless of the pouring rain, ready hands shoved the old car across the road, and on Melody's "Heave!" they started it downward on its last ride. They heard it bumping and bounding, crash, swerve, and crash again with a jangling of broken glass. Then silence closed down on the scene.

Johnny could not understand this wanton destruction of property. He was bewildered by these fantastic aspects of his adventure. There was certainly a grim sanity about the hulking figures of the gunmen, but he could not help thinking that the enterprise, whatever its purpose, must be in the hands of madmen.

Melody threw back his head and laughed in triumph at the sky, letting the rain beat down on his face. "All aboard!" he cried. The men scrambled to their places. Four of them climbed into the body of the truck. One had been busy obscuring the license plates with handfuls of mud. Digger, Melody and Johnny Carpen mounted to the broad driving seat.

Melody turned to Johnny. "Listen to your orders," he said. "You are to pick out the quietest way through the city. We want to keep away from the main streets. Once we're through—the shortest way to the Colonel's. And watch out that we don't get ditched again, because—well, Sam here, has a terrible temper."

Some secret thought of his own seemed to amuse him. "O.K., Sam, get going!" And so they went rattling back along the road, with Daniel J. Melody whistling "The Last Long Mile" between his teeth, but his right hand rested on the butt of the gun slung under his armpit.

II

IT WAS a weird ride, a cold and chilling nightmare, bumping along in the darkness, the headlights sweeping the empty road ahead, the riders tense and strained and nervously alert. Carpen could see quite plainly that they feared some sort of trouble, half expecting it at every turn in the road, though what it was they feared, unless it were the three brown men, he was at a loss to understand. These little men had not impressed him as foemen to be dreaded by

such a band of armed desperadoes, yet ever since he had mentioned their visit to his lunch wagon the whole party had shown a change of attitude.

They were now approaching the city. Obeying orders, Carpen indicated an indirect route. The isolated houses became detached rows, then solid phalanxes, as they sped through, avoiding main thoroughfares. Here and there a light still burned behind drawn curtains. The rain slashed down, drumming on the roof of the truck. They met few cars on the road, and fewer pedestrians. Red lights loomed up, honored by Digger's squealing brakes—then changed to amber, to green, beckoning them on. Sam pushed the truck along steadily and rapidly, but never at any dangerous speed.

After a time the houses began to thin out again, and blank walls of darkness, representing lots and open fields, surrounded the shining ribbon of road. Johnny advised Digger when and where to turn. The city left behind, they began to climb up into the hills again on a steadily ascending grade.

Melody kept up his low whistling, but never took his hand from the butt of his gun. Johnny was wondering what could be in that big crate so valuable that it required six armed men and the utmost secrecy to bring it safely to the doors of Dreamer's Rest at midnight. As the road wound on, higher and higher, they caught casual glimpses of the city spread out below them, a pool of blackness criss-crossed by strings of street lights.

Rounding a curve, the headlights swept across the broken-down veranda of an abandoned, rotting building. This rambling old place, Johnny informed them, was known as the Half-Way House, and had once been a summer resort of considerable patronage. "We turn off here onto a dirt road," he explained.

"I don't see any road," Sam replied, suspicious.

"There is one, just the same—to the right of that porch."

Digger swung the truck around in a half-circle, and the lights picked out the road, marked by old wheel-ruts, and apparently leading into vacancy, like the mouth of a tunnel. Sam headed straight into it,

and they jolted along at a very cautious pace, for Digger distrusted the road. The bare boughs of trees overhead kept whacking the high hood of the truck.

"There's one of Colonel's Pottermax's signs," Carpen pointed out, as the lights flashed on a painted board nailed to a tree. Sam stopped the truck and Mellody turned his flashlight on it. The grim lettering read: "Keep Out. Private Property, Trespassers Advance at Their Own Risk."

"That's plain enough," Mellody commented, and, as the wail of a dog sounded in the distance, "Ah, one of the Colonel's pet bloodhounds."

"Not bloodhounds, police dogs," Johnny corrected. "They say," he continued, "that the Colonel had the barbed wire fences put up, and the wires charged, so that if any one tried to climb over they'd be held fast by the current. I don't know that anyone's ever tried. But I have seen the dogs, running inside the fence. They look as if they mean business."

Mellody chuckled. "It's a good idea, anyway."

AS THEY turned into a straight, gravel driveway, another sign flashed into view. "Keep Out. This Property Is Protected by Mantraps. Trespassers Advance at Their Own Risk."

"Seems to be a regular mania with the old man," Sam commented. "When he says 'Privacy' he means privacy."

"Oh, the woods around here are full of signs. You see, Colonel Pottermax owns this whole side of Pontico Hill. You can't move a hundred yards down there in the woods without running into them."

"Maybe the Colonel's just throwing a bluff," Digger suggested.

"If he is, I'll bet none of the natives want to call it," Mellody retorted. "There's a lot of people can't pass a 'Fresh Paint' sign without sticking their fingers into it, but when it says 'Live Wire' they usually keep their hands off."

"Dreamer's Rest lies over there," Johnny said, pointing. There was nothing to be seen in that direction, but the howling of the dogs had now become a frantic chorus. Still no light appeared anywhere. Another fifty feet, and farther progress was barred

by the barbed-wire obstruction. It was just as Johnny had described it—a double fence, secured by metal posts and set in a gravel bed that was, perhaps, eight or ten feet across. There was a grim and business-like look about the closely woven, eight-foot barrier. There was a space of about six feet between the front and the secondary lines, and the top strands of each were tilted forward and outward in such a way that it would have been a ticklish thing to scale, without considering the electric current that was alleged to run through the spiked wires. The double-section gate was closed and locked.

To the right and left Colonel Pottermax's formidable barrier wound away out of sight. The thing must have cost a considerable sum to erect. Mellody gave ear to the continued hubbub coming from their left. "That ought to bring Pottermax on the run," he said. "Still, Sam, we'd better use the flare. From the general look of things it might be safer to let the Colonel know that friends are outside."

SAM pointed out that the glow would be visible all over that side of Pontico Hill, but Mellody over-ruled the objection, and Digger reached behind the driver's seat and handed over what looked like a thin, red candle. Mellody got down and held a match to it. He had some trouble getting the fuse alight in the rain, but it finally blazed off, shedding a brilliant red light over the scene. The rain not visibly affecting it, Mellody swung the hell-fire flare in semi-circles over his head. While this was going on, Digger was leaning out, gun in hand, watching the road behind them.

They kept the headlights trained on the gates, and before long they saw two figures inside the barrier hastening toward them. One was a gigantic Negro, coatless, bare-headed, with three leashed police dogs tugging at his arms. The other figure was ludicrously bundled against the weather, wearing storm boots, oilskins and sou'wester, and carrying an umbrella as well. He shouted something that was buried between the barking of the dogs and the beat of the rain, and Mellody shouted back and waved his expiring flare, but it is doubtful if either could distinguish the other's words.

Mellody strode up to the barbed-wire gate, impervious to the wetting, and the oncoming man in oilskins jumped and shouted and gestured so that Mellody understood he was being warned not to touch the wires. He watched the man inside stop at a little pent-roofed box mounted on a post and fumble in its interior. Then he proceeded to open first the inner gates, then the outer, while the Negro was jerked from side to side by the surging, savage dogs.

"It's the Colonel's butler," Mellody called back to those in the truck. "Greetings, Loring," he shouted as the man swung back the gate. Sam drove the truck through, and Loring refastened the gate. As he had waved them on toward the house, Mellody mounted the running board and Digger followed the curving driveway until they pulled up under the sheltered entrance to a large, dark house. The frantic uproar of the pent-up dogs sounded perilously close at hand. Such was their introduction to Dreamer's Rest.

Presently Loring came trotting back to them. "Have you got it safe there, Mr. Mellody?" were his first words.

"Safe and sound as the Bank of England," Mellody replied, getting down. "Did the Colonel get my cables and wires?"

Loring nodded. "Bring it in through this side door," he said, busy with the key in the lock. "If you can manage to squeeze it through here it'll save a lot of carrying."

Mellody clapped his hands. "Come on, boys," he commanded. Down rattled the tailboard, and the four huskies in the back dragged the cumbersome case to the edge of the truck. It was as much as they could manage. Slowly they eased it out over the tailpiece until, unbalanced, it swayed downward. Unbidden, Johnny Carpen helped Digger and Mellody bring it to a neat landing on the ground. Johnny knew now that the crate was of considerable weight, but he was no farther along toward guessing its contents. It gave off a smell that reminded him of bilge water.

It was while they were all having a breather after their tussle with the unwieldy box that the first untoward accident befell them. While the heavy work was being done, Loring had been fluttering helplessly on the outskirts of the grunting crew.

The gigantic Negro hovered a few yards away, bracing himself against the forward lunges of the trio of police dogs.

THERE was a snap, a wild howl from the Negro, and one of the big dogs, growling low in his throat, leaped into their midst, having broken or slipped his leash. In a moment there was a yelling, tangled knot as the men tried to duck aside and scatter before this sudden onslaught.

Johnny scampered with the others, but somebody butted into him, he slipped and fell. As he scrambled up he saw the flash of luminous eyes and the swift shape of the dog leaping at him. Instinctively he threw his arm before his face and throat, while pounding away futilely with his other fist. The dog's fangs sank into his arm as he was bowled over, with the huge beast on top of him.

Then Digger's flashlight shone down on them, with his trigger finger ready to annihilate the brute. Loring screamed not to use the gun, while Mellody leaned forward and watching his chance, brought the butt of his gun crashing down on the dog's skull. The dog went limp and rolled off his prey. Carpen rose shakily to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Mellody asked. "He didn't get you in the throat, did he?"

"No. I'm all right," Johnny replied.

Mellody turned wrathfully to the big Negro, "Get those damned dogs away from here, or I'll drill them full of holes, and you, too." The Negro faded back into the night before the menacing pistol.

Once on the ground, the crate could be handled more easily. Two stout wooden rails were produced from the truck. These fitted into metal flanges fastened to each side of the crate, so that it could be borne along in the manner of the old fashioned sedan chair. The men went slowly, one at each corner, their feet scuffling over the gravel walk, breathing noisily under the weight. Loring held the doors wide for them as they crowded through, leaving the dog where he had fallen.

AS SOON as the outer door could be closed, Loring turned on brighter lights. They were in a short, red-carpeted corridor. At the farther end were sliding

doors. Loring went on ahead to open these and light the room beyond. The polished floors, the tall French windows, a raised dais at the front alcove all suggested a banquet room, or the ball-room of a Colonial mansion. But the room was stuffed and crammed with every variety of Oriental furniture, decoration, art and handicraft. It was a veritable museum of Orientalia, the overflow of the internationally famous Pottermax collection. The only Occidental pieces in the vast room were in a cleared space near this dais, a magnificent Renaissance refectory table, with its full complement of priceless chairs.

"Please put it over there on the platform," Loring directed. The four carriers wavered slowly and gingerly across the slippery floor with their burden. Carpen, unnoticed for the moment, had stopped at the threshold of the room, awkwardly trying to bind up his wounded arm with a pocket handkerchief.

Mellody glanced back and saw him. "There's blood running down your arm. Let's have a look," he said, not unkindly. "Take off your coat and roll up your sleeve." When he saw the gashed wounds where the dog's teeth had ripped into the flesh, he beckoned to Loring. "I want you to fix up this man," he ordered. "These must be cauterized. As soon as that's done bring him back here again."

Loring nodded, and took Johnny upstairs to a bathroom. He cleansed the bleeding gashes, then opened the medicine cabinet and ran his eye along the rows of bottles. "Sit down," he ordered, "hold out your arm and keep your head down on your knees."

Carpen kept silent under the stinging treatment until the butler had finished the bandaging, then he spoke up. "Mr. Loring, help me get away, will you? Just open the gates for me, and I'll walk back to the city."

THE butler seemed astounded at this request. He stared at his patient, first with narrow suspicion, then with calculating interest.

"I'm not with this crowd—not with Mellody," Johnny went on. "Look, I have no gun, like the rest of them. I've been kidnapped. I run a lunch wagon over at the

Airport. They came in and made me go along to show them the road here."

The butler was rubbing his chin. "Are you afraid Mr. Mellody won't let you go again?"

"I want to get away," Johnny repeated stubbornly. "I don't want to get mixed up in anything. You needn't worry about my talking, afterwards."

Loring shook his head. "I can't do that now. You heard what Mr. Mellody said. But I'll see to it that you get away safely. You go on down there, and keep your ears and eyes open. You won't lose by it. We'll talk—you and I—later—and see what can be done."

When they returned to the big room they found that the mysterious crate had been lifted into place and the handles taken off. Mellody turned to Loring and made a mock bow. "You may inform Colonel Pottermax," he said, "that Daniel J. Mellody brings him greetings from a far country."

Loring twisted a bunch of keys in his long fingers. "I am sorry, Mr. Mellody, but Colonel Pottermax is not here at present."

"Not here!" For once Mellody's voice betrayed gaping surprise. Johnny Carpen pricked up his ears and moved a little closer. He began to understand that there was something queer in all this and that Loring would be reluctant to part with any one who might be a possible ally.

Loring bowed. "The Colonel was unexpectedly called away to New York. Some rare jade carvings turned up there, and he was invited to have first choice. He directed me to give you this note should you arrive in his absence."

MELLODY'S hand reached out for the proffered paper, but his frozen blue eyes were staring straight into Loring's impassive countenance. The veins in the center of Mellody's high forehead swelled into a three-pronged frown, and there was the silence of death in that vast room as the six men focused their attention on the thin figure of Pottermax's butler.

"He left the money with you?"

"No, Mr. Mellody. He simply told me to give you the letter."

Mellody's finger ripped along the sealed edge of the envelope. He low-

ered his gaze to scan the few lines of spidery writing. His fingers twisted the paper into a screw and pushed it into his pocket.

"Do you know what's in that letter?"

"No, sir," Loring replied. "The Colonel did not show it to me."

"What's he say in the letter, Dan?" Digger inquired impatiently.

"He wants us to meet him at the Hotel Carfax in New York—for the pay-off." He turned to Loring. "How long since the Colonel left?"

"Three days ago, sir."

"When do you expect him back?"

"He didn't say, Mr. Mellody. His usual stay in New York is from ten days to two weeks."

Mellody went over to the crate and put his hand on it. "Do you know exactly what we have in there, Loring?"

The butler nodded. "A six-armed Siva."

"Not a six-armed Siva, damn you, Loring, *the* six-armed Siva. There is no other genuine statue of the god in a private collection anywhere in the world. Perhaps this is the only one ever taken from a consecrated shrine. No one before has ever succeeded in making off with the real thing. No man before Daniel J. Mellody. Here it is, Loring, right here in this case, here at Dreamer's Rest. Colonel Pottermax has obtained what no other collection of Orientalia can boast of!"

"Quite a feat, sir. I congratulate you," Loring murmured.

"That's not the point at all. I won't mince words with you, Loring. It's not my way. I'll put my cards right out on the table. This thing has been about as easy and safe to handle as a crate of dynamite. We've dragged it nearly nine thousand miles, with a price on our heads every foot of the way. There's a man called Hanoi Ghan who would—" Mellody gazed off into the distance. "Never mind," he resumed abruptly, "this thing shut up here has already cost a dozen lives, not counting two of my own men. We've carried it on sampans, pack trains, hidden it on rafts and sailing ships, spent bribe money like water everywhere—what's the damages amount to so far, Sam?"

Digger produced a black leather notebook and flicked over the pages. "Thirteen

thousand, five hundred and eighteen dollars."

Mellody nodded. "You see, Loring, I'm a methodical man. Colonel Pottermax advanced us fifteen thousand dollars for expenses. What's left of that belongs to him, and we have it right here, ready for the accounting. Our agreement, Loring, of which you were a witness, called for the payment of seventy-five thousand dollars on delivery at Dreamer's Rest of the Siva from the Shikanoi Shrine. Here it is. The Colonel can identify it with one look. We've delivered the goods, and we want our money. We'll not go to New York for it, nor any other place. The agreement specified Dreamer's Rest, and here we stay until the Colonel comes back."

LORING coughed apologetically. "The Colonel, sir, would be most angry if he knew that you doubted his honesty. If you'll pardon my saying so, he has quite a temper, Mr. Mellody, and is apt to become unreasonable when his wishes are crossed."

"To hell with your Colonel's temper," Mellody roared. "If he's such a fire-eater, why didn't he do his own idol-snatching? He went to Shikanoi before, just to see this Siva. But no, he didn't have the guts for that. He had to hire Daniel J. Mellody to pull the chestnuts out of the fire." His anger died abruptly, and he continued, "Never mind, Loring, I know it's not your fault, but these high-and-mighty fellows rub me the wrong way. We're not to be put off like a tradesman with a bill. You don't realize what we've been through. I've had dealings with the Colonel before, and good business on both sides, but always through Carminster. I always knew where I stood with Carminster. Now that he's dead, well, I've only met the Colonel once, when we settled the details of this little job, and I don't like his having switched plans on us this way. We'll stay right here till he comes back!"

Loring inclined his head. "I understand your point of view, Mr. Mellody. You need have no fear of Colonel Pottermax's intentions. For months I have heard nothing but talk of the Shikanoi Siva—morning, noon and night." The butler permitted himself an ironical smile. "I can consider myself

somewhat of an authority in that line, now. The Colonel regards this acquisition as the crowning piece of his collection, sir. He is well able to pay for his whims and fancies. Personally, these things do not interest me." He swung back into his formal tone. "Since you intend to wait here, Mr. Mellody, I am sure that Colonel Pottermax would wish me to do everything in my power to make you and your men comfortable."

Johnny Carpen, standing in the background, caught Loring's gaze turned in his direction with a significant cocking of the brows. "How can you get in touch with the Colonel?" Mellody asked. "You have no telephone."

"I shall go down to the city in the morning, and call him from there. I have the usual marketing to do, anyway."

MELLODY nodded. "Good enough. Now, Loring, I'll take you at your word. My boys have stuck with me through thick and thin. We've had to squeeze through some mighty tight places in our little jaunt with that six-armed gent, and I had to lay down some stiff rules. Tonight we can afford to relax a bit. I'd suggest a little something to eat, and a little something to drink, if you can manage it at this hour. Nothing fancy, you know. How is the Colonel's cellar, Loring, well stocked?"

The butler smiled. "Very well stocked, sir. If you will leave it to me, I think you will find everything satisfactory. Shall I serve it in the dining-room?"

"No, right in here, Loring. We've got into the habit of Mr. Siva's company. It'd be no party without him being there."

Loring seemed on the point of saying something, but changed his mind and turned away silently. As he did so there came the doleful howling of a dog. The sound came from the outside, and was followed by others in the same strain.

"What does that mean?" Mellody asked, quickly. "Is any one prowling outside?"

The butler shook his head. "They're just restless at being shut up, instead of running loose, as usual. When they hear a noise, their bark is in a quite different pitch."

Mellody frowned. "I didn't know they

were shut up. Turn 'em loose, by all means. That's what they're for. We'll not be going out again tonight."

Loring stepped into the hall and clapped his hands loudly. The huge bulk of the Negro Lightfoot came shuffling along the hall. Partly by word, and partly by pantomime, the butler made clear what was wanted. Without a sign or a sound in acknowledgement the burly black man turned and shuffled away. Soon a chorus of happy yelps from outside indicated that Lightfoot had turned loose the Colonel's canine night-guard.

AS SOON as the butler had gone, Mellody's men became voluble. They had strikingly similar opinions. "A queer joint," one said. "Shut up here like a fort," another observed. "Something fishy about this place," summed up Joe's ideas, while Bill voiced a distrust of Loring, who "talked like a guy out of a book."

Nobody bothered to ask Johnny Carpen his opinion of the place on Pontico Hill. Temporarily forgotten, he hung back on the fringes of the gathering, torn between a natural curiosity to see this pagan idol, Siva with the Six Arms, which was worth a fortune to Pottermax, and an equally strong desire to get away from this place. Carpen was no fool. He had already heard enough to understand something of the almost incredible coup Mellody had engineered, and the man took on a sinister stature in his eyes. Also, he began to have an uneasy realization as to where those little brown men fitted into the picture. Colonel Pottermax might have considerable trouble holding on to his prize.

Glancing sideways, Johnny saw that Digger and Mellody had their heads together, whispering heatedly, and looking over in his direction now and then. Whatever it was that Digger was urging so pointedly, Mellody kept shaking his head firmly. Presently Sam motioned to him to come over to them. "There's been a hitch in our plans, Carpen," he said. "You'll have to stick around with us now until this thing is settled and we leave here. Don't get nosy, and don't try to run away, or that'll be your finish. Remember, one wrong move out of you and—" He made a sharp gesture. "If

you behave, we'll make it right with you, afterward."

These words were not as soothing to Johnny's peace of mind as they should have been. There had plainly been some argument as to his fate. He felt that Digger took his continued presence as a nuisance, and would welcome any excuse for taking drastic action. He already knew too much about Melody's mission, which had certainly been desperately illegal, and now they were leaving him in a position to learn still more. All that was not a guarantee for future safety.

JOHNNY wondered again if Loring could be persuaded to help him get away. Perhaps it would be better to try to bolt at the first chance, since the butler did not seem to have the sort of courage that would balk Melody's will. Moreover, outside the house were those dogs, and beyond them the barbed-wire fences. It would be no easier to break out of Dreamer's Rest than it would be to break in. Carpen sat down on a carved teak chest to think it over.

Melody called his men around him. "Let's get His Nibbs unpacked and have a good look at him. He's the guest of honor tonight—we'll all drink a toast to the old devil."

They rang for Loring and sent him for an assortment of tools. When these had been supplied, Melody's men went to work with a will, but the packing had been so well done they had to use an axe to hack off the metal strips and tear loose the boards. Siva had been swathed in old gunny sacks and bedded down with straw. This had been wetted at various stages of the journey and gave off the pungent odor Carpen had first noticed.

As the men pulled away these wrappings by the handfuls, the topmost right arm and hand, grasping a mystic symbol suddenly thrust through its covering like a menacing gesture. Presently Siva's snarling, gaping mouth and hideous head arose above the litter of straw and sacking. Arm after arm was freed, until the statue stood clear of the rubble, massive, bronze, threatening.

In spite of themselves, the men stood hushed as they stared at this alien deity.

He had an air with him, this God with a Thousand Names, an air of domination. Even Melody was conscious of some subtle and alien force released into the room at his unveiling. Bits of straw kept sliding down from his hard, muscular body. Massive, man-size he stood, menacing, jewel-studded, his prancing feet instinct with fury, his multiple arms avid to seize and rend.

MELLODY broke the tension with his hard laugh. "Looks kind of peeved, doesn't he? Like to wrestle with him, Bull?" This latter to McSparren, the most muscular and bull-necked of his rank-and-file men, the man who had driven the truck on the last stake of the journey.

"Nothin' doin', Boss," Bull replied. "I don't want no part of him, even if he had only two arms."

At this moment Loring entered the room, pushing a wheeled serving-table laden with dishes, cutlery and glasses. He began to set places at the table, and, amid the temporary diversion created by his activities, no one heard the low grunt that came from the dais.

Johnny Carpen was the first to notice, and leaped up from the chest, pointing. Digger turned around. "Dan! Dan! Look!" he cried. Bull McSparren was sliding slowly toward the floor. His hands were grasping feebly at the smooth texture of Siva's legs. As they watched, spellbound, he slipped farther down, rolled limply over the edge of the dais and fell motionless amidst the welter of straw and sacking, huddled at the feet of the maliciously grinning image.

III

LORING cast a disapproving look around him as he entered the banquet hall at Dreamer's Rest, where Melody's men were holding a carousal in honor of the happy termination of their strange undertaking. In Loring's hands was a tray, laden with decanters of Colonel Pottermax's choicest liquors. These were not the first replenishments he had been called upon to supply, nor likely to be the last, he thought sourly to himself as he approached the antique refectory table, its top now a shambles with

the remains of the repast hurriedly but adequately produced from the Colonel's kitchens.

Pottermax's butler retained his outward air of deliberate calm, but he was both appalled and amazed at the capacity for liquor exhibited by this hard-bitten crew. He did not consider that the bars were down after months of virtual abstention, and only knew that they must be drinking themselves into a state of oblivion. Melody alone sat erect and eagle-eyed at the head of the table, a twisted smile on his face as he watched his henchmen.

Loring's fat-bellied decanters were snatched up with eager cries and wrested from hand to hand with alcoholic jollity and coarse jest. Cigarette stubs littered the used plates and swam in the dregs of the cups; the Colonel's choicest coronas and imported Turkish cigarettes mingled aromas in the air, which was acquiring a bluish tinge.

"You're not drinking anything, Mr. Melody?" was Loring's polite query as he saw the same filled but untouched glass of smoky Scotch before the former's place.

"Somebody in this outfit's got to keep his head clear," Melody answered. "I'll take my turn later. Sit down and have a drink with us, Loring," he invited. "This is our night to howl."

The butler fidgeted, and his sallow face flushed. "Thank you, Mr. Melody. It's very kind of you, but I feel that it is not my place to sit down unbidden at the Colonel's table and drink his liquor. You are his guests, sir, so to speak, but I am still his servant—even in his absence."

Melody cocked an eye upward. "Why so stiff and precise, Loring? You're not still sore because I clouted that dog, are you?"

"Since you mention it, the Colonel sets great store by those dogs. They cost two hundred and fifty dollars apiece."

Melody snorted derisively. "I set great store by my men, too, more than your two-fifty a head. You'd better see to it that they behave better, or you'll have a lot of money tied up in dead dogs."

Loring winced at the sound of tinkling glass. One of the Colonel's choicest goblets had just gone by the board amid the company's general hilarity, Melody looked up.

"I know what you're thinking, Loring," he said softly. "You're cursing them in your heart for swine—barbarians. You're right. All this stuff *is* too good for them. They should be feeding in the kitchen off your coarse china and drinking out of glasses from the five-and-ten. They're not up to this show." He sneered up to the impassive butler. "It's all Pottermax's fault. If he had been here, with the money counted and ready, this would have been avoided. We could have been paid off at the back entrance, like the grocer or the milkman, and sent away. Look at the scum—they've fed like swine, they'll drink till the lights go out, burn holes in your table cover, smash your glassware and probably wind up by being sick all over that nice Sarook on the floor. Just look at the blasted fools!"

THE company was certainly reaching a mellow state. Digger was hilariously tipsy, prankish and obscene. Bill, on the other hand, was becoming morose, melancholy, downing his drinks with short gulps and staring, sad-eyed, at the litter on the table. George, who had been Bull McSparren's companion on the truck bearing the crated Siva, was perspiring, beaming, ready to burst into song. Joe seemed to be more than half seas over, but he kept stiffly upright, in imitation of his leader, glaring fiercely around, ready to fight any one who should even hint he was slightly tight.

Johnny Carpen was puzzled by all this. Accepted into the brotherhood on this festive occasion, he had found himself seated beside Digger, who took a perverse delight in pressing him again and again to have another. As a result, the huge room was becoming a dim, misty affair where Melody's grim face alone, like a sinister moon, shone steadily. However, even the potency of the Pottermax liquor couldn't down the suspicion that the hilarity and clatter created by Melody's men was disproportionate to the amount of liquor actually consumed.

The butler was at a loss to interpret Melody's biting remarks, so he retained the expressionless mask that was the prerogative of his position. "Look at them, Loring," the bitter voice went on, "look at

them—Melody's scum—but I love 'em, every one. Maybe they don't know how to handle a knife and fork gracefully, but give 'em a gun! They're no ornaments in a drawing-room, but out in those Siamese jungles, down those hellish Cambodian rivers in a straw-thatched sampan, no drinks, no women, no food, no real sleep for weeks—and they came through for me! Heat, sweat, crawling water, roots and berries to gnaw at, fever, snakes—and that old Siva tied around our necks like a millstone. It's an epic, Loring, that story, one of the real epics that never get into print. And why did we hold on through all that sweat and hell? So Colonel Pottermax could have an authentic Siva to boast of in his collection? Like hell! We did it so we could split up a bit of money among ourselves.

MELLODY stared at the snarling god whose presence dominated that room, crammed though it was with resplendent objects. "The Colonel's getting that thing dirt cheap. Eight of us went after it, but only six came back. So why shouldn't they celebrate? And if they break every piece of junk in this room, it'll be the Colonel's own fault. Why isn't he here, anyway? He had plenty of notice. Going to look at carved jade when the Shikanoi Siva is due to arrive! He should've been as prompt as we were. We had to come thousands of miles, and all he had to do was to walk downstairs. It'd serve him right if we all carved our initials in this table while we're waiting—a little testimonial from Melody's hoodlums. Maybe it'd teach him better manners for next time."

Loring was dismayed by this suggested vandalism, and visibly flinched. "But you wouldn't allow that?" he gasped. "This table is a very choice specimen, sir, Florentine Renaissance."

"You call that an antique, eh? You'd compare this table with the Shikanoi Siva? Look at it. That's an antique for you. Scour Europe and you'll find dozens of tables to match or surpass this in value—but where will you find another genuine Siva? There's only one has ever been snatched from that God-forsaken hump of Asia, and it took Daniel J. Melody to do it. No matter

how much money was spent to get it—it's still a bargain—the finest Oriental piece you can think of."

"I wouldn't go quite as far as that, Mr. Melody. There is one other piece, for instance, infinitely more desirable, at least in the Colonel's estimation."

Melody was surprised at the man's unwanted enthusiasm. "Oho, so you're an authority, eh?"

Loring made a deprecatory gesture. "Colonel Pottermax is constantly talking about such things, sir. I may claim a quite extensive second-hand knowledge. Personally, as I said before, these things have very little charm for me."

"And what outranks our Shikanoi Siva in the Colonel's mind?"

"The Emerald Buddha, Mr. Melody."

THE adventurer's eyes leaped and gleamed. "Ah," he breathed, "so our Colonel would like to lay hands on the Emerald Buddha. That's a strange story, Loring. Millions have heard of it, and will swear that there is such a thing, yet no living man has ever seen it. Some say it is at Saigon, some Peiping, then buried in the lost vaults of Angkor Vat, or hidden in a lead casket below the red waters of the Shark's Mouth, guarded eternally in the land of the Golden Chersonese. A pretty legend, a very pretty legend. No, Loring, I'm afraid all the Colonel's money will not bring him a look at the Emerald Buddha. Like the Spanish tomorrow, it is always just out of reach. Begin the search wherever you please, it is always somewhere else."

His eyes brooded over distant scenes, thousands of miles away, to that reeking, teeming, jungle land of mystery, of blood, plunder and loot—and its unexplainable, lost civilizations.

"Enough of that." Melody rose from his chair and took Loring by the elbow. "Let's go and have another look at Bull," he suggested in a low voice. Unnoticed, they made their way to the door. In the shadows of the hall the gigantic Negro stood looking in at the revelry. There was no emotion registered on his face, nothing but the sullen apathy that marked all his movements, until they came closer and he recognized Melody. Then a blaze of fe-

rocity shone in his eyes, and his mouth twitched.

Melody was no whit abashed by this display of enmity. He stared contemptuously at the Negro, then turned to Loring. "What I said about your dogs goes for this fellow, too. I don't like him."

"He's devoted to those dogs," Loring explained. "Nobody else can control them. He'll grieve over the one you killed like a father who has lost his child."

The butler led the way up a staircase and along a crooked hallway to a room on the second floor. There, in a simply-furnished guest-bedroom, the inert bulk of Bull McSparren lay stretched out on the bed. As they entered, a woman rose from beside the unconscious man and moved to one side, eyeing Melody with a sidelong glance. The shaded lamp by the bed revealed her coils of glistening black hair, eyes like dark pools, white teeth and olive-tinted skin. The provocative curves of her form seemed deliberately enhanced by the lines of her simple dress. Yet there was something wrong about her face, her eyes.

"Who is this?" Melody demanded, sharply.

"Mrs. Lightfoot—the cook," was the reply. "She's an octoroon. We had to hire that lazy, good-for-nothing black ape in order to get her services."

Melody was more than a little surprised at the impeccable Loring speaking thus brutally of the woman's husband before her face, but the reason was soon forthcoming. "Octoria," the butler went on, "is a deaf mute. You've probably noticed the characteristic expression of her face. Lightfoot is a mute, too, but he can hear. I suppose their marriage was another case of misery loving company."

Under Melody's appraising scrutiny the woman retreated to a distant corner, her lips babbling a whimpering sound. The wet night wind swept in through the open window, rustling the draperies. Melody looked at Loring with a quizzical eye. "This is a damned queer house," he said, "with damned queer people in it. I look forward to a better acquaintance with the Colonel, Loring."

"This proves Wildroot Cream-Oil keeps hair well groomed even if you have cowlicks!"

"He keeps his Wildroot Cream-Oil there because it's his hair's best friend"

"Since using Wildroot Cream-Oil I look twice as good!"

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GROOMS THE HAIR
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AS LITTLE AS
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America's
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THEY turned their attention to the stricken man. The exact nature of his accident still remained a mystery. "No change since we were up here before," Melody muttered. Loring turned to the woman, and his fingers and arms moved in the rapid signs of the mute alphabet, while the lush-figured octoroon looked on intently. At the conclusion her own fingers worked rapidly in reply.

"She says there has been no change, Mr. Melody. The man hasn't moved or shown any sign of life since we left him."

Melody frowned down at the massive hulk. Bull's eyes were closed, there was no perceptible rise and fall of his breast, and he had all the appearance of a corpse. Melody put his fingers over the heart and could feel but the faintest throb, which might have come from his own arteries. He rolled back McSparren's eyelids to examine the pupils. The butler and Mrs. Lightfoot watched silently.

"Hadn't we better send for a doctor?" Loring inquired, seeing his puzzled frown. The case was obviously beyond Melody's rough and ready powers of diagnosis.

The adventurer shook his head impatiently. "How could we explain things to him? And what good could he do, except make trouble, and probably talk too much afterward? This isn't a case of a broken bone to be set or a wound to be probed. Bull hasn't a mark on him." He shook his head. "I can't get the hang of this, at all. Bull must have brought back the virus of some jungle insect, although why it took all this time to work out is a mystery to me."

"Perhaps the wet weather—" Loring suggested. "Haven't I heard the rainy weather brings such things to a head?"

Melody nodded. "Yes, it might be that. It couldn't have been the tsetse, although the effects are rather similar. Back in the jungle they would call this a juju death, and swing rattles and burn feathers to chase away the evil spirits. Our doctors would call it a syncope, with some jaw-breaking Latin prefix, and do about as much good with their own variety of hocus pocus. Yes, I'm afraid Bull is in a bad way—"

"What do you suppose really happened, Mr. Melody? Could he have struck his head on one of the statue's arms?"

"That's hard to say, Loring. When we caught sight of him he was just slipping to the floor. No one was standing near him. At the time I thought he must have cracked his head against Siva, in rising, say. But there's not a mark on his head, and it just isn't possible that he could have hit his head hard enough to stretch him out cold without a cut or a lump or a bruise to show it. Then, too, why can't we rouse him?"

AS THEY watched, a subtle change came over McSparren's face. Its lines seemed to shift ever so gently, to become sunken a bit in the cheeks, shadowed around the eyes. The lips settled into a mocking tilt. Melody was startled by this risus sardonius, a characteristic symptom of tetanus and other forms of poisoning. He slipped his fingers under McSparren's shirt and held them there, concentrating his attention.

Slowly he withdrew his hand. "Bull's dead!" he announced.

Loring stared. "Dead? What in the world can we do—?"

"We'll do nothing for the time being. I'll take care of this. The Colonel need never know, Loring, if that's what's worrying you. Say nothing downstairs. Octoria, hand me that mirror."

The octoroon continued to stare at him. "You forget, sir, she can't hear you," the butler said, and brought it himself. Melody held the glass over the mute lips and under the nose. When he took it away it was unclouded. Mrs. Lightfoot suddenly comprehended what had just taken place before their eyes and began to tremble, making uncouth, whimpering noises, like a sick animal.

"Make her stop that racket," Melody ordered. "How am I going to think this out while she's carrying on that way?" The butler took her by the arms and shook her until the sounds died away.

"Take her away, Loring, and keep her out of sight if you can. Some of my men, you know, might be color-blind—"

It took the butler a few moments to realize the implication in this last remark of Melody's. When it had struck home, a wave of hot blood suffused his face, and for an instant he dropped his mouselike air.

"That would be most unfortunate, sir. Lightfoot is a surly brute, very powerful when aroused, and he is crazy about that wife of his. There would be serious trouble, Mr. Mellody, possibly bloodshed."

"Well, see to it that she is kept out of the way, then. I'll keep the boys away from the kitchen. There's certainly nothing deaf-and-dumb about her figure, Loring. This crew of mine takes orders pretty well, but I'm not running a Sunday-school class. They've had a rough time of it, and they'll be feeling exuberant for some time. The idea is to avoid trouble."

Loring nodded a sombre agreement with this sentiment.

"Say nothing downstairs about Bull. No one is to enter this room. I'm going to lock the door and keep the key in my pocket. I'll break the news in my own way. You'd better be getting back to the party, Loring, and keep an eye on my roughnecks. I don't want Pottermax to have too big a bill for damages. And listen, send Johnny Carpen up here—the fellow that was bitten by the dog. Tell him quietly, so the others won't notice."

The butler's face went blank again as he nodded and hastened downstairs. He leaned over Johnny's chair and whispered the message. Carpen was glad of an excuse to escape Digger's sardonic attentions, but as he went up the stairs he wondered if it was a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire.

AS HE opened the door to which Loring had directed him he thought there was some mistake, for the room was dark. There was a cold, damp air blowing through.

"Come in and shut that door, damn you!" It was Mellody's harsh voice from the darkness. Johnny complied, standing there while he heard the window being closed, the shade drawn, until Mellody turned on the lights. He looked as grim as the gun he was thrusting back into his holster.

Seeing Carpen eyeing the figure on the bed he said, "Yes, he's dead." Then he went over to Bull's body, unfastened the shoulder holster and gun and put them on a table beside him. "Sit down, Carpen."

Mellody sat down, too. "How do you like being a prisoner here?"

Johnny shrugged, too wary to answer in words until he had sized up the man's mood.

"I suppose you've been trying to think of a way to escape?"

Johnny shrugged again. "How?" he countered.

"Don't fence with me, Carpen. This is a man to man talk. I'm not trying to trip you up. No doubt you've been after Loring to help you get away? That would be the obvious move."

Johnny met that steady, boring gaze. "Yes, I asked Mr. Loring to open the gate for me. I told him I'd keep my mouth shut afterward, and so I would."

Mellody nodded. "I thought so. The prim butler. Ah, but Loring wouldn't fall for that line. He wouldn't have the nerve to cross me."

"He said he couldn't do it," Johnny answered simply.

"Probably he told you to stick around and spy on us, and he'd help you later." Reading the truth of this in Carpen's eyes, he continued, "I thought so. I know the breed."

There was a pause. Mellody took Mc-Sparren's gun from the holster and inspected it idly. "We've had some words about you, Carpen, Sam and I. He said you'd be trying to get away. His idea was to slip you the works and have it over with."

Johnny sat tense, waiting.

"I have other ideas." Mellody smiled. "Sam is a little too ready with the iron fist, whether it's necessary or not. He's got the killer complex. I only turn it loose when it's needed. I think you've got guts, Carpen. I like the way you handled yourself when that dog went for you. That showed you could take it."

"You did most of it," Johnny answered. "If you hadn't cracked him on the head he'd have had me by the throat in a minute."

"Yes, but you kept your head. Funny, isn't it, that when you rescue a fellow you feel more interest in him than he does in you for doing the job. Queer, that."

Carpen said nothing, waiting.

"Bull's dead. That leaves us one man

short. How would you like to take his place and work for me, Carpen? I don't mean that you'd have anything to do with what brought us to this house. This is a personal matter between us. You'll be well paid." Melody opened his wallet and riffled through a sheaf of banknotes. "You can't escape anyway, with or without Loring's help. There are queer things going on in this place, and I want to present a solid front in case there is trouble. We may have to fight for our lives before we've finished—all of us."

"But what am I supposed to do?" Johnny asked.

"You take orders from me. You keep your eyes open. Above all, I want a close watch kept on the Siva, and I can't be there in the room all the time. There'll be nothing to break into your scruples, Carpen, unless you're too proud to defend your own life."

Johnny nodded. "There's not much room for choice," he said.

"Good." Melody slapped the top of the table. "You're working for me until we leave this place. That may not be for some time. I think you've got brains enough to figure out what will happen to you if you try to doublecross me. Can you handle a gun?"

"I was overseas."

Melody grinned. "Then the sight of a dead man won't disturb your sleep." He removed the clip from Bull's gun and shelled out five of the bullets. Then he slipped it back and handed gun and holster to Johnny. "Wear that."

Johnny checked the clip for himself. "Three bullets?" he queried.

"Yes. I'm trusting you, but eight bullets against five men might be a temptation, even for an amateur. You'll get more bullets when I see what use you make of those three."

Carpen began to put on the shoulder holster. "If you've got any idea of using that gun to help you escape, remember this. If you should be lucky enough to get past us you've got the dogs to deal with. Beyond them lies the fence. And beyond that may be something worse than all three. Look at the wall behind you."

Johnny's eyes followed the pointing fin-

ger. There was a ragged black hole in the wall paper, head high.

"A bullet?"

"Right on the first guess. A bullet. It came in through that window just before you opened the door. That's why I had the lights out." Melody took a framed etching from the opposite wall and hung it over the bullet hole, driving in the tack with the butt of his gun.

"But who could have fired it—those brown men who came in the plane?"

Melody rubbed his chin. "I wonder? It may have been that black gorilla—Lightfoot. He could've climbed a tree out there. What bothers me is that I didn't hear a sound, and the window was open. Just a buzz past my ear. Well, that won't happen again. Tomorrow we'll look around and see what weapons they have in the house. If I find anything with a silencer on it, God help Lightfoot! Come on, we'll go back to the party. Keep your mouth shut about all of this downstairs."

THEY found the party even livelier than they had left it. Melody's return to the head of the table was greeted by a ragged cheer. They had been showering Loring with bantering remarks and heavy-handed witticisms, as well as pressing invitations to "have one."

As Melody sat down Carpen saw him give a brief nod to his man, George. In a few moments the latter, drunken and hilarious, began to pound on the table and call for "Pottermax." That started things anew, and soon the others were banging away and chanting the Colonel's name. The Pottermax glassware was not equal to such usage, and two more fine pieces went clanging to bits, to Loring's evident horror and disgust.

Melody hoisted his lean height into the midst of this bedlam and pounded for order. While his tongue unleashed words of stinging rebuke his left eye closed in a deliberate wink, and the poker-backed Joe, catching his cue, rose solemnly in his place. "Melody," he began with excessive steadiness of voice, "we have a right to yell for Pottermax." He waved his hand around in oratorical fashion. "Here we have come from the other side of the earth to keep an appointment—and come on time to the dot.

The Colonel had only to sit down in his chair and wait—but did he? No, sir. He walked out on us, and we don't like it. We don't care who knows we don't like it, and I say Pottermax is a lousy four-flusher—"

"Shut up, Joe, and sit down. You're drunk!"

"Drunk, am I, Melody?" came the indignant retort. "I'll show you if I'm drunk." Joe Burkett whipped out his gun and waved it carelessly as he glared from one to another. Loring had all the strained nonchalance of a man who has unexpectedly walked into a cage full of tigers.

Finally Joe's roving eyes alighted on a string of metal Chinese gongs suspended in a far corner of the room. "I'm going to ring the bell for Pottermax," he announced. "Not the big one at the top, nor the next one, nor the next, but that little bit of a one at the bottom. That'll show you." As he spoke his arm crooked, his finger squeezed, and the gun spat and roared. There was a frantic jangling and jingling to prove that he had made good his boast.

Loring jumped a foot at the explosion, sounding so loud in that room, and gave a bleat of nervous fear. Melody grasped the marksman, tore the gun from his hand, and hurled him back into his chair. "This is no circus, you blasted fool!" he hissed, but Carpen saw that left eyelid drawn down again.

George, grown more expansive in his cups, had started the chanting, and now he thought of a fresh piece of drollery. He staggered to his feet and strove to imitate Melody's voice and manner.

"Gen'l'men," he began, "we are neglectin' our guest of honor. While we are here carousin' and havin' a good time in gen'ral, old Siva ain't been offered so much as a glass of water, and him with six arms to lift 'em with. We oughta 'pologize." He grabbed up a sandwich and stalked up to the statue. "Cheer up, ol' boy," he consoled, throwing his arm across Siva's broad shoulders and patting him, "good ol' George ain't forgot you. Have a sandwich, ol'-timer."

He stuck the sandwich into the snarling mouth, and the whole table roared at the ludicrous aspect of the heathen god, thus mocked and baited. Even Melody chuckled

aloud at this tomfoolery. "Pour him a drink, somebody," George cried, busy stuffing the lettuce leaves into that grim mouth.

Then he stood back, as if to survey his handiwork. Every laughing eye was on the outraged idol, and the air rang with approving handclaps and whistles. But George kept on staring, staring, until the laughter wavered uncertainly and flickered out, and some hidden instinct apprised his companions that something was amiss.

The stricken George stretched out an arm, blindly grasping for support, and that feeble action galvanized them all into action. With a concerted rush they were up on the dais. "What's the matter? What's wrong? What happened?" they cried, but the unfortunate man only made a stammering noise with his tongue as he collapsed into Melody's arms.

IV

"BRACE up, man! This is the twentieth century," Melody exploded angrily. "Such ideas belong to the Dark Ages. There must be some simple, natural explanation, but we're all too rattled to think it out clearly."

"Well, what is it, then?" Digger's blood-shot eyes rested sullenly on his leader. "There's been a curse on us ever since we unpacked that damned statue. First Bull went down, then George. All in a couple of hours. No wonder the boys are scared. I'm scared myself. Here we've been sitting around all night, afraid to go to sleep for more than five minutes at a time. It's worse than it was in the jungle. Can't we get paid off somehow and get out of this place? It gives me the jumps. Where the hell is Pottermax, anyway? He's giving us the run-around."

Melody held up his hand. "Take it easy, Sam. One question at a time. If the Colonel had wanted to ditch us, Loring would never have opened the gates. But there is something queer about Dreamer's Rest. I feel it, but I can't quite get the hang of it—yet. I will, I purposely let the boys run wild last night. I figured they'd raise enough hell to scare the wits out of Loring. I think they did. If I'm wrong, we can increase the dose." Melody's mouth tightened in a grim

smile. "I think our butler friend will move heaven and earth to get the Colonel back here. When Joe banged away at that gong I thought he'd jump out of his skin. Anyone who hates guns isn't going to like our company very much." Mellody's eyelid drooped in that knowing wink.

The sun had been up for an hour, but the windows of Dreamer's Rest were still shuttered. Mellody and Digger were holding their conference in a corner of the banquet room, beyond earshot of the others. Bill and Joe were stretched out on chairs in uneasy slumber. Johnny Carpen walked up and down like a sentry before the chaise longue on which George was stretched out, watching in vain for the stricken man to shake off that death-like slumber.

During the hours preceding dawn they had tried everything experience or ingenuity could suggest to rouse him from the coma. They had tried to make him walk up and down, supporting his arms, but it was like trying to make a straw-stuffed figure parade. Scalding hot coffee, rum, brandy, and whiskey had all been tried in vain. In fact, George had not swallowed any of these liquids. There was a constriction in his throat, for whatever was poured into his mouth came drooling out again. He had not uttered word or cry since his dramatic seizure.

Sam stared moodily into his half-empty glass. "Who's been looking after Bull?" he asked.

"Bull won't need much looking after, now," Mellody replied slowly. "He's dead."

Digger gave a start almost as great as Loring's when Joe's gun had gone off. "Last night you kept telling us he would be all right by morning."

"When I told you that he was already dead. He passed out while the party was on. There wasn't a mark on him. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to spoil the celebration."

"Does Loring know?"

"Yes. He was with me in the room when Bull died. There was no fuss, no struggle. He simply stopped breathing."

"So that's why Loring had that greenish look around the gills. We'll have to tell the boys. That'll throw a scare into them, with

George going out the same way. They'll be wondering who'll be next."

"Don't get morbid, Sam. Pull yourself together." Mellody looked at his watch. "It must be full daylight now." He glanced with distaste at the littered table, the chairs askew. The air reeked with stale liquor and tobacco smoke, so that his nose wrinkled in disgust. "This room smells like a pigsty," he growled. "Let's have some fresh air."

HE STRODE over to the bell-push and rang for Loring. Digger, haggard and unkempt, swallowed the finger of whiskey remaining in his soiled glass and lurched to his feet. He, of all of them, had sunk himself most deeply in the mire of the last night's debauch. Loring appeared promptly, wan and worried. It was quite evident that he, too, had had very little sleep. As he entered the room he cast a swift look toward the immobile figure on the chaise longue. Carpen shook his head in answer to the unspoken question.

"You look like you had a bad night, Loring," Mellody said. "Well, now that the party's over, let's have some fresh air, and get that mess on the table cleared away."

"What's going to happen, Mr. Mellody?" Loring asked in a husky whisper. "There's one dead man in the house now, and it looks— This puts me in a very serious situation, sir. I can't imagine what Colonel Pottermax will have to say about all this."

Mellody's jaws squared in hard lines. "I can imagine that, but don't let that bother you, Loring. That will be my headache. The Colonel certainly can't blame you for it."

Loring bowed silently and set about opening the windows. Mellody came over and stood looking down at his stricken henchman. "Has there been no change?" he asked Carpen.

"No change," Johnny answered.

Mellody shrugged and watched Loring open the windows. Each shutter was sheathed inside with metal, and had staunch bolts. "Pottermax must have burglars on the brain," he continued, "between barbed-wire fences, police dogs, and metal-lined shutters. Why, it'd take a company of

men with light artillery to force a way into this house." He turned to the butler. "Are all the windows fastened like these?"

Loring paused to answer. "Every window, sir, and every door. You realize, Mr. Melody, Dreamer's Rest is in a very isolated spot. We cannot rely on either police or fire protection, being so far from the city. It is commonly known that we have formed a very valuable collection of Oriental art here, and our staff is quite small. So it has been the Colonel's object to make the house as nearly burglar-proof as possible. We have to rely on ourselves for protection."

All traces of the storm had blown away during the night, and the bright morning sunlight streaming through the windows was a welcome change from the electric light. Loring had opened several of the windows so that the crisp September air could oust the stale fumes of the celebration.

JOHNNY joined Melody at one of the open windows, gulping in the clean air. Several of the police dogs prowled up outside and stared at them with the fixed intensity of the wild animal. They did not bark. Suddenly they turned and loped away. Lightfoot had appeared, holding a large pail, from which he flung chunks of meat to the pack.

There was a great snarling and snapping, but the burly giant saw to it that each of the animals received a just share. Once he looked up at the windows and saw Melody there. His face assumed a sullen scowl. Johnny thought: "That man will never forgive Melody for killing one of his pets. He'd like to be throwing him to the dogs instead of that meat."

Loring had begun to clear the littered table. Melody, morose and thoughtful, divided his attention between Lightfoot's feeding of the pack and the butler's activities. He saw that Digger had awakened Joe and Bill, and that the three of them were whispering together. "There may be some trouble," he whispered to Johnny. "If there is, you're not to pull your rod until I give the word."

Melody sauntered back to the table and looked up at the Siva, towering above them

on its dais. "Take that silly sandwich out of his mouth, Loring," he ordered, "it looks foolish this morning."

The butler's eyes flickered and wavered. "I'd rather not touch it, sir," he replied, apologetic, but firm.

"Afraid of it, Loring?"

"Yes, sir, I am," Loring replied, forthright about his fear.

Melody derisively called the others over. "Loring's afraid to touch our six-armed friend—afraid to remove that sandwich."

They laughed uneasily, but no one stepped forward to show up the butler's lack of courage. Instead, they glanced furtively at each other. Their leader caught these looks and sneered, "I'll be damned if you're not all scared."

With a look of contempt he mounted the dais himself and approached the squat, ferocious god. With a steady hand he removed the sandwich and threw it on the plate Loring held out. His men noted the steadiness of his hand, but they noted, too, that his movements were deliberate and cautious. When he descended again he grinned at them. "Expect to see me keel over?" he scoffed.

BILL elected himself spokesman for the others. Loring had gone away. "The fact remains, Melody," he stated bluntly, "that it's not healthy to touch that thing. Look at Bull and George—they fooled around it and see what happened. Laugh that off if you like, but I think it'd be a swell idea to let it strictly alone. Let Pottermax handle it all he wants. Our job was to bring it here. Eight of us set out—six came back—this morning there's only four of us on our feet. That's cutting down, and it's something to think about."

Digger turned his bloodshot eyes to the chief. "There's something wrong somewhere, Dan," he mumbled. "I have a hunch, and my hunches never go wrong. I've been trying to drown this one, but it won't drown." He reached for the whiskey carafe Loring had very considerably left behind when he had finished clearing the table.

Melody's hand shot out and moved the carafe beyond Sam's reach. "It's about time you laid off that stuff," he snapped.

"You're pie-eyed now, and there's no telling when we'll need all hands on deck. Last night was last night. This is no time for going off on a week's batter."

"What d'you mean?" rasped the ag-grieved Digger. "Do you think Loring and that black lout are aiming to get that statue away from us without paying?"

Mellody shook his head, "I'm not worried about them. You forget the three brown men Carpen saw last night. Sooner or later we're going to hear from them."

Sam straightened, sobered a bit. "What about them? Where are they?"

"That's just the question—where are they? They didn't come here in a plane just by coincidence. You know they've been tailing us right across the country. Our coming in through Canada was the only thing that gave us the jump on them. When we split up after that narrow squeak in Madison, and had Bull and George take the truck on while we set up a fake trail to the south, we figured that would fool them, and that if they struck the trail at all, they'd be hot after me. Then if it came to a showdown and a fight we wouldn't be hampered by the crate. Well, it looks as if we didn't fool them much. They hopped in a plane from Chicago and came straight through, like a bee after honey."

"We moved plenty fast, yet they got here an hour before Bull drove through. There's no use kidding ourselves about it. Either they held to the trail of the truck right along, or else they've heard about Pottermax and his collection, and figured he would be an A-1 customer for such an article. Hanoi Ghan would be smart enough to know we didn't want the Siva for ourselves, and he'd know that no public institution would underwrite such a job. They may be here simply to interview Pottermax and warn him against buying the Shikanoi Siva if it should be offered. On the other hand, they may have figured out exactly where we were going with it. In either case, I'll bet that within twenty-four hours they will come to pay their respects to the master of Dreamer's Rest."

Joe Burkett was startled. "You mean they'll be coming here?"

Mellody nodded. "Right up to the gate. The question is, what are we

going to do about it? I expected that we'd have the money and be far away by this time. Now we're stuck until the Colonel comes back. Very likely they'll be here before Pottermax. Carpen saw only three of them, but it's almost certain there will be at least three more with them or not far behind.

"When they see how this place is protected they'll become curious or suspicious, or both. They will want to talk to the Colonel, and look over his collection to make sure the Siva is not here. If Loring tells them he is away they may decide he is lying, and that Pottermax is in hiding. Why should he do that, they will reason, unless he is guilty and afraid of them? On the other hand, if Loring admits them, they will see either their Siva or us, because, once inside, they will make it their business to have a good look around, by force if necessary."

"Don't let them in," Sam advised. "Let them stay outside till they rot."

"That's not a solution," Mellody replied. "You know Hanoi Ghan's patience. Once he is certain we *are* inside, he'll wait until we have to leave. We can't appeal to the Colonel about it, and we can't stay here forever. I don't fancy the idea of trying to get back to the city from here, with Hanoi Ghan waiting for us out in those woods. No, sooner or later we've got to face the issue, and we'd better be sober when we do."

Bill was deep in elemental thought. "It seems to me we ought to take one thing at a time. We're here, and safe for the moment. The first thing is to get our pay for the job. That part is up to Pottermax. When that's done and the money divided, then will be time enough to worry about how to get away."

"That's common sense," Joe interposed. "Here we're getting all worked up over some money we haven't got."

"If we have to fight Hanoi Ghan," Bill went on, "why, we'll fight him, that's all. Suppose the 'Six Arms of Siva' are out there in the woods now. When Bull and George get back on their feet it'll be six against six. That's fair enough."

"You'll not see Bull back on his feet—he's dead!" Digger announced.

They gaped at Melody, for, with the exception of Sam, they were still in ignorance of McSparren's death, and the news came to them like a bombshell. Melody nodded solemnly. "He died last night."

Bill pulled his wits together. "So that's it," he rumbled. "Did he come out of it before he died, or did he just go—like—like George over there?"

"He never came out of the coma. It was like a drugged sleep."

"How can you tell for sure he's dead? Maybe it's just a sort of trance."

"I held a mirror to his lips. There was no breath."

"Was anybody with him when he died?"

"I was there—and Loring." Melody suppressed any mention of Mrs. Lightfoot, whose presence still remained unsuspected by the others.

"Where's the body?"

"Upstairs, in one of the spare rooms. The door is locked, and the key in my pocket."

Burkett became voluble. "What's your explanation, Melody? What's causing it? What's behind it? Why has this strange

death hit us only in this house? We know how those others died."

Melody shrugged his shoulders. "If I knew that, Joe, I'd do something about it. My only guess so far is that some of us have brought back a kind of jungle fever or insect virus. It may be that alcohol starts it working."

This statement was only a piece of malicious sarcasm on Melody's part, aimed at Digger's drinking, but it had unexpected results. For a moment Sam's face went a ghastly white, then a red wave of anger swept over it. "So that's why you wouldn't drink anything last night? Damn your hide, you just sat there watching us fill up and waiting to see us drop over!"

Sam sent his whiskey glass spinning across the room in a fury. He jerked his gun out and covered Melody. Joe and Bill backed away hastily, leaving them a clear space.

Johnny Carpen moved sideways to a more commanding position, watching Sam and Melody. This seemed to be the trouble about which Melody had warned him, but the adventurer did not even glance in his



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put into laws are
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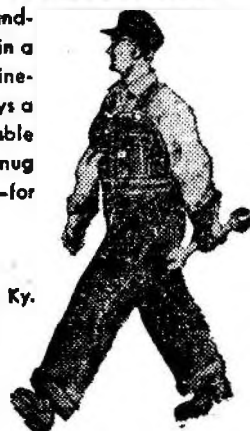
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direction. He stared at Digger coldly. "If that's what you think, Sam, why do you suppose I waited till we reached here before I loosened up on the liquor? I guess you think the Colonel will be tickled pink to find a couple of corpses draped around his sitting-room?"

Sam licked dry lips. His feverish eyes were fastened on Mellody's hands, flat and relaxed on the table-top, while his own wavered as though his own weapon weighed too much. "You needed our help to get the Siva here!" he accused.

"Tommyrot!" Mellody snorted, and added softly, "Put away that pop-gun. If you want to argue, we don't need guns. If you're aiming to take over the management of this party, just say so. I can beat you to the shot right now."

Digger let his hand droop.

Bill and Joe had watched this lightning flare-up between their leaders with bewilderment. Johnny Carpen drew a long breath of relief when he saw that Digger was cowed. Digger had always shown such marked hostility toward him that his only chance of safety was to back up Mellody if it came to a showdown and gunplay.

Mellody's sardonic theory of the strange death which had already snatched one of their number and menaced another had sent a cold thrill of dread through them.

Johnny thought it was time to pour a little oil on the troubled waters. He stepped forward. "But Bull didn't have any drinks," he put in, "Loring had just brought in the liquor when he fell over."

Sam relaxed. "That's so," he admitted.

"I was just trying to give you the needle, Sam, so you'd lay off the booze," Mellody confessed. "I don't know any more about it than you do."

"Then it looks as if George is as good as done for, Mellody?" level-headed Bill questioned.

"It looks like it. That's just the way Bull was."

"How about calling in a doctor?"

Mellody shook his head. "It's too risky. There's Hanoi Ghan and his men to remember. If he should see any of us outside the house there'll be trouble, and if we send Loring it's bound to make talk. This must be some rare Oriental disease, and even if

George were still alive by the time the doctor got here, the chances are he wouldn't know how to treat it. He'd want to send George to a hospital first thing, and ask us a lot of questions we wouldn't want to answer. The next thing you know the police would be sticking their noses into it. It's tough luck for George, but we've got to protect ourselves, and we've got to protect Pottermax. After all, he's paying the freight."

"A doctor might be able to tell us what's causing these deaths," Sam said pointedly. "What's to prevent the rest of us from dropping off one by one?"

MELLODY threw up his hands. "If you three want to send for a doctor, go ahead. I won't oppose it. But you choose one of your own to go after him. Loring must be kept out of this. And if Hanoi Ghan should be waiting around outside, I'll not lift a hand to help, for the one that meets him won't need a doctor. It's no accident that the brown men came here by plane last night."

Mention of the possibility of meeting Hanoi Ghan put a damper on this suggestion. Mellody leaned closer, intent on following up the advantage. "Come on, now, boys, let's not get rattled over this. When we started out, the eight of us, it was agreed that at the end the money should be shared out equally, with me drawing a double share as organizer. We knew we were gambling our lives against the Colonel's price for the Siva, and that at the end there might still be eight of us, or only four, or—none!

"Pottermax owes us \$75,000. Last night each of your shares was worth about \$10,000. When Bull died it raised the ante, and if George should go it will boost them to about \$15,000."

Mellody's figures came very pat, for he had been making private calculations beforehand. The injection of this cash valuation into the matter of the mysterious deaths brought new thoughts and a new attitude into the conference. Brought face to face with the cold-blooded realization that each one stood to gain nearly five thousand dollars through this unexpected calamity, the same train of thought naturally led each to consider that his own death would similarly

enrich the survivors. There was dynamite in the idea.

With this callous view came a cloud of fears—fear of death from the same unknown source, fear of treachery, fear of the double-cross. Unity of plan and action suddenly became a secondary affair, self-protection became all important. The events of the last few hours had added half as much again to each one's stake in the Siva as had months of toil and peril under the most adverse and dangerous conditions. Disintegration and decay had begun its deadly work.

Mellody had appealed deliberately to their cupidity and self-interest, but Digger was not lacking in the same sort of mental agility. "That's true enough, Mellody, but it's only half the story. It does put more money in our pockets, but you hold a double share, so you show a double profit. If our shares goes up five thousand, yours goes up ten. That sort of figuring works two ways."

"Yes, and if I should kick off you'd each get \$25,000. There's your own argument right back to you. Only," and he smiled grimly, "if I'm not here you're not likely to get a red cent. The Colonel's bargain was with me. Don't overlook that."

THE argument was getting warm again. Johnny sat on the window sill and wished that something would happen that would put an end to this bickering. Practical-minded Bill came to the rescue. "Now we're right back to that crazy argument again. Let's get the money before we argue about it. This is no time for such talk, with George lying right over there."

"That's common sense," Mellody approved. "Get the money first. Suppose Sam and I go to New York and get the Colonel to pay us? That's what he suggested in his letter."

Joe and Bill thought this over in silence. "I'm not up to all this talk you and Digger've been having," Bill put in sturdily, "but since the question has been raised, I think we all ought to stay in each other's sight till the pay-off. Then nobody's got to trust nobody else."

"That's my idea, too," Joe seconded. "There are things going on in this house

I don't understand, but so long as I get my fair cut of the money I'm not taking sides or sticking my nose in. Only, I'm telling all of you I ain't going within ten feet of the Siva, but I'm sure going to stand guard over it."

Mellody looked from one to the other with a cynical sneer. "So that's how it stacks up, eh? You trusted me with your lives in the jungle, you worked with me in a hundred tight places where the least dumb play on my part would have meant death for all of you, and now that we're back, safe and sound, the old loyalty goes to pot. Sam thinks I murdered two of my own men, you others are afraid I'll collect for the job and skip. A hell of a fine bunch you are!"

"Listen, Mellody," Joe argued, "forget all this talk. If Hanoi Ghan is out there in the woods, hiding and watching, none of us are going to show ourselves outside this house. So that settles that."

"I don't say they're out there right this minute," Mellody stated, "but they're bound to show up. That's inevitable, since Carpen saw them arrive."

And so Mellody resumed his briefly challenged leadership. He rang for the butler. "Loring," he began, "we've talked this over among ourselves, and this is our decision. We've brought the Siva here, expecting to be paid on delivery. Instead, we find the Colonel is away. He wants us to meet him in New York. We've decided not to let the statue out of our sight until we are paid, and we've no intention of dragging it to New York. It is up to the Colonel to honor the terms of our contract by bringing the money to us here."

Loring, impassive, but listening closely, nodded.

"My men are restless," Mellody continued. "This house seems to be a hoodoo to us. There are reasons why we should get away. We came here secretly and no doubt the Colonel wouldn't want our presence known. On the other hand, we can't sit around and twiddle our thumbs indefinitely. We've got one dead man on our hands now, and we may have another before long. Something has to be done soon about that. They're not what you'd call good company to be shut up with.

"To cut it short, Loring, this waiting

around is all damned nonsense. Our business with Pottermax is important enough to come first. He can go look at carved jade any time. When you go down to the city today wire or 'phone the Colonel that we must have our money within forty-eight hours, or else—"

"Or else what, Mr. Mellody?" Loring's face was stiff and hostile.

"Or else we'll take any measures that seem suitable. You tell that to Pottermax bluntly, as I've told it to you. Don't beat around the bush with oily phrases. Don't try to soften it up. We mean business. We don't give a damn whether the Colonel himself comes back or not, but if we don't have that money in forty-eight hours there's going to be trouble. Perhaps," he mused, "you'll learn what is meant by the 'Six Arms of Siva.'"

Carpen came over to Mellody and touched him on the arm. "I think George just died," he whispered.

V

JOHNNY CARPEN stood at the window of Colonel Pottermax's guest room and looked down at the lithe movements of the police dogs as they padded to and fro. The bed behind him now held two bodies instead of one. Carpen, planning eventual escape, had found and hidden a pair of wire-nippers. His scheme was to get out to that barbed-wire barrier when the chance came, cut his way through and get away down the side of Pontico Hill. He had examined the control board downstairs and learned how to cut off the current from those wires. The trick was to get out of the house unnoticed and past those dogs.

A key turned in the lock and Mellody entered, locking the door behind him. "Did you find anything?" Carpen asked.

When Mellody turned Johnny saw that he was carrying two revolvers and a shotgun. "I've been through the rooms, and this is the crop."

He put them down on the table and broke open the magazines, spilling out ammunition. He peered into the muzzles and sniffed them. "Apparently they haven't been fired recently," he said. Then he pushed aside the picture covering the hole

in the wall and pried out the twisted bullet. "No, it's still a mystery," he announced after comparing it with the ammunition from the seized weapons. He put the unloaded guns away in a closet. "Now we'll get on with this other job," he said.

Mellody stared long and hard at the two corpses lying side by side on the bed. George Dorgan had succumbed to the same mysterious blight that had overtaken Bull McSparren on the preceding night. Like Bull, he had never roused from his coma.

About an hour before Loring had driven the station car through the barbed-wire gates on his way to relay Mellody's ultimatum to the absent Colonel Pottermax. Mellody had had a talk with the butler in the garage before the latter started, but it was Lightfoot who swung the gates shut behind the departing car, as Mellody had forbidden his men to show themselves where they could be seen by any one lurking beyond the barrier. He and Digger had watched the departure through field-glasses from an upstairs front room.

Having been prepared by Bull's earlier and similar fate, this second death was not so severe a shock, but it certainly intensified the sullen gloom that had overtaken the party. Death by hazardous undertaking, death in the jungle, death in open fight they had faced without quaking as a normal and measurable risk, but this remorseless striking down by an unseen malignancy was unnerving. The looks they cast at the snarling god were suspicious, uneasy.

CARPEN had helped Mellody carry Dorgan's body up the stairs, to place it side by side with McSparren's corpse. Now Mellody donned rubber gloves and proceeded to strip the dead men to stark nakedness. With a magnifying glass he had found in the library he examined their bodies for telltale marks, bruises, wounds or bites. There were no abnormal swellings or discolorations. Their nails had a bluish tinge, which was repeated more noticeably in the hollows of the eye sockets.

Dorgan's body was easily handled, but rigor mortis had seized upon Bull's bulky frame, and Johnny's help was required to shift him about. Mellody showed no re-

pugnance for this gruesome task, examining the dead flesh of his former comrades with the utter detachment of an investigating scientist.

A determined rapping at the locked door interrupted his labors.

"Who's there?"

"Sam."

Mellody opened the door. Digger glanced briefly from Carpen to the naked bodies on the bed and glowered at Mellody and his round glass. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Mellody looked at him in disgust. "Can't you lay off that liquor for a while?" he growled. "You've got a breath like a sewer."

"Never mind about *me*. I'm sober enough. What are *you* doing?"

"I'm still trying to find out what killed them."

"Well?"

Mellody shrugged. After their sharp-edged skirmish of the morning a sort of armed neutrality had been tacitly agreed on, but Digger had gone back to his bottle, and his mood had become uglier in consequence. Sam, too, knew his chief well enough to know that the episode would not be forgotten. This inner disquietude made his outward bearing the more truculent.

"Suppose you try your luck." Mellody handed over the gloves and the magnifying glass with that maddening smile of his. Digger's whiskey-soaked nerves quivered, but he would not back down before that mocking voice. He went through much the same motions as Mellody had just finished. The latter sat down in a chair and lit a cigarette but he watched Sam's movements none the less keenly. Carpen kept himself in the background.

Finally Digger put down the lens. "I give up," he said wearily. "What's your theory?"

"I wouldn't call it a theory. Of course any of this supernatural stuff is out, but I'd say it'd be a good idea to steer clear of the Siva. Somehow, that seems to be the danger zone. Don't touch it. Don't handle it."

Digger stared moodily at the dead men. "Are you quite sure they're dead? Not just in a trance?"

"Bull is getting stiff as a board. That's pretty good proof."

Digger was watching Johnny narrowly. Suddenly he jerked out his gun. "Where'd you get that rod?" he demanded. "Come on, I see it there under your coat."

Before Carpen could answer, Mellody brushed the weapon aside. "Don't be so damned melodramatic, Sam. I gave him that to carry. It's Bull's gun, and there are three bullets in the clip."

Digger's suspicions flared anew. "What's the idea, Mellody? Trying to build up a private army?"

"Use your head for once!" Mellody snapped. "We're short two men, aren't we? We've got to keep a solid front. If the brown men come we can use an extra man. I'm not counting on any help from Loring or Lightfoot. In fact, I've grabbed every gun I could find in the house."

"But why hand over a gun that way? That's asking for trouble."

"Don't worry about Carpen. He's got to play ball with us to save his own neck. He'd need a lot more than three slugs to get out of this place. If you catch him making any wrong moves, give him the works. I've warned him."

"It's bad medicine, Mellody. He'll be telling Loring he's not one of the crowd. Loring'll tell Pottermax, and he won't like it."

Mellody grinned. "I'm beginning to care less and less about what Pottermax will like and won't like. He forced this situation on us, and he'll have to take the consequences. These, for instance." He pointed to the bad.

"Yes, what about Bull and George? When Pottermax comes back he won't stand for us planting them anywhere near this place, and if we put them away now. Loring'll want to know all about it."

"I've got that all figured out, Sam. There's no use trying to fool the Colonel about it. We'll tell him the truth. We'll box them up all proper, put them in the cellar, and take them along when we go. We can leave them stripped, and do a bit of digging in the woods the other side of the city. That ought to satisfy everyone concerned."

At that moment the pack of police

dogs began their clamor. Carpen looked out the window. He could catch a glimpse of Loring's car at the gates, and the leaping, yelping dogs gathered at the inner circle of fence. Presently Lightfoot ambled across the grounds, stilled the more ambitious yelping with a crack of his whip, then let himself through the inner enclosure and opened the gates for the butler. Melody trained his binoculars on this spot to watch the operation, and followed the car until it disappeared from his range of vision, the garage being built out from the rear portion of the house.

"Well, let's go down and get the news. I'm anxious to hear what the Colonel has to say for himself."

They went downstairs and along the rear hall to the back of the house. They waited inside the back door, for Melody would not risk any of them being seen outside the house in daylight. Loring was still in the garage, helping Lightfoot unload the various packages of groceries and food supplies which he had brought up from the city. Melody waited until Lightfoot had trudged away with the last armful before he put his question.

Loring was quiet and impassive. "I telephoned your message to Colonel Pottermax," he replied. "He told me to say that he would return in two or three days with your money. It is absolutely impossible for him to be back before that time."

"Did you tell him about McSparren and Dorgan?" Sam broke in.

"I felt it my duty to do so," Loring answered, primly. "The Colonel was very much put out about it. His language was quite—er—violent, sir. He said that you were not to—dispose of them—before he arrived, and that it would be best if no one were allowed to enter or leave the grounds on any pretext in the meantime. He was most emphatic on that point, sir, as a matter of protection to his own interests. You can readily understand that, Mr. Melody—"

"Yes, yes, I see," Melody waved the point aside. "You were careful that your conversation was not overheard?"

"Oh, yes, quite, sir. The Colonel had left his usual quarters at the Carfax and had gone to the Hotel Ravenal. This necessi-

tated two calls, but I was in a booth at the main office, and no one was near me."

"I hope you used good judgment in your choice of words over the telephone, Loring. If one of the operators happened to listen in, and heard you talking about dead men, she might very well report the matter."

"No, no, Mr. Melody, I was quite discreet. No one without a definite knowledge of the situation could have understood it. It required a certain amount of roundabout conversation, but I managed to convey the exact situation."

"Then your trip came off without further incident?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, Loring. All we can do is to sit tight until the Colonel comes back. You can put on a nice dinner for us tonight, but we'll cut down on the liquor, and I'll see that my men give a better account of their manners this time. Remember, just one round of drinks."

"Shall I serve it in the dining room?"

MELLODY gave the butler a penetrating look. "What's the idea of trying to coax us away from that room all the time, Loring? You tried to get us out of there last night, and again this morning. Now you're at it again. Listen to this—as long as we're in this house we're camping right by the Siva, even if it knocks our last man off his feet. We've traveled with that statue so long he's become one of the party. Where he is, that's where you'll find us, eating, sleeping, drinking—or dead. So you'll not be getting a chance to poke around him, Loring."

The butler's face turned the shade of putty. "I've no wish to go near it," he answered sturdily. "It's just that, sir. It unnerves me to be walking about in that room. I can still see those two men falling. It's—it's sacrilegious, Mr. Melody, to sit there eating and drinking, right under that thing—"

Melody snorted. "What you need, Loring, is a good shot of the Colonel's Scotch. But don't take too much, or you might be wanting to wrestle old Siva, and I'm afraid he's got too many arms for you." The adventurer's mocking laugh followed the retreating butler.

Mellody had no intention of allowing his men to develop their brooding frame of mind by sitting around, idle. His embargo on the liquor supply would ordinarily have met with some grumbling, but somehow his half-joking theory of the alcohol and the jungle virus had made an extraordinary mark on their imaginations and spoiled their taste for liquor.

He ordered Lightfoot, through Loring, to drive the dogs into their corral until nightfall, complaining that their noise was distracting and annoying. Then he commandeered the big Negro's services for the making of two stout oblong boxes in which the dead men could be placed awaiting ultimate removal. He asked Sam to supervise the job, which was performed in the cellar, where they found the necessary tools and lumber.

Joe was given the binoculars and assigned to duty at an upstairs window. From there he was to keep watch on the surrounding country, the clumps of trees, the shrubbery, the unbroken circle of fences hemming in the hollow saucer in which Dreamer's Rest stood.

Loring had exploded the legend that the barbed wires were charged with an electric current strong enough to hold a marauder fast, but he had shown Mellody a burglar alarm register on the wall of the servants' living room which rang at any contact with the wires, and had arrows to indicate, to within a few yards, the exact spot of that contact.

Mellody took Johnny with him into the banquet room. "Here's your assignment for the afternoon. Hide behind that cabinet over there in the corner. Keep still. Make no noise. If anyone enters this room watch them. That's all—just watch. Keep yourself hidden no matter what happens."

Carpen nodded, wondering what scheme was being hatched in that intricate brain. He concealed himself in the indicated spot, from whence he could watch both doors to the room. A broad shaft of sunlight fell across the gleaming metal body of Siva like a spotlight.

MELLODY hunted up Loring and they set off on a tour of inspection. Mellody was thinking of a possible siege by the

brown men under Hanoi Ghan, but to the butler he explained that he was merely curious to see if the house was really as impregnable as Loring had boasted. While they made this round, Mellody was checking up on more than doors and windows, and when they had finished he could have found his way unerringly through Dreamer's Rest in the dark.

When they came downstairs, Mellody dismissed the butler and turned into the library, a comfortable, masculine place, pleasantly untidy, and lined with books from floor to ceiling.

He browsed around until he found an encyclopedia, and there, on page 891 of the volume marked Con-Dem he found what he sought, a copy of the standard manual alphabet for the use of deaf mutes. He started to read the accompanying text, but found it so technical that he gave it up, and, instead, tore out the page of manual signs and pocketed it.

Sprawled out lazily, lost in thought, his eyes stared unseeingly at the rows of books. There was a soft noise outside in the hall, coming through the partly opened door. Instantly Mellody's eyes closed and quiet snores sounded from his throat. There was no further sound from the hall.

Mellody waited patiently for fifteen minutes. The only sound in the house was the muffled noise of the carpentry going on in the cellar. He slammed the library door behind him and walked heavily toward the banquet room.

There was no one in sight. "Carpen!" he called quietly. Johnny's head popped up from his hidden post. "Did anyone come in here while I was gone?"

"Only Loring, a few minutes ago."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No. I kept out of sight."

"What did he do?"

"He just came in, looked around, went up on the platform and looked at the Siva—"

"Did he touch it?"

"No, he just looked at it. He walked all around it. He didn't make a sound. Then he stopped, like he heard something, and went out that door."

"He heard me slam the library door. I did that on purpose."

"No. That was later. I heard that."

Melody frowned. "He looked and looked, and then went away without doing anything? That's odd. Where was he standing when he decided to leave?"

Carpen showed him the exact spot. "I guess he saw you hiding," Melody said. "Get back there, just as you were when Loring was here."

Johnny disappeared behind the cabinet. Melody looked, but couldn't see him. Then he turned slightly, and Loring's retreat was explained. There, in the glass door of another cabinet standing against the side wall, was a clear picture of that part of the room, showing the crouching figure behind the other cabinet.

"Come out, Carpen. I see how it was. Loring was too smart for us that time!"

MELLODY pulled up a chair and smoked a cigarette as he quietly brooded over the stony-faced god whose arrested pose was like a prance of rage. The man's face was lined in deep thought. After a while he arose, locked the door through which Loring must come if he returned to the room, and approached the Siva. The broad shaft of mellow autumn sun had nearly left the god now, casting its golden glow only over the left shoulder and arms.

The lens came into play again. Subconsciously, Melody moved warily, for he stood on the spot where McSparren and Dorgan had been struck down. Without directly touching any portion of the Siva, he brought his glass to bear on the gleaming surfaces. The god indeed had the look of an enraged wrestler, with his body oiled for combat.

He gave particular scrutiny to the fingers, hands, and joints of the six arms, for Melody had an idea that perhaps one of the arms had some concealed mechanism which enabled it to strike with deadly force. He could find no evidence of such a movable joint, however, and discarded the idea when he recalled that George Dorgan, the second victim, had been in full view of every one all the time.

This was really the first opportunity Melody had had to inspect their prize since they had rifled it from the Temple at Shiknoi. On their long, circuitous flight after-

ward, the Siva had been securely crated, and the crate had never been opened until they came to Dreamer's Rest. He paid particular attention to the jewels in the head-dress, the eyes, the collar of skulls and snakes, the hands, and the navel-stone. The light was beginning to fade, but was still sufficient for his purpose. Johnny Carpen stood on a chair and directed a flashlight into the snarling mouth, while Melody looked through his lens, but neither light nor glass could be adjusted to give satisfactory results.

Melody sat down again, and in the gathering darkness stared long and gravely at the Siva, until he had the semblance of a second statue. In the gloom, many strange thoughts raced through his brain. A rapping at the locked door roused him. He called out, then rose to open. It was Joe, his usefulness as a lookout having been ended by the darkness. Digger and Lightfoot were still at their gruesome carpentry. Somewhere in the kitchens Mrs. Lightfoot and Loring were busy over the evening meal.

WITH the coming of night a fresh restlessness seemed to be born in Melody. The shutters were closed and bolted, but still he wandered up and down, in one room and out the other, then pacing through the halls.

Loring had just begun to set the places for dinner, when the pent-up dogs began a frantic barking. This unexpected hullabaloo brought everyone up short. Even Sam came up from the cellar, plane in hand.

"There must be somebody out there," Loring stated, uneasily. "That's the noise they make when they hear a strange sound. We'd better set them loose."

Melody considered. "Not yet. Wait. It's dark now. I'll slip out and see if I can spot anything. Get ahead with the dinner, Loring. Sam, keep an eye on that burglar alarm. If anyone touches the fence, it will register, but don't go out until I come back. Just give me the whistle, and I'll know."

"Maybe it's the Colonel come back ahead of time," Sam suggested. "He may have changed his mind."

"Yes, and how would he get here from New York in this short time?"

"By plane."

Melody shook his head. "That's not like-

ly, unless he came empty-handed, and if he did that, it would be better not to have come at all," he added, cryptically. He slipped out the side entrance and went toward the gates, treading cautiously. The dogs, hearing him, or scenting his presence, became even more incensed. Fed only in the mornings, and then but sparingly, by night-fall they were in a vicious and savage state. Never petted or pampered, they resembled wild beasts more nearly than household guardians, and only the big Negro seemed able to control them.

After a while Melody returned, as stealthily as an Indian. He reported no sign of anyone's presence, and said that he had made the circuit of the wire barrier. The board had sounded no alarm. The dogs, nevertheless, continued their frantic howling, milling about in their corral.

Joe, Loring, Lightfoot and Digger went out for some additional scouting. Carpen stood under the porch, watching. He saw Melody and Bill standing some little distance away, talking, and it occurred to him that he had not seen Bill since the early morning.

When the scouting party returned, and the dogs' excitement snowed no signs of abating, Melody asked, "If we turn one of the dogs loose outside the gate, will it return?"

"I suppose so," Loring answered, "if Lightfoot is there to handle it. I have no control over them. They know me, and wouldn't bite me, but that's all. Lightfoot is their real master."

"Well then, suppose we try it? If there is a prowler outside, that should send them flying."

"But who could be out there?" Loring queried. "A tramp, perhaps, or some hunter who's lost his way. Suppose the dog bit someone, or even killed someone? There'd be trouble."

MELLODY shrugged his shoulders. "Call Lightfoot over," he said. "This is private property, and we've a right to protect it. There's no excuse for prowlers in an isolated spot like this, and at night."

So the burly Negro came shuffling onto the scene again, and led out one of the fiercest of the dogs on a leash. As they approached the gates, it became more and more unmanageable, until even Lightfoot's enormous strength was barely sufficient to restrain its bounding surges ahead.

Loring was still in ignorance of the little brown men's embassy of death, but Melody and each of his men had the disturbing conviction that at last Hanoi Ghan's presence was threatening them. They huddled around their leader in a tense group, ready to draw and defend Dreamer's Rest and its stolen treasure against priestly vengeance. The claims of justice and ownership meant nothing to these men, to whom possession was *all* points of the law.

At a signal from Melody, Lightfoot and the eager dog approached the outer gate. Loring, at a subsequent signal, unlocked and set in motion the mechanism that released the barrier. As the gates swung slowly open, the Negro deftly slipped the leash from the dog's spiked collar, and with an exultant yelp it leaped through the opening and disappeared, bounding away to the right.

The gate was instantly secured again,


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and they all listened to the powerful brute's short yelps going into the distance. It was their only means of approximating the dog's course. Evidently the animal knew what was expected of him, for at no point had he shown the slightest sign of hesitation or confusion.

Five minutes, ten minutes, passed, since the last yelp had come back to them. The men began to get a little uneasy, standing in the darkness, waiting. The whispering noises, the rustling silences from the surrounding woods had an uncanny quality. The other dogs in their kennels had subsided to snuffling whines, but they stirred restlessly. Joe was sent back to see if the alarm-board had registered any disturbance, ending Johnny Carpen's dawning hope that this might be a good chance to get busy with his wire-nippers and escape while the dogs were penned up.

"It's strange we don't hear the dog any more," Loring mumbled.

"Perhaps he made a bolt of it, once he was let out," Mellody suggested.

"I don't think so. If there was any one lurking out there, he'd certainly go for them. That's what they're trained for. Perhaps they heard his barking and ran, and he ran after them. We should not have done this, Mr. Mellody. Those dogs are too powerful. They could tear your throat out, if they got you on the ground."

MELLODY was listening to the stilly night. "It seems more likely the dog got hurt in this instance, Loring. You'd better have Lightfoot sound the recall."

The Negro received his order from the butler. Lightfoot's infirmity made it impossible for him to whistle, but he clapped his hand over his mouth and emitted weird sounds on the order of the Indian war-whoop.

These shrill blasts had great carrying power. Three times Lightfoot gave his weird cry, but the sound died away without any answering yelp or bay from the dark circle of the Pottermax woods. The penned-up dogs whimpered.

"It may be he's chasing somebody down the hill?"

"If he were, he'd be yelping. He'd hear our call, and we could hear him, too."

Five more minutes went by in silence, without a clue to the dog's fate. Lightfoot let go with his shrill calls at intervals. As the minutes passed, Mellody grew more thoughtful. "Well, it looks like he's gone for good," he said, at last. "Let's get back to the house. If the animal returns we'll hear him at the gate."

Loring seemed quite nervous and perturbed over the incident. "I don't like this at all," he said. "We'd better have the other dogs turned loose at once."

Mellody nodded, and they tramped back to the house in silence, while Lightfoot went over to the corral. In due course Loring appeared with the first portion of their dinner.

"Sit down and eat with us tonight, Loring," Mellody invited.

"I'm sorry, sir, but—"

"No buts, Loring. Sit down! I'm taking over command of this place until Pottermax returns. I want you to eat with us. That's an order."

Mellody's iron intent was plain in his tone. After a moment of confused hesitation, Loring bowed coldly and set out a place for himself at Mellody's right hand, as indicated. Then he served the first course of the evening meal.

The dinner passed off more pleasantly than it had begun. Mellody kept up a flow of anecdote and reminiscence of his various sojourns in the Orient, to which Loring listened attentively, if silently. The others said little, but occupied themselves with their food. Lightfoot carried in the various dishes, and Loring served them.

When they had finished, Loring brought on the familiar tray of decanters and glasses. "Remember, Loring, only one round of drinks tonight, but you can make it a liberal one."

The butler nodded, passing around the glasses and starting the decanters on their way. On a signal from their leader they waited until all had been supplied and Loring had resumed his chair. He poured a small portion for himself, a diminutive glass with a scant two fingers of the smoky Scotch that had formerly proved so alluring to Digger's accumulated thirst.

With a swift movement, Mellody exchanged his glass for that of the

butler. Loring was astounded at the action, Melody's men but little less so.

"Drink it, Loring," Melody commanded. "We're going to watch you swallow that before we touch a drop. This may be very good liquor, as it appears, or it may be seasoned with a few drops from that bottle you brought away from the druggist's this afternoon!"

An intense silence followed these remarks. Melody was grim and unsmiling. His men's eyes focused on the butler and the glass before him. Carpen saw Digger's ever ready hand stealing toward his coat lapels. Loring's face paled, then flushed, then grew paler than before. "This is an outrage, Mr. Melody," he cried, "you must be mad!"

"Drink it, damn you!" Melody thundered.

The butler's distended eyes saw nothing but the circle of threatening faces watching him; that, and Digger's hand slipping along. He seized the glass, took several heroic gulps which nearly strangled him, and emptied a goblet of water as a chaser.

"And now, Loring, you'd better tell us the truth about Colonel Pottermax! You've been lying to us long enough—now your lies have caught up with you!"

VI

LORING stared, white-faced and wide-eyed, at his accuser. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and chin. Slowly his head turned from left to right, but on all sides he met the same ominous silence and pitiless stares. Even Johnny Carpen looked at him without pity after Melody's charge of attempted poisoning.

The butler passed his napkin over his moist face. The potency of the liquor was whipping his face with color, and making his sallow skin glisten. "Your idea of a joke, Mr. Melody," he quavered, "is a little upsetting. I'm not used to such rough humor."

For answer the grim adventurer drew a folded slip of paper from his pocket. Without unfolding it, he tossed it over to Loring's place. "You left here at 11:17 this morning," he replied. "On that paper you will find a list of all your stops, with

the time. You did not telephone anywhere, you sent no wires, you held no private conversations. You did not stop at the central telephone office at all. You were watched every foot of the way. Every move you made was marked down."

"It's a lie, a trick," the butler screamed, leaping to his feet.

Melody pushed him back into his chair. "Read the list," he said sternly. But Loring made no move to touch the folded paper.

"Bill, tell the others your part of the story."

Bill kept his eye steadily on the butler. "I went to the garage before Loring started. I hid in the back part of the station car, between the seats, and covered myself with a blanket that was there. He never looked in the back, but got in and drove off, after Melody had finished talking to him. At the first stop in the city I got out, hired a taxi, and trailed him in that. Loring was never out of my sight—not for one minute. He didn't go near a telephone. He didn't meet anyone. He just bought things in the stores, as I wrote down on the list. I followed him about half way on the road back. When it got dark I walked up through the woods."

Melody nodded. "Nice work, Bill." He addressed the others. "When the dogs heard Bill coming they started that racket, so I slipped out alone and opened the gate. You can see, Loring, there's no use trying to bluff us about this. We've got the goods on you."

The butler was staring at the folded paper as though it were a death warrant.

Melody's voice became suave, persuasive. "Now, Loring, tell us—where is Colonel Pottermax? Come on, there's no use looking at Carpen. You wouldn't help him and he's not going to help you."

"I don't know!" Loring's voice came with a gasp.

Melody flung up his hand. "Loring, think a moment. You don't realize what you're facing. This is no drawing room comedy. You're dealing with a tough crew. We've had to kill a dozen times to bring that idol through safely, and if necessary, we'll kill again. We've risked our necks a hundred times on this job, we've lost four of our men, and we're going to get a square

deal from the Colonel if it's the last thing we do. So be careful, Loring, and think hard, or you'll find yourself with the two upstairs."

MELLODY paused to light a cigarette, then rose and went to the statue of Siva. From behind its base he brought three things, and ranged them before him on the table—a thin strip of bamboo, a small pair of pliers and a rough wood file. He stared at the butler abstractly, as though he were pursuing some impersonal problem. "I'm going to ask you some questions, Loring. If you've any sense at all, you'll give us the truth because, a little later, we'll be asking you the same questions, but the circumstances will be somewhat different, and if the two sets of answers don't agree—God help you!

"There's something phoney going on around here, and we want it cleared up. We've played our part on the level, and we'll see to it that everybody else plays the same way. You've been the Colonel's man, so it was your duty to look after his interests, but now you're our prisoner, and your problem will be to save your own skin. Did you ever hear of the *bastinado*, Loring?"

Idly, Melody picked up the split bamboo. "It's an old Oriental custom. I've observed it on my travels. You take a bamboo lath, like this, and strike the bare soles of the victim's feet. Not hard, Loring, not hard at all. Quite gently—thus. But it continues. A skillful operator can kill his man after some hours of this torture. Your feet are probably nice and soft, Loring, and as I'd be only a clumsy amateur, we'd probably botch the job. After a little while the feet that were like this," and Melody pressed his hands flat along the table, "are like this," slowly closing his hands into fists. "Naturally, the victim makes a great deal of noise while this is going on, but that's all right when you're in a lonely place like *Dreamer's Rest*."

The butler stared and stared as if he couldn't believe his ears. Two drops of sweat splashed from his chin. His eyes, venomous with hatred and fear, watched Melody.

"Another method greatly in favor with

Oriental secret inquiries," the relentless voice went on, "is to ask a question, then take hold of a finger- or toe-nail with pincers—just like these—and pull it out by the roots, slowly. You've no idea how hard it is to tear loose the confounded things. I've watched that being done, too, Loring. It takes a steady pull and then a twist, like this!" Melody demonstrated in the air, and added, "Its great merit is that you usually get a truthful answer, and a damned quick one. You see, you've got nine chances left to check up on a lie, although sometimes, unfortunately, the suspect is unable to answer more than once or twice.

"In certain parts of the Orient they hold that drawing a rough file over the teeth is a splendid inducement to speech. A trifle crude, perhaps, but useful if you're in a hurry. I'll admit that you've got us blocked there, Loring, for I see now that you've bought your present teeth. Still, you can imagine what it feels like!"

MELLODY gave his explosive, cackling laugh, throwing the file on the floor. At the clatter the butler collapsed in his chair, gasping, greenish over this grisly recital. His body shook in a sudden retching as the sweat on his face turned icy cold. Joe gravely held a napkin to Loring's mouth while the spasm lasted.

Johnny looked closely at the sneering adventurer, unable to credit him with the serious intention of putting these tortures into practice with this weak old man, but one look at Melody's blazing eyes made him realize that this was not an empty threat.

Melody smiled down sardonically. "You're weak, and soft, and flabby, Loring. I don't think you've got the guts to take it. You'll howl like hell from the start. Well, we shall see!" He puffed calmly on his cigarette for a few moments. Absolute silence reigned. "Now that we understand each other, let's begin again. *Where is Colonel Pottermax?*"

Loring struggled to sit up straight and answer, but it was too much for him. His voice cracked and he gave a hollow groan. Melody held the glass to his lips and made him swallow the rest of the whiskey. Then he derisively straightened the man's black

tie. "Now! No more stalling. Out with it!"

"I don't know. He went away. I don't know where he is." Loring's hands were clenched and shaking.

"Is he hiding anywhere in this house, or in the grounds?"

"No. He went away."

"Is he in New York?"

"I don't know."

"Do you still maintain there is no way by which you can get in touch with him?"

"Yes."

Mellody frowned. The sweat broke out again on the butler's face.

"When did he leave here?"

"Four days ago."

"But what did he say? What excuse did he give you? Our wire was here before that."

"None. That's not the Colonel's way. He just went away. He does things like that. Often. Eccentric, sir. He gave me the letter to hand you when you should arrive."

"Then the Colonel really wrote that letter? You didn't forge it yourself?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"That's fine, Loring. Remember what I've just told you. If you're still trying to lie to us, you've got a damn sight less brains than I give you credit for. The Colonel wrote the letter. The letter asks us to meet him at a certain hotel in New York. That implies the Colonel is waiting there for us right this minute. Do you think he is, Loring?"

The butler did not answer.

"If you think he is, Loring, I'll send a man down to the city to telephone. If he's not there, we'll take it out of your hide. Or, if you're sure he's not in New York, tell us the reason why you're sure. Remember, you did *not* phone anywhere today. You can't get around that without an explanation."

Loring hung his head. "I—wrote—the—letter," he confessed.

MELLODY paused, and his fingers played idly but suggestively over the bamboo and pincers. His men sat stolid as carved statues.

"Well, I begin to see through the fog," Mellody resumed. "There is a scheme. We were supposed to fall for it by dropping the Siva here and running off to New York

to a fake rendezvous to get our money. That much is plain. But after that—what? Did Pottermax think we'd take it lying down? Did he think his barbed-wire fences and pack of hounds could cheat Daniel J. Mellody out of his rights? Ha, that would be a foolish notion! There's something here, something more than meets the eye. Perhaps the Colonel *is* in hiding in this house. Maybe he's listening to us this minute." Mellody burst into staccato laughter, slapping his thigh. "I'm beginning to enjoy this. I must meet the Colonel, Loring. I insist. And you're going to lead me to him—you're surely going to lead me to him."

Mellody pondered a few moments. "Loring, I'm going to be entirely frank with you. I'm going to do my thinking out loud, as it were. I want you to understand our position. Here we are with this blasted idol on our hands. All our profit is in that. We've spent practically every dollar the Colonel advanced to get it here. We've gambled our lives against this profit.

"As it stands the Siva is worth nothing to us. We can't go out and peddle it. We could pack it up and go away, but it would be about as useful as carrying a millstone around. The alternative is to sit here and await the Colonel's good pleasure. After all, this is his house, packed full of valuable things, and he can't stay away forever. But we don't like this place. We've had nothing but damned bad luck ever since we came here.

"Pottermax must have some trick in mind, although I can't quite see why a man should agree on a price for something, advance fifteen thousand dollars for expenses, entirely without security, and then repudiate the rest of the bargain. There is no way in in the world either he or I could get back that fifteen grand. That's gone for good. Now I've done all my talking, Loring. It's your turn. Do you believe the Colonel has any intention of paying us for the Siva?"

"I am sure he intends to keep his contract, Mr. Mellody. You put a wrong interpretation on his absence."

"If I have, why has he run out on us? Can't he raise the money just now? If he can't, why doesn't he put the case before us, man to man, and see what can be done about it? Or is he trying to needle us, so

that we'll take, say, half that figure, and call it square?"

"Perhaps that's it, sir," Loring hesitated. "I really can't say. The Colonel never confides his financial matters to me. He's a very erratic man. He often goes away like this, and we think nothing of it. He's not a man you can question that way. That's why I wrote the letter, and then lied about the call to New York. It was simply to keep you from getting restless over the Colonel's absence. I thought he would surely be back within the time mentioned and then everything would be all right."

"I see. Keep peace at any price. Pottermax must find you a very useful person, Loring. By the way, just what was it you bought at the prescription counter in the drugstore?"

"Some medicine for my catarrh. I'll show you the bottle."

"No, no, sit down. We'll look at that later. Catarrh, eh? Have you a bad case of it?"

"Yes, sir. I've had it for years. I have a special prescription on file there."

"You certainly have, Loring, and if you take that stuff you'll never be bothered any more by your catarrh!"

"Why, what do you mean?"

MELLODY bounded out of his chair and towered over the shaking butler. He thrust an accusing finger at him. "The bottle you got had a skull-and-crossbones label, that's what I mean! You had to sign for it, because it was poison! I think you've been unloading another pack of lies on me," he growled. "Trying to flim-flam Daniel J. Mellody twice in one day! We'll see about that. Joe! Bill! Tie him in that chair!"

Loring yelped and tried to dodge, but his resistance was worse than futile against the combined strength of the two gunmen. Joe held the squirming victim down while Bill tied each arm to the chair and fastened a running noose around his neck, the other end of the rope being tied to the back rung of the chair.

Johnny Carpen was the only one left sitting at the table. Uncomfortable and uncertain as to his part in this crisis, he saw that Digger's eye was on him, with a challenging smile on his lips. Mellody stood by all the while, sounding that explosive

chuckle that had so little mirth in it. "Take off his shoes and socks," he ordered, and his henchmen did his bidding, while Loring put up such resistance as he could. When it was over the elderly man was panting, and his efforts had so tightened the noose around his neck that he drew gasping breaths. At a sign from Mellody, Joe eased the knot. Mellody gently balanced the bamboo rod in one hand and the pincers in the other. Stark fear looked out of the butler's eyes.

"There's no use staring at me like a trapped rabbit, Loring. You had your chance to come clean, but you wouldn't play ball. Now you'll pay for it. We're not going to kill you, because we don't want a murder charge hanging over us in this country. We're not going to loot this place, either, and be hunted down for thieves. But before we've finished you'll be wishing you were dead and out of our reach. We've got to go back to the very beginning and start looking at everything from a fresh angle. You won't find it very amusing, Loring. I'll give you five minutes to meditate on your sins or to think up more lies. It won't make much difference either way."

HE DREW the chair to one side and set up a folding screen around the prisoner. Then he hurried from the room, and when he returned he was leading Mrs. Lightfoot, his grip firm on her arm. There was a startled buzz at sight of her, for Mellody's men had had no inkling that there was a woman at Dreamer's Rest.

"Quiet!" Mellody commanded, "and don't make any moves to get her suspicious. This is Lightfoot's wife. She's the cook here, and she's deaf and dumb." The woman stood gracefully erect, the beauty of her figure marred only by the dull, vacant expression of her face. She did not even glance at the screen that hid Loring's chair.

Mellody took from his pocket the torn-out page giving the manual alphabet for deaf-mutes. He sat down and propped it before him on the table. Slowly and awkwardly he made the letter movements, as illustrated. When he had completed the sentence he looked expectantly at the woman. She looked back at him as blankly as a cow. Painstakingly he repeated the man-

ual letters. The woman made uncouth noises in her throat and her arms flailed erratically.

"She's goofy," Digger remarked. "You'll get nothing out of her."

Mellody grew irritated, but he tried again with the sign manual for one hand. That worked no better than the other. Mrs. Lightfoot continued to make her strangled noises. Her questioner cursed her stupidity aloud and made angry gestures. Finally he gave it up. "Here, Sam," he snarled, "try your luck on this dummy. There's the alphabet. Ask her what day Pottermax left here."

While Sam worked this out, Mellody strode up and down impatiently. He hooked his foot in the corner of the screen and brought it crashing down, disclosing their prisoner. Mrs. Lightfoot cowered back, whimpering. At the same moment Mellody stepped behind her and fired his gun at the floor. The bullet ricocheted wildly and Octoria Lightfoot, the deaf-mute, let out a startled scream that was a long way removed from the former uncouth whimpers.

MELLODY confronted her with glistening eyes. "Another fake, eh? Making monkeys out of us, sitting there wigwagging like mad, and you as able to hear and talk as any of us. Well, you'll get a chance to do both."

He led her firmly by the shoulder, and Digger rose up, leering at her. "Let me have her, Dan. I'll make her talk!"

There was perfect understanding in the erstwhile vacant eyes now. At Sam's first step she twisted loose from Mellody, leaving a strip of her dress in his hand as hostage, and leaped toward the door, shrieking, with both men after her.

This door had been kept closed, but as she bounded to it the halves slid back as if by magic, and the giant Negro's face glared in at them. Octoria leaped through the opening, while her husband slammed the doors tight in her pursuers' faces.

This momentary halt was enough to give the pair a flying start along the corridor. As Mellody emerged in pursuit he saw that Octoria had already gained the stairs, but Lightfoot was not given to such fleetness of foot, and had not yet reached the bottom step.

Giving a yell of triumph, Mellody closed the gap between them. Somewhat to his surprise, for he was unarmed, the giant black halted on the third or fourth step, blocking their passage, thereby giving Octoria time to escape.

Mellody rushed him, and they came to grips. For a moment they swayed to and fro, then the white man clamped on a punishing hold he had picked up in the haunts of rough-and-tumble fighters. Lightfoot's face convulsed with pain, and he let out a yammering cry, but the torture only served to explode his tremendous strength. He swung his antagonist clear off his feet and literally hurled him down at Digger, who was vainly trying to get in close enough to lend a hand.

The two of them hit the floor with a thud, and during their general entanglement Lightfoot made good his escape. Before they were on their own feet again, they heard his clumsy steps thumping upward to the top floor. Mellody's head was ringing from the shock. "It's my own fault," he muttered, "I shouldn't have got his goat that way. Get back there and keep an eye on Loring," he ordered his men, "Sam and I can handle this."

While the others returned to Siva and their prisoner, Mellody and his lieutenant mounted the stairs to the third floor. Mellody knew which was the Lightfoots' room, and, as expected, found the door bolted. They pounded and shouted but he gave no answer until they began a vigorous rapping on the wooden panels.

Without warning, Lightfoot's bullet crashing through the door, partially burying itself in the wall of the staircase. Digger had felt the wall and both he and Mellody scrambled out of range. The latter knocked up Digger's ready gun. "Let it go," he whispered. "There's no use starting a gun fight now." Then, leaning over the rail, "Joe! Joe!" he shouted. "Come up here!"

JOE came up, and Mellody issued his orders. "You park here, Joe, and keep your eye on this door. They're both in there, and they're not to be trusted. Lightfoot's got a heavy caliber gun and he's

willing to use it. We'll get around to his case later, just now it's enough to see that he doesn't get away. If they want to give up and come out, make them throw the gun out first, and watch out, for he may have another. If they make any bad moves, let 'em have it—but in the legs—there are questions we want to ask 'em!"

Carpen, lingering in the lower hall, heard all this talk, and decided it was about time he tried to escape from this mad-house. He slipped into the servants' room and shut off the alarm-board for the wire barriers. He took the wire-nippers from their hiding place and put them in his pocket.

Melody and Digger had just started down the stairs when Johnny cautiously unbolted the back door and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Veiled in the blackness of the night, he listened for the dogs. The pack was at the far stretch of fence, yelping, leaping, growling ominously as they raced to and fro along the inner barrier. Apparently some new source of disturbance had reached their keen ears.

Grasping his gun, Carpen fled like a fleet shadow, not knowing just how long the attention of the pack would be held at that distant point. Straight as an arrow he set his course, trampling over flower beds and through crackling shrubbery. Before he realized it he had stumbled into the inner line, and the barbed-wire prickles

went the pliers, and as he was able to squirm through the barrier. His steps were muffled by gravel. A fleeting glimmer at Dreamer's Rest showed the bulk, blacker than the round of sky.

Johnny kneeled down to cut the last strands between him and freedom. With a warning swish something sang past his head. There had been no explosion, but he knew it for a bullet. The same unseen marksman who had nearly picked off Melody!

Like a throwback to a night patrol in Army days, Johnny flattened himself against the ground, face buried in the crook of his elbow. He waited. For a minute or two nothing happened then the same swishing

buzz came again, and a shower of gravel was kicked over his face.

RETREATING through the hole he had cut, Johnny crouched behind a bushy clump, trying to spot the sniper's position. There were trees beyond the fence. Impossible to see anything there. A third bullet cut sharply through the dry leaves over his head. There was now no doubt about it, this was not random shooting—the sniper was able to follow his movements.

The Pottermax dogs were still in pandemonium on the far side. Johnny zig-zagged his way back to the house. Bolting the door again, he tiptoed along the hall. Apparently he had not been missed.

As he looked into the banquet room he saw Melody standing over the butler. His eyes had the merciless gleam of a bird of prey swooping to the kill. "I think we'll start with this jigger. It'll save time," he said, waving the pincers.

The terror-stricken Loring jerked against his bonds as he saw Melody bending towards him. Then, out of the darkness, plain even to those shut up in the house, came a long-drawn cry, scarcely human, that throbbed and beat like the call of some eerie night bird. To a man, Melody and his men stood rooted in their tracks.

VII

THEY had ample reason to remember that sound. They had first heard it thousands of miles away, calling above the jungle noises, while they, cursing and dripping with sweat, were feverishly hacking branches to cover that grim crate hidden on their raft. Again and again they had heard it, showing the relentless searchers still on their trail. Now here it was at their heels again, half way round the world, at Dreamer's Rest.

With one accord they turned to their leader. "The Six Arms of Siva!" he snarled. Then he began to chuckle, with that insane mirth of his that was like the grating of rasped metal. "They certainly picked a fine time," he chuckled. "Do you know what that cry was, Loring?"

The butler shook his head, bewildered.

"That was a challenge from the Six Arms

of Siva. They know they've caught up with us at last."

Loring stared, but it was evident that the name meant nothing to him. Involuntarily he looked up at the Siva with its six writhing arms.

"You may as well hear about it," Melody continued, "for if they get in here they'll cut *your* throat as quickly as ours." He turned to Johnny. "That goes for you, too, Carpen. There'll be no explaining things to them. We wipe them out or they'll wipe us out."

He paused as the cry was lifted again, this time from a different quarter. "When we first broke through the Siamese jungles," he continued, "we were surprised to find the Temple of Shikanoi so carefully guarded. The Shikanoi Siva, for some reason, was more closely watched than any Siva I've ever known. Day and night the priests were on the watch. That made the operation much harder. We lay low for a time, thinking we had struck a time of festival. We had to make a whole new set of plans. We could have got away with the Phangoa Siva, for instance, without striking a blow. We could have been down to the coast with it before it would be missed.

"However, the Colonel's specifications called for the Shikanoi idol, so that was what we lifted. We had some bloody work to do to get at it, on account of those priests. Then we had no sooner packed it up and started on the back trail than hell broke loose along that river. Signal fires, drums, that queer call everywhere. Our line of retreat was cut off—sure death was waiting there. But Daniel J. was too foxy for them after all. We had our sampan ready, hid the crate aboard it, poled our way along a side creek and across a wide lake, and went into hiding. We didn't try to break through, as they had figured we must—instead we headed north, smack into the jungle.

"The story of our wanderings with that crate, and how we got it over to the China Coast would be too long to tell, Loring, but we made it. We bribed when we could, and killed when we had to. Anybody who got curious about our boat and its cargo was just out of luck. While we were drifting around there waiting for a certain tramp

schooner to pick us up we accidentally overheard what had been going on back in Shikanoi.

"IT SEEMS that as soon as they saw we

I had given them the slip they stopped the mad scramble after our supposed trail. Instead they set up a sort of Board of Strategy. The head of this was a little brown chap named Hanoi Ghan, a fire-eating hell-bender if there ever was one. We should have bumped him off before we made the snatch. It would have saved us a lot of trouble. This Hanoi Ghan had plenty of money to work with, and he must have spent it like water. Expense was no object, so long as a man named Melody could be cornered and the idol restored to Shikanoi.

"Their spies spread out for hundreds of miles along the coast. They watched every port, every freight movement. Meanwhile the guardians of the Shikanoi Temple drew lots, and were sent off on our trail in parties of six, after elaborate rites and ceremonies. You see, Loring, one for each arm of the Siva. Three of each party of six were dedicated to getting the Siva back by peaceable means. They were forbidden to use violence of any kind. The other three had opposite instructions. They hope to win an exalted station in the after-life by knocking us off wherever and whenever found. They are out to kill. If one found me on the street surrounded by policemen, and could get in a blow, he would kill me without hesitation, because if he should be killed on this mission, the deed has increased merit.

"Now we have them with us—the Six Arms of Siva. They are waiting out there. There may be three, six, twelve—I don't know."

"And they will kill?" Loring quavered.

"Some of them will," Melody answered. "If they get in here, they'll slit everybody's throat, yours included, Loring."

"But some of them are peaceful, aren't they?"

"Sure, that's the way I heard the story, but how are we going to tell whether it's true, and if so, which are which? I can't tell by looking at them. You can't trust their word for it. They've no intention of putting on a square, stand-up fight. Anything goes with them. No holds are barred.

If they can knife you on the sly, they'd be tickled pink."

"What's the next move, Dan?" Digger asked. He ran his tongue over his lips. Bill was poised, tense, staring as though he could see through the solid walls, his hand instinctively at his holster. Johnny felt that it would be useless to tell them of his attempt to escape, and of the rifleman with the silencer on his gun. Melody already knew about that gun.

MELLODY straightened his shoulders. "I'm going out and talk to them," he announced slowly. "If there's going to be any killing on Pontico Hill, I'm willing to meet it halfway. Want to come along?"

"What's the idea, Dan? Why let them know we're here?"

"Why not? What's the use of kidding ourselves? Of course they know we're in here, or they wouldn't have sounded the call. How they came to know, I'll be damned if I can guess, but they *do*. Didn't Carpen see three of them over at the Airport? Still, we've got the whiphand. We've got the Siva, and good defenses, and if it comes to a scrap we can hold up our end. But I'm going to talk to them. If this turns out to be the peace crowd I'm going to sell the Siva back to them. We may not get as much out of it, but it'll teach the Colonel a lesson."

"But the dogs, Dan? They're all over the place. We'll have to coax that Negro down here to round 'em up."

"They'll tear you to pieces, Melody," Bill put in.

Melody snorted. "What do I care about dogs?"

"They'll kill you," Loring said shakily. His eyes shone with suppressed excitement and fear.

"You city chaps are all chicken-livered," Melody flung at him. "You can't even dominate a dumb animal. You'd let a dog drive you up a tree. Bill, rummage around and get me that whip Lightfoot uses. I'll show you how to handle them!"

When the whip was found Melody took it in his left hand, cracking it once or twice to get the feel of it. His gun was in his right. "Open the front door!" he commanded, and Digger went with him and

opened wide the doors. The light from the hall shone down over the steps to the gravel driveway. Beyond was darkness.

Johnny approached the adventurer. "Remember there's a gun with a silencer on it," he warned.

"They won't use it till they see what answer they get to their call," Melody replied. He gave an imitation of Lightfoot's uncouth cry, and waited. One of the dogs came bounding to the circle of light and stood staring. His eyes glowed, his hackles rose, his growl was deep in his throat. Another came up, and another, snarling and suspicious.

THEY stood stiff-legged, puzzled but hostile. Melody put one foot forward. Crack! went the whip. Another step. Crack! Crack! At the same time he used crisp words of command. Steadily he marched down upon them, swinging his whip. They gave ground, slowly at first, then dashed back to rejoin their companions, still in full cry at whatever lay beyond the fence.

Melody made no effort to tread warily after that. He walked boldly beyond the pool of light, crossed the lawn at an angle and dove into a mass of shrubbery. From there he lifted up his voice and did his best with the night cry of the brown men. Almost instantly an answering call was lifted. Another. And another. The dogs became even more frantic. Melody shouted above their din, using the richly voweled idiom of the Cambodian tongue. Then he crouched down and crawled away from the spot whence his voice had been lifted. He had not forgotten the invisible sniper, but no bullets came.

Forward he moved again, toward the inner barrier, but always obliquely. When any of the dogs came too near, he cracked his whip and cursed them, then dropped on all fours in the darkness. So, worming his way along like a redskin, he reached the wire fence. There he crouched and shouted to the hidden brown men, and they shouted a reply.

At the conclusion of their parley, a disk of light cut the darkness outside the barbed-wire barricade, and into this disk were stretched three right hands, lean and brown, with red-tinted nails. The light was then

snapped off, and Melody went slowly back to the house, cracking his whip. He dared not proceed more rapidly for fear of bringing the savage pack down upon his back.

Digger was waiting anxiously in the lighted doorway, gun ready. Melody gave him a triumphant thump on the back. They bolted the door and returned to the banquet room.

Melody was plainly elated, swaggering up to the table and banging the whip across it with a crack like a pistol shot. "A sale!" he cried. "The Shikanoi Siva sold to the highest bidder! Fifty thousand dollars, boys, within forty-eight hours! What do you think of that?"

"Fifty thousand? Dan, they're kidding you. Where'd they get that much dough in two days?"

"Maybe they are, Sam. We'll see. The fifty thousand was my idea, the forty-eight hours was theirs. They claim to be the peace party, ready to buy the Siva back at my figure. They swear the money will be ready. They also warned me that the others are somewhere around here and that we'd have to deal with them as best we could. This bunch will not, or can not interfere. The two parties are acting independently, and I gather there's a sort of race on between them."

"It's a trick, just to get us to open the gates."

"They've agreed to come in daylight, and show the cash before we open to them. It's a fair enough offer. Let them come buying, or let them come fighting, we'll be ready either way, and that will be the end of this cat and mouse business."

LORING jerked in his bonds. "Don't sell out, Melody," he pleaded. "Wait till the Colonel comes back. Give him a chance to get here. It's only the fair thing to do."

"I'm sick of waiting for Pottermax," Melody snapped. "To hell with him. We've played nursemaid to Siva long enough. When the little brown brethren show up with the money the Siva goes with them, and I'll help them load it. Yes, and I'll throw in the truck, too. Pottermax had his chance. He's tried to gyp us out of our money. What does he think we are, a bunch

of punks? Before I'd leave the Siva here, I'd take a blow-torch and melt it down to a shapeless lump."

Digger was looking at the statue. "That offer sounds phoney to me," he insisted. "What can they do with it after they get it? How will they get that heavy thing back to Shikanoi Temple?"

"If we managed to smuggle it in, they can smuggle it out again. Anyway, that's their headache, not ours. They've got real money behind them, and they're willing to spend it. That greases the road anywhere."

Melody walked closer to the Siva. "People sure have funny notions. There's Colonel Pottermax, who was willing to part with a fortune to get hold of a genuine Siva. No imitation stuff for him. Yet what is it? Just a statue, and not all honest metal at that, judging by the weight. There's a handful of semi-precious stones on it, but what of that? I was surprised to see what a cheap lot they are. The whole bunch is not worth over a thousand or so.

"Look at the eye-stones. You'd think they were rubies, but they're not—they're a rather inferior grade of rubelite. So is the navel piece. And those collar and head-dress stones are spinels. The fact is, there's not a real, first-class gem in the lot. Which brings up the question, why did Pottermax insist on having the Shikanoi Siva and no other? There were plenty of others easier to get at, easier to handle, and practically unguarded. This one was guarded as though it were the Emerald Buddha itself? Why? Why, Loring? The Phangoa Siva is set with three pigeon's-blood rubies that'd make your mouth water just to see them. It is smaller and lighter than this one. It would've been as easy as kidnapping a scarecrow. Just a matter of dropping a bag over its head and running.

"There's something queer about this whole business. I can't put my finger on it, but it's there. Why did Pottermax pick out this particular Siva and then run out on us at the last minute? Why was there such an infernal racket after we took it, and yet no official complaint was made? Hanoi Ghan could have bought a dozen Sivas for half of what he spent trying to track us down. I can understand their sending out a war party for revenge, but why should any

of them be authorized to buy it back at my figure?"

"You haven't seen the color of their money yet," Digger replied. "It's all a fake. They'll doublecross you."

"If they try it we'll mow them down," Mellody retorted. "At any rate they've gone away. The dogs have shut up."

"Don't sell to them, Mr. Mellody. Hold on and wait until you hear from Colonel Pottermax," Loring still pleaded. He seemed genuinely earnest and anxious. "Let me go," he begged, "you can afford to do that much. I haven't done anything against you."

"If I set you free, can you produce Pottermax by tomorrow night?"

"No, but I am sure he will return."

"Can you produce the money Pottermax promised by tomorrow night?"

"No, but the Colonel will have it with him."

"That's what you say. No, Loring, you'd be of no more use to us free than tied up. Besides, I haven't finished with you, just because I've found a new buyer. I'm going to get to the bottom of all this hocus-pocus. Why did you get Octoria to pretend she was a deaf-mute? Why —"

MELLODY stopped suddenly, staring over Loring's head as if he were about to come down with a Siva-seizure, then he howled with laughter as he sank into a chair, pounding the arms with his fists. He kept up this unnatural mirth so long that his men began to eye him suspiciously. Johnny Carpen had long since concluded that there must be a wide streak of insanity in the man.

"Why, you old fraud! You pious old goat! So Lightfoot is very jealous of his wife, eh? Now I know why you were so upset when I warned you to keep the fair Octoria out of sight. That brought the blood into your cheeks. Mrs. Lightfoot, eh? Ha! Ha! Ha! Deaf and dumb, eh? Misery loves company? Let's have some nuptial music! A wedding march! 'Oh, promise me' on the chimes. Chimes? I have it—the very thing!"

The pinioned butler looked on in amazement. By this time he must have thought his captor totally and completely mad.

Mellody ran across the room to a strong, wired-glass cabinet, wrenched loose the lock,

and returned bearing the pride of the Pottermax jade collection, the famous Kien Lung Bell, carved from a single piece of *feitsui*, or imperial jade. Around its top extended an exquisitely carved band of bats and kylins. The bat, Oriental symbol of happiness, and the fabulous kylin, the stag-dragon, held to be the noblest of beasts, appearing only at the birth of sages.

"This is a beauty," gloated Mellody, running his fingers over it, "far better than anything in the Bishop or Woodward collections. Let's get it tuned up for that music." He tapped its sides with the butt of his automatic, setting it swinging from its carved teakwood yoke.

Loring flinched. "You'll break it, you fool!" he shouted.

"Don't get excited, man," Mellody answered coolly. "You don't know much about the subject, Loring, or you'd know that jade is called by the Chinese the musical stone. Confucius used to soothe his mind by making music on a set of jade chimes. It's all in knowing how."

Tap—tap—tap went the metal butt against the three-hundred-year-old bell, in increasing tempo. It swung to and fro, then the ghost of a tone wavered from it. Harder—harder—and the note of the tough, fibrous jade bell was beaten forth—protesting. Louder—louder it beat upon the air as Mellody's arm came down in increased cadence.

Loring writhed and twisted in the chair. He seemed to be undergoing torture. His eyes were wild and terrible, the lines of his face askew. "Stop it—stop it!" he screamed in impotent fury.

Above the tumbling, shivery tones of the precious bell, sounded Mellody's crackling laugh. Then, with a tremendous crash, he brought down his arm and the pistol butt shattered the priceless jade. Three times Mellody's arm went up and came crashing down before this master product of the Kien Lung artists was smitten into toneless shards.

The butler, the man who "didn't care a damn for this Oriental junk" was writhing like a snake, screaming like a madman. "Vandal! Barbarian! Butcher!" His eyes blazed with maniacal fury. His chair jerked from side to side under his frenzied surges. His mouth was near to foaming. It worked with horrible intensity even when no words

came forth. Curses strangled of their own fury in his throat and issued as croaking sobs. Had he been free he would have flown at Mellody's throat like one of the Pottermax dogs.

Mellody sent the priceless wreckage flying to all corners with one sweep of his arm. Teeth gritted, he shook his fist in Loring's face. His words came tumbling out like a long-dammed cataract flinging itself down a mountain slope.

"Loring! You are Pottermax—Colonel Oriston Pottermax!"

VIII

MELLODY pointed an accusing finger at the cringing man. "There's no such person as Loring, the butler. That was all a swindle—a fake—from the start. I see it all now. You hired some one to play the Colonel at our first meeting. That was smart work all right, but not quite smart enough to fool Daniel J. for long. He smelled a rat. Lightfoot, Octoria, the forged letter, the lies about the trip to town, every little clue told me that the Colonel had *not* left Dreamer's Rest. Just a play for time, a chance to get at the Siva, maybe to get rid of us by poison and get it for nothing. It took me a little while to tumble to it, Colonel, because you started this trick so early in the game, but here I am, ready for you. You couldn't sit there and watch that marvelous bit of jade being smashed. No real collector could. You had to unmask yourself, and I knew it. And now, by God, you're going to tell us why you were so anxious to swindle us out of this thing. Spill it, damn you, spill it!"

The enraged man seized the steel pliers. The truth of Mellody's startling deductions was plain to behold in the pseudo-butler's terrified air, his cringing, stricken eyes, looking this way and that for escape. Carpen could see nothing but death waiting for the man who had tried to outwit Mellody.

What tortures the latter might have wrought in his vicious rage will never be known, for, as he approached his twisting but helpless captive, three shots in rapid succession came from above-stairs.

Then came Joe Burkett's stentorian bellows as he came bounding down the stairs.

"Mellody! Mellody! Lightfoot's gone! He climbed down a spout from his window. And the woman! They're running to the garage! They'll get the car! Stop them!"

Indeed, at that moment they heard the explosive backfire of the car outside. "That sounds like our truck," Mellody shouted. "After them, everybody! We'll catch them at the gates! Shoot them down!"

They rushed through the hall and unbolted the front door. Before they could get through and take proper aim the truck was swooping past the corner of the house. Digger's gun emptied a whole clip after it, but the bullets were wild and ineffectual.

"Come on," Mellody cried, "they've got to stop at the gates! We'll catch them there! Watch out for the dogs!" The roar of his gun sent several of the animals scampering. The others were running beside the truck, yelping and leaping as if they were out for a frolic.

Lightfoot was not as slow-witted as he was slow-footed. He did not follow the curving gravel driveway, but sent the truck directly toward the gates, cutting across the smooth lawn and plowing right through the shrubbery.

Mellody and his men tumbled after them, holding their fire. They kept in a knot, ready to handle the dogs should they turn on them. By that time Lightfoot's machine was going in high gear. As he neared the barrier he put on an extra burst of speed. The heavy front punched through the inner fence as if it were paper, then catapulted into the barbed-wire gates. The mass, the weight, the momentum, were sufficient—the gate was demolished, torn, twisted, bent aside, leaving a gaping breach.

OCTORIA gave an exultant cry as the crouching Negro steadied the lurching truck and sent it whirling down the out-road. The headlights quickly swept from sight, followed by a futile spray of lead from the baffled pursuers' guns.

Black night closed down on Mellody and his men, chagrined and defeated. There remained that deadly breach in their defensive barrier. Through it the dogs had gone scampering along behind the escaping truck. A chill, dark silence fell. Behind them shone a faint light from the open door of

Dreamer's Rest. From the woods beyond the breach came sly whisperings. Perhaps only the wind stirring the crisp, dead leaves—

And then it came—the blood-chilling screech that showed the avenging Arms of Siva were watching and waiting. Again and again it rose on the black night, to the left, to the right, from in front. Those others had gone away, as the silence of the Pottermax pack had attested. These, then, must be the ruthless brown men, consecrated to death without mercy or pity. Far away there was a spurt of flame, and the familiar whine of a bullet that was not too far off its course.

"Quick!" Mellody yelled. "Back to the house! Run!"

Johnny, wedged between Mellody and Digger, could not have broken away then, even if he would rather have taken his chance with the brown men than return to that sinister house. Shaken, panting from their sharp sprint, they bolted the doors of Dreamer's Rest.

Mellody stood at the foot of the stairs, his hopes collapsing, but still every inch the commander. He despatched Joe and Bill to make sure that every door and window in the place was properly barred, not forgetting the one on the third floor from which Lightfoot and Octoria had escaped, for the brown men were like monkeys.

He strode into the banquet room. Loring was straining and wrenching at his bonds until the veins on his forehead stood out near to bursting. Mellody laughed at him, taunting him to make greater efforts.

Rap! Rap! Rap! came a summons at the heavy front doors of Dreamer's Rest. Mellody hurried out into the hall. He directed his men to strategic points, himself standing under the center light, gun ready.

Again the three steady raps.

"Shall I fire through the door when they knock again?" Digger whispered.

"No. The wood's too thick. Save it."

Presently Joe Burkett signaled to them. "I hear a queer noise here at the back. Sounds like water splashing." They went to the rear of the hall and listened. Nothing.

"I hear it, too," Bill called. "It's a swishing noise." They put their ears to the wall. Mellody's eyes narrowed. There was a faint sound somewhere, something going drip, drip, drip.

Mellody sniffed the air. There was a pungent odor, growing in intensity. "Gasoline!" Johnny Carpen exclaimed. There came a low whirr, a few faint crackles, and a thin roll of smoke puffed in under the rear door.

Digger's face paled. "Fire!" he gasped. "They've found the storage tank in the garage and drenched the walls with gasoline. God! They're going to burn us out!"

Panic seized them in its merciless grasp. They milled about in the hallway, everywhere finding their worst fears realized. If the brown men had resorted to fire as a bluff to lure them out into the open, the construction of Dreamer's Rest had fooled them, for it caught hold like a spark in a tinder-box. The hum of spreading flame was fast becoming a roar.

"Let me think—let me think," Mellody muttered, standing pale but erect, a statue of despair, but with unimpaired courage.

Rap! Rap! Rap! came the summons at the front door. No smoke came from there, but no one wanted to open that door. Panic-stricken, Digger whirled and leveled his gun. He sent an answering bullet to each tap. Almost immediately there was a heavy roar, an explosion that jarred them all to the floor, and the doors were shattered, the splintered remains hanging drunkenly from their hinges. A dense white smoke rolled in. Only one light bulb survived the blast. From the banquet room came the sound of falling, breaking objects, and Pottermax's shrill screams for help.

JOHNNY CARPEN went down with the rest of them before that blast. He struggled to his feet, gun in hand, faced with the necessity of expending his three bullets against the followers of Hanoi Ghan. But no brown men came swarming through the opening. Nothing happened. No shots. No cries. Just a battered, broken doorway, with smoke rolling in.

There were other proofs of that, besides the smoke pouring across the threshold. It was growing hot. Hot enough to start the perspiration oozing on Mellody's nearly bald pate. Soon it would be unbearable.

Daniel J. Mellody came out of the explosion completely mad. He had picked himself up from the floor, glaring, red-eyed, fangs bared like a wild beast's.

"Stick it out!" he croaked. "Let 'em come. Stick with Siva and they can't touch us. When they come through that door we'll blast 'em. They'll never get it back."

They gave him the fearful, sidelong glance one gives a mad dog. To run or roast, that was their choice. Bill pulled himself together, changing the grip on his gun, and dashed out through the yawning opening, veiled by billows of pearly smoke.

There was a sound, a shot, a wild cry. Then silence.

"See," Melody yelled, "they got him. He walked right into it. That's what they're waiting for!"

Nevertheless Joe and Digger began a stealthy movement forward, hugging the walls. Behind them Melody spat out curses. "Yellow! Yellow!" he roared after them as they breasted their way into the unknown. There was a burst of gunfire, shouts, and then the shots stopped abruptly. The madman laughed and laughed until a bullet came whizzing through the smoke and made a round hole in the staircase.

Melody saw Johnny crouching there, gun in hand. He dipped into his pocket and gave him a handful of shells. "Here you are, Carpen. Load up. We'll show them. You've got more guts than all the rest of them!"

They retreated into the banquet room. Melody slammed shut the doors, locked them, and they worked feverishly barricading it with all the furniture they could move into place.

The sealed-up room threatened to become a purgatory. The corners were already hazy with smoke, which poured across the high ceiling, rolling lower and lower as it gained in volume.

Melody approached his captive. Madness and death looked out of his eyes. At the mere sight of his face Pottermax screamed until his voice choked. Above them, on the dais, towered the stolen Siva, vengeful, snarling God of Destruction, multiple arms reaching to destroy, feet prancing with rage.

HE TOOK the old man by the throat. He smiled down at him, such a smile as old Pottermax had never seen before, not even on a heathen devil-mask. "We're

not leaving here; you and I," said the purring voice. "We're staying right here with Siva. Nobody shall ever have him. He's mine." The hands tightened. "Why did you try to cheat me, Colonel? Come on, speak up. You won't have long—"

The Colonel's will was shattered. "There are jewels," he gasped, as Melody hung over him. "The Shikanoi Siva has been the hiding-place for the sacred jewels for centuries. I knew that, but I could not get near it—the guard was too strict. Three times I tried. I—I couldn't bring myself to kill. I was afraid. So I sent you back for it."

Melody looked down at him with satanic glee. "So that was it! Old Siva's got a bellyful of jewels and you wanted to get them for a song. No wonder the brown men didn't squawk at my price. But you—you couldn't keep an honest bargain. You had to lie and cheat. The wealth of Golconda offered for a dollar, and you try to beat the price down to two bits. It serves you right, damn you. Now, Colonel, just whisper to old Daniel J. how to get at this treasure hoard. Hurry, hurry, we've got to move fast!"

"Melody! They're battering at the door!" Johnny warned. "We'd better unbar one of the windows and run for it!"

"Hold them off! Give 'em a dose of lead. That'll keep them back. Five minutes more! I'm going to get those jewels. We'll have time enough."

THE iron hands eased their hold on the wrinkled throat. "There's a spring—an opening—in the back of—the mouth," Pottermax wheezed.

Melody exploded. "Liar! Liar!" he screamed. "That's how the others died. There's death in that mouth! Bull cleared the packing straw from it—and died; George stuffed a sandwich in it—and died. You'd like me to reach in there and die, too, eh? Come on, out with it—how is it worked?"

The cruel fingers dug like talons into Pottermax's neck. The old man gagged and choked. "The mouth—mouth—mouth!" he drooled, then collapsed like a puppet that has had its leading wires cut. Johnny, watching the doors slowly buckling under the assault from the far side, pumped his

three bullets where he thought they would do the most good. There were cries of anger and dismay from the hall as he filled the clip of his automatic.

Even though Dreamer's Rest was doomed, nothing could sway Melody from his adamant purpose. The muffled roar and crackle of flames dominated all other sounds. Here was a blazing funeral pyre for both Melody's daring quest and Pottermax's evil greed. In two corners of the room actual flames were visible through the smoke. The cellars below were ablaze, and eventually the pressure must crumple the floor like so much paper and wipe them out with one blast of its fiery breath. In places the hot boards stung through leather soles.

A momentary break in the billowing smoke brought out the face of Siva, triumphant. Snarling an answer to the challenge, Melody whipped up his gun and pumped bullet after bullet at the towering god. The heavy air muffled the shots to dull roars. The bullets ricocheted from the metal image, leaving scar-like creases. One carried away the left eye of the god, giving him an even more vindictive look.

But Melody had not done with Siva. Mouthing terrible cries, no longer a man, but a primal, atavistic fury, he leaped to the dais and hurled himself on the god. He tugged, and strained, and beat his hard hands on the harder metal to overthrow the idol. Panting, spent, he slid back to the floor.

THE brown men, with chattering cries, were battering at the door again. Johnny let them have three or four bullets, but it only gave them temporary pause. Conserving his remaining bullets, he ran to one of the windows, flung it up, and began to tug at the bolts that held the metal-lined shutters.

Melody's hand chanced to fall on the axe which had been used to open the crate. He swung it with renewed ferocity, battering with the blunt end against the grinning features. Again and again he flailed away at Siva, this mad Melody who would wrestle with a god on the very brink of hell.

His thews had the power of steel, and

nothing less than the annihilation of Siva would slake his revenge. Blows showered down upon the head, the body, the legs. Stripped of his stones, battered, eye sockets empty, the god still snarled. Not even an axe could hammer that away.

Melody's heart seemed to rise into his throat to choke off his breath. Wheezing, babbling curses, the madman swung a terrible blow full against the snarling mouth. That blow jarred loose the secret of the Shikanoi Siva. An oval portion of the heavily ridged abdomen came loose in response. Behind it was a sparkle, a glitter!

Melody shouted his triumph. He repeated the blow. The secretly hinged plate opened a little wider. Small stones trickled through and went bouncing away over the floor. Glittering stones of many colors—the Treasure of Shikanoi! Guarded by the death-dealing snarl of Siva!

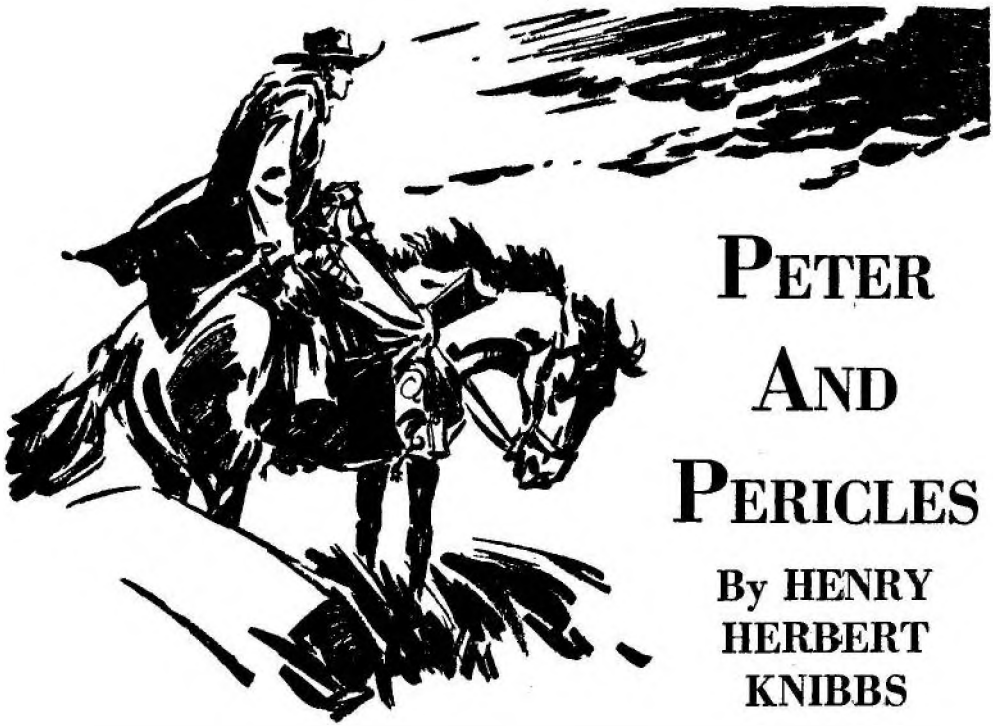
The axe sank into the umbilical crevice. It stuck fast. Melody tugged, wrenched, pulled with the strength of ten men. The hoarded treasure was leaking now like grains of corn from a split sack.

Without warning the battered Siva tumbled over, thrown off balance by the frantic pull, and crushed down the man beneath it. Melody, pinned on his back, screamed with pain. Pearls, rubies, amethysts, opals, emeralds, poured out upon the floor to mock him. Flames licking hungrily, a roaring in the air and in his ears, and red, red, red everywhere in the world.

Johnny approached him warily. He needed that axe. Melody, looking through a red mist, thought he came after the jewels. He clawed them to him like a dying miser. Carpen snatched the axe and groped his way back to the window. He hammered and pounded until the metal-backed shutters gave way. Tongues of fire flicked at him from the flaming woodwork.

Melody, pinned down by the Siva in the doomed room, sobbed and cursed by turn as his fingers blindly gathered closer to his body the now useless Treasure of Shikanoi. Scorched and singed, Johnny Carpen dived headlong through the ring of flame. The darkness of night on Pontico Hill wrapped him in safety that was like a cool caress after a terrible fever.

Three Times in as Many Days the Stolen Stallion Changed Hands



PETER AND PERICLES

By HENRY
HERBERT
KNIBBS

THE Arizona moonlight played tricks among the squat junipers dotting the Moonstone rancho. The brush, the red earth, the occasional outcrops of rock appeared to float in a mist of transparent silver. Wandering over to the southeast corner of the horse pasture with his old companion, Piecrust, the young stallion Pericles stood drowsing in the shadow of a juniper. A fugitive, desperately in need of a fresh horse wormed under the fence. The young stallion sharpened his ears. His neck tingled with apprehension. Inch by inch the man worked toward the deeper shadows of the junipers. Pericles snorted, whirled. The loop of the fugitive's rope rose and spread with a soft hiss. Pericles ran straight into it.

Early that morning, Jimmy Hobbs rode over to the Moonstone ranch. The Triangle outfit was giving a dance. Wouldn't Mrs. Annersley drive over and fetch along Buck and his fiddle?

Ma Annersley wasn't so sure she could come. But wouldn't Jimmy have another cup of coffee. Jimmy would. And who had been riding that sorrel over east of the horse

pasture, that stuck his leg in a prairie dog hole and had to be shot? Ma Annersley was puzzled. There were no sorrel horses in Moonstone pasture. After Jimmy had left she spoke to the foreman, who investigated. Somebody, riding a sorrel sometime recently had stolen, not one of the thirty regular cow ponies then in pasture, but Pericles, Peter's Pericles!

Ma Annersley knew what that meant. Peter loved that young stallion. He would trail him and fetch him back if it took all summer. Ma Annersley was not one to mourn unnecessarily. Yet tears filled her eyes as later that morning she gazed at the lone rider crossing the Moonstone pasture. "But if he hadn't gone," she reflected, "and him caring for that horse like he does, it just wouldn't have been Peter."

MANY miles north of the Moonstone, in the Anvil Butte desert, Pericles chose the worst piece of going they had yet struck to snatch the rein, hide his head and break in two. Rid of his strange rider Pericles ran until his excitement died down. Mountain bred, he began to work back to-

ward his own country. As he reached the foothills west of Anvil Butte the coils of rope, dancing on the saddle horn, fell and became entangled in a root. He was caught. But he knew better than to struggle. The stars faded. Flaming lances of the sun shattered in showers of gold on distant butte and pinnacle. Fugitive and flight forgotten, Pericles drowsed in the warmth of dawn.

Shorty and his partner had had an argument that morning, a bitter argument about the responsibility for a stretch of down fence and some stray saddle stock. They had left the line shack without eating breakfast, and had been combing the foothills of the Devil range since daybreak. As they rode out onto a small, grassy opening, Shorty stopped. Above the brush opposite loomed the head and ears of a magnificent horse. But the tall puncher was first to dismount and untangle the rope that held the stray.

Far back in the hills, many hours from the Moonstone, the tall puncher made a tiny fire among the pines, threw and hog-tied Pericles and heated a running iron. "Never been branded," he said, as he stooped to take the iron from the fire. "I'll just make him somebody's horse.

"Whose, meebby?"

The tall puncher paused. Was that any of Shorty's business? They argued, each claiming the stray stallion. Stooping again to reach for the iron, the tall puncher burnt his hand. Shorty laughed.

The tall man whirled about. They went for their guns, firing swiftly. Pericles heaved and struggled in a frenzy of fear. The tall man sank slowly and lay in a grotesque huddle. Shorty, who had been hit twice, knew he hadn't long to stay. He stared at the captive stallion. "How much am I bid? Going . . . going . . . stout, handy, knows cow work . . . how much am I bid?" Stumbling toward the stallion he fumbled at the ropes. Pericles lunged up and rocketed down through the timber of the mountainside. Shorty waved his hand. "So long, somebody's horse!"

DISTRUST of men and a new hunger for freedom urged the young Moonstone stallion out and away from the shadowy forest land into the all-visible of flat, sheer space. Head up, mane and tail plumes

of smoke on the breeze, he gradually began to swing round the arc of a great circle that would take him back to the south country and Moonstone.

Over toward Socorro a Bar Cross cowboy became aware that his own mount had stopped and was gazing at something in the brush. A stray slant of sunlight struck down on the bronze head and forefront of a horse, its nostrils red rimmed, its eye showing white. Johnny moved his mount around the juniper thicket. "Gosh-amighty!" he murmured as he saw Pericles. It was a stiff chase, up that rock-strewn wash, and the young stallion might have escaped had he not unwittingly run into a sheer wall at the head of the canyon. Pericles followed sullenly as the Bar Cross hand led him down and out of the wash, the unwilling property of the third man who had captured him in less than two days.

When Johnny led Pericles up to the stone house that evening his partner Gene was flouring a couple of big fresh steaks. Gene looked up long enough to appraise the Moonstone horse. "Hm." He slapped a steak into the skillet. "No brand. No rider. Tar Baby, I'd call him."

"Only he's a roan."

"And an awful lot of horse. You didn't say roan, did you?" Gene gazed dreamily at the sizzling steak. "Say, man Johnny, you wouldn't think of selling a horse that didn't belong to you, would you? I mean, selling him to a friend."

"He's sold!" said Johnny promptly.

And much to his surprise, his partner Gene promptly handed him thirty dollars.

TRAILING the stolen horse to the general neighborhood of Magdalena, Peter Annersley of the Moonstone learned that two cowhands had been found shot to death beside the ashes of a small fire, far up in the Datil hills. A short iron was found in the ashes. Their own mounts had been accounted for, but not the tracks of a horse they had been leading. Convinced that the tragedy was in some way connected with the pride of the Moonstone caviyard, Peter drifted over to the Bar Cross horse pasture. Jimpson Weed was alone and glad to see the owner of the Moonstone. Grumblingly he told Peter that Gene and Johnny had

gone canteloping off somewhere, probably to Socorro to play poker. But why they took a pack horse along with 'em, was a mystery.

The following morning Peter Annersley took the trail over the mountain. The sign he read puzzled him. A led horse had broken away from someone and headed out into the desert. The tracks corresponded with those he had been following for three days. Peter followed them until he discovered that the young stallion had headed up into the high meadows of Thunder Mountain. Thunder Mountain! That was Judson Hammil's stamping ground. And "Horse thief" was merely one of the milder terms applied to the Hammils. But Peter had come a long way and would go a long way further to recover his favorite mount. He had bought and paid for him with sweat and trouble. With the infinite patience of the man who wins animals to his will rather than breaks them, he had won Pericles to his use and pleasure. While Peter took a pardonable pride in his horsemanship, in his quiet way he took an even greater pride in his ability to keep that for which he had striven.

SEARCHING for grass and water, Pericles traveled along the foothills, by degrees working up into the Thunder Mountain timberlands. Again he had escaped from his captors. Waiting till the two Bar Cross men stopped for a brief noon rest, the apparently docile stallion suddenly reared, lunged forward and snapped the rope. Before the surprised cowboys could get to their mounts he was too far to be overtaken.

Now, his mane and foretop bunched with cockle burrs, his sides caked with dust and sweat, he drifted from meadow to meadow, prospecting his new domain. That night he sought an open spot on the mountainside and caught up a little on his sleep. At dawn he began to graze slowly along the broad, timbered crest of the range, working south. The distant Moonstone, with its familiar pastures, the Southern mesas and the Southern hills, were calling him back.

As he approached a grassy opening, he belled his nostrils, and his crest rounded in an autocratic arch. Their colts beside them, a band of mares plodded along one of the trails—the steeldust mares of the Hammils.

At sight of Pericles they stopped, heads up, ears sharply curious, their colts imitating them with juvenile intensity. Like a battalion of bugles the echoes answered Pericles' challenge. Somebody's horse? Now he belonged to the wild. Here was a family such as he would have chosen; a family, and a home.

Again with his kind the young stallion took his natural place in the scheme of things. Forgotten were Piecrust, Peter Annersley, and the Moonstone country. There was no urge to leave these new-found pastures.

Pericles ran with the mares, secure in his new-found freedom. He learned the trails from meadow to meadow, the water holes, the sparsely timbered peaks and the wooded canyons. Half wild, the steel-dust mares of the Hammils roamed much. Their range was unfenced, yet they made no effort to leave it. Mountain bred, they shunned the low country. Only when snow came did they drift down to the lower reaches, grazing in Blue Canyon, Horse Thief Hollow, and along the desert foothills.

MANY miles from the Hammil homestead, the mares and colts moved lazily in the noon heat, grazing along the south slope of Thunder Mountain. Head up, his mane ruffled, his eyes on the edge of timber below, Pericles stood sniffing the light breeze. Faintly there came to him the smell of a sweating horse toiling up the trail. Presently he caught the smell of man. His ears flattened and he swung his head like a fighting stallion when about to attack. Every fiber in him told him to run, but curiosity held him. First he would see what he was running from. He stiffened to a statue when the head and shoulders of a man appeared, and the head and forefront of a horse. Suddenly he knew the horse and knew the man. It was Peter Annersley, and the old cow pony, Walking John.

Pericles had begun to revert to the wild state. For a week he had not seen a human being. Yet the old authority, the old significance still held. The very fact that he was free and could run made him independent of fear.

"Well, Perry!" Low and even came Peter's familiar greeting.

Pericles' ears twitched. The primitive tugged at him. Against it he felt the pull of habit and curiosity. Peter sat his mount simply looking at Pericles. If he could come near enough to use his voice without startling the distant mares, he might capture him. Urging his horse forward a few yards he stopped again. One or two of the mares raised their heads and stared.

"Nice family you've got," Peter spoke as though to a human companion. "Good grass, too." Pericles flicked an ear. Peter moved his horse forward again. Wise and dependable Walking John seemed to know what was expected. As Pericles showed signs of bolting, the old cow pony stopped. "You're not wild," said Peter, chuckling. "You only think you're wild. What say if we both behave ourselves, and jog back home together?"

No vibration of overanxiousness ran from the solid, quiet man who faced him. Peter's low, easy intonation told the young stallion that his owner was in a friendly mood. Walking John was now within a few feet of the young stallion. Peter knew that the slightest move toward his rope would end their visit. If, however, he could get near enough to even slip his bandanna over Pericles' neck, the young stallion would stand.

With casual ease Peter dismounted and let the reins fall. He stood at Walking John's shoulder. Walking John's head came up, as Pericles whinnied softly. They touched noses. His faded blue bandanna in his hand, Peter wiped his forehead. "Just suppose," he said quietly, as he moved imperceptibly up to the stallion, "I slip my hand up, so . . ." Pericles quivered as he felt the twisted bandanna across his neck. Of all things he feared the rope. To all intents and purposes, he was again a captive. Yet he experienced no sense of being mastered. Good nature, friendliness, humor radiated from his owner. One of the distant mares whinnied—a shrill, startled call that brought the other mares round, heads up. Pericles whirled, snorted, stood for an instant watching the mares, then broke away and rocketed down the meadow.

The band bunched and drove toward the distant timber. For a second or two Walking John watched them, then lowered his head

and went to grazing. Tucking the bandanna back into his pocket, the owner of the Moonstone mounted and drifted on down the south slope of the mountain. It had taken him two weeks to trail and locate the lost stallion—two weeks of difficult tracking, chance meals, indiscriminate sleeping places. Nor had he had any help. Peter Annersley told no one where he was journeying nor why. Such news would run ahead of him, hamper and possibly frustrate him.

NOW, as he drifted down the wooded trail he saw in perspective a long and stiff campaign. Alone, unaided, it would be next to impossible to run Pericles down and rope him. The range was too spacious, the country too rough. He might make a deal with the Hammils. But once aware of Pericles' quality, and that he carried no brand, chances were they would claim him and demand a stiff price for him. Or agree to catch him up and return him—and they would never do that. Judson Hammil, father and chief of the clan—Peter and he had punched cows together, years ago, down on the Tonto—had become the most notorious horse thief in New Mexico.

Peter went warily. As he rode down the long winding trail, he reached in his vest pocket and drew forth a cartridge. He gazed at the polished brass, the blunt-nosed lead. For over twenty years he had carried that solitary shell, a memento of the Tonto Basin war. He tucked the cartridge back into his vest pocket. Jud Hammil had not always been outlaw. Once Peter and he had been friends. Perhaps it would be just as well to go direct to him and demand his property. But Peter was dubious. There were Hammil's sons to be reckoned with. Necessarily clannish, they decided all questions by open vote. Even if Judson were willing to return the stallion, it was likely his sons would vote him down.

THE next day Peter Annersley rode up to the mountain homestead, described Pericles, and told the Hammils, simply, that he wanted him. Tall black-bearded Judson Hammil turned to his sons—Ira and Brent, and the hunchback, Finn. Ira and Brent, loafing at the long table in the big moun-

tain cabin, said they weren't interested in the stallion.

"I know Annersley," said Judson Hammil.

Finn laughed. "Since when have we been turning over unbranded stock to anybody that asks for 'em?"

"He's my horse," said Peter.

Aware of Finn's attitude, Judson Hammil told Peter he could have the stallion but that he'd have to catch him up himself. This Peter knew he could not do. Finn, washing the supper dishes, jerked his flour sack apron off, and flinging it on the floor, stamped on it. "I vote no!" he cried in shrill fury.

"That'll do," said Judson Hammil. Whereat Finn, subject to epileptic fits, became so violent that his brothers had to hold him. Finally they carried him to a bunk, frothing and muttering. For a while Peter and the Hammils casually discussed stock, grazing and the cattle market. When Finn had quieted down, his father asked him if he had reconsidered his vote.

The hunchback's voice was a vicious whisper. "I vote no!"

"All right, Jud." Peter rose, and declining an obviously insincere invitation to stop till morning, mounted and rode on down the mountainside.

IT WAS long past midnight when he arrived at his headquarters—Manuel Vaca's place in the Arroyo Hondo. His Mexican friend had news. It had been whispered that the Hammils were expecting trouble. They had stolen a bunch of horses from a rancho over west of the mountain, horses, Manuel explained, that had previously been stolen by the Yancy boys. "Thief steal from thief," declared Manuel. "And that is bad. For a long time, the Yancy vaqueros and the Hameels have had that bad feeling. Now it will be the big fight, no?"

Peter drank hot coffee and disposed of a plate of beans as he pondered the possibilities. The old Mexican often freighted provisions up to the Hammils. He knew the hill country.

Next day, in Socorro, Peter borrowed a carbine and bought a belt full of ammunition.

On a ledge above the trail in Horsethief Canyon, Peter Annersley lay watching. An occasional shaft of moonlight broke through the clouded night sky, defining the stone corral immediately below, the stone house some fifty yards beyond it, and the trail leading down into the somber depths of the canyon. Saddled and bridled, four horses moved restlessly about the enclosure. One of the horses was Pericles.

Just before dust had settled down, Judson Hammil and his son Ira had ridden down from the mountain. Each led an extra horse. They were heavily armed. Approaching the stone house with extreme caution, they scanned the trail both up and down before they entered.

Having learned from the Mexican Manuel that one of the Hammils had captured Pericles and had him corralled at the homestead, Peter set out on an experimental journey. Pericles running with the steel-dust mares was out of his reach. But Pericles in a definite location was quite a different matter.

He had found the Hammil homestead temporarily abandoned. There was no one about, and no stock in the corral. That afternoon, working through the timber to the head of Horsethief Canyon on his way down to the desert, Peter heard horses coming. He barely managed to reach the ledge where he now lay when the two Hammils appeared. When Peter saw Pericles he determined to recapture him.

Evidently the Hammils were taking precautions against a possible surprise by the Yancys. As no one stood guard near the stone house, Peter surmised that Brent Hammil and the hunchback Finn were on guard at the upper end of the trail. His only way out was past the stone house, which he couldn't pass without being heard. The canyon trail was narrow, winding and steep. Night was his only friend.

As he stretched to ease his cramped muscles, a dislodged pebble fell to the rock below. A crack of light showed at the door of the stone house, and a shadowy figure stepped out. For several seconds the man stood listening, then went in. Peter shrugged. If a dislodged pebble could be heard that distance, there was slim chance of getting away with Pericles.

The hoot of an owl floated across the dusky canyon. The corralled horses moved about restlessly. Waiting until a barricade of clouds again blotted the moon, Peter picked up his rifle and moved cautiously along the ledge. Entering the corral swiftly, he spoke to Pericles in a low voice. The young stallion whirled and took round the enclosure, the other horses milled with him. Huddled in a corner, they stopped and faced him. He heard someone coming from the stone house. In a few seconds the cloud barricade would pass the moon. There was but one place to hide. He lay down and rolled under the water trough.

THE oncoming footsteps reached the corral. Peter could hear the soft creak of saddles as the horses breathed. For a long time the man stood listening in the silence. A slow drip from the water trough kept tapping Peter's face, but he dared not move. The gate creaked, and the listener came over to the water trough. Peter could have reached out and touched his boots. The trickle of water, ice cold, ran down Peter's neck. Finally the mountain man turned and walked back to the stone house.

Peter crawled out, and speaking Pericles' name, walked toward him. In the moonlight the horses could see what Peter was. They allowed him to approach. Still speaking to Pericles in a low voice, Peter reached up and caught hold of his bridle. The other horses stood quietly watching him as he led Pericles out. The trail past the stone house, clear in the moonlight, vanished in the shadows of the distant canyon wall. Certain that he could not pass the house unheard, he decided to take it on the run. As for making the sharp bend in the trail just beyond the stone house, that was one more chance he had to take.

Pericles, fretting to go, leaped forward. Moonlight glinted on a rifle barrel as one of the Hammils stepped out. Bending low, Peter spurred the young stallion. A sliver of flame, the crash of a shot, the jolt of the impact as Pericles drove straight into the mountain man—and horse and rider swept on down the trail. Leaning with his mount as Pericles took the sharp bend on the run, Peter heard the whistle and crash of a second shot. "That would be the old man."

Slowly he took Pericles in, cooled him to a walk, talked to him. At that quiet gait Peter could hear should any follow. He thrust his short rifle into the empty scabbard. How Ma Annersley would scold at such goings on! But Ma Annersley wouldn't know, because she wouldn't ask questions. "I see you got Pericles. My, but you need a bath and a change of underwear!" Well, he had Pericles. But it was a long way to bacon and coffee. And about time, too. The darkness had begun to grow thinner. Far out on the desert the edge of the eastern hills showed sharp against the cold gray of early dawn.

Round bend after bend plodded Pericles, still on tiptoe, still hot to run. As Peter dismounted to take up the loose cinch he thought he heard the distant patter of hoofs. At the next bend he looked back. A horseman was rounding the bulge of the canyon wall on the run. As much as he disliked the risk, Peter let Pericles out. It was stiff going, even for the sure-footed stallion. Risking his own neck to avoid killing a man, Peter wished the other fellow could only see it that way. But who was the other fellow? One of the Yancys, or old man Hammil?

Foam-breasted, his nostrils wide, his ears sharp, Pericles charged on down the trail. Slowing to cross a wash strewn with boulders, he sped on out onto the sandy flat of the desert. Peter glanced back. The tall, black-bearded figure, recklessly spurring after him, was Judson Hammil.

The sun in his eyes, Peter Annersley headed for Anvil Butte. If he could keep just out of rifle shot, he could avoid a fight. The Hammils were big men, their mounts hill bred and hardy. Peter himself was pretty solid. But was there ever such a stout and big-hearted stayer as this particular Pericles?

Anvil Butte loomed black and somber in the early sun. Loose reined, neck outstretched, the mountain man's big steel-dust gelding ran a scant three hundred yards behind. A faint pop, and a spent bullet plowed the sand alongside Pericles. Peter looked back. Judson Hammil was still coming on at a run. Far behind him bobbed the figures of several riders in pursuit. Again came that ominous faint pop. Hammil's

horse swerved, but kept on. "That," said Peter to himself, "would be the Yancys."

So Judson Hammil was not the pursuer but the pursued! Peter found a grim humor in the situation. Hammil was in a tight place. Peter would no longer have to entertain him. The Yancys would attend to that.

In the broken country surrounding Anvil Butte Pericles slowed to a walk. Hammil's horse, still pounding on across the flat, had begun to lag. Before Peter had crossed a hundred yards of the rough, lava-strewn basin, Hammil had stopped, dismounted and curled down behind a high outcrop. Peter reined in. The horse of the mountain man was either hit or badly winded, and Hammil was going to shoot it out with his enemies. Now that was like old times down on the Tonto. Both Peter and Judson Hammil had fought through the Tonto Basin war together. Twenty, no, twenty-three years ago, reflected Peter. Both kids then. And Jud was considered square those days, if you weren't too particular about angles. One thing—he was game.

PETER could feel the sun warm on his shoulder; the same old sun that made the Tonto Basin hell and repeat. He dismounted. Black with sweat Pericles took a long breath, shook himself. Hammil's pursuers—there were six—had begun to spread out. Hammil's rifle cracked. One of the Yancy horses dropped and rolled over.

"Just so," said Peter, leading Pericles behind the shelter of a huge angled outcrop. Tying him to a chunk of lava and taking his short rifle, he made his way toward the rocky barricade where Judson Hammil lay.

A few yards back of Hammil, Peter stopped. "Take it easy, Jud," he said.

"Grand advice—with six of the Yancys popping at me, and your gun at my back." Hammil did not turn his head. A bullet nipped the edge of the outcrop and whined off at a sharp angle.

"I'll side you for a spell." Peter, crouched, worked toward the other.

"Suit yourself." Again Hammil's rifle barked. A distant rider, hatless, spurred for cover.

A few yards back of the outcrop, the mountain man's horse lay on its side. A glance told Peter the gray would never

get up again. Hammil was cool, his eye steady as he glanced at Peter. "Your horse give out?"

"No. He had just begun to run."

"Then why in hell did you come back? You're old enough to know better."

Peter grinned. "And you're just as sociable as ever. Need any help?"

Hammil shook his head. "They got past Finn and Brent. Ira's crippled so he can't move. But the old man's feeling healthy yet."

FOUR of the Yancys had now scattered to right and left, evidently planning to ride round and take Hammil from the rear. Two of the six were not visible. On his knees, Hammil peered over the top of the ledge. A shot spattered sand in his face. The mountain man spat. "Never was a Yancy that could shoot worth a damn."

"No?" said Peter Annersley as a slug droned past and struck the dead horse. Catching the angle from which the shot came, Hammil turned sideways and fired.

"Missed him," said Peter. "Heard it hit a rock."

"Suppose you try your hand?"

Peter assured Hammil he was a mere spectator. He had no quarrel with the Yancys. Hammil grunted. He wouldn't believe Peter Annersley under oath. Peter grinned. Come to think of it he didn't have to take an oath to be believed. "Not even for stealing cows?" said Hammil. "Everybody stole cows, then," retorted Peter. "And some stole horses." Hammil's beard twitched. "Got a canteen?"

"No. Dry?"

"No. But I expect to be, before I get out of here."

"And a long time afterwards."

There was an ominous cessation of firing. Hammil lighted his pipe, counted his cartridges and glanced at Peter's well filled belt. His back to the ledge, Peter watched to the right. Hammil watched to the left. A slug spattered on the lava behind which Pericles was tied. Peter waited. Another slug tossed a puff of sand at the base of the rock. "Have to stop that," he muttered.

"Ain't a bad little horse," said Hammil. "What did you pay for him?"

"Plenty." Peter fired several shots at the low barricade where one of the Yancys lay. But the concealed rifleman kept on firing leisurely at Pericles.

"Trying to put us both afoot," grumbled Hammil. "Can't you get him?"

"I can keep him busy."

WATCHING his chance to get the man who was shooting at Pericles, Peter did not see the two Yancys ride suddenly out of an arroyo not fifty yards distant and spur toward Hammil's barricade. But he heard the shots ripple from Hammil's rifle like pelting rain.

"Got 'em," said the mountain man casually as he stopped shooting. Both men were down, and Hammil had wantonly shot both horses as they started to run.

The man who was firing at Pericles kept on loosing slug after slug at the stallion. Buckling down to it, Peter returned the fire. Hammil, whose pipe had been shot from his mouth when the two Yancys charged, took a chew of smoking tobacco. He noted that Peter's cartridge belt was about empty. Hammil himself had pumped the last cartridge from his Winchester. And in a running fight with the Yancys as he left the stone house in Horsethief Canyon, he had also emptied his six-shooter. But he wouldn't let Annersley know that.

Peter reached down to his belt. He had used his last shell. He saw that Judson Hammil was intently watching him. It was a quizzical, cold look, yet with a touch of humor in it. Peter's eye was drawn to a movement over toward the left. Far out, a rider appeared. Presently he was joined by another. They turned their horses toward the north. The Yancys had had enough of it.

THE desert sun had begun to bite. Peter wiped the sweat from his face. One of the wounded horses was trying to get up. The other lay struggling, its hind leg shattered. Peter's neck grew hot. "You didn't have to do that, Hammil."

"Mebby so. I did it."

Slowly Peter walked over to the wounded horses, and mercifully ended their suffering. Slowly he walked back to the barricade, punching the empty shells from

his gun. He paid no apparent attention to Hammil's interest in the proceeding.

"That will be too bad," said Hammil, cocking his own six-shooter.

"Just what?"

"The long walk ahead of you."

"So?"

"Just so. I'll be taking the stallion."

"You mean you'd set me afoot?" Peter simulated surprise.

"Just that." Hammil gestured to the distant riders. "First, I've got an account to settle with the Yancys. Second, I like the stallion."

"But there's a reason," said Peter.

"Yes. A good one. I hold it."

"I've got a better."

Hammil's deep-set eyes were fixed on Peter's hand as he reached in his vest pocket. "Here it is." Peter turned a solitary, blunt-nosed cartridge in his fingers. "Twenty years ago—on the Tonto. Remember the two young waddies who stood off Harlock's warriors in the bad lands? Stood 'em off—and drove 'em off, but it took every last shot they had?" Peter slipped the cartridge into the cylinder and whirled it one hole from center. "Every last cartridge but this. You didn't know I had it. Even then I didn't trust you."

"Good!" said Hammil. "An even break. We can shoot it out."

Peter shook his head. "I won't dispute your nerve. Nobody would. But your gun is empty." Peter's cool smile was discouraging. Hammil picked up his Winchester. Fearing treachery, Peter would not move until he had left. Hammil waved his hand. "Well, so long, Pete."

"So long, Jud."

The mountain man had gone but a few steps when Peter called to him. He came back. Peter handed Hammil the missing pipe, its stem a stub. For a second they stood each looking the other in the eye. "Thanks," said Hammil. Turning, the mountain man strode toward the far foothills, cursing an empty gun.

Tethered behind the lava outcrop, Pericles stamped and pawed. Always gunshy, the shooting had strung up his nerves.

Peter, as he went to untie him, whistled softly to himself. Ricocheting from the outcrop, a rifle bullet had cut the tie rope

all but in two. Peter took hold of the rope carefully. The young stallion came to him, and nosing his shoulder, whinnied softly.

"Just so," said Peter.

Pericles seemed anxious to be going home. He would have headed south. But Peter reined him toward the east. He could do nothing for the men who lay back there on the desert. But he could report to the coroner in Socorro. "No," he said as Pericles fretted to run. "No hurry. We got a long pull ahead."

The men back there on the desert. . . .

Well, they had paid in the same coin they exacted. But the horses. To shoot them down wantonly. . . . What a fool Hammil had been. He might have caught up one of them. And if he hadn't shot them down he would have had a shell or two left. And so—Peter shrugged—who would now be riding Pericles.

Three weeks ago, it was, he had set out to find him. Hardship, scanty meals, long chances, even the fight, were mere incidents. He had recovered Pericles. That was really all that mattered.



SONG OF A ROLLING

STONE

By ARLEN LUVANO

I'VE sat in the saddle a-ridin' all day
 A-roundin' up critters to sell.
 I've gone to the hills for the dirt that would pay,
 And figured on oil from a well.
 I've stoked in a boat on the tropical seas,
 I've crawled through a jungle on hands and on knees,
 I've worked with the lumberjacks fellin' big trees,
 And just plain loafed for a spell.

I've whispered sweet nothings to blonde and brunette,
 And laughed and ridden away.
 I've knelt in a church I shall never forget,
 Feelin' I needed to pray.
 I've cussed in each language I ever could hear,
 I've drank every booze from straight whiskey to beer,
 I've gone into battle without thought of fear,
 And called it all in a day.

I'm shiftless, folks say, and blame my content
 In hours they figure a loss,
 As if He who patterned our life never meant
 A man to be his own boss.
 I don't owe a dollar to a friend or to foe,
 I'm always good natured and ready to go,
 Perhaps I ain't worth much; but then I don't know—
 Just what could I do with moss?

Almost Anyone Would Read a Swinging Skull as a Danger Sign



THE PENDULUM OF THE SKULL

By J. ALLAN DUNN

BUD BARRETT peered through the stiltlike stems of the pandanus grove that covered the ledge above the waterfall, and saw the weft of canvas flying at the maintop. He was sailor enough to know that this was a signal of recall, to guess that a sudden change in the barometer, prophesying a shift of wind, had decided the skipper of the *Flying Cloud* to get out to searoom and deep water, away from the shallows and

coral ledges through which they had worked up to the island in search of fresh water.

The casks were not yet filled. He saw that, by squinting down at the stream where the men labored under the urge of the first mate. But the signal was imperative. In a few minutes they would go.

The first mate shouted his name, cursed it volubly, but Bud lay doggo, wriggling back under the broad leaves of a ground vine, completely hidden.

He was not going back. He had slipped away just as he intended doing when he learned he was to be in the shore party. He had never been a willing member of the crew of the *Flying Cloud*, and now the skipper, or the owners, could take the wages due him, and welcome.

He was through with a bully mate whose head he ached to punch—believing he could do it successfully—but who fought with kicks and belaying pins, backed by a gun and official authority. He was sick of the stench of the fo'c'sle, of the wrecks of humanity with whom he was quartered and rated—though he admitted several of them were better seamen than he was—tired of the badly cooked food. It would have been different if he had deliberately selected his berth. Then he would have gone through with and swallowed his medicine, bitter as it might be, but—

The two boats were leaving. There had come a strong and sudden wind from seaward, against the prevailing trades. The reef-set coast had been suddenly transformed from a weather to a treacherous lee shore. Cyrus Barrett, not yet accepted as Able Seaman, meant little in the face of that danger. They would not care if he were marooned on the island for the rest of his life, eaten by the natives. He was not the first sailor who had deserted.

Barrett hugged himself. There was not much danger from cannibals, he fancied, though the bush tribes were said to be wild and dangerous savages. But there was a trading station along the coast, beyond the lava cape. The creek there was only a shallow one, and the skipper had sailed past, intent only upon replenishing the water that had staled on him and sailing on down south to the whaling grounds. As soon as the *Flying Cloud* was well clear of the land, Bud meant to work his way along the shore to the station.

His plans were hazy. He thought he might be able to get some sort of a job, splitting coconuts, keeping tally, anything—or playing Crusoe. He had acted on an impulse that was based on weeks of ill treatment. The mates were bad enough, the skipper was a hell driver, and what was bad now would become intolerable once they got to whaling.

He had noticed food enough since he had come ashore—fish in the stream, fruit of all sorts, coconuts, wild bananas, shaddock, guavas, breadfruit, even orange trees. And freedom. Freedom from dirty weather, and a howling mate cursing him on to unfamiliar tasks, setting him to all the dirty work aboard, making a mark of him, calling him "Dude" while the cringing men laughed at the feeble joke. Freedom from the cockroach ridden bunk, and its moldy mattress of sodden, insufficient straw.

He had his knife for defense against wild beasts—if there were any. He didn't believe the tribesmen would bother him before he had got to the station. And he had heard the second mate talking to the doctor—as the cook was called—saying that the island was quite a point of call for whalers watering north and south, and for other ships. He could get away, if the trader wouldn't use him—any ship was better than the *Flying Cloud*, built like a barrel, wallowing and pitching and rancid as an ancient lard keg.

He stretched out luxuriantly in the warmth, shaded from the sun that filtered down through the leaves. It made him drowsy and, before he knew it, he was napping.

When he woke, the sun had shifted several degrees, the seawind was wrestling heavily with the tropic growth, fronded boughs thrashing, ripe fruit plumping down. The *Flying Cloud* was clawing into the gale, working out through a wide channel among the reefs that now showed white with foam.

Bud came down from the cliff, crossed the stream on smooth boulders, took a drink on the far side, stuffed his stomach with orange-skinned bananas that tasted curiously like Baldwin apples, and, skirting the mangrove belt that masked the exit of the creek, started to work down to the shore where the traveling should be easier and less hazardous than an attempt to strike through the thick bush.

It was harder than he imagined, the belt of mangroves far wider, while the fury of the gale was astounding. Blue sky and sun had disappeared, the clouds were slate colored and lowering, and out of them blew the strenuous wind, that bowed the tops of the biggest trees and sent the palms lashing

like whips. Whenever he got into the open it drove him staggering at a tangent back to shelter again, and came roaring through the bush after him. The barrier reef was a white and smoking wall of spume, the ordinarily placid lagoon was sudded with windblown foam, washed up, flung up in spongy masses.

Bud didn't know it, but it was getting close to the rainy season, to the monsoon changes with swift shifts of wind and furious storms. All the wonder of gold and green and azure had turned into moaning gale, struggling vegetation that had lost its luster, while the light was flat and hard and cold.

Again the sky appeared to close in. A javelin of lavender flame rent it, flooded turbulent sea and tossing forest with its weird levin. He caught a glimpse of the *Flying Cloud* fighting out under eased sail—thankful that he was not punching at the stiff canvas, yelled and sworn at for his clumsiness—and then, as if the bottom had fallen from a mighty cistern, the tropical downpour burst, hissing into the lagoon, thudding on the beach, bulleting the leaves, cutting off light, all sense of location, blinding him as effectually as if he stood in the tumbling spray back of the falls at Niagara.

THE wind did not cease. Its force was so tremendous that it angled the streams of water, and sent them with a rush and a roar that blotted out everything, and rendered him in a moment sodden, beaten; until he felt bruised, floundering about in the edge of the bush, tripped, stumbling, flung headlong by writhing lianas. He found himself at last in the midst of the root stems of a great fig-baniam, whose mighty thatch resisted even such a rain as this. Penetrating its dark maze until he touched the main trunk, he stood cowering, cold, shivering, though the temperature was close to ninety, watching the eerie flickering of the lightning checkering the tangle of the bush, listening to the frightful clamor of the long peals of thunder that went rolling overhead.

It was a nightmare of darkness, of dread, marked by the crash of some great tree, the furious, unceasing battery of the booming surf booming a deep bass to the wild orchestra of wind and rain and thunder. The

air was hard to breathe. It was charged with unleashed statics, that he felt crackling in his hair, that tingled at his shrunken fingertips. Half an hour ago and he had been proudly confident of his own cleverness, his own ability, now he felt like the least of mites, the most helpless of atoms, an ant at the mercy of a whirlpool or crawling over a trench top with a battle at its most awful height—powerless—afraid.

Then—suddenly as it had come—the gale passed. First the rain, sweeping on like a gray regiment, the wind driving after it, the thunder lunging in sullen retreat, the darkness lifting, and the sun flinging flashing lances of victory under its blue banner.

Color and warmth coming out. Sparkling, dripping leaves of emerald, ragged banana pennons lifting again, cockatoos screeching, birds calling, the seas slowly subsiding, the pounding breakers on the reef still flinging spray that was now haloed with rainbows.

Bud came out of the baniam to find himself on a narrow trail, less than three feet wide, its floor of dirt packed solid by generations of naked horny feet, the bush on either side wattled with undergrowth, vines, close-set trees. The air blew fresh from the sea, and carried on it the peculiar fragrance of the bush mingled with the salty tang—odors of ripe fruit and heavy scented flowers. He pushed on shorewards, thankful for the path, not recognizing it for a bush-trail until he came to where it ended on a strip of shingle. Here he saw, aswing from a bamboo like a grisly pendulum, a human skull, sign of *tabu*, warning that the trail was trapped with pits and poisoned stakes, with ambushed spears and arrows triggered for the unwary.

Luck had been with him. The lower end of the path that he had traversed was harmless. He lost no time in leaving the grim vicinity, though he went with the feel between his shoulder-blades of an ever threatening spear flung from cover.

The tide was going out, and he left the bush alone, though his thirst grew as the hot sun warmed him, dried him, and then threatened to sap his vitality.

Globular bush-fruit tempted him, hanging golden and enticing but, to Bud, they were but apples of Sodom, filled with the ashes of death.

WADING, evading quicksand, making swift traverse over beaches of crushed and tiny shells, clambering over flinty lava promontories, he hurried on, with but one thought—to reach the trading station. The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, that inhospitable signboard of the tropical jungle he had looked upon as an inn where food was for the plucking, and sleep a delight. His imagination, stimulated by all that he had heard and read of the savage isles of the South Seas, began to ride him like an evil hag upon his shoulders, bringing only one comfort, a remembrance that the trading stations were said to be comparatively safe these days—for fear of reprisal—and that so long as one kept to the beach in their immediate neighborhood there was not much to fear.

The mates in charge of the two watering boats had been armed, and they had brought along some rifles in the boats. At the time Bud had thought these precautions perfunctory, though it had been because of the mates' watchfulness against any hostile natives that he had been enabled to slip away as he did. Now he realized that he had been running a far greater risk than he dreamed of, and the mere fact that he had come so far unscathed seemed to triple the odds against his getting through.

But at last he came to the horn of a bay, and looked gladly across its blue and green crescent to where buildings showed among verdure, their iron unpainted roofs looking like brass in the sun—now westerling, losing power, but gaining glory, slowly gathering nightrobes of purple for its bed.

There was a long wharf running out into the lagoon, two small boats alongside, a gracefully lined schooner with furled sails at anchor, palms with slender silver trunks and plumes of tender green above clusters of coconuts marching in stately rows down to a narrow strip of beach. Here was civilization and Bud's spirit resumed its mastery. Fear fell from his shoulders like a released bundle at the end of a long trail. He marched almost blithely through the palms, grateful for their shade, looking longingly up at the nuts. He could not climb those slim boles, nor could he even open the nuts with his knife. But he looked hopefully forward to the trader offering him a green nut

with the top lopped off, filled with cool, slightly effervescent contents. He had heard the sailors raving about the joy of a fresh coconut.

He was in bad shape after his long trip in the sun, scorched for all his sea tan, his feet rock-bruised, weary after the rough going that had taken him since noon to travel.

A rocky gully cut through the trees as he neared the house. It looked like a petrified cascade with the water turned to gray, porous stone. It was an ancient lava flow. In little earthen pockets guavas grew, with a sort of Spanish bayonet. Screw pine made clumps of cover. He saw a faint path that led from the plantation he was in, and doubtless offered the best crossing of the ravine. Following it, voices stopped him on the edge of the gully. One was a girl's in evident protest, the other's—rough and domineering with a sort of bullying insolence to it—was that of a man. Instantly—like dog to wolf—imaginary hackles seemed to lift on Bud's neck. The girl's voice was sweet, the man's harshly dominant and masterful.

With the approaching sunset all wind had gone. Words came clearly to him as he halted, uncertain where to look for the speakers, since they were not visible on the little path.

"He can't last out the night, I tell you," said the man. "Then what you goin' to do? You can't stay here alone. You got to come with me. It ain't as if I warn't willin' to marry you, soon's we git to Suva. I can't do it before, can I? Don't be a fool, Thelma. You know what 'ud happen to a woman alone here on a tradin' station. The bushmen'll know when he dies inside of an hour—know if you're alone. The place'll have to go till we git another agent. Lucky the copra's aboard. Now you go git yore things together, an' be sensible. I'm goin' to look 'round a bit."

"No!" cried the girl. "Go with you? Trust you? Marry you? No!"

There came an exclamation from the man, another from the girl, stopped almost immediately, a rustling in the bushes, an oath from the man. Then Bud saw them, as the man came out of the cover where they had been talking carrying in his arms a slender struggling figure in blue. The figure writhed

and fought, struck and clawed at his bearded face, while he laughed, and forced her higher on his great chest, bending his bull neck until his beard brushed her cheek.

He set her down with a great guffaw, releasing her almost as violently as he must have clutched her and, still laughing, strode off among the guavas toward the buildings. Bud came leaping over the lava rocks, his fists clenched, and his gray eyes blazing.

He had glimpsed scarlet streaks on the man's nose and the barer parts of his cheeks as his big bulk wheeled and disappeared. The girl in blue reeled, steadied herself, rubbed violently at one cheek, and then her eyes, wild with resentment and fear, dilated suddenly at sight of Bud. He was catapulting toward her with his scorched face, unshaven, hatless, his slopchest clothing grimed and torn, but, nevertheless, to her woman's instinct a knight charging to her rescue, or her avenging.

She shook her head at him, and a mass of redgold hair, already disarranged, came tumbling down far below her shoulders. The beauty of it, the sheer, slender loveliness of her vital youth, held him more than her shaken head, her arm outstretched as if to actually arrest him, her whispered,

"Stop. He'll kill you! He'll shoot."

Bud remembered now the swing of a holstered gun low on the man's hip. It would not have held him back—it would not now. Something else held them both entangled—sea magic perhaps. Magic beyond doubt. Gray eyes looking into blue ones. Gazing with a dawning recognition. It was the call of youth to youth.

Bud looked like a beach-hobo, but manhood showed in his height, in a well-knit symmetry, the shape of his head, his jaw, his nose, his eyes frankly admiring her.

The girl's color rose till both cheeks matched the one she had rubbed so furiously to wipe out that bearded, ravished kiss. Her young breast rose and fell with her quickened pulse. Like the spark that closes contact between two charged poles, something bridged between them, something rose in their eyes and ran, each to each, along that bridge. For a moment everything else was forgotten except each other. The surf boomed and the sunset deepened, the world rolled on, but they stood still

until there came the sound of the man's voice shouting, "Purdy, Oh Purdy! Where are you, you blighter!"

"I've got to go back to my uncle," said the girl. "He's dying. There's nothing much I can do for him, but—"

"I heard what that blackguard said to you," said Bud. "My name's Barrett—Cyrus Barrett—Bud Barrett. I deserted from the whaler that put in this morning for water lower down the beach."

"You don't talk like a sailor?" There was no real criticism in the words, rather compliment.

"I'm not much of one," said Bud. "But you don't have to go with that skunk, whether he's got a gun or not. So don't let that worry you."

SHE gave him a look that was reward in advance. But she shook her head.

"You'll only get into trouble," she said. "Watterson's killed more than one man, they say. There are the others with him. And—I couldn't stay here alone with you."

"I don't see why not. What's convention got to do with a deal like this? I'm square—you know that." He had no doubt of her conviction along that line, but he saw in the same instant that she was right. He had to protect her that way, too.

"He isn't going to shoot me in cold blood," he said, "though he might have if I'd interfered just now. I'm sorry I didn't get here soon enough to do that. A man that would bully a girl in the fix you're in is yellow, anyway. You go on to the house, and I'll happen along just as I would have anyhow. What's the matter with your uncle?"

"Heart trouble, island fever and trade gin," she said, her voice suddenly hard and bitter. "A combination of the three."

Bud saw, in her young, brave face, contempt, worry, weariness, the lack of sleep, the long trial of nursing.

"I've got to go," she said shortly. "You must be all tired out—hungry and thirsty. It's good of you to want to help me."

"I'm going to. Have you got a gun up at the house?"

She nodded, though she seemed to be listening to something else. A forefinger shot up to her lips, her pupils enlarged again

until her eyes seemed black. She looked like a startled deer, Bud thought, remembering Californian days.

The bearded man had stepped silently as a cat out of the guavas, and stood looking at them with a mirthless laugh. It showed his white teeth amid his uncombed whiskers, puckering close the scratches the girl's nails had scored.

"Who's yore pickup, Thelma?" he asked. His dark eyes flashed in swift anger as he advanced threateningly toward Bud, plainly resenting the intrusion. "Where did you come from?" he demanded. Bud held his ground, looking at him equably, though what with the need of water, and his leg weariness, his judgment quailed a little at the size and brawn of the man.

"Off the whaler *Flying Cloud*," he answered.

"She's out to sea. Flew the coop, did you? Fo'c'sle too tough for you? Rather shirk than work? Thought you'd hit the beach an' bum yore livin? Well, you've come to the wrong port, sonny. We don't like sand-lice round here. Git!"

"You own this place?" asked Bud. He knew he was inviting a row and, aside from the gun, knew the chances were that he was going to get the worst of it, but the girl's presence, the still keen memory of the man's attack on her, did more than merely bolster him; they charged him with challenge, regardless of consequence. Neither was he going to be entirely helpless. He kept his eye on the holster, he set his stance for a spring. He knew the girl was standing with one hand at her heart, fearful for him, and he knew it was going to come out all right.

Here was more magic—the escape from the watering party, the first glamour of the bush, the wild fury of the storm, the swinging skull and the trapped trail, the girl, and now this encounter.

Swift as the impression of a dream all this projected itself upon the screen of Bud Barrett's brain before the man answered.

"I own half of it, if that's anything to you."

"And the other half is mine," said the girl.

The man's face twitched with rage.

"Then you go 'tend to it," he snarled at

her. "You, you scupper pup, git to hell out of here."

WITH the roar of a brute, his eyes glaring in his convulsed face, the big man leaped with dynamic force and swiftness. One hand was out to clutch at Bud's shoulder, to spin him about while he kicked him down the gully for the pithless scarecrow he looked; the other was clubbed for a blow, ignoring his gun, a man proud of his bull strength, eager to demonstrate it.

It was a costly mistake in judgment. He had expected the scarecrow to turn and run; expected nothing else from a runaway sailor. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred he would have been right. As it was, Bud stooped a little, his two hands shot out, and clamped on the other's right wrist, twisting and wrenching the arm until Watterson yelled with the pain of it, swinging a flailing blow that Bud neatly ducked. Then, while he let go the tortured arm with his left hand for a moment, he deftly plucked the gun from the holster, as the bearded man wrenched free and rushed him, flinging about him hairy arms that were hard as timber and flexible as rubber.

The gun went flying, and Bud spared a glance over his shoulder as he fought to free himself from the grip.

"Get it, get that gun!" he gasped, and saw the girl retrieve it, then step back with the weapon in her hand, her young face fierce with the look of a tigress.

All functioning ceased in him save that of preservation. He was on the defensive, his ribs bowing out of shape, his breath being slowly crushed out of him, his arms pinioned, while the bearded face close to his was gloating, vindictive.

Bud's right hand worked up the other's left by jerks, feeling the great muscles pliant in their sheaves, constricting him; feeling for something else, finding the place, fingers digging fiercely, frantically, in between tendon and nerve, touching a vein, clamping down.

The triumphant face was again convulsed, this time in sudden agony. It felt to Watterson as if a red-hot wire had been inserted below his left biceps, midway of the great muscle, burning, searing, paralyzing. Strength went out of his left arm, the scare-

crow sailor tore loose, leaped in. One blow, cushioned by his beard, but jarring him, crashed hard and close to the point of Watterson's jaw, the other landed full on his mouth as he floundered forward, beside himself with rage, his left arm temporarily impotent, numbed.

Bud slipped the rush, panting, his wind broken, his heart pounding, but game and cool. The fruit he had eaten since his meager breakfast on the *Flying Cloud* had given him nothing beyond filling space in his clamoring stomach. Sun and the struggle over the beach had taken full toll. He was in the condition of a tired athlete who attempts to wrest honors from a fresh boxer, after a long program of gruelling contests. His two tricks of jujitsu had served him well once, but the nerve paralysis would not last much longer, Watterson would be on his guard against repetition. Bud had weight against him, power, the sustained vigor of a well-fed man. His tongue stuck to the inside of his mouth—the thirst that had increased all through the afternoon now attacked him viciously, making him a little dizzy, robbing him of all elasticity.

THE sun was glaring straight up the ravine, close now to the rim of the sea, turning the gray rocks red as blood. Bud sidestepped, working round to get it at his back. Watterson followed him, rubbing his tingling left arm into which strength was slowly returning, murderous rage flaming in his eyes. Bud found himself backed against a boulder just as the girl gave a cry of warning, and his opponent, with a grunt of content, started a left swing that came down on Bud's guard like a sledgehammer. He used the slowly revitalizing limb as a club, while he drove hard to the body with his right. It shook Bud hard, and it hurt badly. The vitality seemed suddenly sapped out of him, and he sagged down on his heels, covering, with Watterson stepping back a little, grinning, set to send in the finishing blows. Under one wrist Bud glimpsed the face of the girl, anxious, alarmed. This brute, if he downed Bud, would kick most of the life out of him, would have the girl at his mercy.

Bud saw the right fist start and, with his own anger and hatred surging back, bring-

ing fresh energy on its flood, he crouched suddenly and lashed out while Watterson's blow sickled the empty air above him, and its launcher stumbled forward. Bud was inside the guard, and the smash he sank in the other's plexus—with the second higher and under the heart—were vicious and hard enough to brake the fighting impetus of the bearded man. They left him winded, gasping while Bud slid away from the rock that had trapped him, whipped in a short, lifting uppercut to the hairy, deceiving jaw and, trying for a left hook to the pit of the stomach once more, felt his foot slip under a looping vine. It twisted into a crevice, and gave away under him as he fell sprawling, and saw Watterson, still gasping horribly, his great chest pumping spasmodically as he strove for full lungs, stooping. His face was bestial with triumphal ferocity as he lifted a booted foot to kick Bud in the head, the ribs, anywhere that would maim and hurt, leave him crippled and senseless.

Bud could not help himself, the treacherous vine was still snared about his ankle and he was on all fours.

There was the bark of a shot, the whine of a bullet overhead, sudden stupid surprise on Watterson's face. The girl's voice sounded clear as crystal, hard as metal.

"I'll hit next time, Watty. You know I can. Now, get out of here. Get off to the schooner. Get outside the reef as soon as the tide will let you. Go on, down the gully to the beach. Your boat's waiting for you."

Bud freed his ankle from the treacherous loop, and got up painfully. His foot was hurt and wrenched, but it was still serviceable. Watterson's scowling astonishment changed to a leer.

"That's how the land lies, is it? That's why you deserted? I reckon yore ship called here before, mister. Want to leave the two of you together."

Bud hobbled forward, but the girl was ahead of him. Her eyes flared, her jaw was hard set, and there was no mistaking the determination that spoke in her words, her pose, as she stood with the big Colt pressed close against her hip, slanting upward, covering Watterson.

"Wattie, if you say another word I'll shoot the tongue out of your mouth. You've

shown yourself what I've always thought you were—rotten. I'm through with you."

Watterson nodded, a bit grimly, yet with the air of a winner for all his ignominious retreat. The girl watched him down the slope, standing poised on a boulder where she could command the gully and Watterson's descent to the beach.

When Watterson had turned toward his boat, Bud helped her down, and noticed that her firm chin quivered. She caught up a trembly lip with her little white teeth.

"He'll get all the best of it, at that," she said. "He's got the copra and the schooner, and that's really mine. I'll tell you all about it presently," she went on wearily. "You need food, and uncle—"

A shrill wailing cry started in the direction of the buildings, repeated, augmented by a score of alien throats.

"He's dead," she said in a low voice. "The boys have found it out. I left Tiri, the foreman, with him."

THE boys, Bud supposed, were the plantation hands. The mournful sounds were weird in the dusk that was rapidly sifting down as they walked toward the house. He remembered what Watterson had said about the bushmen learning swiftly of the death, and that she was alone. She was not quite alone now, but he had been forced upon her. Unless he went into the bush they would have to defy the conventions until the next ship called. His presence would embarrass her. And he could not leave her with her black boys, savages themselves, and liable to reversion to the wildest type. He had attempted to rescue her from Watterson's frying-pan, only to compromise her, or leave her exposed to perils not to be thought of. Plain before him he could see the pendulum of the skull.

Suddenly the wailing was punctuated with something that sounded like distant thunder from the heights that still held a flaring light on their fantastic crags. It was too regular for that. It was the sound of drums—drums beaten by naked cannibals, dancing about their fires and totem images.

He glanced at the girl, who was looking at him.

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "They always start them going at sundown,

and keep it up until after midnight. Whenever they have nothing to do, the natives dance. They tell me they do much the same thing in New York," she added, with an attempt at making light of the matter.

But her face was wan, and Bud felt suddenly the strain of the life she must have led—a drunken uncle for her only companion, the cannibal haunted bush, the treacherous plantation hands, the management of the place in her care. And now this last catastrophe that he had blunderingly brought about.

He braced himself to play the man. At least, Watterson was gone—though she had been the main factor in that. There was no sight of him. His boat had disappeared, the girl said. She had been quite capable of taking care of herself after all—unless Watterson had caught her unawares. It was up to him to solve the situation. As night swiftly fell, he squared his shoulders while he limped along, shaking off the depression of the darkness, the dead man waiting for them in the house, the black boys working themselves into an ecstasy of mock grief that might swiftly change to something far more fiendish, if they sensed that the white girl was unprotected.

So far the presence of the schooner restrained them. When that left it was up to Bud, inexperienced in such conditions but resolved to find some solution.

The stars were coming out, the wailing hands, naked save for loin cloths, their eyes rolling and their heads flung back like howling dogs, had lit palm torches, where they squatted outside the trader's bungalow. They gaped at the sight of Bud. The girl dismissed them tersely, snapping commands at them in Beach English, and they slunk off to their quarters.

A tall native came out on the little porch and spoke to her.

"Massa Tiri *mate*," he said. "Wattosoni, he speak along of you?"

"I saw him, Tiri," she said.

"I hear shot," he replied looking suspiciously at Bud. "Some trouble walk along of you?"

"No trouble. Tiri, you speak along those boys go make one grave—all same in garden. Now."

"I suppose I seem callous to you," she

said, "but my uncle has been ill for a long time. He was only my father's half brother, and he was not much of a man."

She was plainly holding on to her self control, and Bud said nothing, wondering at the pluck of her. She left him in the front room with a lighted lamp, while she went in to where the dead man lay. She came out again in a few minutes, her face composed, though she had been crying.

"We shall have to bury him soon," she said simply. "But you've got to eat."

"I'll wait," said Bud. His hunger had left him for the time. He followed her back into the room, and saw the body lying on a bed with the mosquito curtain drawn aside. It was a weak face with a straggling beard that did not conceal the inefficient chin, and marks of dissipation showed on it.

The schooner was still there when they returned from the garden, the grisly task completed.

"They can't get outside until the tide serves," she said. "I don't think he'll bother us. He's satisfied with his bargain. And he'll come back. He knows I can't stay here." She started putting a meal on the table, making hot tea, opening tins, producing bread and fruit.

"We'll eat—we've got to eat," she said. "You must be starved."

SHE sipped some tea, broke some food, and Bud, after the first morsels, found himself ravenous. Food was necessary for the plan slowly forming in his mind.

"You mean you stand to lose your share of everything?" he asked.

"Watterson was in partnership with my father. My name is Thelma Selwyn. My father owned the schooner. Watterson put up the money for the trading goods. We had a place on Muriti. And we established this station for collecting copra. Afterwards we started a plantation here, as well as at Muriti. Watterson was in charge. I used to sail with my father"—her voice broke, recovered—"until he died. There was a hurricane at Muriti. I was at Suva waiting for father. I was staying with friends. My uncle—I always called him that—came instead. Father had been killed trying to rescue some of our people.

"Uncle Tom was no sailor. He hated

the sea. I could have handled the schooner alone, but he would not hear of it. So he took over the station here, and brought me with him. Watterson took the schooner, picking up shell and *beche de mer* about the group besides copra. Uncle said father wished it that way. I do not think he trusted Watterson. I never liked him. I know he did what he wanted with my uncle. No doubt he cheated us. There has never been an accounting, I believe. Not for a year.

"I suppose it all seems shiftless to you. Helpless. But I am a girl and legal affairs for a woman under twenty-one are not made easy in this part of the world. My uncle was practically my guardian."

Bud nodded. His face had hardened, but it was not the less attractive to the girl who eyed him frankly. His eyes lost their boyishness, and gained in determination. Lines showed from nose angles to mouth corners; his scorched features became endowed with a stamp of efficiency, and his voice took on character, responsibility. There was little of the deserting fo'c'sle hand in the man who talked quietly and seriously to her.

"The schooner is really your share, then?" he said. "The station and the goods here Watterson's?"

"Yes. Practically that. Wait a moment."

She went out on the little porch, and came back to the open door.

"They are all aboard," she said. "Tiri is watching. He is foreman here, and I can really depend upon him. He is fond of me, and grateful for some things I have done for him. They cannot get out of the lagoon for an hour yet. There is one thing bothers me. Tiri says no one has paid the hands, and their annual wages are due. Watterson knows I cannot do it without money from the copra he has aboard or the ship's money he must have with him. He will claim to have settled with my uncle, of course."

"We'll handle all that, I think," said Bud. "We'll have to work quick, though. We've got an hour, you say. That's what I wanted to know. How about the crew on the schooner. How many?"

"I'll call Tiri in. He knows."

The native entered, hunkering down on the floor, accepting Bud with a nod, his face with its flat nose, full lips and retreating forehead grave, and his eyes, dark and

lustrous, fixed on the girl's face. She spoke to him in native dialect, and he replied promptly.

"There are eight boys in the crew," she translated, "a half-caste cook who is part Chinese, Purdy and Watterson."

"Any of the boys the ones you knew—who sailed with your father and you?"

"Five of them, Tiri says."

"Know you—and like you?"

"I think so. They know Tiri."

"We'll take a gamble on them? How about Purdy?"

"He's Watterson's mate, a Scotch Australian, drunk whenever Watterson lets him be. I was mate for my father. Watterson hired Purdy."

"You could sail the schooner out of the lagoon?"

The girl's eyes lightened as she nodded at him. Tiri listened intently with his head cocked to one side, striving to follow the English.

"As long as the partnership is going to split, that's what you'd rather have, isn't it? Your original share—the schooner?"

"Oh, yes."

"This end of it no use to you—outside of the stores—without capital or without a boat?"

"No use without capital. The hands have to be paid. If they were I could sell the copra to other traders who call here at times. But—"

"I understand. This is no job for a girl. I wouldn't be stuck on it myself." The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, and every now and then, when he listened for it, he could hear the beat of the drums.

"With the schooner you could make out trading, couldn't you?"

"I think so. If I got credit for trade goods. I know a good many of the islanders. I'd like to try it."

Bud almost said, "So would I," but he wasn't ready for that yet.

"All right," he said instead. "How's Tiri as a fighting man?"

"What are you planning?"

"You've got a small boat. I'm going off in it—with Tiri, if he's game—and I'm going to persuade Watterson to take over the station for the schooner. I've muddled things for you so far. I think I can straighten

them out. I'm a fair shot myself, and Watterson is afraid of a gun unless he's got the drop on the other man—or girl. I'm going to get the drop on him. What's the crew likely to be doing?"

Her eyes sparkled now, approving him.

"They'll be for'ard, probably below for a while yet, playing with dice."

"Shooting craps, eh? Civilized that far. How about Tiri?"

"He'll come with us." Again she spoke rapidly to Tiri who rose to his feet and pounded himself on the chest.

"That Wattasoni no good," he said. "That *ehipe* belong along Missy. We take."

"Fine. You'll have to come along," he said to the girl. "Gum things up to leave you on shore. If we make the deal, there's no use delaying a start. Might complicate things. I hope to send Watterson ashore with Purdy and whoever insists on going with him."

"Of course I'm coming," she told him. "Purdy and Watterson will be in the cabin.

The native boys may not make any trouble, if we can handle Watterson and the mate."

"We'll handle them. Can you get some things together quickly? You said you had a gun, and there's Watterson's. How about Tiri?"

"Me? I got knife. I got club. No trouble along of me."

"Native boys on board armed?"

"They'll have knives. But Tiri can handle them if they're below. They can only come up one at a time."

"Good, that leaves the cook. He'll be in his galley?"

"If we have luck."

"Bully." Bud stood up, and so did the girl. "Thelma," he said, "you're a wonder. I didn't know there were any girls like you. You're taking me on trust, you know."

"I know," she said gravely.

"You can," said Bud and held out his hand.

SHE gave him hers. "I trust you," she said. "I know you're not a common sailor. I don't know what I should have done without you. I'll be back in a few minutes. That gun is the same calibre as mine. Tiri, you go get ready. You savvy what we go along to fix?"

"Plenty I savvy, I go."

She came back with a strapped valise, a gun belted on, her eyes shining. She handed a box half full of cartridges to Bud, who filled the cylinder of Watterson's Colt, and slipped the rest into his pockets. Tiri appeared with the bone haft of a knife showing above his loincloth, and bearing a hardwood club that ended in a knob with a beak of shell or bone projecting from it. This was a formidable weapon which he swung with easy zest, his eyes glittering, transformed into the warrior. He had smeared some white stuff on his face and was plainly happy at the role he was to play.

"Those kanaka boy," he said, "talk too much along their pay. I tell um we plenty fix. Tell um bimeby Wattasoni he come along shore—tomorrow he pay. They believe which way along of me I speak."

"Watterson will pay them," said the girl, "if he has the money aboard. I suppose he has. If we take the schooner he'll have to stay here, and run things until a ship calls. Or we can send one."

"We won't worry too much about Watterson," said Bud. "Are we set? Let's go."

They went down the beach, and along the wharf to where the boat lay. There seemed nothing incongruous to Bud in the adventure they were launching—the girl he had met, himself delivered from the fo'c'sle of the *Flying Cloud*, and the loin-clad native. It seemed only the fitting close of the day that had crammed with happenings. It accorded with the sound of the drums coming down from the dark purple heights, the waving bush, the breeze, spicy with strange scents, that was blowing off the land, the phosphorescent curl of breakers on the reef, the brilliant stars duplicated in the calm lagoon across which they drifted. With Tiri using a stern oar as paddle and rudder both, they moved slowly down on the schooner, which showed with lights in the after ports and glowing from the skylight. A phonograph was grinding raucously aboard.

Tiri was crooning very softly to himself as he plied the oar—hardly above his breath—yet there was something blood-thirsty, a very lust of killing, in the short phrases that he hummed, as he carefully handled the turning blade, its little wisps of seafire streaking away from it. They were now close

up to the schooner, low in the water from its copra cargo, the freeboard easy to negotiate. Tiri brought them up beneath the overhanging stern, round to the starboard quarter. Then he stood up, club in hand.

"I climb um port side," he said in a noiseless, but audible whisper. "You go sta'board. Suppose some one he look along of you, I fix um."

It was good strategy. Tiri was a warrior first, and a foreman afterward.

"You no make fix um for dead," warned the girl.

Tiri grunted, let his body fall away in a curve, and dissolved into the water without splash, hardly rippling it. They gave him a moment or two, though time was getting a scarce and precious commodity. The tide was slack, and any minute Watterson or Purdy, both probably, would turn out the crew, loosen gaskets and hoist the anchor, which had already been hauled short. But the phonograph still sent out its sugary words, and they could hear the voices of the two men, the clink of a glass and bottle, could even get the reek of somebody's pipe as they crouched, their pulses beating fast, their blood tinkling. Man and woman—not much more than boy and girl—they were committed to the same adventure, their adventure, running the risks together.

SHE touched Bud on the arm. They rose, but with the painter of the shore dinghy ready to take a turn about a cleat, when they saw the glow of a cigarette spark as their heads lifted above the rail. Their hands were already on it, ready to go aboard. A catlike, white-kilted figure, whose slant eyes shone by the lighted binnacle lamp, glided toward them, a long knife coming out of a girdle with swift dexterity. It was the cook.

"Wha' fo'—?" he began, and never finished that sentence. Tiri suddenly seemed to materialize out of shadow. His club came forward, too gently to hurt a fly, Bud fancied, a stroking blow that braked its own force, and landed at the base of the cook's skull. Instantly the man pitched forward on his hands, and as instantly Tiri stooped, advanced, picked up his victim before he collapsed, and deposited him neatly in the starboard scuppers.

"Plenty quiet he stop," he said in Bud's ear. "No kill. Him all right bimeby."

The three of them stood glued to the deck, listened, trying to pierce the gloom forward. They had left a light in the bungalow to allay or prevent any suspicions. The phonograph record ended. A man spoke in the cabin, thickly, with a Scotch burr.

"It's all right for you, Watty, the way ye plan it. But what do I get out o' it? I'm your catspaw, it seems. I put the lad out o' the way while you get the lassie, an' a' the gear. Suppose I kill the lad? What's it worth to ye, Watty?"

"I don't want him killed, I told you. Not till I'm through with him. You're half seas over now, Purdy, we'll talk it over again later. Tide's close to the turn. We'll go out now, and we'll come back tomorrow night. Make a landing in Turtle Bay, and go ashore. You'll get enough out of it to keep you drunk for a month. We'll go into details tomorrow. Time to go on deck."

"There's just two drinks left in the bottle, Watty. Lemme help ye to a dram. We'll drink standin' an' bottoms-up to you an' the little leddy."

Even as the cook's sentence had been clipped, so was the drinking of the toast to which Watterson had responded, standing with his back to the companionway. He caught sight first of the astounded look on Purdy's hiccoughing features, taking in the still more astounding fact that the mate was allowing something to come between him and his liquor. He wanted Purdy to keep mellow until his plans had been carried out. The Scot lost his customary caution when properly primed with alcohol, and would be better able to help in the kidnaping which was forward, together with Watterson's plan of a personal revenge against the scarecrow sailor. He had done what few men could boast of, stood up to Watterson in physical contest and not come off second best.

Purdy's jaw sagged, he slopped some of the gin out of his glass. It was plain to Watterson that the cause of it was back of him, and he started to whirl, his hand at the same time dropping to a gun with which he had replaced the one captured by Bud. But the latter, retrieved and used by the girl, was now, even as Watterson shifted

his shoulders, pressing its hard uncompromising muzzle between them.

"Your own Colt, Watterson," said Bud's voice, almost cheerfully, but not jestingly. "Put up your hands, and keep 'em that way. Mr. Purdy, you're covered from the skylight—so be good."

The mate's eyes, pale blue in their blood-shot whites, rolled upward to where Thelma Selwyn looked down through the opening, her gun barrel resting on one of the brass protection rails.

"Sit down at the table, Purdy," Bud went on. "Stretch your arms out in front of you. Just a minute, Watterson, I want another gun from you. May give it back to you later. All depends on the way you behave. You go sit opposite Purdy. Fix your arms the same way. Now cross 'em, both of you—cross 'em and join hands."

"I heard you two talking about Miss Selwyn," he added, his voice losing everything but menace. "Outside of your kind intentions regarding me, I'd just as soon shoot as not, Watterson," he warned. "Just as soon—and a little sooner." He meant it, remembering the ribald flippancy with which they had planned to pretend to leave, and then return and dispose of both of them. He ached to batter Watterson into a pulp for his rottenness, and his will leaped in his eyes and twitched in his trigger finger.

The pair obeyed, their hands and wrists forming a diamond hitch that left them helpless, though Watterson was raging, and Purdy seemingly stupefied. But Bud kept an eye on the little mate whose eyes held a glint that suggested he was not quite as drunk as he acted.

"We are going to put the partnership on the old basis, Watterson," he said. "I'm acting for Miss Selwyn. You get back the trading station end of it, and she takes the schooner—also the copra—and what's in that safe, outside of enough to pay the hands."

"I don't want a word out of you," he went on. "Your mouth is too inclined to be dirty. You'll do just what I say. You've probably swindled Miss Selwyn out of a good deal of money, first and last. She's closing all transactions here and now with this deal. We'll tow you out to sea a way, and then you can row back on the tide, and

run things as you like. You're getting out of it cheap. What you need is a dog-lash, I don't want to twit a man who can't talk back, so—"

HE MOVED round the table, and searched Purdy for weapons, finding none. Now he stood at one end of the table, a gun in either hand. The girl had disappeared. Suddenly he heard a shot, a hubbub forward, one deep voice shouting. Watterson hitched his shoulders as if to rise, but dropped them again as Bud's right hand gunsight was brought to bear between his eyes. Bud was torn with irresolution. The girl must have fired. She must have been in peril. The cook might have revived, the men forward have—

"Eyah!" That was Tiri, jubilant. Appeals in native, clearly of surrender. The girl, pleading with Tiri.

"That all right, Missy. No can break that kind fella skull. Too much thick. Hi, you black fella, you make um gasket loose, catch um mainsail—catch um jib. Anchor he come up!"

There was the padding of bare feet on deck in answer to the commands. The girl came down the companionway behind him.

"I had to shoot Fong in the shoulder," she said. "He came to and tried to knife me. We'll send him ashore. I'll do the cooking."

Bud was watching Watterson narrowly. The man's evil mind itched for some way to express itself, to hurt the girl, to malign Bud. He started a sneering grin, and checked it as his eyes caught the look in Bud's coldly malicious as his own.

"Get the money out of the safe, Watterson," Bud said. "All of it. How much do the wages amount to, Miss Selwyn?"

"Nine hundred and sixty-dollars, outside of Tiri."

"Let him include Tiri."

"Ninety more."

"One thousand and fifty. You don't *have* to pay this to the hands, Watterson, but it will pay you to do it, so Miss Selwyn thinks you will. They are expecting it from you, anyway. Tiri told them you'd come ashore, and pay it with the cash. I imagine they'll be uneasy till they get it."

"I'm going up on deck again to take her outside," said the girl. "There'll be three

men to go back with them, besides Fong. The rest will come with us. I'll give Tiri the wheel as soon as we are clear and come below again."

Watterson rose slowly as she disappeared. His eyes were venomous. He looked at Bud like a balked devil, then at Purdy, and went towards the safe, squatting before it, twirling the dial. Bud heard Purdy's hard breathing. He had seen the look pass between the mate and Watterson, and he was on his guard against something, not sure of what it might be.

Watterson turned round with a tin cash-box in his hands, and put it down on the table.

"You can open it," he said sullenly. "There's my keys. But it's plain piracy."

To open it Bud would have to put down one gun, more or less occupy both hands. There was a trick here, but it seemed palpable.

"You open it," he said. "And count off what you need; I'll check it."

Watterson bent his head over his task. But not before there had been another glance between him and Purdy who—too suddenly—showed signs of drunken stupor and drowsiness. And not before Bud fancied he had seen a swift gleam of triumph pass over Watterson's face.

What was it? Counterfeit money? Or was the cash-box empty? The ship's money spent?

WATTERSON seemed to have trouble with the key. The lid came up suddenly, screening his hands. Bud guessed the riddle as Purdy, suddenly sober and alert, flipped up a hand, caught the neck of a bottle, and jerked it straight and hard at Bud's head, while Watterson's right hand came into view holding an automatic he had taken from the cash-box.

Two shots, a crash of glass, then two more shots, blended in continuous sound before the girl came leaping down the companionway. Bud had struck at the flying bottle with his left hand gun, shattering it, even as his right hand pulled trigger simultaneously with the discharge of Watterson's automatic.

A bullet got him in the left shoulder, twisting him with the heavy impact. But

he saw Watterson, with a curious look of surprise on his face, fire again, and send the lead through the top of the table before he slid down to his chair seat and then the floor, a leering, foolish grin, blood breaking out high above his right eye.

His gun fell on the table. With almost incredible agility Purdy flung a heavy tumbler after the bottle, and reached for Watterson's weapon. The tumbler caught Bud on the jaw, and the cabin whirled in a fog as he convulsively squeezed the trigger—and missed. The bullet flew high while Bud tottered back, slumping to a transom, struggling against unconsciousness.

He came to, with his head in the girl's lap, his face wet with fresh water, the blood-sodden sleeve of his coat ripped out at the shoulder, and his flesh bared to the wound. Her hands were at work, her fingers probing gently but firmly where the lead had torn through. A twinge of pain had brought him back again to see pain of another sort in her eyes, big in her pale, strained face, to see something else there that was not hard to translate.

"Don't move yet," she said.

"I don't want to move—ever," he murmured, knowing he was foolish, content to be so before he pulled himself together and glanced round. Purdy sat on the opposite transom with a face the hue of cigar ashes, holding his right forearm that was sopping with blood. Thelma Selwyn had shot him before he could fire at Bud.

Tiri had what seemed to be the dead body of Watterson in his brawny arms, depositing him on the transom beside Purdy, bending over for examination.

"He not dead, Missy," he said in tones of distinct disappointment. "Too much luck for him."

After all, the casualties were not so serious that they felt compunction about sending them ashore. Blood poisoning was the only thing to fear, and there were plenty of disinfectants in the station kit. Tiri had found it necessary to club two of the crew before a third capitulated, and the rest—original members—recognized him, and joined the cause of the daughter of their former skipper—the girl who had acted as mate and whom they liked and respected far more than Watterson and Purdy. The

thick skulls of the natives, buffered by their mats of hair, had saved them from fracture, and they were able—with the third man who, as their fellow tribesman, was left behind, leaving the schooner purged of all possible malcontents—to place Watterson with his gouged skull bandaged, Purdy, with his bleeding stopped with a tourniquet and Fong, with his shoulder given first aid, into the shore dinghy.

In consideration of the wounds Bud and the girl gave up the plan to tow Watterson and his followers to sea. They cast them off, watching them paddle shoreward toward the beach of the wharf and the lighted bungalow, as the schooner, on the first of the ebb, the land wind in her sails, slid through the reefgate to the open sea.

IT WAS three days later before Bud made confession. His shoulder was stiff, but it did not pain him particularly, and the wound was healing at first intention. He took it easy in the cockpit, unable to assist, watching the smart handling of the schooner by the girl who, with Tiri for mate, made no trouble of it. She could navigate also; she could do a lot of things that made Bud feel particularly humble.

The glamour was still over things. They were alone together in a world of sunshine and fresh wind, of blue seas and sparkling foam—man and maid who had adventured together, and who trusted each other.

"Is there real money in independent trading, picking up cargoes with a schooner?" he asked her, after he had figured out a hundred ways of working up to his subject—and abandoning them.

"A living," she said. "It depends a great deal on good-will. The big firms like Burns Philp have all the best of it, of course. And we only have a short season for copra. You have to make out with pearlshell, *beche de mer* and sharks' fins. Through the rainy season you have to lay up.

"Of course if one has capital, and can pay expenses for seven years while the palms grow to maturity, you can lease land cheaply, and then every tree is worth almost two dollars a year to you, if you make oil from the copra. That all means machinery. And it's a long time to wait."

"If one was *alone*—yes," said Bud. The

girl looked at him questioningly. It was the end of the day, and the sea was darkening with sunset.

"You see," said Bud, his voice trembling a little with his earnestness, and with his swiftly growing fear of the outcome now that he was going to put things to the touch. "I don't amount to much, Thelma. I was shanghaied because I thought it was clever to take in the San Francisco waterfront and try to sample all the rotten booze we ran across. There was a fight. I wound up in the fo'c'sle of the *Flying Cloud*.

"But there wasn't a girl mixed up in it. I've petted and necked, but it always seemed to me that I'd run across the right one some day, and that she'd feel the same way about it—that we'd been on the way to meet each other all the time. It sounds crazy, but I felt that way about you from the beginning.

"I left a car standing somewhere on Kearney Street—eight weeks ago. I wonder who's got it now? Not that I worry. This schooner's a lot the better boat. And there's quite a bit of money, too, dear. I threw a lot of it away and I'd have got rid of the rest the same way—money that my poor old dad made by bucking the game.

I've never earned a cent—so far. I'm not much—but I think I could be—it's different now—"

She turned and looked at him, her lips a little apart, her breathing a little hurried, her eyes—

"Would you, could you, Thelma?" he asked her.

Tiri and the native boys did not bother about cooked meals. They had dried fish, green coconuts and fruit. The fact that supper-time passed in the cabin without any preparations did not upset their arrangements and Tiri, munching a strip of sun-cured squid he took from his loincloth, made no objections to the fact that, under ordinary circumstances, his skipper-mistress should have relieved him at the wheel.

Looking ahead into the smoky sunset, Tiri took another dried tentacle and crunched into its crisp, salty sweetness. He knew the two were talking nonsense. Lovers always did. Was he not a lover? Was there not a girl even now who would be waiting for him to come back with wild ginger wreaths for his wide shoulders.

Life was good! Fight—food—mating. Very good!

FURS AND FUR PRICES

IN THE fur-trapping days before the Oregon emigration, furs bought for a few cents of trade goods often sold for hundreds of dollars at the markets. In the very early days, one trader obtained 110 prime beaver skins, worth about eight dollars each, for five leaves of tobacco each; twenty prime skins for a yard of white cotton cloth. This same man bought beaver skins, worth over seven dollars each, for an average cost in trade goods of eleven cents. The Hudson's Bay Company's early valuation of furs, averaging a year's collection, ran about as follows: Otter, \$12.00; Beaver, \$6.00; Bear, \$5.00; Fox, \$2.50; Lynx and Wolf, \$2.00 each; Deer and Wolverine, each, \$.75; Mink, \$.60; Raccoon, \$.40; Weasel and Muskrat, each, \$.15. Sea otter skins ran from \$25.00 to \$75.00 each, and there was a Russian colony on the Pacific coast that made a specialty of procuring them. A few years later, beaver brought \$4.00 a pound from American traders in the mountains or at the posts, and \$6.00 or \$7.00 a pound in St. Louis, while silver fox skins brought only \$60.00 at the post or rendezvous. Elk and wolf skins were not desired, but the latter sometimes brought a dollar each. The annual export of beaver skins by the Hudson's Bay Company ran from 50,000 to 100,000. On one small river alone the Indians obtained 130,000 muskrat skins in one year, 60,000 the next year, and none thereafter! Dressed buffalo hides brought about \$2.00 each; the robes, \$4.00, while painted or quilled hides sold at from \$8.00 to \$10.00. The hunters, knowing how the Indians prized the skin of the white or white-spotted buffalo (a freak of nature sometimes met with) were keen to kill these animals and trade the skins to the savages for as many as 60 common buffalo robes.



THE BENT GUN BARREL

By BARRY SCOBEE

*Of Course the Young
Rancher Noticed His
Rifle Was Missing*

WHEN Fife Guernsey returned to his shack after two days' absence on another ranch he saw at once that his rifle was gone. Disturbed over the matter, he rode on to town at once to make inquiries, and possibly to inform the sheriff.

Fife had two sections of land and twenty head of yearlings—just a start for himself. He knew how to handle cow stuff as only men born to the game can know, and having little to do on his own ranch he frequently helped out the big cattle barons in a pinch. Instead of paying him in daily wages they, in their free-handed way, would tell him to pick out a calf, to be driven home at branding time. Fife was a hard worker, extremely likable most of the time, and nearly everyone was interested in boosting him along.

Fife's nearest neighbor was old Uncle Jimmy, four miles away over the wind-swept hills, and in the obliging way of the Big Ranch country the young man always went past the old man's cabin on his way to town.

Uncle Jimmy owned thirteen square miles of this choice short-grass country, and the papers were prepared and ready to execute conveying the land to Fife on easy terms

and at low value. Any adjacent ranchman would have paid a third more, but Uncle Jimmy regarded Fife as a son. However, the old man, like many another graybeard, could not quite screw up his mind to complete the sale of the land that he loved.

And the whole country knew that if he should go riding off over the Great Divide with the papers unsigned, a nephew in San Antonio, the only heir, would ignore Fife Guernsey and sell at once to the highest bidder for cash.

Fife, riding his strawberry roan along a narrow trail, topped a ridge in the face of a clean wind and looked down on Uncle Jimmy's stone cabin in a snug rimple of the hills.

When he was still some distance from the cabin Fife's keen outdoor eyes caught sight of a gun on the ground beside the trail. Coming abreast he dismounted, and saw that it was his own thirty-thirty rifle, and that the barrel was bent quite noticeably, and that there was dry blood on the blue metal.

The young ranchman, tense as a startled buck, scanned his surroundings with hard eyes, but saw nothing unusual. The cabin was closed. A few white hens were picking hungrily around the door.

Fife walked on, leading the mare. At the cabin he opened the door without knocking and entered.

Uncle Jimmy lay on the floor, in a pool of blood, as if horribly beaten down with a club.

Fife staggered to the outside in a daze, his thoughts repeating over and over, "Poor Uncle Jimmy, poor Uncle Jimmy."

His mind cleared rapidly. A natural aptitude made him quick in such matters, so that he felt at once that the deed had been committed with his rifle to involve him—that it had been stolen, used, and placed beside the trail as if he in fleeing from his crime had dropped it there.

But his own predicament did not concern him at the moment. He reentered the room to make certain whether life lingered in the clay, and assured by examination that it did not, he shut the door, took up the bent rifle and rode on toward the town.

Midway of the remaining seven-mile ride he thought of turning off, for away to the left were the ranch buildings of "Boss" Hamilton, a cold blue-eyed man, truculent as an iceberg is truculent, and land greedy; and a pair of miles to the right "Black" Jackson, a dark-visaged, whip-tongue man, also land greedy. Both men had been bidders for the thirteen Uncle Jimmy sections. But if these men were told of the tragedy there was little they could do. The sheriff was the man to be informed speedily. So Fife jammed the little mare hard ahead.

This urging caused the mare to stumble on the rocky trail and pitch to her knees. Fife was not thrown off, but he leaped from the saddle in a blazing fury. *His* weakness was a quick, practically uncontrollable temper, flaming out at times of impatience.

"You—you—you—!"

He mouthed inarticulately, brandishing the rifle crazily about the mare's head, wanting to strike her, trying to keep from doing so.

His nose spurted into bleeding.

Temper frequently got him into momentary trouble. The only times he had been known to curb it before letting the fits run their course of blows or profanity was when enraged at the mare. And now gradually he subdued the ugly temporary insanity without striking her, and brought himself

back to normal. In shame he checked the nosebleed with his handkerchief and mounted and rode on.

The town was an upland village with a store, hotel, post office and the like bordering a bare stony plaza. Fife expected to arrive at the hour when the townspeople, summer people from the cities, and the ranch folk would be gathered for their mail. And he was right, for as he approached he saw that the mail hack was there from the distant railroad, and that the usual throng of men, women and children was ganged around the little pine shack office.

Casual eyes among the forty or fifty people turned to regard the lone rider in the plaza. Fife saw the district judge on the fringe of the crowd, and stopped his horse close to him. He held up the rifle. At sight of the barrel they stared.

"Uncle Jimmy has been murdered," he announced.

People grunted and gasped and hushed. Out of the silence the judge exclaimed stupidly, "Murdered! Why, he was in town yesterday evening!"

"Killed by blows on the head with this rifle," asserted Fife with a tremor in his voice. "In his cabin. You'd better send out a car to get him. And—where's the sheriff?"

Nobody answered or moved. Faces were upturned to him curiously.

"Why, Fife!" said the judge reproachfully.

Startled, Fife scanned the faces, saw morbid curiosity, slack-jawed amazement, incredulity, pain, horror—and comprehended.

"Great Lord!" he cried out. "You think I did it!"

Still no answer. They simply continued to stare. Of all of them there Fife's gaze found and held the dour eyes of Black Jackson, and that man, from some reason within the depths of himself, spoke out in his metallic voice for the whole crowd to hear.

"You done it in a rage o' temper, Fife. Your nose is bloody."

Silence awaited the reply to this accusation. Marked thus by his weakness, Fife flew into his violent rage. He raised the rifle crazily, mouthing inarticulately, cocked the piece.

The throng recoiled, with scared eyes glued to that bent, uncertain rifle barrel.

Fife's nose began to bleed. Firmly the old judge reached up and drew the gun from Fife's relaxing hands, and let down the hammer.

"This crooked thing fired into a crowd," said the man of the court, kindly as a father, "might strike a little child."

"I'm—I'm sorry," stammered Fife. "That was foolishness."

This was why he could be tolerated and highly regarded—he was quick to acknowledge his wrong.

"You ain't explained yet," rasped out the black scowler.

"Tell us what you know, Fife, son," suggested the judge.

"When I got to my shack at noon today," Fife started in at once, "my rifle was gone. I headed for town to ask you-all about it, if somebody had borrowed it, or what. When I got close to Uncle Jimmy's place I found it alongside the trail, bent like that."

He pointed to the gun in the judge's hands.

"At the cabin Uncle Jimmy was on the floor. He'd been clubbed with this rifle barrel. The body was stiff. Might have been there since last night, for all I know. I stayed all night at Mistah Hamilton's Rock Arroyo springs."

For verification of this the townsmen and ranchmen turned to Boss Hamilton and his foreman, a wizened, swart man named and invariably called simply Turk. Hamilton's frosty, truculent eyes were without expression.

"Fife was to do some fence-mending for me," he said. "Ask Turk."

"I seen Fife at the head o' Blue Horse Canyon yesterday noon," that little individual spoke up pertly. "He said he would finish the line and be home by dark. And as per usual I told him to pick him out a ca'f fo' pay."

All faces turned up again to Fife.

"That's right," the horseman acknowledged. "But I found a lot o' fence washed out on Rock Arroyo and fixin' that up put me all night at the springs there."

Then he added, "Mistah Hamilton rode over thataway last week. Reckon he knows the fence was washed out."

Boss, never wordy except when the iceberg in him was cracking and wrecking, only shrugged.

"You two look like you're trying to corner me!" Fife spat at him and Turk.

"Now, now," cautioned the judge, "let's tread easy."

Silence again, and out of the midst of it there boomed a grim voice, new to all ears, "I was on the Rock Arroyo yesterday afternoon."

He was a stranger in the country, a tall, lean and thin-mouthed fellow with beady eyes, leaning against the hitch-rack. Everybody looked hard at him.

He clipped out an explanation, "I'm the new hand on the 6K."

"And you saw me, didn't you?" Fife brightened.

"No, I didn't! This is none of my biz 'cept to help ketch a killer." He was addressing the crowd. "But I didn't see this heah bloody-nose feller, nor no other man neither, on the arroyo yesterday afternoon."

"Maybe I was down in the ditch hunting fence posts," suggested Fife. "My horse was down there out of sight most of the time."

The beady-eyed one shrugged indifferently, and to him the judge said, "Don't go away till we give you the word."

"Here, here," spoke up suave John Huguenot in his deep mellow voice—he, too, had been an earnest contriver for Uncle Jimmy's fine land—let's don't accuse men till we get some evidence. What cause would Fife have to kill the old man?"

"Not any," answered the judge, "except his fits of crazy-mad, and you know it, John Huguenot. Let's talk sense. Has any of you seen suspicious strangers in the country? Or do any of you know anything about this at all?"

He awaited a response, but none came, whereupon he continued.

"Let's figure out, then, when Uncle Jimmy was last seen—while all the crowd is here convenient. As for myself, he came to town late yesterday and signed up the deed conveying his land to Fife, and gave me the deed to hold in escrow. He left my house at a quarter of six."

Surprise and chagrin greeted the announcement of the deed in Fife's favor.

Boss Hamilton's cold eyes lost their sharp focus, and the strangest, most unreadable dancing expression imaginable popped into the eyes of Turk, the foreman. Black Jackson swallowed his Adam's apple and spat viciously; while in the face of suave John Huguenot there came and fled a look of bitterest disappointment.

"Did anybody see Uncle Jimmy after he left my house?" demanded the judge.

"I—saw—him."

The halting confession came from a young woman, a city summer visitor to the cool hills, who had passed beyond mere plumpness to fatness. She was as white as rice paper.

"Where, miss? And when?"

"At his home, Judge, just at dark."

All eyes were glued on her. She was so miserable that she was pitiful.

"Will you tell us about it, miss? Don't be frightened."

"Y—yes—ahm—I'll try. I went out horseback riding with Mr. Thorne."

Instantly the eyes of the throng shifted to the young man, Thorne, in his light flannels and cap. His little square mustache stood out like a black stamp on his tense, pale face.

"We watched the sunset from the ridge above the—Uncle Jimmy's house," she went on bravely. "Then we stopped and talked a minute with him as we rode back. That was the last I saw of him."

"You're doing excellently," praised the judge in his fatherly way. "And what else?"

"Well, about a mile from town my horse jumped and the saddle girth broke and I was thrown, or fell, off. I got Mr. Thorne to take the horse and saddle back to Uncle Jimmy's to fix it while I waited by the road."

"Why did you do that?" interrupted the judge in astonishment. "A mile or so to town, five or six miles back to Uncle Jimmy's."

The young woman went on firmly.

"Well, you see, every time I've gone out horseback riding some sort of silly accident has happened. It's because of my being so—so stout, you see. Once the pony gave out, another time I got off and couldn't get back on. People laughed at me behind my back. And last night—well, I just didn't

care for the people to say that because I'm so stout I broke the saddle girth. So I persuaded Mr. Thorne to go back to the old man's to get it mended—we didn't think the old man would tell if Mr. Thorne asked him not to. But Mr. Thorne didn't come back. I waited until about midnight and walked all the way in alone."

Attention switched to Thorne again. He was nervously smoking at a cigarette.

"What have you to tell us, Mr. Thorne?"

"She is correct," answered Thorne from a pinched throat.

"You left Uncle Jimmy alive?"

Thorne stammered something indistinct.

"Miss, has Thorne explained to you why he didn't return with your horse?"

"No, Judge."

"Fact is," Thorne spoke up. "she wouldn't hear me. Fact is, I got lost and I didn't want to tell. I got off on the wrong trail in the dark and rode around till daylight."

"You got the girth fixed?" broke in John Huguenot suavely.

"No, he didn't," spoke up the citizen who had horses and saddles to rent. "And besides that, he lost the girth."

The judge nodded encouragingly at the dejected Thorne.

"Fact is—I—" stammered the young man, "fact is, the old man had been killed when I got back to his place."

The crowd was startled afresh.

The judge sang out accusingly, "And you didn't tell it! Thorne, that looks bad. Thorne, you're from San Antonio, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was afraid to tell, after being lost all night. I—"

"Thorne, do you know Uncle Jimmy's nephew down there, Jason Brine?"

"N-no."

The judge left this angle up in the air. He looked the crowd over.

"Anybody else know anything about this?" he asked. "Any suggestions before we send out for the body?"

After a moment of waiting, Fife asked earnestly, "Is there any objection to me going, too? I'd like to look over the ground for clues."

"Sure, go ahead," said the judge. "I'm not accusing you or trying to hold you.

But somebody has killed old Uncle Jimmy, as you say, and—" he dandled the bent rifle on his two palms thoughtfully—"whoever did it is going to be found out. Most of you know my faith, that the evil doer is most certainly punished, somehow. It's quite possible, if we only knew how to read it, that this crooked gun could tell us who the guilty person is, who it was that lent his hand to so dastardly a crime."

There was an uneasy stir among the hearers, as if the bent barrel might turn itself in the kindly old judge's hands and point crookedly at one of them.

The old man spoke again about bringing in the body. Two men with cars volunteered. The sheriff came up. When those who were to go stepped out, the crowd broke up. Into the car where were the sheriff and Fife the judge whispered a warning.

"Keep an eye out, boys, for signs of Uncle Jimmy's nephew. The old man had a letter saying he was coming out from San Antonio on a little trip. He might have called on his uncle early last night—you understand. Can't leave any stone unturned in a case like this."

The automobiles rushed away. Fife relaxed a little, smiled whimsically at the young fellow driving.

"Tough luck," sympathized the latter. "But, hang it all, Fife, they don't very many of 'em think you did it."

"This bloody beak—the sign o' my crazy temper—if it hadn't been for this they wouldn't have thought of my doing it."

"It's bad, Fife, that temper. The boys have often said so. Nobody in the country got a temper like that unless it's Boss Hamilton's Turk—and he ain't a white man, exactly."

Back in town, when the automobile dashed away in a stir of dust, some of the men of the melting crowd gathered around the judge, curious to inspect the rifle. The gun was passed from hand to hand, presently reaching a half-grown city boy who, being unused to guns, thoughtlessly cocked it as it pointed in the general direction of a dozen men. It was John Hugenot who struck the muzzle up in a startled way.

"Boy!" he expostulated. "Don't be pointing that thing around promiscuously. That crooked barrel—"

"No tellin' who it'd hit," finished another.

"Try it on the 'dobe fence," suggested Black Jackson, "and see if the thing will shoot, and where, just outa curiosity."

Ten or twelve paces away was a high adobe wall. The man who had the gun proffered it around the circle. Turk accepted it and faced the blank wall. He opened the magazine to see if it were loaded.

"Four, five shells," he observed. "Don't think the bullet will split the barrel, d'you-all?"

He held the gun at the hip, pointing straight out in front of him, and fired, but the bullet struck up a little spurt of dry earth from the old wall at least ten feet off to the right.

"Fire in a crowd, you sure couldn't tell who'd get hit," said the beady-eyed hand from the 6K.

Nobody seemed to like this man. The subject was changed by Black Jackson speaking in a disgruntled way.

"Hope Fife Guernsey gets to enjoy his new land that the jedge is holding the deed for."

"Finest passel o' land around here—eight thousand three hundr'd and twenty acres almost wuth killin' for."

"Hope no jail nor nothing like that comes up to keep Fife off o' the land," said Turk with a leer.

Nobody answered that either. Turk's boss, the cold-eyed truculent Hamilton, was not there to echo yea or nay.

The people did not return home. They collected on the long hotel and drug store porch to await the coming of the body and more information from the sheriff. They were still there, augmented by later comers, when at last the two automobiles that had gone out for Uncle Jimmy came rolling in.

Fife Guernsey crawled from the lead car as grim as an executioner. He searched around and caught sight of the man he wanted.

"Turk!" he commanded.

The wizened little man, still carrying the crooked rifle, came forward a step or two, a curious play of emotions on his countenance. The spectators on the long porch

a few paces behind Fife—and Thorne and the stout woman were there side by side—froze at something in Fife's tone.

"Turk," said Fife, clear and firm, "I found a clue. Uncle Jimmy's little garden gate was kicked off o' the hinges. Done because it was slow to open. Done by a man with a nasty temper."

"You've got the nasty temper," retorted Turk.

"I had a nasty temper, but it's gone. But it was your temper that splintered the gate. I found another clue that proves it. When you kicked the gate off you were on your way to leave my rifle alongside the trail so the crime would be laid at my door. You had to go through some catclaw bushes, and a briar snagged a piece off your gauntlet."

Fife held out on his palm a triangular scrap of leather that would have covered a dime. Unwittingly Turk twisted his left arm up in the manner of a person looking at a wrist watch and displayed to his own and the public gaze a clean triangular spot on the cuff of his gauntlet.

"That sheepskin is easy to split off," commented Fife. "Do you want me to fit this scrap o' leather on the fresh scar to prove what I say?"

Turk's face faded slowly to a dirty, frightened gray.

"Turk," said Fife, "you'll get life for this."

The little fellow began to speak with stiff, oddly working lips.

"I—didn't—do it. I borrowed your gun—on way back from Blue Horse Canyon—to shoot coyote down the valley."

"Well?"

"And was taking it back, going past Uncle Jimmy's to try once more to buy his land, and Uncle Jimmy wouldn't listen to—"

Turk's words broke off and his gaze left Fife and distended with horror and fear at something back of Fife. Fife, cooler and more certain of himself than he ever had been, heard a step or two to his rear, felt the tenseness of the throng, but he did not turn around. He tried to command Turk's attention, for it seemed to him that this was the big moment to force a confession. He took a step forward and, throwing out an arm, shouted at Turk.

"Confess! Confess! Who killed Uncle Jimmy?"

Turk's affrighted gaze skipped back to Fife—Fife who had found him out and stripped him bare here before the throng and who yet was a menace—and Turk's mad senseless temper for which he was known flamed like an explosion.

In one movement he raised the rifle to his waist and cocked it. All the hatred and uncontrollable evil was in his face. He fired pointblank at Fife's body.

But Fife was not touched. Turk dropped the rifle from nerveless hands, staring again past Fife.

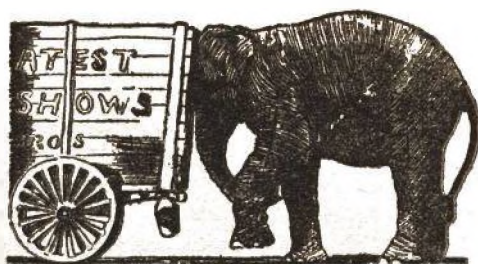
Fife faced about. Big Boss Hamilton stood there with his two great hands pressed to his right breast, high up, where the bullet had struck, and with a most ludicrous expression of amazement on his broad face.

"Why—why—" he stammered blankly, "that crooked gun barrel picked me out. Turk said—Turk said when I bent it over Uncle Jimmy's head that it'd ruin us both."



ELEPHANT LAW

By PAUL ANNIXTER



SIDE-WALL BENSON, bull boss for Grimm's Great Consolidated Shows, lounged back in his old-canvas-covered chair between the camel enclosure and the roped-off elephant picket line. It was mid-forenoon and the big menagerie tent was not yet opened to the public. Apparently Side-wall was utterly at ease and half asleep, with his brown-paper cigarette gone out between his lips. But the cigarette was perennially there, and perennially dead and he was by no means asleep. Under his old black felt his brow was troubled; his brain refused to relax along with his body, for many and varied were the problems that confronted him.

First there was the death of Big Bertha, the shrewd, eighty-year-old female who had been in all matters of initiative the virtual leader and moving spirit of the eighteen elephants of the circus herd. She had died early in the spring, a mean complication for Side-wall in itself, for there was no other dowager in the herd with gimp and sagacity enough to take her place. Leadership was now vested in Khartoum and Pundit, the biggest and oldest bulls in the company. There are individuals and personalities in an elephant herd as distinctly unique and outstanding as there are among humans; and often the quirks of character that go with them are subtler and more enigmatic

than in humans, and much harder to read.

What worried Side-wall especially was the fact that an old antipathy between Khartoum and Pundit had broken out afresh since the advent of Major, a new addition to the herd, purchased from a traveling show that had gone broke in Los Angeles. Khartoum and Pundit had hated one another as a matter of principle for two years, their trouble having started over a foolish young cow named Dundora, who had been a coquette and a natural trouble maker. As soon as he had seen the cause of the trouble, Side-wall had had the owners get rid of Dundora; but the poison had been sown and the two bulls had rumbled and threatened each other into pitched battle. Only the intervention of Big Bertha had prevented the jealous males from killing each other and wrecking the show in the process. A dozen keepers, trainers and cage-men had milled helplessly about, armed with bull hooks and prodding irons, but totally unable to stem the tide, until Side-wall had rushed Big Bertha to the scene, sent her four-ton weight smashing into the breach, backed by the authority of her strident trumpeting. Again and again she had rammed herself between them until the men, working swiftly, had been able to slip chains on the hind legs of the monsters. But now Big Bertha was gone. Should an-



*The Bull Herd Lacked Leadership;
as the Old Bull Boss Knew
Only Too Well*

other clash occur nothing but high-powered rifles could avail against them.

This perturbing knowledge Side-wall had been carrying himself. There was no one he could talk to of his obscure problem. The bull herd was entirely in his care, for he possessed the only real knowledge of elephants in the circus, an arcanum of hard-won wisdom which is not the property of any old trainer. Knauss, the German trainer, for instance, was a one-pointed, efficiency-bitten man whose animal knowledge was confined entirely to seals and horses. Duschene, the dub trainer who put the bulls through their stuff in the main ring and who was their virtual owner and trainer, according to the banners, knew next to nothing about elephants. He had merely been hired to learn the part of the old "trainer" who had died, shouted the appropriate things at the correct time and cracked his whip while the bulls went through their act just as they had gone through it for more than thirty years.

SIDE-WALL was a man close to sixty, scrawny and grizzled, with hard, dry, sun-yellowed hands that were highly reminiscent of claws just now as they clutched the chair arms. His faded blue eyes looked sharp and birdlike too, in the dark seal-brown of his face. He had grown bent and wrinkled in his thirty-five years of trouping under the big-tops, but about him was a sense of peaceful philosophic calm that seems a requisite of all who work continually with elephants.

Side-wall's word carried a long way in the circus world. Everyone in and about the show scrupulously respected the privileges of his station. He was as important as the menagerie superintendent himself, sometimes vastly more so; in on all matters of the show's route schedule and recipient of the special trust and confidence of Joe Grimm the owner, for many and far-reaching are the responsibilities of a boss bull man. There was a time—two times, in fact—when Side-wall and his bull herd had practically saved the show; once in time of storm, another time when the train had been derailed. Side-wall took his position in a quiet matter-of-fact way, but in him was a deep pride that showed in his

taciturn dignity and in his old heart was a welter of sentiment connected with this job and its deep affections born of association. One sensed that anything which might arise to sever him from his work might sever his very life.

In his present dilemma, he knew, it would be worse than useless to apprise the menagerie superintendent or Joe Grimm, the owner, of the danger. If Side-wall couldn't manage his department without mishap, a new bull boss would be hired and the job of twenty-five years would go glimmering. So Side-wall had nursed his worry alone, comforting himself with putting a heavy chain on each of the four legs of both bulls each night. Only Shorty Ellis, his assistant, had any conception of the true state of affairs.

The chains had a psychological effect, perhaps, but would be quite useless if the giants chose to break loose. For elephants are captives only so long as they submit; nothing else can hold them. Khartoum and Pundit when roused were vast pulsating engines of destruction whose power was immeasurable. No one knew of the one-sided communions Side-wall had with the two bulls at night after the big tents were dark, how he stroked the great trunks and strove to instill into them the law and responsibility of leadership.

THE past two weeks the bad blood between the two tuskers had been aggravated. Every now and then one or other of them would lift his trunk with a challenging blare and strain at his shackles, his wise little pig eyes gleaming wickedly. As the days went by with no change in the state of affairs, a feeling of restless presentiment grew on the old bull boss. It seemed to him that the entire herd likewise sensed electricity in the air. They were more restless than usual. Eyes were continually rolling in pachydermic excitement. They were rarely quiet; their squeakings, gurglings, rumblings, rappings and thuds to be heard in the picket line even at night. Numberless times the old man had been roused from sleep by some blasting or clanking of chains a bit more startling than usual.

Supposing Khartoum and Pundit should break loose after all! There would be a

fight such as never had been known in the circus world. And which of the two would conquer, he wondered, for there was nothing to choose between them. Each bull stood over nine feet at the shoulder, and each measured a full fourteen feet in girth, even their weight was almost equal. Their tusks had been cut short and balled at the ends, it was true, but backed by close to ten thousand pounds of battering power they were still terrible lethal weapons.

But then, Side-wall reflected, should there be a pitched battle now, it would never go on to the death. Rifles would have to be brought to bear at once. But in any case the net result of such a combat would cost the show several thousand dollars worth of elephant flesh, to say nothing of indemnities, for damages mount fast when elephants run amuck. And the blame would fasten on him.

FOR an hour Side-wall had been covertly watching the new bull, Major, from under the pulled-down brim of his hat. Major, pictured on the billboards as the biggest elephant in captivity, because he was a few inches taller than Khartoum and Pundit, though he was so lean and rangy that he weighed in over a thousand pounds lighter than either. He stood now waving a wisp of hay in his lean trunk before tucking it into the pink cavern of his mouth, while his whitish little eyes rolled from side to side.

From the first Major had interested the bull-boss, though he hadn't been able to catalogue him to his own satisfaction. Something of an enigma, the Major, a dashing personality in his way, startling to the eye with his added height and unballad tusks; a jaunty brute. When they had first met, Khartoum and Pundit had displayed a dislike of the newcomer, but that was more or less natural in the case of a third and younger bull, particularly since he had been placed among the dependables at once, with only one small chain on his left hind foot. One thing Side-wall was sure of, Major hadn't been long under canvas. Side-wall could tell by numerous small traits. The young bull had been a decided bargain, a fact which had caused Side-wall a certain amount of anxiety at the time. Also Major's

instinctive ganging up with Frieda and old Emma seemed odd in an elephant of his essential dignity. Frieda was an ill-natured razor-spined runt of the herd, and old Emma a soured, lean-flanked old-maid elephant, a misfit whose disposition had been ruined in early years by bad teeth. Whenever opportunity presented itself these three formed a clique, which fact mystified Side-wall, for elephants, even in small tame herds, are definitely benefic or malefic. From time to time he had seen old Emma reach over and take some of Major's hay—a thing which no other elephant could do without being whacked.

What Side-wall could not understand in his charges tormented him with uneasiness and even with a sense of impending disaster, for with elephants understanding is power, the only real mastery. Commune with his mighty friends as he would, reassurance was somehow lacking. Side-wall was ridden with the feeling of one who is on the verge of dramatic and terrible events against which there was no way of fighting. It was only with an effort that he shook himself free of it for an hour or so at a time. That morning, acting on a hunch, he had sent a telegram to a friend in Los Angeles. The answer would perhaps throw light, one way or another, upon his problem at hand.

The day passed and nothing untoward occurred beyond a short skirmish in the picket line between Pundit and old Emma who had somehow irritated the great bull, at watering time. It was quickly halted by the keepers but proved all too much to Side-wall, for Khartoum's trumpeting at the other end of the line had risen instantly to a fury, while jets of dust spurted up from the straining stakes that held him.

THE following night they pulled into Kansas City about dawn and found trouble waiting in the form of a clay lot turned into grease-mud because of a recent rain. The heavy steam calliope and the tanton tank of the mother hippopotamus, the far-famed Blood-Sweating Behemoth of the colored posters, promptly mired down to the wheel-hubs. The sweating horses strained, slipped and sank to their knees

again and again until finally the call came from the boss hostler: "Bring out the bulls!"

A few minutes later four of the female elephants (for all elephants are "bulls" to the circus world) came drifting silently up in the growing light, with Side-wall himself perched on the neck of the foremost. But strain as they would they were unable to get the tank wagon on dry ground.

Side-wall Benson stood by frowning, for he knew that only two animals in the show had the power to shift those wagons—Khartoum and Pundit. Major had proven himself totally inefficient and untrained for such tasks. It was only after considerable hesitation that he and Shorty Ellis loosed Khartoum and led him forth to the mired trucks, Side-wall walking with a hand on the swaying trunk, Shorty perched high on the great neck.

"Use your hook," Side-wall counselled tensely. "Don't let 'em get close together when we bring him back."

But apparently Khartoum was too serious about the work in hand to think of Pundit. Within twenty minutes both the great trucks were righted and shoved deftly onto firmer ground by the resistless pressure of his broad willing head.

For a minute or two as Khartoum was led back to his place in the line, he stood free and unshackled within forty feet of his rival. Both bulls looked sullen and in evil mood, but, obedient to the great hook held threateningly over his forehead, Khartoum made no effort to attack the other, but turned slowly and majestically around and backed into his place at the opposite end of the line. Side-wall, fastening the final chain about his hind foot, stood up and wiped the nervous sweat from his forehead. Then he stood for a space with his arm about the dangling trunk, and when he turned to go, left a ripe red apple in its eager tip.

Another storm was brewing. That night the heat under canvas was suffocating; the sky instead of being dark indigo, pollened with stars, was a dull drab, and the humid motionless air oppressed body and mind like a blanket.

The barking of the snack-stand vendors and side-show men lacked zest that night,

performers were touchy and nervous because of heat and perspiration, and the crowd that oozed out of the big top after the last show were carrying their coats and mopping their faces. Even the elephant line was quiet as death that night. To Side-wall it was like the calm before dramatic storm and he found himself listening and listening as he lay in his bunk, but for what he hardly knew.

IN THE middle of the night a sound as if of the roaring of cataracts stole into Side-wall's exhausted senses. For a long time he seemed struggling desperately to shake off the illusion, but it persisted, and eventually he struggled free from the sleep that clouded his brain. Suddenly he sat up in his bunk as his tent was flooded by a blinding flare of lightning. The whole universe above him seemed smashed and shattered in a diapason of thunder. He jumped up to lace the snapping tent-flaps against the sudden roar and rattle of pelting rain, his ear trained toward the menagerie tent. His watch said three in the morning. A couple of hours yet till dawn, but he wouldn't try to sleep again. He hurried into his clothes and roused Shorty Ellis, for somehow the menagerie tent seemed calling.

He was hardly dressed when a new note blent with the riot of the elements. He knew it, of course, for the high trumpeting of an elephant. It was followed by a sort of screaming bellow, which momentarily drowned out the fury of the storm. Then other thudding crashing sounds as if a wagon or some heavy apparatus had been smashed or overthrown, accompanied by a crescendo of coughing grunts and roars from the cat and hyena cages.

At the rear entrance to the big tent he almost collided with another dim figure, Heeney, the menagerie superintendent.

"Khartoum!" yelled Heeney, above the wind. "He's loose! He nearly run me down just now—outside the tent! What you going to do?"

Another job was imperilled now, besides that of the bull-boss; plain to be read in Heeney's anxious quaver. If the damage done was wholesale the superintendent would be called to answer. About time

somebody else was sharing the worry, Side-wall opined.

"I tell you there's hell to pay in there!" Heeneey panted, catching at the old man's arm.

"Go hunt your hole!" snapped Side-wall, jerking away. "Get the canvas crew out if you want to help. And all the cage men!"

He plunged on to find a great section of the menagerie sidewall torn out, and within, by the flare of a hastily lit gasoline light fourteen elephants blasting and rumbling as they swung their trunks and swayed straining at the picket stakes, while out in front of the line one of the herd lay dead, Una, one of the younger cows. She lay on her side crushed, battered and strangely flattened, as if caught in some mighty steam press, blood streaming from great wounds in her side.

Khartoum and Pundit gone! Their chains snapped like so much twine, stakes half uprooted. And there—good God, Major's place empty, too! What did it mean?

"Cage-men! Helpers! Quick!" yelled Side-wall, and a dozen dim forms coming through the storm gathered round him. "You, Shorty, take four men with you and get them five big rifles out, then follow us. But don't use them guns till you get the office from me, understand?"

"You four men stick here and keep the rest of these bulls quiet. Don't spare your hooks," Side-wall shouted further above the cacophony of the storm. "The rest of you come with me."

Head down Side-wall hurried stumbling through the blackness in the direction of the distant sounds of conflict which were momentarily blotted out by the rolling of thunder. His every sense strained ahead into the storm, in an agony of suspense. No doubt but that a titanic battle was waging out there in the night. The sounds seemed to have rolled away in the direction of the railroad tracks. Now and then as he ran the old man groaned aloud, for he felt so utterly alone.

IN TWO or three minutes the noises of combat became more terrible, became, indeed, the most awe-inspiring thing that any man present had ever heard. They passed a telephone pole splintered and lean-

ing against its wires. There were stampings, blastings, bellowings and trumpeting mingled together with the wind and thunder in one huge paroxysm of sound. As they came closer the scraping of leathery hides could be heard, like the rasping of rusty iron while the ground actually boomed to the thudding of feet as the giants crashed and parried. Now the riflemen came running up, bearing two lanterns.

Presently arose a scream, as of some great creature in agony, stabbing through the night. One of the fighters was down.

"Bring up that lantern," yelled Side-wall, and next minute a gasping cry broke from him. The fallen elephant was the new bull, Major. And Khartoum and Pundit stood together above him, making no move to savage one another. They had combined forces in a battle against the new bull!

As Major heaved himself up again with mighty effort, Side-wall had a close look at his eyes. They were red-white and rolling with berserk killing lust. The brute had become transformed, something obnoxious in the very feel and look of him because of the destructive fury that obsessed him. It was the evil look of the rogue that Side-wall knew too well of old, while in the eyes of Khartoum and Pundit was a wholly different wrath, contained, relentless, punishing.

The rifle-men pressed closer in a half circle, guns ready, but Side-wall was out in front of them with arm aloft, shouting above the din of renewed conflict, "Hold them guns, men. It's all right, I tell you. Them bulls know what they're doing."

"They're killin' him," shouted Hodge, one of the cage-men.

"No, they ain't. They're puttin' hell through him an' he needs it. Keep your fingers off them triggers, I say." Then the old man advanced, carrying a lantern, his other arm outstretched while words of praise and pleading came from him in a strained and broken voice: "Go to it, boys. Good old fellows, give him hell. Don't mind me. It's only old Side-wall. An' you can lam me, too, when you're done. S'whelp me, I been the biggest fool that ever swung a bull-hook!" He ended in a cracked laugh, and Shorty Ellis saw him dash a hand across his eyes.

Once again the strident blaring cry of pain as the tall bull went to his knees under a rain of blows from either side. A moment or two he bore up under the chastisement of flailing trunks and prodding tusks backed by tons of avenging might. Then with a moan he was on his side, flat in the mud, but not until his head was on the ground and his very trunk had ceased to writhe, formal gesture of submission, did the punishment cease while the two old bulls drew slightly back and stood at attention.

Justice had been meted out by elephant law without the aid of man and to Side-wall that moment was fuller than any he had yet known as arbiter of elephant affairs.

"And that," said Side-wall to Shorty Ellis, as the rangy bull was allowed to stagger once more to his feet, tottery, and with down-held head and trunk, "just about settles all our troubles."

SOME four hours later, the storm over, flags and banners all fresh in the early sunlight, Khartoum and Pundit stood together at the watering tank drinking slowly and spraying water in gentle streams over each other's wounds. All their old enmity had been put aside and friendship sealed by their mutual upholding of law and order. No doubt now but what the leadership of the herd was jointly and safely vested in the two elderly giants.

The sense of this, a peace that comes of authority well placed and trust established, somehow permeated the menagerie and the whole circus lot. At least it seemed so to Side-wall Benson who was sitting once more in his old canvas chair, this time outside in the sunlight. As the two great friends, amiable stake-mates once more, were led inside, Shorty Ellis came out and joined his chief.

"Guess we know who to put them four chains on now, eh, Shorty?" Side-wall grinned.

"Y'know," said Shorty, removing his

blue keeper's cap to rub his round, short-cropped head, "I can see the whole thing now."

"Yeah?" said Side-wall glancing sharply round.

"Y'see," said Shorty, who had never been long on brains. "Them two wounds on Una's what gives it all away. Them wounds was made by sharp tusks without no balls on the ends. Major's the only answer to that. Major up and killed her and ol' Pundit and Khartoum lit into him for disturbin' the peace. 'Pears to me they been watchin' him nervous-like for a couple of weeks, knowin' he was a bad one. They know the bossin' of the herd's up to them now since Bertha died. Figure it out for yourself."

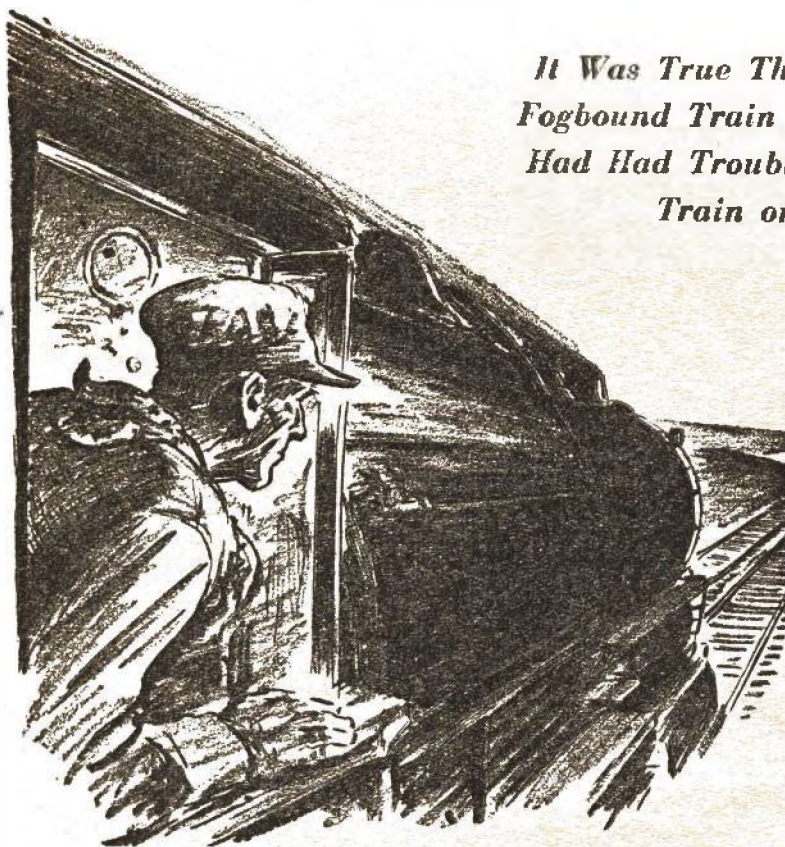
Side-wall spat brown into a saw-dust heap. "That's a smart job o' figurin', Shorty, on'y you're about four hours late. About the lack of balls on them tusks of Major's, we're goin' to correc' that right this morning." His voice was happy but still a trifle shaky and uncertain. "By the way, here's a letter I got just now that verifies all them deductions of yours. I had a hunch the other day and got a friend of mine back in Los Angeles to look up the history of this here Major, an' here's what he says—" He handed a long night letter to his helper.

"Jeepers Cripus," muttered Shorty, after puzzling through the long message in which the gaunt new bull was convicted by his own record of being a periodic rogue, a homicide and a trouble-maker. "Who'd ever a-thought it of the Major? So that's why they sold him so cheap."

"Life's sure funny," said the old bull boss. "All these days we been a-chainin' an' double-chainin' the only power in the herd that could possibly have held that critter in his tantrum. What'd 'a' happened if our fool chains had held?"

"I'll answer that one tomorrow," said Shorty, moving off.

*It Was True That Since That
Fogbound Train Wreck Jenkins
Had Had Trouble Keeping His
Train on Time*



UNSEEN HANDS

By
T. T. FLYNN

WHEN a man loses his money, his child, or his home, he is pitied, and the pity has a healing power. When a man loses his nerve he is pitied, and that pity has a scorching power. The bigger the man, the deeper the hurt; the greater the pity, the more bitter it becomes.

I am minded of a man I knew well who was so pitied. The knowledge became public property through a rumor, one of those vague, intangible tales that spread and grow, changing their color and often intent, with the passage from mouth to mouth, blasting characters, ruining reputations, and generally bringing distress to those concerned, if the tale happens to be derogatory in the beginning. This one was.

Who started it no one rightly could say; probably someone who secretly envied John Steele or cherished an unknown grudge against him. Anyway it started, and before long was common property. You were liable to bump into it anywhere on the division, and even in the adjoining divisions.

John Steele had lost his nerve, the tale went—John Steele, who was one of the steadiest engineers that ever graced the right side of a cab. It was unthinkable, yet the tale persisted and, as is the way with things oft repeated, soon became an accepted fact, at least until John refuted it.

There were those, and many of them, that scoffed at the idea and confidently asserted that John would show the whole thing up when he became aware of the gossip. I say "as soon as he became aware of the gossip," for it was literally so. There was no one who cared to repeat the tale in front of him.

The whole division watched and waited and buzzed underneath. And John suffered, for—God help him—enough of it was true to damn him to himself. The miserable tale hung by a slender thread of fact and he was helpless before it.

I never found it hard to feel sorry for him. When one, seated in a swaying cab seat, has thundered ahead better than a mile a minute, driving into a solid wall of fog

behind which anything might be hiding; when one had seen the red danger signal jump out fifty feet in front of the engine and flash by before the throttle could even be closed; heard above the shrill scream of brakes a mighty crash, and felt the world rock and go blank; when one has awakened in a hospital and learned that the pal of years, last seen on the fireman's seat across the cab, was no more, and others with him, and had been told that the grim reaper has passed one by a hair—then, I say, there is some excuse for a clutching at the throat, a pounding at the heart, an involuntary closing of the throttle when once again the fog closes down in front of the speeding train.

I said so and still do, but on the Twin Spring Valley division of the D. & R. there are many who hold no such views. A man's a man, a job's a job; if he can't hold his place down, let him make way for someone who can.

There were none who held more strictly to that code than Jenkins, the superintendent of the division. A hard man, Jenkins, hated by some, disliked by many, but a man of results. The trains on his division arrived and departed on time to the minute. There was no slacking in any of his departments, no making of excuses. If one could, one did. If one couldn't, one got out.

And so, when John Steele's train arrived late several times, Jenkins turned his attention to the matter. John received a summons to go on the carpet, or, as it was phrased, a request to see Mr. Jenkins in his office. There was a little frown of worry between his eyes and a greater load of apprehension in his heart as John mounted the stairs to Jenkins' office. Such a summons could mean only trouble. Jenkins never praised. They got paid for it, was his reason.

After a wait in the outer office, John was admitted to Jenkins' presence. Jenkins kept him waiting while he leisurely examined some papers. Finally he picked up a report and wheeled around in his chair.

"Steele," he barked, "you've brought your train in late several times recently. What's the matter?"

John shifted uneasily and followed the moulding with his glance as though seeking an answer along its length.

Jenkins tapped his desk with the end of his pencil. "Well!" he said impatiently.

Jenkins' clerk later reported the interview with much gusto. "It was," he averred, "the funniest thing I ever seen. There was old man Jenkins gettin' madder'n madder tryin' to get an explanation out of Steele, and not a word could he get. Steele would work his mouth, but nothin' would come out."

Later, from John, I learned, with no hint of apology beyond the bare statement of facts, what took place. He couldn't describe the shadows that rode in the rocking cabs at night, more especially those nights when the fog closed down dank and thick over everything, the nights when the powerful headlights pierced but a few feet and ended in a baffled blur.

He couldn't make Jenkins see those who stood by his shoulder at the head of the thundering train. Warm and comfortable, safe and contented, the passengers rode in the brilliantly lighted coaches or dimmed Pullmans. Their lives were trusted to the engineer, unthinking perhaps, but nevertheless so. It was not of his own safety that John thought when he faltered in the fog. It was those who had died in ghastly wrecks and the thought of those who rode in the train behind that wrenched at John's heart and beaded his brow when the cold banks of fog closed in ahead. All of which eddied through his mind as he stood mute before Jenkins, unable to bring it forth in speech.

He did his best. "They's things," he stated, half ashamed.

"Things?" said Jenkins, suspiciously. "What sort of things?"

"Just things, ghosts, mebbe," said John, and not another word could Jenkins get out of him. Finally Jenkins spat and leveled his finger menacingly.

"Ghosts?" he snarled. "Ghosts, eh? I'll tell you what's the matter with you, Steele. I've been hearing stories and now I know they're true. You got a yellow streak and it's coming out. Since you piled into that freight train, you ain't been worth thirty cents whenever there's a fog hanging low. You're yellow as a canary."

That got under John's skin. "Yellow?" he said. "No, sir. Not yellow. Why, I'll fight anyone on the division or any other. I'm not yellow, Mr. Jenkins."

Jenkins grinned, nasty like. He reached down into a desk drawer and yanked out a time table. "Here's what you want to fight, Steele, if you want to keep running on the D. & R. I'm going to keep my eye on you. Look out or you'll be firing, again, maybe leave the road altogether."

He turned to his desk as a signal of dismissal. John shuffled out, his face flushed at the way the old man had threatened him, but with a kind of drawn look about his mouth—you know, like you see in a woman's face in pictures showing them protecting their children from some danger. Perhaps he was thinking of his wife and the brood of kids and their home with the payments coming due regular.

It's no cinch when a regular engineer loses out. Usually, ever since they have been able to work, they've been on the railroad. They're crack men. But when they're out, they're out—finished. All the other roads are full up and they'd have to start at the bottom, where they began years ago. They don't have another trade, and, as they're usually too old to really make a go at anything different, they usually just drift. Some get into watchmen's jobs and one thing and another. But you can usually lay to it that hard times have come when one loses out. So Jenkins' threat carried weight. He was not only striking at John. He was striking at John's wife and children, and that's something else again.

Things sort of went along smoothly for quite a while after that. To an outsider everything would have looked sweet and peaceful, but an old-timer could have told you different. In the first place, Jenkins was not the forgetting kind. I remember the time he gave Jerry Timkins one of those "the next time and away you go" ultimatums, and five years later reminded Jerry of the warning as he fired him. In the second place, there was the talk of a yellow streak. No honest to goodness he-man who suspects that all other men consider him yellow can turn away from the situation with a free mind. It's bound to stay with him. Every man he talks to, every group he passes, will stir the memory.

And then, there was John's own, private problem. A thousand times he asked himself if the "ghosts" were not just an excuse

to cover a cowardly streak. His honest mind told him no, yet when he passed groups of his fellow workers and saw their covert glances, their remarks to one another, his cheeks burned and he hurried that he might be alone.

All that is not good for any man, and John began to show the effects. He lost weight. There was a haggard air about him, a look of strain. He grew silent. He was no longer seen laughing, joking and gossiping with the engineers and firemen about the roundhouses and bunk rooms. He took to sitting off to himself, smoking his pipe, brooding.

Well, as I said, things went along that way for quite a spell. The weather was fine and clear. John brought his train in, trip after trip, on time to the minute.

His run was an easy one. Every other day he took a local up to Jackson City, arriving there at five-thirty in the afternoon. At nine-thirty he coupled up to the Tri-State Limited, with a fresh engine, and brought her without a stop, the whole hundred and forty-three miles, to Rawlings, where another fresh engine waited.

It was at Jackson City that fate, or the Gods of Chance, or luck or anything you care to call it, gave John a chance to make good to the whole list of things that had been troubling him. Personally, I'll always maintain that John gave himself the chance, for it wouldn't have been a chance if he hadn't made it so.

That day he took the local up on time and turned his engine over to the roundhouse forces at the inspection pit. At eight-thirty he was again on the job. It had grown quite dark. A chill coolness was in the air, a sort of hint of the colder weather that was not far off. John and his fireman were out in the ready lot, where all the engines were placed after being overhauled in the roundhouse. Their engine, repaired and tightened and greased, with a full tank of coal and water, stood passively, like a sleeping monster. It wasn't the same engine they had up. It was a larger, more powerful one. The heavy, all-steel Tri-State Limited is a lot different from a nondescript local train.

The fireman was in the cab, working up a good bed of fire and generally getting things in order. John, on the ground, was

carefully going over the machinery he was to drive for the next few hours. He moved about his work, a smoky oil torch in one hand, a long spout oil can in the other, looking, by the eerie light of the flare, like a visitor from another world.

He was frowning, and with good cause. The president of the road was making an inspection trip, and Jenkins was accompanying him over the length of that division. Their special car was on a siding, waiting to be coupled to the Tri-State Limited. It was a provoking situation at best. Many things can happen to delay a train, but when the old man rides, none of them better had. Any mishap or delay is sure to mean trouble for someone. To add to the difficulty, or detract from it, if you like, a light mist had been gradually thickening into the certain beginnings of a good, healthy fog.

As John worked slowly around the engine, the fog thickened, gradually shutting out objects, until the engine stood alone in a little world of its own. As the fog deepened, John grew more depressed. It seemed as if he was playing in hard luck right along.

He well knew that, before the night was over, he stood a good chance of departing from the D. & R. and facing real trouble. His thoughts about Jenkins were not of the pleasantest. In fact, no one had many pleasant ones for the man, but John's were of an extra bright red, so to speak.

He was about through inspecting and oiling his engine when footsteps caused him to look around. Standing there was Jenkins with two young lads. It seems the president was taking his young grandson along with him, so Jenkins brought his boy to keep the other lad company for the time they were with the party.

Jenkins stood watching John for some time while the lads moved about, inspecting the engine critically and talking together. John went ahead with his work, paying no attention to the superintendent. Finally Jenkins spoke harshly.

"Steele!"

"Yes, sir." John paused and turned around.

"The president's car is going to be coupled to your train," said Jenkins.

"So I heard," John replied.

JENKINS looked significantly at the fog which shut them in. "I expect you to get in on time," he declared.

"I always try to," John assured him.

Jenkins chewed his cigar and frowned. A cloud of steam and noise from an outgoing engine kept him quiet for a moment, but when it was cleared away, he spoke. "No ghosts," he warned. "If you see a spook this trip, Steele, pull out your time table and give it a look. It is liable to be the ghost of your job."

Red, that was not reflected from the bandanna around his neck, stained John's face, but he said nothing. You can't talk back to the man who holds your bread and butter in the hollow of his hand.

Jenkins turned to go, but halted as a man burst out of the fog into their range of vision. It was a machinist from the round-house who had been working on one of the nearby engines. "Did you see that engine that just passed?" he asked excitedly.

"We didn't look," answered John. "Anyway, the steam from her cylinder cocks hid her. What's the matter?"

"Maybe I was dreaming," said the machinist, "but when she passed me I could have sworn I saw two boys running around in her cab. Maybe I was mis—"

He never finished his sentence. Jenkins grabbed his arm.

"Two boys?" he demanded.

The machinist nodded.

Jenkins looked about. Nothing but the dirty, gray walls of fog was visible. He called the boys at the top of his voice. A muffled bell from a distant yard engine was the only reply.

It was evidently so. The two boys had slipped away while Jenkins and John were talking, and climbing into the cab of an engine, had in some way got the thing started.

Probably it moved away so smoothly that they were going at a good pace before they were aware of the danger.

"My God!" Jenkins turned to Steele. His face was drawn out of its usual mask and was ashen with sudden fear. Believe me, he had good reason for it. His son's life, the president's grandson's life and his job were all on that runaway engine. "My God!" again burst from the lips of Jenkins as he

fairly screamed, "They'll get out on the main line!"

John's thoughts were racing. "They may get it stopped," he said, partly to quiet Jenkins' fears, partly to stimulate his own forlorn hope. In his heart he knew it was pretty forlorn. He remembered what his trained ears had subconsciously noted, when the engine passed them. She had a very short exhaust, a sign that her valves were cut back to about her maximum speed. She probably had a boiler full of water, a good fire and plenty of steam. They made terrible possibilities.

It was John's moment for rejoicing. Jenkins was humbled and suffering before him. The man who had branded him as a coward, who had stood between him and a safe future, who never gave mercy and presumably would never ask for it, bore on his face a terrible fear. I won't say it was fear of his job, although the job wouldn't be worth two cents if anything happened to the old man's grandson. It was fear for his boy. Jenkins was stripped of his weapons, "smote hip and thigh," and in the heart also.

As John looked at him he felt no gladness, only pity and a sudden fierce determination. He turned and raced for the cab steps.

"Come on," he flung back over his shoulder to Jenkins. "We may be able to catch them."

In another moment they were rolling down the yard. They could hardly see where they were going. The fog hid everything but a little circle a couple of hundred feet in diameter. They edged along, pretty slowly at first, for there was the bare chance that the engine would be halted, some way, before it got loose on the main line.

At the lower end of the yard all the tracks run together into two tracks that lead out on the main line. There is a small switch station at that point. As they came up, the headlight picked out the switchman, waving his arms. From him they learned that an engine had passed his red light at an excessive rate of speed and vanished down the main line tracks. It was gone before he could see who was in the cab.

Well, that was that. No further doubt remained. Those two kids were on a wild, runaway engine, with fifty miles of clear

track ahead of them. Running off schedule, they were liable to drive into almost anything. If the engine kept on, with the draft getting the fire hotter and hotter, the boiler would quickly run dry and the whole shebang go up. It was a cheerful prospect all around.

Jenkins clutched at John's shoulder. "Can you catch them, Steele?" he asked huskily.

They had clattered across the switches and were also on the main line. The fog was so thick you couldn't see a thing, except the glistening rails fading into nothing just ahead and the telegraph poles standing ghostly beside the tracks. By way of answer, John pulled his goggles down over his eyes and eased out on the throttle. The engine gave a surge forward and began to pick up speed.

The fireman later told of that ride. At first he did not know what all the fuss was about. Nevertheless, as soon as they began to move, he turned to his fire. After they left the yard, the speed began to increase. Lacking the drag of the train, the engine rocked and tossed severely. Faster and faster it went. The hammer of the driving rods increased to a ceaseless pound.

John crouched behind his little, projecting windshield, like a statue, his eyes glued to the track ahead. Jenkins muttered nervously to himself, and every few seconds leaned out the sides to look ahead.

It soon dawned on the fireman that they were in great danger. The mass of metal beneath their feet was hurtling ahead in a fearful way. It lunged and swayed from side to side until it threatened to leave the rails altogether. The noise, of the machinery was fearful to listen to.

The fog opened a scant way before them, whipped by, and, lashed and torn by the fury of their passage, closed in behind. Every few seconds John raised his hand to the whistle cord and the blast went abroad. It did little good. They were running straight into the jaws of death. Somewhere ahead of them was the other engine, how far they could not tell. It might be five hundred feet or five miles. It might have stopped suddenly. In that case they would do the same. But John was taking the only course open, the supposition that the engine ahead was running at a good rate of speed

and they would overtake it before it slackened a great deal.

The fireman stopped his labor long enough to withdraw his watch and get their time between two mileposts. As he computed the result he turned a frightened glance on John. They were traveling at a far faster rate of speed than the rules of the road allowed. Even Jenkins wore a sickish expression as he peered into the unknown into which they were running and gave a thought to the risk.

During one of these fearful moments John turned his glance from the road a second and took it all in. He smiled a peculiar smile and yanked the throttle out to the farthest notch. Jenkins clutched at the side of the cab as the engine flung herself more wildly. Leaning close to John's ear, he finally shouted through dry lips, "Isn't there too much danger in going so fast?"

"Danger?" John turned his head long enough to look Jenkins in the eye. Jenkins knew all right, that John was thinking of the time he had been branded "yellow." He flushed, and John turned back, satisfied.

They did not slacken their mad pace. John hung halfway out the window and searched the blur ahead until his eyes ached. Of a sudden, he was rewarded. A tiny pinpoint of red light flashed out, up ahead in the fog. It was what he had been watching for, the red signal on the rear of the runaway engine. They were traveling so much faster than the other engine that the light seemed to leap back at them. But John was ready for it. At the first sight of the pinpoint of light he closed the throttle and applied the brakes. With diminishing rapidity the rocking, tossing rear end of a tank came back into the circle of their view. There was a moment of suspense while it drew near, then it seemed to slow down and they were running evenly about fifty feet behind.

By the light from their headlight the rear coupler could be seen open. John gradually drove his engine nearer, and finally, with a bump, he coupled the two engines together.

Moving with the quickness of a cat, he closed his throttle, swung out of his

seat and through his side window. There was a little ledge just below for that purpose. Holding desperately to the handrail above the window, he edged along until he gained the running board on the side of the boiler. From there, it was the work of a couple of minutes to travel the length of the boiler, down across the pilot, up the ladder on the back of the runaway's tank, and over the top of her coal to the cab.

Immediately the pull from the forward engine ceased, and with a shrill grinding of brakes the two came to a stop. The sudden silence, broken only by the throbbing exhausts of the air pumps, was almost startling.

Jenkins stumbled down and made for the other engine, to find two wildly sobbing, terror-stricken kids. He clasped his son in one arm and included the president's grandson in the parental embrace. I have the fireman's word for it, there were actually tears in his eyes.

He looked at John over the heads of the two boys.

"A—a great ride, Steele," he said huskily.

As usual, John was tongue-tied. He pulled out a handkerchief and fell to polishing his goggles furiously.

"There is going to be a new road foreman of engineers appointed," Jenkins continued after a moment. "I—a—well, we'll see what we can do." Which was as good as a direct promise, coming from him.

Well, that sort of cleared things up. The fireman saw to it that everyone heard the truth about John's yellow streak. Jenkins saw to it that John got a better job; and the new job took John away from the engineer's seat and gave his worrisome conscience peace.

Afterward, in a moment of curiosity, I asked John about the ride through the fog. "John," I said, half joking, "what about the ghosts? Didn't you have any trouble keeping them away from the throttle?"

John thought a moment and then spoke slowly. "They were there," he said. "Two of 'em, two mothers. But they were pullin' out on the throttle instead of pushin' in."

I wonder.

*A Department of Justice Man Invades
the Strangest Island Hideout*

MURDER KEY

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

CHAPTER I

DOWN FIGHTING

AT DAWN, Buckland awoke with a start. Something was wrong. Dead wrong! He blinked the sleep out of his eyes and stared again at the slouching figure of the pilot in the seaplane's forward cockpit. Robinson? No, never! By some black magic, a stranger!

It wasn't Robinson who was flying him—*couldn't* be. Robinson was a slim youngster, this man up ahead a husky. Whoever he was, he had almost twice Robinson's span of shoulder.

Three thousand feet below, four thousand maybe, the sea spread out in a murky infinity. Moisture glistened on the wings and on the polished deck.

Buckland sat up straight, straining his eyes. He tried to tell himself they were playing a trick, but the strengthening light made him certain that they weren't. Yesterday afternoon he had engaged young Robinson to fly him south. Last midnight, although the airport anchorage had been pitch dark, he had taken for granted that it was Robinson at the controls of the waiting plane.

But here—no question—was a different pilot.

Why?

The ship slashed into a cloud-bank, thundered for an eternity through mist that stroked Buckland's cheeks with clammy fingers and burst finally into brighter daylight.

Then he could see more than the outlines of the huge shoulders and that bull's neck



rising squatly and solidly out of them. He was looking at a scar, jagged, angry-red, that cut a crescent along the nape of the thick neck. Fascinated, incredulous, he leaned forward.

Yes. The scar was really there!

What had happened to poor Robinson could only be guessed, but one thing was coldly clear to Buckland at that instant. He had been tricked. Instead of flying to a job, he was flying for a fall. Called by whatever name, it was still Death's own shape there in the pilot's seat.

The scar gave the answer to at least part of the mystery of the substitution. It was the distinguishing mark of a criminal, a cold-blooded murderer, whom Buckland had once sent off to a stretch in Atlanta Prison; a deadly enemy whom he would never forget and by whom he would never be forgotten.

ANOTHER cloud came slamming at the plane. Gray fog blotted out the scar, the neck, the mighty shoulders. Buckland gulped in a deep lungful of the soupy air. There was no use now trying to go behind the fact, no use speculating on how this had come about. With Jim Murtha flying him he was on the spot.

Three thousand feet up, four thousand, ten thousand—what odds? He was at Murtha's mercy. Murtha was an aviator, and *he* wasn't. A bullet from Buckland's own gun had put that raw crease in Murtha's

neck, and Murtha had sworn to kill him.

A picture of Jim Murtha as last seen flashed on Buckland as the plane roared blindly on. Murtha up on his elbow in a hospital bed spitting out the promise: "Some day it'll be you and me again! Some day I'm going to rub you out, Buckland!"

Then they were out of the cloud and Buckland was confronted not by a memory of Murtha but by Murtha himself. The pilot had swung around. Vindictive small eyes close set in a blotchy red face gloated on Buckland.

"Awake? Surprised?"

That came through a twisty, one-sided grin, the words rushed back on the hurricane blast from the churning stick.

Buckland contented himself by nodding to the first question, shuffling off the second. As he swiftly recognized, he was doubly at a disadvantage in this situation. He had looked death in the face many times before, and looked at it always with calm eyes. Now he'd have to shout to make himself heard against the propeller's roaring back-draft. And shouting never had been his style in a crisis, never would be. He shrugged again, held his gaze steady on Murtha's and waited.

IT WASN'T, plainly, what Murtha had expected. Buckland's lean face betrayed no more than polite curiosity; no sign of astonishment, no flutter of panic, showed for an instant.

Murtha stopped grinning and glowered. "It's a long drop, Buckland!"

It was, of course. That was all Buckland's expression conceded.

Murtha swung all the way around and faced Buckland, elbows resting on the deck.

"See?" he said. "She's steady as a rock, this ship. Flies herself."

Buckland nodded. His lips framed, "Well?"

"She'll fly herself," said Murtha, grinning again, "as long as the gas holds out. The way I understand, you're not a pilot. Right?"

Still Buckland played the listener's part. He shook his head and let it go at that. Murtha threw a glance at the instrument panel.

"Inside half an hour," he went on, "we'll be where I'm going. Then I'll be bailing out. Savvy bailing out, Buckland? I mean I'll be dropping off on a parachute to a certain little island I know. Saying goodbye to you, and leaving you to get down the best way you can."

Buckland's hand had strayed to his seat-cushion and the movement, caught by Murtha, brought a derisive twinkle into his shoe-button eyes.

"Don't make me laugh!" he guffawed. "You think there's a 'chute in that bag you're sittin' on—think all you've got to do is bail out right after I do and pull the rip-cord. But you're kiddin' yourself, Buckland. I tended to the parachute back there after I tended to your little pal Robinson. It won't open, brother. You'll just have to stick with the ship."

KNOWING Murtha, Buckland could believe that. Now he could see the whole murderous scheme. Without doubt, there had been a dozen times in the course of the night when he could have been killed by a bullet or a knife thrust; times when he was dozing, off guard, defenseless. But that wouldn't be Murtha's way. A quick death would have been a merciful death, and when Jim Murtha hated a man he was coldly without mercy.

"You'll stick with the ship," he repeated. "Fly around with her while the gas lasts. Crash with her when it gives out. And you won't need to worry whether she comes down on the water or on land. It'll be all the same to you, Buckland. The big wash-out!"

Off ahead of the plane, due south, Buckland could make out two dark dots on the water. For a moment he thought they might be ships; then he knew they must be islands. Murtha had also seen them and was shifting his course.

That took his eyes forward, and without a second's hesitation Buckland swung up out of the after cockpit and went crawling along the deck. He was half way to the pilot's seat when Murtha turned.

"Get back, you fool!" he snarled. "Get back, or—!"

He had a pistol in his hand, a gun that evidently had lain ready to his reach in the

forward cockpit, and his eyes glinted wickedly behind it.

To Buckland, the menacing weapon in Murtha's grip might have been a toy. Murtha would squeeze the trigger, certainly, unless he backed away; there was never a question of that in Buckland's mind. But bullets had missed him before. Against the pistol he had a chance, a slim chance but at least a fighting chance.

It was his last chance, too. Unless he took it, somebody by-and-by would be finding a dead detective in the wreck of a crashed plane. There'd be no evidence of murder, no clue to the truth, no scent to start the hounds of the law on the killer's trail. On the government records in Washington, Neil Buckland, ace Department of Justice agent, would be written down as the victim of a flying accident no different than the hundreds of others still occurring each year.

AUTOMATICALLY Buckland, crouching midway between the cockpits, clicked to a decision. Murtha saw him move as if to yield to the threat of the gun and turn back.

"That's good sense," he grunted. "No use making me give it to you now, when you can live another hour. While there's life there's hope, Buckland. Ain't it so?"

Buckland had shifted his weight, at last found a spot on the slippery deck where the footing was firm. From a sprinter's stance he launched himself at Murtha, his lithe body cleaving the tearing wind like a javelin.

The surprise of that unsteadied Murtha's pistol hand. The gun snapped up and spat flame, but the bullet screamed over Buckland's head and passed over the tail into space.

Murtha was on his feet as his passenger's plummeting six feet of brawn crashed into him. He fired again and this time the bullet went straight up. Buckland had his wrist in a grip that the giant enemy could not break.

For breathless seconds they struggled for possession of the pistol, slamming between the combings of the narrow cockpit. With a terrific twist, Buckland sent the gun flying from Murtha's clutch. It thudded on the

cockpit floor, went sliding under the deck. But in another instant, Murtha's right hand had closed on his throat and he was being borne backward.

At such close quarters weight counted mightily. Buckland, giving away upward of twenty pounds when he flung into that wild scrimmage, felt himself weakening under the pressure of those choking fingers.

Suddenly he changed his tactics. His fists ceased their pounding at Murtha's gory face and his arms circled the enemy's thick, hard body. Then a lift, a twist, and they were rolling precariously along the seaplane's deck.

For a terrifying second, Murtha found himself half over the side; and in that second he lost his nerve and relaxed the pressure of his deadly grip on Buckland's throat. A scream of horror burst from his broken lips.

"We're gone!"

But they were rolling back, rolling out on a wing. When they were half along it, the seaplane, miraculously on an even keel until then, fell off into a dizzy side-slip. Murtha grabbed desperately at a mooring cleat as he felt himself sliding, and gave Buckland the opening he had begun to despair of finding.

With the clutch on his throat released, Buckland's strength had come back. Every ounce of it was behind the crashing blow he swung at Murtha's jaw.

Murtha took it with a grunt. His eyes rolled and closed, and his hand loosened on the cleat. Knocked cold, he went sliding again along the sloping wing. Buckland caught his arm. Gripping the lifesaving cleat himself, he struggled up the wing dragging Murtha's dead-weight after him.

The ship was all that had been said of her, first by young Robinson and latterly by Murtha. As the weight shifted, she righted herself; and when Buckland had finally got Murtha to the deck and dumped his inert bulk into the cockpit astern she once more straightened out.

NOW she was close to the nearer of those two shimmering white-and-green islands. As nearly as Buckland could judge, she had lost a third of her altitude in the side-slip.

Even seconds were precious, for the islands were small, and as Buckland knew from a study of the charts back in New York the only ones within range of many miles. Once past them his chances of parachuting to safety would be practically nil.

That being so, he wasted neither time nor pity on Murtha. Leaping down into the forward cockpit, he tore the 'chute out of the cushion on the pilot's seat, swiftly strapped himself in the harness and with a last glance at the senseless Murtha stepped off a wing into space.

He had fallen almost half a thousand feet, he thought, when he pulled the ripcord. Instantly a cloud of white cloth was streaming out above him. The parachute opening, stemmed the speed of his descent with a jerk that all but stopped his breath.

The seaplane had gone straight on. Swinging crazily under the 'chute, he wondered whether Murtha would recover from the effect of that jaw-breaking blow in time to bring the ship down to a safe landing. He caught himself hoping it would come out that way, then asked, "Why should I care a hang?"

He couldn't answer that, just didn't know. Jim Murtha would have sent him to his death with a grin. It was simply the difference between the two, between one man fighting for the law and another fighting against it. Murtha was Murtha and *he* was Neil Buckland. That was the only answer. Yes, he wished Murtha a good landing and longer life. If their paths ever crossed again and pistols flashed into their hands as they faced each other, that, of course, would be something else.

BUT there was no need to worry about Murtha—not *that* way, anyhow. Buckland saw that while he was still lazing earthward on the parachute with a good couple of thousand feet between him and the island.

The seaplane, miles to the south, was banking and turning. In the clear upper air—down here over the island the clouds were silky and far scattered—every detail of the maneuver was plain to Buckland.

Little as he knew about the technique of flying, he was well aware that no ship ever

built would go through such a performance without human control.

That steep banking and swooping turn meant just one thing. Murtha was on his feet again, and he was coming back. With the passing of two or three minutes, Buckland could see him in the cockpit up front. Then the ship was suddenly dipping and diving for the parachute.

It whizzed on down, the near wing tip almost touching the edge of the 'chute, and as it passed there was a stab of flame from the pilot's seat and a streamer of gunsmoke whipped tailward out of the cockpit. Buckland heard one of the taut ropes above him sing out as a bullet scotched it.

His own automatic was in a shoulder-belt, hard to get at because of the parachute harness. To reach it a buckle had to be opened, and the buckle resisted.

Half a mile north of the 'chute, Murtha was banking again, then making altitude for another dive. A few hundred feet over the wind-buffed parachute, he nosed down and came whizzing, shooting as he came.

BUCKLAND felt the scratch of a slug along the side of the heavy belt holding him suspended. A little black hole showed in the cloth of the swaying 'chute, then a second and a third.

But now, thank God, he had got the better of the stubborn buckle and his police positive, most reliable of all service arms, was ready for action. As the seaplane dived past him, he blazed away.

One bullet drilled from his gun and missed the plane completely. Another gouged a shower of splinters from the deck just forward of the front cockpit.

It was pointblank range then. A shot from the ship whistled perilously close to Buckland's head. Again he pulled the trigger, and this time he knew he had scored a direct hit on the enemy.

Murtha's left hand lifted from the controls, clawed at his chest. He slumped forward.

Staring after the plane, Buckland saw it nose straight down and plunge directly for the glittering sea. Murtha was past stopping that insane dive. The ship struck the water with a crash like thunder and burst into flame.

Dazedly Buckland looked down at the utterly unbelievable.

Yes, it had happened. Happened, probably for the first time in the history of the air. Weirdly enough to make the grade in a Ripley cartoon, a parachute had fought a plane and come out the victor!

The wind was carrying the 'chute away from the blazing wreckage, sweeping it in toward the island shore. Shifting his eyes from that funeral pyre of Murtha's to the beach, Buckland saw a pigmy figure racing madly along the sand.

At his best guess, he was four hundred feet up then, and when that distance had been halved he saw that the runner was in a bathing suit, saw it was a girl.

Still further down, wondering just how hard a parachute landed a passenger from the clouds, he observed something else.

Brown as a berry and gloriously blonde, that girl on the beach was without a doubt the loveliest bathing beauty his eyes had ever rested on!

CHAPTER II

THE MURDER TRAIL

BARELY beyond the wash of the rushing surf, Buckland's 'chute set him down with a jolt that sent him sprawling. He freed himself from the harness and burrowed out of a smother of billowing silk as the girl in the blue bathing suit came to a breathless halt beside the parachute.

She stared wildly at the flaming wreckage of the seaplane, sliding along on the tide a quarter-mile offshore. Then her eyes fixed on the pistol still clutched in Buckland's hand and went round with terror. Quickly he slipped the gun back into his shoulder holster.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he assured her. "Don't look at me that way, please. I'm really perfectly harmless. The fellow piloting the plane, though—"

"I saw everything!" gasped the girl. "The shooting! You killed him!"

Buckland brushed a shower of damp sand from a trousers leg and looked off toward the blazing ship.

"If I didn't," he said, matter of fact, "the

crash did. It was his life or mine. You must have seen that."

Horror still glazed the girl's blue eyes.

"But it was—*murder!*"

A grim smile twitched at Buckland's lips.

"I think you'll change your mind about that," he said softly, "when you know the whole story." His gaze, wide awake now, steely gray, swept along the white beach. "I'm not much of a navigator, and a parachute isn't much to navigate," he said. "But on a guess, I've lighted on Barracuda Island. Right or wrong?"

The bathing girl, in Buckland's eyes as out of place there as a flamingo would have been in Times Square, nodded dazedly.

"Right. You're on Barracuda. Yes."

Buckland found himself fumbling mechanically for a cigarette, lighting it.

"But I thought Baracuda Island was unpopulated."

"Properly speaking," the girl told him shakily, "it is. There's just a lighthouse. It's up on the point, hidden by those palms. My father is the light-keeper."

The shadow of the tragedy she had witnessed had not left her face, and there was something of fear or at least doubt in her eyes as they studied Buckland.

He spoke reassuringly. "Then your father and I are certain to talk the same language." He lifted his small gold shield from his pocket and let her glimpse it. "At least we both work for the same Uncle Sam. Myself, I'm a Department of Justice agent, Neil Buckland."

Sight of the shield and longer scrutiny of his clean-cut, alert face had lessened her alarm and she murmured her own name. To Buckland, the name seemed to fit her. It was Lorimer—Kay Lorimer. But her brow was still clouded. Again her eyes went to the wreck of the plane. Evidently the fuel tanks had broken away in the crash; now they were floating in the center of a roaring cauldron, from which the seaplane's hull had been swept clear by the swift current.

"It—it's horrible!" she whispered.

"But all in the game," Buckland said tersely. "The man I shot down was an enemy of the law, a personal enemy of mine. A murderer with enough imagination to have figured out a highly scientific way of sending me to Kingdom Come." He

shook his shoulders, straightened. "Well, he's finished. Suppose we get up to the lighthouse and let your father know he's got company on Barracuda?"

FOR a moment the girl was silent, dubious again. Her eyes rested searchingly on Buckland's and then a tremulous smile came.

"I may as well tell you the truth, Neil Buckland," she said. "We're alone on this island, you and I. Father went in to the mainland this morning—started before daylight. Old Joe Horton, his helper, had a bad attack in the night. Father was afraid it was appendicitis and took Joe down to Palmetto City."

Buckland looked off into the west. Low on the horizon lay that second island he had noted on the chart and glimpsed from the air. Beyond it there was just sky to be seen; even from the plane the mainland coast had been only dimly visible.

"A long trip," he said blankly. "He can't possibly be back before night."

Kay Lorimer met his eyes straight.

"A very long trip, Neil Buckland," she said quietly. "Father won't be back until tomorrow." She was taking him at face value now, he saw; her constraint was finally gone. "But I know he'd want me," she added, and smiled, "to make you welcome to Barracuda Island's best."

For a space after that they stood together on the sand, watching the cross currents carry the flaming gasoline pool and the plane's hull farther and farther apart. Then, sitting in a neat whitewashed room while ham sizzled in a great frying pan and the aroma of boiling coffee erased that eerie battle from the front of his mind, Buckland gave Kay Lorimer a picture of the drama back of his amazing arrival on Barracuda.

Through those soberly silent minutes on the beach and during the long walk up to the lighthouse, he had been able to fit Murtha exactly into the crazy sequence of events culminating in his parachute leap and the crash of the seaplane. Murtha, of course, had joined forces with "Big Nick" Mollino's cutthroat gang following his release from Atlanta a few months before. And upon discovery that Buckland was flying south to seek out Mollino in his ocean

hiding place, Murtha, beyond doubt, had been the mind which conceived the bold strategy of seizing Robinson's plane and taking his ancient enemy for an aerial ride.

AS BUCKLAND told the story, in swift, blunt, direct narrative, while the girl hung tensely on his words, the springboard of action was the killing of Frank Layton, a brother government agent, by the gang-leader, Mollino.

A mountain of a man, cruel, ruthless, many times a murderer and almost as many times a millionaire out of the profits of criminal operations covering all America, Big Nick Mollino had been able for years to snap his fingers at the police of a score of cities. Everywhere the most powerful of local politicians fed at his trough and bowed to his will. And to the will of those politicians, filling their pockets with Mollino's crooked gold, the police were subject. Knowing him for what he was, they had no choice but to let him come and go on his swaggering murderous course.

Then Uncle Sam had taken a hand. Government attorneys, aware that Big Nick had been the instigator of a hundred murders, were equally well aware that it would be impossible to convict him of any one of them; witnesses, if not frightened into silence, would drop out of sight.

Put there were other laws which Mollino had violated that required no human witnesses to jail him. Enjoying a prodigious income, he had paid no income tax. That under Federal law was a crime in itself—a crime to which cold figures, unemotional, unassailable and unsusceptible to intimidation, would testify.

Three months ago, Big Nick had been secretly indicted for income tax violation and Layton, fellow ace of Neil Buckland in the Department of Justice service, had been sent to arrest him.

At last Mollino saw himself in a position where he could no longer use political influence to protect him. Facing certain imprisonment, he used his gun—emptied it into Layton's body and fled.

Layton, possessed of a tremendous vitality, lived long enough to gasp out the facts of the shooting and to name Mollino; then

Buckland, who was Layton's best friend, had taken up the trail.

NIGHT and day for three months, Buckland had drifted through the underworld posing as a fugitive from justice and seeking some whispered hint of Big Nick Mollino's whereabouts. Yesterday, in New York, his long and patient digging had finally borne fruit.

"I came across a criminal named Berger," Buckland told Kay Lorimer, "who had once been a lieutenant of Big Nick Mollino's. They had fallen out; and when I told Berger I had a personal grudge against Mollino to pay off, he promised to find out where he was hiding.

"Early yesterday afternoon Berger called me by telephone. He was very much excited; said he had managed to get the information for me, but feared that some of Mollino's people were close after him. And he was dead right about that. While he was still talking, I heard what I knew must be the rattle of a machine-gun coming over the wire. There was a scream from Berger and then a thump.

"I traced the call and found a crowd around a drug store a few blocks from the shady hotel where I had been living under an assumed name. Berger was still slumped in a telephone booth inside, literally torn to pieces by tommy-gun fire and dead as a doornail.

"But he had lived long enough, at least, to give me the lead I wanted. An hour later I was engaging a plane to take me on the last lap of the long trail. And that was the plane you saw go down in flames."

Buckland stopped to light a fresh cigarette. Then, hurrying on, he offered a solution of the mystery which had confronted him on awakening in the seaplane.

"Murtha, who hated me," he said, "must have been one of the machine-gunners who killed Berger. It's a safe bet that he was in the crowd in front of that drug store, suddenly figured that I had been on the other end of the line while Berger talked and had somebody follow me.

"It would have been easy enough, for I didn't have the slightest suspicion I might be tailed. I went to the Public Library, looked over some maps and charts. Then

I called Washington and got permission to hire a plane.

"I knew this young fellow Robinson, and naturally went to him. What happened after that is clear enough. The man who was shadowing me hung around the airport and found out about my arrangement with poor Robinson. He reported to Murtha, who, being a flyer himself, cooked up that scheme of putting me on the spot five thousand feet up. As he had it figured, he was going to use the parachute himself and drop off the plane when we were over Big Nick Mollino's island hide-out. It's a place called Cocaine Key."

Kay Lorimer put down a sizzling platter before Buckland and stood staring at him, white-faced.

"Cocaine Key?" she gasped. "Why, that's another name for Sharkfin Island—the one just west of Barracuda. Except in thick weather, it can be seen from here. At this minute you're less than fifteen miles from Cocaine Key!"

BUCKLAND nodded and grinned.

"Then my chart-reading isn't so bad for an amateur, after all. Just what I figured." He forked a thick slice of ham onto his plate, superimposed a pair of turned-over eggs and filled his thick cup with steaming coffee. "By the way, Miss Lorimer," he said hopefully, "I don't suppose you've got an extra motor-boat around here. One that you'd lend to a comparative stranger?"

Startled blue eyes regarded him across the table.

"Yes; there's a power dory. Why?"

"Thought I might like to take a little trip over to visit the neighbors after breakfast."

For a moment the girl sat silent.

"You'd face a killer like this man Mollino alone?" she exclaimed. "Madness!"

"Mollino's alone, too—or so Berger said," Buckland quietly told her. "As for the madness part, Sam Layton was the best buddy I ever had. I want to nail Big Nick myself, single-handed. By and by there'll be a revenue cutter along to pick him up. But the way I feel about it, I've got to be there first." He leaned toward. "Can't you understand?"

She looked at him with steady, thoughtful eyes, and then slowly she nodded.

"You'll let me use the dory?"

"You'd wreck her, sure. It's treacherous water between the islands. Reefs everywhere, mean currents."

"But I've got to get there ahead of the Coast Guard people!" blazed Buckland. "Call it just pride of service, call it whatever you please. But I tell you—it's the way Frank Layton would want it! Why say you understand, when—"

Then he saw what she did. Kay Lorimer's eyes were shining, her chin set.

"Don't worry, Neil Buckland," she said in a low voice. "If it means so much to you, you'll get to Cocaine Key this morning. I'll pilot you there myself!"

CHAPTER III

ONE MORE MIRACLE

WHEN Neil Buckland's bullet thudded between Murtha's ribs and the forward pitch of his body threw the seaplane into that terrific power dive, his chance of coming through alive was one in a thousand. And Jim Murtha, half-conscious, was flyer enough to know it.

He was wrenching desperately at the controls as the ship slammed down into the sea and the fuel tanks exploded. Then—lights out!

Half an hour later he opened his eyes to discover that by a caprice of fate he had survived both the crash and the fire.

In close succession, two miracles had happened that morning. Not only had a man swaying helplessly beneath a parachute won a gunfight over a competent pilot in a beautifully balanced plane, but the pilot, shot down in flames, had escaped with his life.

Another pilot might have offered a prayer of thanksgiving, but Murtha came to spluttering curses—until a slapping wave had filled his mouth with water.

He had been thrown from the ship, but he was still with it, supported by a tangle of wire that held his chin just above the sea. At a distance of a mile or more the gas-fire that marked the drift of the fuel tanks was burning itself out.

It was the sting of the salt water in his

body wound that had hastened the return to consciousness, he realized; and now, finding the pain all but unbearable, he climbed laboriously over the scorched side of the plane.

Now it was just a boat, for the wings had sheared off at the impact and were drifting on a separate course of their own between the half-filled hull and the blazing tanks. The powerful engine had ripped loose and gone to the bottom.

Drenched, raging, Murtha saw that his own drift was toward the smaller of the two islands between which he and Buckland had fought their strange duel. He knew that island of old. Years ago he had served an earlier enlistment with the criminal forces of Big Nick Mollino. Half a hundred times when the dope-running racket was at its height he had come to Cocaine Key to take a cargo from the great stock of narcotics cached there.

His eyes, though, clung to the shore of Barracuda Island, searching for some tell-tale of Buckland's fate. By then Buckland and Kay Lorimer were breakfasting in the lighthouse and the parachute, a collapsed white patch on snow-white sand, would have been indistinguishable at half the distance. Therefore, drifting steadily down on Cocaine Key, Murtha came after a time to a conclusion highly satisfactory to himself.

Lacking proof to the contrary, he was ready to believe that Buckland had dropped into the ocean and drowned.

"And wouldn't I like to have seen it!" he remarked.

THEN he was in better spirits. His wound, he discovered, was only a flesh wound. Barring a gash over the eye, he had suffered no injury when the seaplane hit the water and broke up; and that shower of blazing gas had missed him altogether. Adding in the fact that the tightly built hull was leaking only slowly, if at all, he could call it a good world.

An hour after he climbed into the boat he had turned his attention from Barracuda Island to Cocaine Key. On the beach there stood a figure he could be certain, miles away, would be Big Nick Mollino's.

Murtha stood upright on the thwarts and

waved, and presently the man on Cocaine Key was waving, too. Then he vanished and after a few minutes a motorboat was nosing around the southern point of the island.

It came rushing out in a lather of foam, swung around alongside the seaplane hull. Shirt-sleeved, big-shouldered, blue-chinned, Nick Mollino himself was at the helm. Amazement flared in his hard black eyes.

"Murtha!" he grunted. "What the hell?"

While Mollino held the two hulls together, Murtha transferred to the speedboat and slumped into a cushioned seat.

"All I'm goin' to ask you for now, Nickie, is a smoke," he said. "But you owe me a lot more than that, you'll find out. I've got myself shot up and cracked up flyin' here to slip you the news. You've got to lam again, Mollino. The Feds are wise to where you are!"

The recital that Big Nick listened to as the keen-lined mahogany runabout shot shoreward held him spellbound.

"I know that dude Buckland," he said, making the boat fast at a float in a small landlocked bay opening into the lower end of the key. "If you drowned him, you can call it two favors you done me."

"Then it's two, Nick!" Murtha was confident now. "But getting Buckland off your tail is only part of it. Don't forget about that revenue cutter. She'll be along after you, sure as shootin'. And when she gets here you want to be gone."

FROWNING, Mollino rubbed his lumpy chin.

"If you'd got here a few hours earlier," he said, "I'd be gone by this time. Off for Europe or South America. Since I came down to Cocaine Key, I've had a yacht bought for me and there's a lot of the old Rum Row bunch aboard as crew; a dozen of 'em, the hardest-boiled in the fleet."

"A yacht? Where do you keep her?"

Big Nick Mollino laughed sourly.

"Don't forget, Jim," he said, "that there's a lighthouse over on Barracuda. Wouldn't I be a sucker to have a ship the size of the *Four Winds* hanging around Cocaine Key to start the light-keeper shooting off his mouth when the supply boat calls? Hell, the yacht's almost the size of a liner.

She just slips in at night with all lights doused and clears before sun-up. That way I get anything I want from the mainland—and all the news."

They went climbing again until another thought came to Big Nick. He stopped.

"What was the name of that guy you slugged at the airport? Robinson? Wonder if there'll be anything about *him* in the papers when the *Four Winds* brings 'em out tonight."

Murtha grinned.

"Hardly, 'way down here," he said. "We didn't croak him. Just tapped him on the dome and tied him up. He won't have nothin' but a headache. Well—maybe two of 'em, after he finds his plane gone."

Big Nick Mollino looked at him with a flicker in his half-closed eyes.

"Jeez," he murmured, "but you've turned out kind-hearted, Murtha. Well, come on, anyway, and I'll show you one of the qucerest joints a bird on the lam ever holed up in. Yeah, and one of the purtiest fixed out!"

CHAPTER IV

MAROONED!

BARRACUDA ISLAND was flat, sandy, green with thick-growing palms. Cocaine Key—on the chart, Sharkfin Island—was as different geologically as if half a world lay between instead of a few miles of blue water.

Nearing Sharkfin, Neil Buckland noted its rocky structure with rising amazement. In these waters, it was a freak. Back of the strip of beach, bare and craggy hills rose to a height of several hundred feet.

Several hours had then passed since Murtha's commandeered parachute let him down to that romantic meeting on Barracuda. The dory's engine, balky after long disuse, had required endless tinkering before Kay Lorimer was willing to trust herself to the swift inter-island currents. But Buckland, eager as he was to drop a hand on Big Nick Mollino's shoulder, had found the delay far more endurable than he would have believed possible.

Just how it happened, he still didn't know exactly. Nevertheless, formality had

dropped away while he and the girl labored over the motor, shoulder to shoulder. Long before the job was finished they were "Kay" and "Neil."

Now, dividing his eyes between the curious formation of Cocaine Key and the slim shapeliness of the Naiad at the dory's wheel, Buckland inwardly was lamenting that beauty like Kay Lorimer's should be wasted on Barracuda Island.

Somebody, he thought, ought to do something about it. Somebody, for instance, like himself. Somebody who was single and had a good steady job not subject to economic fluctuations.

Not that she wasn't the kind who'd stick to a man no matter what happened to his job. Kay Lorimer was just as plucky as she was pretty. Buckland had met girls in his own business with plenty of nerve, but never one with more nerve than Kay.

Trying to dissuade her from going along to Cocaine Key, he had told her just what sort of a man Nick Mollino was—a killer at heart and a killer in fact; endowed with the savage courage that nature gives to the jungle beast and quicker to shoot than to give ground.

But that hadn't fazed her, hadn't budged her from her resolution. If the dory went to the twin island, she'd go too. And here she was, deftly threading through reefs that Buckland perceived to be actually as thick as she had told him they were.

Half a mile off the key there was a last barrier on which white water crashed in a line of boiling foam that showed no break to Buckland's eye. But unerringly the girl found a gap and drove the dory through it in a drenching shower of spindrift.

The beach was deserted when Buckland, pistol in hand, stepped over the bow onto the sand. He looked back at the reef, and paid Kay's piloting the compliment it had earned.

"Looks," he said, "as if you'd been here before."

She smiled. "Any number of times. I was born in the lighthouse. Even when I was going to school, I lived there half the year. My brother—he's working on the mainland now—used to bring me over in his sloop. Sharkfin was as much the playground for us, almost, as Barracuda."

BUCKLAND'S gaze searched the beach. But still he and the girl were alone. "Been here since the dope-runners evacuated?" he asked.

She had. But those unpleasant neighbors of a few years ago, she was able to assure him, had left no buildings behind them.

"There never has been as much as a shack of Sharkfin," she said. "No need for anything like that. Behind that second hill there's a fine dry cave big enough to shelter an army."

Buckland pulled the dory further up on the sand and dug in her small anchor.

"Swell!" he said. "Then that's the first place we'll look for Mollino. But mind this, Kay Lorimer: if it turns into a shooting match you scoot for the boat and stay off shore until you see who wins. I'm telling you now, the more distance between you and Big Nick, the better you're off."

Side by side they climbed the near hill, and when they reached its summit Buckland discovered the harbor.

"Swell again!" he whispered, pointing down. "See that pier—and the flossy speedboat tied up at the float? Sure enough, the Big Bear's home!"

They descended, climbed again and then for a second time Buckland stopped short.

"Wait!" he said, catching the girl back. "In another minute we'd have been walking right over him!"

They were at the top of the second hill, and just beyond the depression a bulky, shirt-sleeved figure had suddenly materialized.

"Mollino," whispered Buckland, "or I'll turn in my tin!"

"The cave's right over there," the girl said, close to his ear. "He just came out."

With his broad back turned to them, the wide-shouldered cave-dweller of Cocaine Key was scrambling up the further hill. Buckland, crouching out of view, saw him surmount it and vanish.

"We're between him and the speedboat, anyhow," he said, "so I'll let him go. Might pay to have a look through this cave before I nail him. Go ahead, guide, and lead the way."

From where he stood then, Buckland could see no sign of a cave; but Kay

Lorimer, even after the years, went to its opening with the same sure sense of direction which had taken her so neatly through the reef. It was hardly bigger than the average house-door, overgrown with brush, and Buckland confessed to himself that he might have combed the island for days without finding it had he made the crossing from Barracuda alone.

Within was a narrow twisting passage, cool and dark. Buckland took the lead when they had entered it, the girl's hand in his. For a dozen paces while his eyes were accustomed themselves to the gloom he moved on blindly. Then suddenly he stopped. He had made one turn, then another, and now he was looking into a great rocky chamber through which a suspended gasoline lantern cast a bright radiance.

"Good God!" Buckland breathed. "Don't make a sound, Kay!"

This cavern opening before his startled eyes might have been lifted bodily out of the Arabian Nights. Its walls were hung with tapestries, its floor covered with heavy and costly rugs. Furniture that would have graced a mansion filled the lighted area around the lamp; deep-cushioned chairs, vast lazy davenports, tables of burnished mahogany and teak.

But that was the least of the surprise. In a big wing-chair turned toward the entrance passage a man sat smoking and sipping from a tall glass at his elbow—the same man whom Buckland could swear he had seen passing over the hill three minutes since. The light from the lantern showed full on his face, and the face was Big Nick Mollino's.

Peering over Buckland's shoulder, Kay Lorimer also saw him.

"Who?" she gasped.

"The man I want!" whispered Buck-

land. "Who the other fellow was doesn't matter. I'm grabbing off Molino while the grabbing's good."

Pistol raised, a sharp command on his lips, he stepped briskly into the light. Mollino jumped to his feet, his eyes bulging. The glass slipped from his fingers, smashed on the rug.

"Buckland!" he blurted.

"The law, finally," said Buckland. He stepped forward, plucked a revolver from Big Nick's pocket and dropped it in his own, and prodded him with the muzzle of the automatic. "Quick-step now, Mollino," he said. "You seem to have friends on this island, so we'll be getting off it—fast!"

He had looked for resistance, even after his prisoner stood unarmed. But Big Nick Mollino, for the first time of record, seemed utterly unnerved. His eyes still bulged. His jaw, having dropped, lifted only to fall on his thick chest again. The thought came to Buckland that a man confronted by a ghost might react just so.

It was only when he saw the girl, out in broad daylight, that Big Nick's strength appeared to return. His black eyes resumed their normal stoniness there beyond the cave entrance, and narrowed. They darted swiftly about and then fixed fairly on his captor.

"Listen, Buckland," he said, "this collar won't get you anything but a pat on the back. What's the use being a sucker? Call it off, and I'll make it so you never have to worry about a dollar."

BUCKLAND shook his head.

"Uncle Sam does that," he replied "March!"

Ten minutes took them to the dory. Buckland shoved it off the beach and stood



with his pistol jammed against Big Nick while Kay spun the engine.

"It's gone dud again!" she said, looking up. Then she sniffed and stooped again. "No, that isn't it!" she cried. "Somebody's knocked a hole in the tank, and the gas is all gone!"

Buckland stared at Mollino and Big Nick smiled thinly and shrugged.

"I heard Cocaine Key is haunted," he said. "Maybe it's so."

"Bunk!" growled Buckland. "That beefy friend of yours saw a strange boat and went to work on it. That's okay by me. We'll just move you in your own pretty runabout."

But when they had reached the bay, Mollino's speedboat was no longer at the float. It was dashing out of the harbor mouth, heading south, a wide expanse of shirt-sleeved shoulder rising at the wheel.

Big Nick Mollino stood by with his hands in his pockets, grinning broadly.

"Yeah, this island's haunted, all right," he chuckled. "There goes another ghost—your old shooting-gallery pal, Jim Murtha, raised from the dead. *Now* what're you goin' to do about it, Buckland?"

CHAPTER V

GANGED

MMURTHA, incredibly resurrected, had made a good job of it before taking flight from Cocaine Key. With rare foresight he had opened wide the tap on the drum holding Big Nick Mollino's shore-side gasoline supply, and the last drop of the fuel was spewing into the bay as the speedboat whirled seaward.

"Could we row?" Buckland asked Kay Lorimer, turning from the empty drum.

"With what?" she wanted to be told. Then, water wise, practical, she pointed out that even if oars were available the heavy dory could not be maneuvered with them in the tide race between the islands. "We're here," she opined, "until the cutter comes along."

Buckland's face clouded.

"I'm afraid," he admitted, "she won't turn up before tomorrow. That was how Washington figured it, anyway."

Big Nick's flickering smile showed he

had heard that, but he said nothing. Nothing then, and nothing during the hours that followed while Buckland anxiously scanned the horizon for a promising ribbon of smoke that might foretell the approach of reinforcements.

The only smoke visible was that of a northbound tanker, hull-down to the east. After that a coastwise four-master dawdled by, so far westward that signaling her was automatically out of the question. Late in the afternoon a white wedge seen to the south and moving directly toward the key lifted Buckland's hope, only to resolve itself into the speedboat returning.

When she was close to the harbor entrance, he saw that instead of only one passenger she now carried a half dozen or more.

Big Nick, sitting on a stringpiece of the pier, broke out with a sharp, hard laugh.

"Smart ghost, that Jim Murtha! I told him that some of the old bunch was bottle-fishin' off the mainland nowadays—and what do you s'pose he's gone and done? He's brought a gang out here, just in case that dory of yours didn't mean any good to Nick Mollino!"

Kay Lorimer's cheeks went suddenly white. She whispered to Buckland:

"There's too many of them, Neil. You'll never be able to stand them off in the open. Get to the cave!"

He nodded and his eyes swung to Mollino.

"Start climbing, Nick!" he snapped. "Back to the drawing room!"

The speedboat was already at the float as they reached the crest of the near hill, and Buckland turned to count heads as its crew tumbled ashore. Tough odds! Including Jim Murtha, there were eight of them!

"Know how to handle a gun?" he demanded of Kay at the cave entrance, and when she nodded he slipped Mollino's big revolver into her hand. "All I want you to do is stand guard over Nick," he said. "If he starts anything—even looks as if he was thinking of it—just plug him. You hear, Nickie? Those are Miss Lorimer's orders, and between you and me she's the young woman to carry 'em out to the letter."

Buckland himself had elected to defend the entrance, but within short order following the appearance of Murtha's mainland recruits on the hill opposite he knew he had picked the wrong spot. Widely deployed, well sheltered among the rocks, they harried him with a cross-fire that he dared not spend his scant ammunition in returning.

Crouching deep in the mouth of the cave, he was protected adequately enough from direct hits; but ricocheting bullets whined uncomfortably close about him, and when one finally nicked an ear he decided to retreat to the main chamber.

A cry escaped Kay Lorimer at the sight of the streaming blood.

"Neil! You're wounded!"

"Only scratched," Buckland assured her. "But it's mean out there, with slugs bouncing off the walls every which way."

He dragged a heavy table to face the passage and turned it over on its side to form a breastwork while Big Nick Mollino sat grimly watching him. Kay, her eyes never turning from her prisoner, tossed an aside to him.

"There used to be another way out of the cave, Neil. I think I could still find it—if you want me to."

Buckland's jaw was set hard.

"Not yet, Kay. Just you keep out of the line of fire, and I'll knock these lads over as fast as they show their noses. If we *do* have to leave by the back door, I guarantee there won't be many of 'em left to chase us."

OUTSIDE, the besiegers had discovered that the mouth of the cave was no longer defended. Buckland could hear them calling back and forth; then, evidently, they were closing in. After tense minutes, his straining ears caught the sound of stealthy steps in the passage.

A venturesome head appeared, and Buckland squeezed the trigger. As the police positive slammed a wild scream echoed in the passage. Back of the barricade, Big Nick suddenly raised his voice in a roar of encouragement to the attackers.

"Rush him! Rush him! You hear, Murtha? It's Buckland, and he's got nobody but a gal with him!"

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Out of the corner of his eye, Buckland saw Kay Lorimer lift the heavy revolver in a hand without a tremor.

"Quiet!" she commanded. "Don't think I'm afraid to shoot, Mollino."

Big Nick was willing to believe her. He signed off abruptly. But his reassurance that only one man had to be faced gave fresh and vicious impetus to the attack. With a rush of hobnailed feet it came on.

In all, five men managed to hurl themselves from the passage. Firing over the table as their guns flashed and thundered, Buckland dropped one of them cold and spun another with a shoulder wound. A third had reached the barricade when a bullet from the rear droned past the defender's ear to cut him neatly down.

"Nice bowling, Kay!" Buckland called as the three still on their feet dived back into the passage. "Thanks a lot."

THEN Big Nick, sitting tight but vocally berserk, was shouting again.

"Murtha, listen! Look down in the stern locker of the speedboat! What you find there will settle this fast!"

Behind the smoke pall, Murtha's voice immediately sounded.

"Hold everything! Wait till I see what Nickie means!"

After that, long minutes dragged. In the passage, Murtha's men whispered hoarsely among themselves. Within the big chamber, the mainlander knocked over by Kay Lorimer's bullet groaned and lifted himself and crawled off to join them; and Buckland, scooping up his gun, let him go. The other casualty, bored through the forehead by a slug from the hard-hitting police positive, lay still, finished.

In a tight voice, Kay Lorimer asked Buckland a question.

"What can it be, Neil? What has he gone for?"

By that time, Murtha was returning.

"Got 'em, Nickie," he called. "Look out for yourself. Here goes!"

A cylinder of gleaming metal came hurtling out of the passage, and while it was still in the air Buckland knew what it was, knew he was beaten. It struck the face of the table and burst with a loud bang. In-

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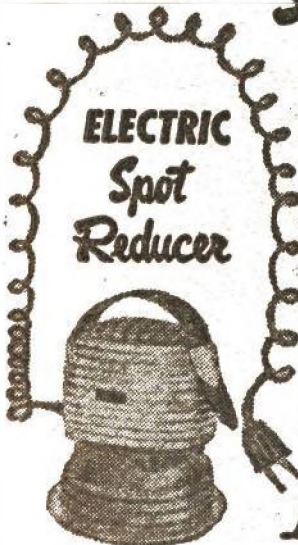
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stantly a vapor thick at sea fog sprang up to fill the chamber.

"Tear gas, Kay!" cried Buckland. "Don't wait. Hit for that back way out!"

Blinded and choking himself, he was up on his feet, firing both his own pistol and the wounded gangster's without direction until the hammer's were clicking on dead shells.

After that, the men in the passage were streaming in at him again. A crushing blow fell on his head. Murtha's excited voice came to him from what seemed suddenly a far, far distance.

"Don't, you ape! That guy Buckland is mine! Save him for me!"

Then a black curtain dropped.

CHAPTER VI

BIG NICK'S BACK DOOR

THE acrid odor of the tear gas still hung heavy in Mollino's rockbound retreat when the first glimmer of returning consciousness came to Buckland. Just as a far away voice had been the last thing he heard, so another remote voice was the first. Now it wasn't Murtha's, but Kay Lorimer's.

"The light!" she was pleading. "It must go on. *Must!*"

Buckland got that much and slid back into coma. With the passing of time he was aware of a broad assortment of discomforts. His head hurt, his eyes and his nose smarted, his throat ached, his wrists were throbbing painfully and his hands seemed to have lost all feeling.

He remembered the tear gas and the blow from somebody's pistol butt. Then he discovered what was wrong with his wrists and fingers. He was lying on his back on one of Big Nick Mollino's plushy rugs and his arms were behind him, braced with what he knew must be his own handcuffs.

Somebody was talking near him; talking, as Kay had, about a "light." But this voice was a strange one, husky, masculine. It said:

"Between you and me, Nick didn't give a damn whether the Barracuda Light showed tonight or not. He just dropped

for Blondie. Figured the quickest way around her was to humor her. If he don't waft her away on the *Four Winds* with him, I'm nuts."

Someone else said:

"At that, the kid rates a yacht like *Four Winds*. She could have mine—if I had one."

Through slitted eyes, Buckland inspected the talkers. They were, evidently, two of the mob of rum-runners brought out from the mainland by Jim Murtha. Buckland lay close to the chair in which the nearer of them was lolling. So close that he could have reached out and snatched the pistol negligently tucked in the man's coat pocket, if only his hands were free.

They weren't free, though, and that was that.

Buckland closed his eyes again. Gathering strength moment by moment as he lay there, he listened long and learned a great deal.

Kay Lorimer, her duty to the Barracuda Light inbred, had come through the gas attack with one thought paramount. Whatever happened to her, whatever to anybody, the beacon must shine. And somehow she had persuaded Big Nick Mollino to take her to the other island.

That was Item One.

Item Two: Big Nick had a steam yacht which would call at Cocaine Key at some time within the next few hours and on which he meant to make his getaway before the appearance of the revenue cutter supposedly following in Buckland's wake down the coast.

Item Three: Jim Murtha had been taken on a trip to Barracuda by Mollino because Big Nick, for some reason of his own, wanted Buckland to live for a while—whereas Murtha had been barely restrained from pumping a gunful of lead into him while he lay senseless.

Item Four: At Murtha's direction, one of the party from the mainland had repaired the gas-tank in Kay's dory and the boat had been refueled. She now lay at the float in the bay, ready to go.

IN BUCKLAND'S feverishly active thoughts, this last piece of information and the first stood instantly bracketed.

Squired by a pair like Big Nick and Murtha, Kay Lorimer needed protection if a girl ever did. And if he could only get loose and arm himself, he could get to her in the dory within an hour.

Coming over to Cocaine Key, Buckland had made mental notes on the course Kay followed. He was sure he could dodge the reefs, particularly since the dory had been taken around to the bay and that hard-boiled inner bar wouldn't have to be negotiated.

But how to get out of the handcuffs? How to get out of the cave? How to get to the dory?

The first question was, of course, the key question. A moment after he had flung his brain against it, Buckland discovered the answer. It lay beneath him, cool against his arm—a paper cutter that had fallen from the table when he up-ended it to form his barricade.

He knew those handcuffs of his. The lock was worn out, the key a joke. Any pointed bit of metal would release the springs.

When ten minutes had passed, Buckland was surreptitiously rubbing back the circulation into his freed wrists. The paper cutter, plus patience, had done the trick.

He wrestled with a temptation to grab that gun so provocatively near—and was glad, after another few minutes, that he had fought it down. The man in the far chair was getting up then, stretching, yawning.

"Gettin' sleepy," he said. "Maybe a breath of air'll wake me up. Guess you'll be all right alone with the corpse, Jerry?"

Jerry grunted, "Sure!" and his partner disappeared into the passage.


Thirty seconds later, or thereabouts, the "corpse" had life. On his feet, with Jerry's gun seized and uplifted, Buckland swung the flat of it down on his guardian's head.

Jerry made no sound. He just went limp and sank lower in his chair.

Buckland tiptoed into the passage and tiptoed back. From the volume of the voices, the whole main body of the gang stood clustered outside the cave entrance. Exit that way would be too precarious. Swiftly Buckland circled the walls of the main chamber in a search for the rear passage remembered by Kay.

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tapestry. And not by a split second too soon. The sleepy guard reappeared almost at the instant Buckland made his discovery. He stared first at Jerry, supine, and then at Buckland. Simultaneously he raised a pistol and a shout of alarm.

The pistol spat fire and the bullet crashed into the rock wall less than a foot from Buckland's head.

Buckland let go with the gun that had been Jerry's, and Jerry's partner pitched steeply forward. Others were running from outside, guns brandishing, as Buckland darted into the back-door passage.

It was a squeeze at the end, but presently he was out under the stars on the hillside.

He had a long lead when the first of the pursuers appeared behind him, a longer one as he dashed down the last slope to the pier. The tide, luckily, was ebbing. It carried the dory clear of the float as he wrestled the engine into action.

Lead spattered around him as he leaped to the helm and swung off for the harbor mouth, but the range was long and the aim of the winded marksmen on the pier was not so good.

Buckland called back a decisive, "Toodlee-oo!" and was gone, unscathed.

Outside, as he rounded the point and headed for the blinking light on Barracuda Island, a large vessel that showed only running lights was steaming toward the Cocaine Key harbor.

For a hopeful moment Buckland was certain this was his revenue cutter, ahead of time; a promise of safety for Kay Lorimer and prison for Big Nick Mollino.

It wasn't, though. Passing so close that she all but grazed the dory, the dark ship showed him her name in gold under her stern.

"Four Winds!"

She was Big Nick's yacht, which made things worse and worse. In short order she'd be starting out after him, hell-bent on running him down.

He stooped to tinker with the throttle, trying to coax another knot, or a fraction of a knot, out of the dory's tinny motor.

God! Could he make it? And if he couldn't, what about Kay?

CHAPTER VII

TRAPPED!

THE wind was blowing up strong from the north, and a heavy sea was running now between the islands. But what the dory lacked in speed she made up in sturdiness; and the tide, too, continued to favor her as she plunged toward the beckoning light.

On the crossing Buckland kept a sharp lookout, but there was neither sign nor sound of the speedboat. Coming under the lee of Barracuda, he was sure that Kay and her escort from Cocaine Key must still be there.

Almost at the exact point where he had landed in the parachute that morning, he ran the dory high onto the Barracuda beach and jabbed her anchor into the sand. He looked back over the water and saw those red and green lights coming steadily on—the running lights of the crook-manned yacht which he had momentarily mistaken, an hour ago, for his expected cutter.

The *Four Winds* hadn't lingered at the key even long enough to drop her hook. Steaming to head him off, but forced by her greater depth to take the long course around the reefs, she appeared to be about halfway between the islands. Halfway and coming strong.

Buckland gave her one brief glance and set off at a dog-trot along the beach. Clouds had blotted out the stars. A drizzle was falling. The night had gone as black as a coal-mine shaft, and he had only the white line of the surf and the off-and-on flash from the lighthouse to guide him as he ran.

Far up the shore, close to the Light, a rope stretched taut along the sand sent him into a headlong spill. As he scrambled up a long flash from the lighthouse show him what had tripped him. A grapple was at one end of the rope, and that snippy mahogany runabout of Mollino's at the other.

He stopped swearing then and heaved a sigh of relief. If the runabout hadn't left Barracuda, neither had Kay. Right on this spot he'd manage in some way to get her out of the hands of the Cocaine Key contingent; with five cartridges left in that six-shooter of Jerry's, and surprise on his side, it shouldn't be so difficult.

Then he and Kay would shove off in the dory, together, lose themselves in the night, strike as far over toward the mainland as their gas would take them.

At this point the palms grew down close to the surf, offering the best kind of concealment. Buckland picked a spot by a path that led toward the lighthouse and crouched under the palms to await developments.

After a time he heard voices. Two men coming down from the Light passed so close to him that he could have touched them by reaching out an arm. One was Jim Murtha; the other, he surmised, one of the mainlanders who also had come over from Cocaine Key in the speedboat.

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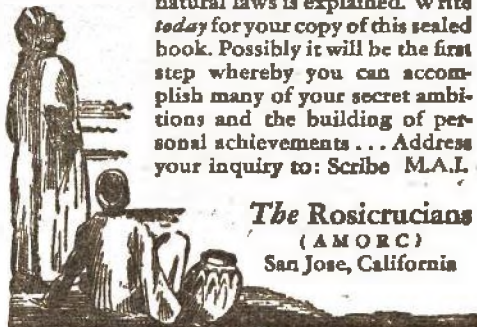
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Murtha was grumbling. "Nick's a damn fool. That dame just hasn't got any time for him. Instead of wasting breath trying to frame her onto the yacht, he ought to be beating it."

The other man said, "Right. She won't listen to reason. Ain't the type."

THEN they were on the beach and the mainlander was staring at those approaching lights.

"Hey!" he ejaculated. "There's the *Four Winds* comin'. Must be somethin' up!"

Murtha rasped an oath.

"Yeah, and Nick back at the Light shinin' up to the blonde! You'd think he'd learn somethin' after all the trouble he's got into with women."

Knowing Big Nick Mollino, Buckland lingered to hear no more. At this minute there was a job cut out for him at the light-house. With his blood at the boiling point and murder flaring in his eyes, he started silently and swiftly along the path in the direction from which Murtha and his companion had come.

In the same white-washed kitchen where Buckland had breakfasted on ham, eggs and the best coffee of his memory, Big Nick stood facing Kay Lorimer, and he had stopped smiling. His dark eyes smoldered, his voice was no longer suave.

"Listen, kid," he said, "you're comin' with me and you're goin' to like it. I'm willin' to be good to you, but I can be tough, too. Yeah. Just as tough with women as I can be with men. My advice is, don't make me be that way."

He took a step toward the girl, and she shrank back. Mollino glowered.

"You're off me now—sure. And I know why. You started gettin' notions about that Fed'ral punk Buckland, you and him playin' around here alone. But you can just forget him, see? He's washed up. I'm lettin' Murtha have him, and where Mister Buckland finishes is at the bottom of the drink."

A shudder shook Kay Lorimer's slim shoulders, covered now by the same wide-collared middy she had worn on the trip to Cocaine Key with Buckland. But her eyes were steady and hard.

"If anything like that happens," she said, her voice flat, "you'd better not let *me* live.

Because if it's my last act, I'll see you in the electric chair. You and your whole crooked crowd."

A BIG hand flashed out and seized her wrists. But Big Nick Mollino was grinning again.

"Just a little stick of dynamite, hey? Say, that's the way I like 'em. If you wasn't sold before, you're sure sold now, baby!"

With a sudden tug at the captive wrist, Mollino brought her to him. A thick arm embraced her; hard fingers imprisoned her chin as she struggled. A choking cry broke from her lips.

"Neil! Neil!"

To Kay Lorimer it was the day's third miracle that happened then. The kitchen door swung in with a crash and Buckland—a Buckland she had never seen before—stood there. His face was white with fury, his lips bloodless, his eyes aflame.

"I'm here, Kay!" he snapped, and like a charging tiger he sprang upon Big Nick.

Mollino had dropped her wrist and wheeled and was going for a gun. But he never drew the weapon. A lacing right to the jaw sent him reeling as Buckland, his own revolver forgotten, sailed in on him.

A table went over. Stacked china crashed. Beaten back, swinging wildly, Mollino within the space of a dozen seconds had stopped an uppercut that seemed to the girl to lift him clear of the ground. He rocked on his heels, groaned, went down in a jelly-like heap among the broken dishes.

Instantly, Buckland was stooping over him. Kay Lorimer saw a flash of metal in the lamplight and handcuffs closed with a click on Big Nick's limp wrists.

Buckland looked up at her.

"Just to make it official," he said. "Now let's be quick about it. Got any good tight place where I can lock this cave man up?"

Still half hysterical, she pointed to a door.

"Only the cellar."

Buckland had snatched a dish towel from a rack by the sink. He ripped it, rolled half of it into a ball and wadded it into Mollino's mouth.

"If you ever want to gag anybody," he panted, "just do that. Gags don't have to be tied in, Kay."



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He jerked open the cellar door, dragged Mollino to it and let him slide. The key was in his pocket when he turned, rubbing his knuckles.

"Now we take it on the run," he said. "Pronto this island is going to be overrun with human vermin, and the high seas is the place for us."

He caught up Kay's hand, started for the door through which he had come crashing and then stopped dead in his tracks.

"Too late to run," he whispered. "Listen! That's Murtha and company coming back. I guess the best place, after all, is up in the tower."

They were scarcely out of sight on the winding stairway when Murtha burst into the kitchen.

"Nickie!" he roared. "Where the hell are you? Hey, the yacht's over from the key!"

Climbing behind Kay Lorimer, Buckland reached up to press into her hand the gun he had taken from Mollino's pocket on the way down-cellar.

"Another pistol for you, Kay," he said. "And don't be shy about using it. We're certainly on the spot now!"

CHAPTER VIII

A SWITCH IN TIME

FROM a window high in the masonry tower, directly under the great beacon, Buckland stared down at Barracuda.

The dark bulk of the *Four Winds* lay anchored close under the beach and one of her launches was chugging in to the island. A babel of voices rose from the small boat; and Buckland turned with a tight laugh to Kay Lorimer, standing silent and tense at his side.

"That's the toughest crew to land here since Captain Kidd's day," he said. "But don't let it worry you. This place is like one of those 'keeps' in the old castles. With our two guns we could easily stand off a regiment until morning. And by then—don't forget—the revenue cutter'll be along."

Her hand rested for a moment on his arm. "I'm not afraid, Neil," she whispered. "I haven't been—except down there with Mollino. And then you came."

The door below slammed, and Murtha

went shambling down to the shore. Returning, he brought back the landing party from the *Four Winds*.

"Not so good." Buckland murmured. "There must be nearly twenty of 'em."

And somebody had stumbled on the dory; that came to him in one snatch of talk he caught. They knew, then, that he was on the island.

Murtha's voice, heavier than the rest, ascended.

"That Fed'ral guy is poison. My guess, he pulled a fast one on Nick and grabbed off the girl. Anyway, Nickie's missing."

The crowd trooped around the Light and into the kitchen. Presently Buckland heard a crash from below as if a door had been kicked down, and at next report Big Nick Mollino had been found. His mad bellowing drifted up the circular stairway, "These damn handcuffs! Can't somebody get 'em off me?"

Buckland kicked off his shoes and in stocking feet slipped down to eavesdrop.

From all sides Mollino was being besieged with pleas to board the yacht and get clear of the islands, but he was doggedly bent on spilling blood first.

"Buckland's on Barracuda," he blared, "and if it takes all night I'm goin' to find him and pay him off. Right in front of that dumb jane, I'm goin' to give it to him. And she goes with me, see? That's what I told her, and that's what I'm tellin' you, and that's what I mean!"

Then Murtha, "Why the hell don't you leave Buckland to me, Nick? I'll fix him pretty before he's much older; don't you think I won't. He had it comin' from me for years. Say—"

Mollino cut him off with an impatient grunt.

"Listen, gang!" he shouted. "We'll make it a treasure hunt. A thousand bucks—a grand note—to the one that spots Buckland for me!"

Even Murtha gave attention to that offer.

"A grand, Nick? You mean it?"

"Cash dough. Tonight!"

There was a pause. Then Murtha spoke again.

"Okay, Nickie, I'm biddin' for your thousand. Do you know what I think? Well, I got a hunch Buckland and the dame

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never stirred out of this lighthouse!"

"Nerts! Do you see 'em?"

"Is this all there is to the joint? Ain't there an upstairs? *A whole lot of upstairs?*"

Someone wanted to know, "How do we get there?" and with that Buckland turned and started to climb. But while he was still in sight from below the door opened and light from the kitchen fell full upon him.

"Here he is!" a voice shriiled. "Here he is!"

Murtha was pushing through the crowd, yelling, "Let me take him! Get outta the way!"

A gun barked and a bullet chipped the tower wall, showering Buckland with stinging splinters of stone. He swung around and fired before Murtha could pull the trigger again. Murtha went down.

He stopped to discourage immediate pursuit by letting go another bullet, then bounded on.

"I just finished what I started this morning," he said breathlessly to Kay Lorimer when he reached the room beneath the light. "Laid Jim Murtha out cold after he took the first shot. Now we're in the open, anyway. They know where we are—and we know they know!"

Kay herself had been trying to talk. She caught his shoulder, wheeled him around to the window facing north.

"Look, Neil! Look!"

His eyes lighted as they followed her pointing finger. Out of the north a vessel even larger than the *Four Winds* was bearing down on the islands.

"The revenue cutter!" he breathed.

She nodded.

"It *must* be, Neil. No passenger ship or freighter would ever take that course."

Buckland caught his breath sharply and groaned.

"But Kay—she'll be no good to us! We're on the wrong island. See! She's heading further east now. She'll go to Cocaine Key, find nobody there and push along. Good God, what a tragedy!"

She moved closer to him.

"What if she does go on? These people won't dare stay more than a few hours. And for that long, surely, we're safe where we are. We can hold the stairs."

For an instant the truth of their situation

trembled on Buckland's lips. He knew Big Nick Mollino, knew they had to deal with a man who threw caution to the winds.

To Big Nick, who had held great cities to ransom, the holding of this obscure island for a week or a month would be nothing.

Trembling against Buckland, Kay Lorimer seemed to have read his thoughts.

"Neil!" she cried out. "What if they don't go? What if they're still here when my father comes back tomorrow? What will happen to Dad?"

Buckland straightened. He was staring past Kay, staring past the throbbing gasoline engine and the dynamo that supplied the light with its current, staring at two gleaming bars of brass on the far wall. His arms went around her.

"They'll go," he said softly. "They'll be gone in an hour, I think I can guarantee. Maybe long before that."

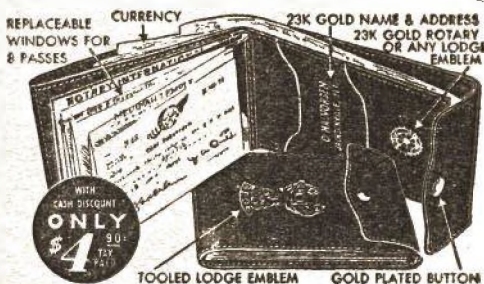
She looked up into his face and saw a calm certainty there.

"But—but how can you know, Neil?" she gasped.

Buckland smiled at her, held her close. "Wait," he said, "and see."

While she stood at the window watching the white revenue cutter speeding toward Cocaine Key, he left her side for a moment. When he came back, Big Nick Mollino's voice was rolling from below. "You got Jim Murtha, Buckland," he shouted, "and in just two minutes we're

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comin' to get you. In your own case, there's no trade. You croak. But here's a proposition. If you want to send the girl down, she won't be hurt. You hear? If she stays and stops a bullet, it's nobody's fault but yours."

Buckland answered him with a laugh.

"You're not going to get me, Mollino," he called back. "Not that you haven't got enough men. *That* isn't it. You just haven't got enough time!"

Again the door slammed below, and after a space there was a trampling on the stairs. Prone at the head of them, Buckland sent a bullet into the first of Big Nick's gunmen and as neatly picked off the second.

That rolled back the attack, and once more Mollino was shouting up from the foot of the tower.

"Okay, Buckland! We'll try it another way. We'll sit here on the island until we starve you out."

BUCKLAND had another laugh for that. "I'll be having ham and eggs for breakfast tomorrow, Nick," he answered. "And maybe a stack of wheats."

Then Kay was suddenly calling him, her voice vibrant with excitement.

"Neil! The cutter! She's heading over for Barracuda now!"

Finally Mollino's people had seen the cutter, too. There was pandemonium below and by common impulse the Light's besiegers were racing for their launch. In their wake trailed Big Nick, cursing insanely.

Ten minutes later the *Four Winds* was under way, and once more Buckland and Kay Lorimer had Barracuda to themselves. Ten minutes after that a white-uniformed officer from the cutter was rapping at the lighthouse door.

"What's wrong here?" he wanted to know. "Whether you know it or not, you went dark three-quarters of an hour ago."

Buckland faced him smiling.

"Thanks for coming, Lieutenant," he said. "I sort of thought you would if I switched the light off, so I took the liberty of doing it. Now that you're here, I'll switch it on again. You see, I happen to be the Department of Justice man you came down here to meet."

Thirty miles below Barracuda, as was

duly reported later by the press, the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Banshee* overtook the slower-moving steam yacht *Four Winds* that night. From the yacht to the cutter, one Nicholas Mollino, wanted both for income tax violation and for murder, was immediately transferred. And as he stepped aboard the *Banshee*, Mollino was placed formally under arrest by U. S. Agent Neil Buckland. When his prisoner had been put in the *Banshee's* brig Buckland stood on the after deck of the cutter smiling quizzically at an extremely good-looking young blonde.

"I sort of felt it was a tough spot and that something drastic had to be done," he said. "But as a lighthouse keeper's daughter, I don't suppose you can ever forgive me for tampering with Barracuda Light."

Kay Lorimer looked at him thoughtfully.

"As an everlasting admirer of the U. S. Department of Justice," she said, "I believe I almost can."

A deck officer of the cutter, strolling aft, turned his back abruptly a moment later and strolled forward.

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