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XB 391-A

by **Robert Leslie Bellem**

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SPICY 'ADVENTURE' STORIES



DECEMBER, 1941

Vol. 14, No. 6

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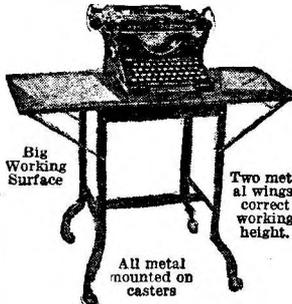
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X-B 391-A



By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

JEFF STORME spotted the brawl as soon as he emerged from his toolhouse at the Fleetwing Aircraft Engine plant. Two uniformed guards had captured a voluptuous brunette girl scaling the high wire fence that enclosed the factory grounds; and now, under the raw brilliance of

banked floodlights, they were subjecting her to a midnight manhandling.

Her clingy rayon dress, Storme noticed, had already been torn open from neckline to belt, disclosing a glimpse of surging white breasts as ripe and firm as passionfruit. Her tapered legs kicked out



Fury churned through his soul when he saw the girl on the platform.

wildly as she tried to free herself of restraint; but the effort merely earned her a slap across the face hard enough to make her whimper.

Seeing that blow, Jeff Storme was galvanized into action. His lanky body stiffened and his grey eyes narrowed to slits of ice in the tanned leanness of his features.

Jeff hated the role he was enacting, but he could see no other course. At all costs—even though it cost him his sweetheart—he must leave no stone unturned in the defense of his country

He roared "Hey, what's the idea?" and plunged at the main gate, bashed it open. Outside, he charged at the uniformed pair.

Without releasing their squirming brunette captive, they swung around on him. They were big bruisers, those guards, each of them a six-footer with the poundage to go with it. One wore sergeant's stripes and a matching arrogance; Flobert, his name was, the toughest private bull on the Fleetwing Aircraft payroll. He beetled his black brows and snarled "Who the hell do you think you are, wise guy?"

Storme thumbed the circular celluloid badge fastened to his overalls, the badge that carried his photograph and identified him as a Fleetwing employe. "I'm Jeff Storme, mike-checker. Now get your hooks off that girl."

"Oh. That chippie's a friend of yours, huh?"

"Call her that again and I'll ram your teeth down your ugly throat. Yes, she's a friend of mine. Sonya Valenska. Her folks run the boarding house where I live—and you've got no business pushing her around."

Flobert's lips peeled back in a humorless grin. "Don't be telling me my business, pal. I caught her tryin' to climb this fence, see? And you know damn' well what happens to people who go snoopin' around a war-industry plant."

"Oh-h-h, please . . . !" the brunette girl wailed faintly. "I didn't m-mean any harm. Don't t-take me to prison! I w-was only . . ." The words died to a gasp of sudden pain as Flobert twisted her wrist with vicious sadism.

JEFF STORME balled his fists knuckle-white; took a swift step toward the uniformed sergeant. "I'm telling you once more to take your hooks off her, mister."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll be needing a new face," Storme rasped. "Sonya is no saboteur."

"Then why was she tryin' to get inside?"

"I'll give you the truth. I asked her to come."

Flobert's bushy brows lifted sardonically. "Oh. A date, hunh? A little neckin' party in some nice cozy corner of the toolhouse. I get it. That's just ducky. I'm sure glad you told me, pal."

"Glad? Why?"

"On account of I think I'll pinch hit for you," the beefy sergeant chortled. Then he slugged a stiff left to Jeff Storme's midriff; followed it with a solid uppercut to the jaw, a punch that packed dynamite.

Storme's knees buckled. He went down. There was a roaring in his ears, a dull haze fogging his vision, a sickened nausea in the pit of his stomach. Writhing on the ground, unable to arise, he dimly saw the two guards dragging Sonya Valenska toward the shadows beyond the reach of the floodlights; and he sensed what was in store for her. Flobert's hands were already seeking and exploring her lush curves despite her frenzied, helpless writhing.

Jeff Storme wagged his head savagely to clear away the cobwebs; staggered to his feet, punch-drunk but determined. Then, recovering his strength, he loped in pursuit of the two private cops

and their moaning, helpless prisoner.

He caught up with them behind a pile of stacked lumber. Sergeant Flobert was mauling the Russian girl backward, his mouth batten- ing on her unwilling lips. The torn bodice of her dress had been yanked down over her shoulders and Flobert's avid eyes licked greedily at the sweet display. "Easy, baby," he was panting. "I ain't gonna hurt you . . . much." Then he kissed her again.

That was when Jeff Storme nailed him.

Storme's attack held the advantage of surprise. Sergeant Flobert's uniformed underling seemed too startled to make a move, and Flobert himself was too busy pawing at the brunette girl to have time to protect himself. In consequence, Storme smashed full-tilt into the fellow without hindrance; yanked him backward and measured him for a kayo.

But the sergeant was fast with his reflexes. He rode with Storme's first battering punch, came back with a lifted knee that would have crippled his lighter adversary had it landed. It didn't land, though. Storme twisted, took the kick on his thigh where it did no damage. Then, while Flobert was still off-balance, Storme got him with a looping right to the jaw.

He put all his wiry strength into the blow, followed through with perfect timing. Flobert's teeth clicked together with a curious grinding noise. His hot eyes walled back until only the whites showed. He dropped.

Jeff Storme turned menacingly to the other uniformed man, who

apparently had not yet recovered from his surprise. "Okay, chum. You want a dose of the same medicine?"

The cop made a belated move for his holstered revolver—a move arrested in midair as Storme's fingers clamped his wrist. "Hey—!" he yelped.

STORME spoke quietly, his voice laden with cold threat. "Now look. I know you can call for help, have me pinched. I know you can have Miss Valenska thrown in the can for trespassing. But if you do, we'll both testify how you and Flobert tried to assault the girl before turning her over to the authorities. That wouldn't look very pretty on the record, do you think?"

"No, but—"

"So all right. It's a stand-off. You keep quiet and so will we. Agreed?"

The company cop shrugged uneasily. "I guess so."

"Good. And when Flobert comes to, you'd better tell him the score." Storme then turned to the brunette girl. "Come along, Sonya. I'll take you home."

She gave him a grateful glance, snuggled her arm through his in a way that caused his elbow to press into the swelling base of her breast. Together they strode away from the factory grounds and along the two short blocks that led to the boarding house her parents conducted for aircraft workers.

On the dark porch she clung to him, her voluptuous figure quivering against him, her arms stealing softly about his neck. "You

—you were splendid, Jeff, t-to save me.”

“That damned Cossack!” he grunted sourly. “I wish I had broken his filthy neck. He’s a symbol of the whole dirty American system, the strong oppressing the weak, the ones in power looting and pillaging and defiling the common people!” It cost Storme a mighty effort to speak such treason but he forced his voice to a counterfeit anger, a spurious heat of resentment. He was playing a game, a dangerous and imperative game whose stakes were far greater than any he had ever before attempted.

The girl’s dark eyes surveyed him, seeming to probe into his very brain. “You talk that way because a company policeman tried to m-make love to me?”

“That’s only part of it,” he growled. “It’s true I care for you, Sonya. Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked you to come to me at the toolhouse tonight. But it goes beyond that. I say Flobert is a symbol. A symbol of everything I hate!”

“And yet you work for the airplane engine plant. You work to produce defense materials for this system you say you despise.”

He twisted his lips in a bitter smile. “A man’s got to live. It takes money; and how else can I earn it except by working at a job I’ve been trained to do? That doesn’t mean I enjoy it. I’d like to tear down the whole rotten scheme, rebuild it the way it should be built. With the workers getting the breaks they deserve. The breaks they’re already getting in other countries.”

“I wonder if you really mean that, Jeff.”

“I mean it as much as I love you,” he answered her; and in this reply there was no untruth, for he did not love Sonya Valenska any more than he hated the American way of life. He was merely enacting a role that might, in some small measure, help defend his country from the insidious encroachment of foreign dictatorships.

The Russian girl nestled closer to him in the darkness. “If you would let me put you to the test. . .” she whispered into his ear.

“A test of my love?” His embrace suddenly crushed her and his mouth hunted her parted lips. She was willing enough to accept his kiss; eager, apparently, to let him fondle her. And yet, despite her surrender, he found little pleasure in what he was doing. It was a task, a job that must be done; and as he caressed her he kept thinking of another girl. . .

The girl he really loved. . . Betty Pelton. . .

HE tried to pretend that it was Betty, slender and blonde and hauntingly beautiful, who was in his arms, rather than this statesque Russian woman. And the kisses he rained on Sonya’s moist mouth seemed almost a profanation of the genuine love he had for Betty. . .

There was a cushioned porch swing nearby. He drew Sonya Valenska toward it; pressed her backward with his demanding weight. “You asked me for a test. Here it is!” he panted harshly.



Storme's attack held all the advantage of surprise.

His lips traversed her throbbing throat, her lilting white shoulders where the clingy rayon dress had been ripped open by the aircraft factory guards. He sensed a sudden tightening of her mounded breasts. Her lush body seemed moved by scalding inner tides storm-swept with hunger for him.

LONG moments later he drew her to her feet, supported her with

his arms. "Now you know how I feel about you," he said in a growling whisper. "Can you have any doubts, my Sonya?"

For answer, she gave him her mouth again, repaying him in the same kind of coin he had just spent. And it was while their lips were still welded in a fervent kiss that someone stepped up to the porch; someone who gasped: "Jeff—Jeff Storme—oh, my God!" in a

voice broken by disillusionment.

Storme whirled, his eyes stupid with disbelief, his heart hammering savagely. In the gloom he recognized the newcomer. It was Betty Pelton, his fiancée; the girl he planned to marry when the right time came.

Betty stood there before him, slender and wraith-like in a white linen frock that stressed the liting symmetry of her figure, the boyish flatness of her hips, the perky curves of her unbrassiered and dainty breasts. Tears glistened on her pale, wan cheeks; tears of amazement and of heart-break. "Jeff. . ." she said again, weakly.

His own voice went harsh, raspy. "Betty! What in God's name are you doing here?"

"I—I knew you'd be home from night shift at this hour. I hadn't seen you or heard f-from you in more than a week. So I c-came to v-visit you. . . I'm sorry if I interrupted. . ."

He wanted desperately to leap at her, take her in his arms, explain the truth of the matter. But he did not dare. Too much hinged on the course that had been set for him; he told himself he must place his country's welfare before his own happiness. It was a bitter decision to make; but he had no choice. He knew that Sonya Valenska was watching him, waiting to hear what he was going to say. . .

Slowly he unclenched his fists. "Betty, listen to me. This is a rotten thing I've got to tell you. But—well, it's all over between you and me. I mean—"

"You—you love this girl?" Bet-

ty indicated the brunette Russian woman.

"Yes."

"I—I understand, Jeff. It's all right." She turned, her shoulders slumping, and left the porch; vanished in the night. And to Jeff Storme it seemed that there were only dead ashes where his heart had been.

HE looked at the brunette girl. "Well, Sonya, do you need any further proof that you're the one I love?"

She smiled enigmatically. "Perhaps?"

"What do you mean, perhaps?"

Her pointed tongue licked over too-red lips. "It is true you sent the slender blonde one away. It is true you have . . . made me your woman. But if you really want me, there is something else I would have you do."

"Name it!"

She said: "Come," and drew him into the house.

INSTEAD of taking him upstairs, she led him toward a door in the kitchen, a door he had not known about. Opening it, she disclosed a steep staircase leading downward to a secret cellar. Light gleamed down there, and low voices blended in a babbling monotone—furtive, conspirational.

Jeff Storme feigned astonishment. "What the devil is this, Sonya? Who's down there?"

"Men whom I want you to join," she answered. Then, before conducting him down the steps, she opened a small cupboard and brought forth a red mask, a silken thing with eye-slits and a trailing

drape that would conceal its wearer's features from hairline to chin. "Put this on. Then follow me."

He obeyed mechanically; and then he found himself in the underground room, surrounded by a dozen men similarly masked. They were grouped in chairs before a small platform at the far end of the cellar, and when they saw Sonya Valenska leading a newcomer into their meeting-place they leaped up in unison; burst into growling questions.

The Russian girl raised her hand. "Quiet, my comrades. I have brought you a new recruit who can help us much in our work. I vouch for him."

Muttering ceased, and Storme was conscious of suspicious eyes appraising him through the slits in a dozen red masks. He wondered what he was supposed to do now. As if having read his thoughts, Sonya told him: "Be seated. We await the coming of our Leader. He will soon arrive. Then the meeting will begin—and you will learn many things."

Storme's pulses raced. He had come thus far with an almost fantastic ease. If the rest of his job should prove as simple, sabotage at Fleetwing Aircraft would soon be erased like marks from a blackboard. Somehow, though, he had a feeling that matters were progressing too smoothly; that danger lay ahead. And when he thought of Betty Pelton, his throat tightened painfully. Somehow he must contact Betty, he told himself; contact her soon and explain the scene she had witnessed between himself and Sonya Valenska. . .

His thoughts jerked back to the present as someone clumped down the steep wooden staircase. He twisted around, stared at the red-masked man who now moved stolidly toward the tiny platform. This newcomer was big, muscular in his baggy tweeds, latently sinister in his crimson hood-mask. Was this the "leader" to whom the brunette Russian girl had alluded, the one they were all waiting for? If so, who was he? What foreign identity lay behind that bright red mask?

The fellow stepped up to the platform, cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was snarling and guttural as if deliberately disguised.

"Heil, comrades!"

In concert came the muttered response. "Heil!"

There was an instant of silence. Then the masked speaker again addressed his listeners. "Tonight you were summoned for a discussion of methods. But I have changed my plans. There is something more important for me to do. Therefore I dismiss you. Go back to your posts."

Jeff Storme would have departed with the others, but Sonya Valenska clutched his arm. "Not you, my lover. You will remain and talk to the Leader."

Storme's eyes narrowed behind the mask. "About what?"

"About the test I mentioned," she said. Then, when the last of the mob had gone, she took him to the man on the platform. "This is the one," she said.

The hulking fellow studied Storme. "So you wish to join us. Correct?"



"That depends. What kind of organization are you running?"

"I think you must have already guessed, my friend. America stands in need of a changed government, a government for the benefit of the workers. It is our task to accomplish that change—to help get it under way. In this you can be of great assistance—if you are willing."

The Russian girl answered for Storme. "He is willing. I can assure you of that, my Leader. He hates the present system, the money-grabbing capitalists who grind down the laboring men and defile their women. . ."

"Good," the big man grunted. Again he looked at Jeff Storme. "Listen closely. This is to be your task." And he poured out a tor-

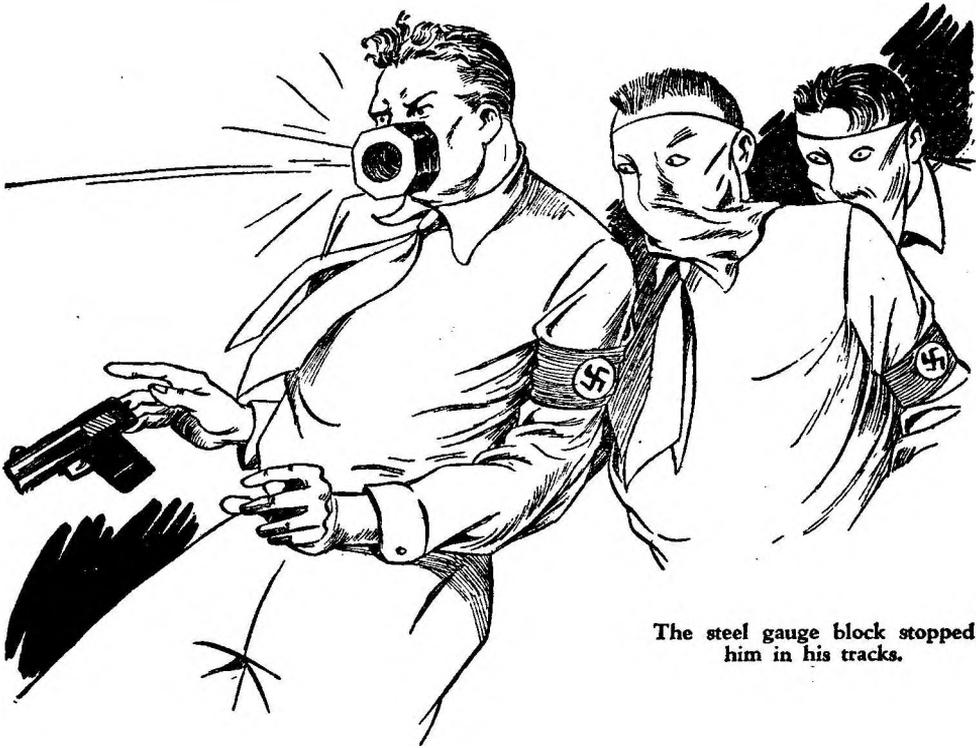
rent of crisp, curt orders; orders that amazed Storme by their cleverness.

WHEN it was finished, Storme nodded briefly: "I'm willing. Now may I go?"

"Not for ten minutes," the masked one rasped. "That is to insure that you will not summon the police while I am still in this place." He cast a glance at Sonya Valenska. "I rather imagine you will not find it unpleasant to remain here a while." And he clumped up the steep steps; left Storme alone with the brunette girl.

She cuddled close to him. "You could remove the mask now, if you wanted to . . . kiss me."

His nerves were twanging with



The steel gauge block stopped him in his tracks.

desire to get away, to report what he had learned. But he realized that he must play his cards cautiously lest Sonya suspect his true intentions. So he slipped the crimson silk from his face, put his arms around his voluptuous companion, mauled her to the platform. "Your beauty tortures me!" he lied. "I want more than kisses. . .!"

Her fingers fumbled at the torn front of her dress, where she had pinned the edges together. The pin came out; she threw it away. "So you will not scratch your hands when you touch me," she whispered temptingly.

IT WAS past one-thirty in the morning when Jeff Storme finally left the cellar. He went upstairs in the boarding house, os-

tenibly to his hall bedroom; bade Sonya good-night at the door of her own chamber. But when she was gone, Storme descended again to the first floor; silently stole into the night.

There were two things he must do, and swiftly. One was to report to his superiors. The other was to see Betty Pelton and try to make amends for the way he'd treated her tonight. Somehow he was haunted by the expression he remembered seeing on Betty's wan features when she caught him holding the Russian woman in his embrace. There had been heartbreak in that look, heartbreak he had to mend. That seemed more important, now, than anything else.

Hurriedly he strode along the

silent streets, block after block, until at long last he came to the little cottage where Betty Pelton lived alone. He rang the bell, imperatively, savagely.

Presently the slender blonde girl opened the front door. Her azure eyes widened. "Jeff . . . you!"

He looked yearningly at her lovely, lissome contours so indiscreetly revealed by the sheerness of her crepe de chine nightgown. A light glowed at her back, silhouetting her dainty hips and long, tapered legs; cascades of unpent golden hair streamed about her dulcet shoulders, making her flesh seem even more creamy by contrast. The sight of her pert little breasts pouting through gossamer silk made his blood race madly through his veins.

"Yes, Betty. I've got to talk to you, tell you about—"

She drew back. "You'd come here to me . . . after what I saw you doing to that other girl. . .?"

Deliberately he pushed her aside, entered the house and forced her to come with him into the tastefully furnished living room. "Betty, my sweet, you've got to listen to me. You've got to understand. I lied to you when I said we were finished. I *had* to lie."

"So that you would not lose your Russian mistress?"

He reddened. "She's not my mistress, Betty. I made love to her, yes. It was part of my job."

"Your *job*—?"

"Yes. I'm not what you think I am, sweetheart. I'm not an ordinary airplane-factory tool man. I'm an agent of the FBI. God help

me, I'm not supposed to tell anybody that; but I can't help myself now. You've got to know—so you'll understand what it was all about."

The blonde girl stared at him. "You — you're a Federal detective?"

"Right. I was assigned to duty here in the Fleetwing plant for a special purpose. You know that Fleetwing has been working on a new long-range bomber plane; the biggest ship ever built in this country or anywhere else. The X-B 391-A—that's the serial number of this experimental bomber."

"I—I've heard of it, Jeff. I've heard that if the design proves successful it can be built in quantities and make the United States the world's most powerful nation in aviation. But I don't see—"

He seized her hands, squeezed them. "You will see. I'll make you see! There have been attempts to sabotage the X-B 391-A from the start. That's why I was sent here. Nazi agents were at work; but the local authorities couldn't seem to ferret them out. That became my job; and up until tonight I'd succeeded only partially."

"How do you mean?"

"I reached the conclusion that Sonya Valenska and her family were implicated in the sabotage activities; that they were really Germans, not Russians. That was why I went to board with them; why I began worming my way into Sonya's confidence."

"Then . . . you aren't really in love with her, Jeff?"

He grinned wryly. "Of course not. But I had to play the game that way. I pretended to fall for

her. Tonight I invited her to sneak into the factory for a tryst with me—”

“Jeff!” the blonde girl’s voice was reproachful.

“I know. It’s not very nice to think about. But I knew she’d be caught by the company cops as she scaled the fence. That was part of my plan, to have her captured. Then I figured to rescue her, which would completely gain her confidence. It worked out exactly as I’d hoped.”

Betty Pelton tried to smile. “You took her home and . . . made love to her?”

“I had to.”

“You . . . kissed her. I saw you.”

REMORSE made him flush painfully. “It was play-acting, I tell you!” he breathed unsteadily. “It wasn’t anything like . . . *this!*” His arms snaked about the slender, golden-haired girl’s waist and he drew her up close to him, so close that his chest flattened her nubile little breasts. She didn’t seem to mind the hurtful pressure on her rounded charms; instead, she stood on tiptoe to accept the kisses he had for her. For a long moment they clung together in ecstasy, forgetful of everything but the desire to unite themselves in love-bonds. . .

At last he held her at arm’s length. “It wasn’t like that when I kissed Sonya,” he said again. “It was just a job; a thing I was compelled to do.”

“And then. . . ?”

“It worked. I told her I hated the capitalistic system, the American scheme of things. I told her I’d let her put me to any test she

wanted. And she took me to the headquarters of the sabotage ring!”

“You—you pretended to join?”

“Right. I talked with the leader, a masked man I couldn’t recognize. He assigned me to a task that would ruin the X-B 391A, delay its production indefinitely. At the plant, I’m a mike-checker. That is, I have charge of the Johannsen gauges; the master blocks which check the measuring capacity of every micrometer in the factory. I test those micrometers every day, see that they don’t vary even a tenth of a ten-thousandth of an inch. That’s how accurate the work is on the new Fleetwing engine for the experimental bomber.”

The yellow-haired girl blinked at him. “But how could you, alone, single-handed, delay production of the bomber?”

“By substituting incorrect Johannsen gauges. By mis-setting every micrometer used in the plant. It’s a damnable clever idea. The mikes would be not more than a couple of thousands off—but that would be plenty. From that time on, every part produced for the Fleetwing engines would be microscopically offsize, just enough to cause an impossible fit. The thing wouldn’t be detected until final assembly; then the whole works would be haywire.”

“The engines wouldn’t run?”

“They’d run, perhaps; but they’d break down under the pressure of service. They might even pound themselves out of their nacelles on the first test-hop. And nobody would know why; because every part would apparently

check properly with the micrometer specifications. It would be the micrometers themselves that would be false—and the damage would be done before that could be discovered.”

“Oh, Jeff—Jeff! It’s horrible! You can’t do a thing like that!”

Jeff Storme smiled. “I don’t intend to, my sweet. I’ve found out all I wanted to know about this sabotage mob. Now I’ll report to headquarters; have them rounded up when they hold their next meeting in Sonya Valenska’s cellar.”

FROM the doorway a harsh voice said: “Wrong, my snooping FBI friend. We will not be rounded up, because you will not report us to your superiors. *Get your hands in the air!*”

Storme pivoted, saw a beefy man in uniform moving toward him with drawn automatic. “Sergeant Flobert of the factory police!”

“Yes,” Flobert chuckled. “Like-wise *gaukierter* of the local Nazi bund. In other words, the leader in the red mask who gave you your orders in Sonya’s cellar a while ago. Did you think I trusted you then, you fool? Ah, no. I waited outside; followed you when you sneaked from the house. I trailed you here; heard everything you told this sweetheart of yours. Too bad that you said so much to her. It means that you both know more than is good for you—and people like that usually do not live very long.”

Fury lowered a hazy crimson curtain before Jeff Storme’s vision. He realized, now, what an idiot he had been to come to Betty Pelton before reporting to his su-

periors. He had let his tongue wag—and he had placed his golden-haired fiancée in jeopardy of death!

Had he been alone in this danger it wouldn’t have mattered so much. But Betty was in it with him. That changed things. He had to do something about it—fast.

He leaped straight for Flobert’s gun.

The Nazi agent swerved, raised the weapon; brought it down across Storme’s jabbing left fist with bruising force. Pain stabbed screamingly from wrist to elbow to shoulder as the blue steel smashed Storme’s flesh. Flobert laughed when he saw his adversary’s left arm dangle uselessly. He ducked when Storme struck at him with his right. “A medal for bravery,” he sneered; and he slugged the automatic home to Jeff Storme’s skull.

Storme went out with Betty Pelton’s shriek ringing in his ears.

HE AWAKENED in the meeting-cellar under Sonya Valenska’s house. How long he’d been unconscious he had no way of knowing, but instinct told him it had been many hours. Dazed, pain-dulled, he tried to focus on his surroundings.

He was trussed hand and foot on the floor of the underground room; the chamber itself was brightly lighted, full of red-masked men. Among them moved the brunette girl, Sonya Valenska, laughing, jesting when casual hands touched her boldly as she passed. The leader of the sabotage bund, masked now but easily recognizable as Sergeant Flobert because of his size,



The voice from the doorway said: "Get your hands in the air!"

sat at the edge of the speaker's platform with the ever-present automatic strapped to his thick middle. He was leaning forward in his chair, fumbling at something—

"Good God!" Jeff Storme choked and tried to sit upright. *That trembling figure at Flobert's feet was Betty Pelton!*

Her golden hair in tumbled disorder, her dulcet figure clad only in the gossamer nightgown she had worn when Flobert had barged into her cottage, she lay bound and gagged on the platform as the bund

leader ran his fingers over her snowy shoulders. His caress looked almost melodramatic, as if it might have been staged and timed to meet the moment when Storme would regain consciousness.

Storme squirmed against his fetters; raised his voice in a savage shout. "Lay off her, you rat!" he raged. "Turn me loose and I'll break you apart!"

"Ah," Flobert said quietly. "I thought it was time for you to come out of it. The hypo I gave

you after I knocked you out lasted a bit longer than I expected." Then, to a trio of the red-masked bundsters: "Lift him. Bring him here to me."

Storme felt himself being seized, carried forward. Then his captors propped him upright before the platform, pinioning him so that he could not move.

Over Betty Pelton's helpless form, Flobert spoke to him. "Now listen, snoop. Which means most to you, this blonde sweetheart of yours or your job as a Federal dick?"

"I don't get you," Storme said. It was a lie, though. He fully understood what Flobert meant; and sparring for time would not help very much.

The bundster grinned an ugly, sinister grin. "You've been making a play for Sonya Valenska so you could learn our secrets. By the same token, Sonya was making a play for *you*—to bring you into our organization. It was a game of cross-purposes, and the only fact we did not know was your connection with the FBI. However, that does not matter now. As a G-man you mean less than nothing to us. But as a toolmaster, a checker of micrometers, you can be quite valuable to us."

Storme's eyes narrowed. "Sure. You've already told me how you want me to substitute offsize Johannsen gauges at the engine plant. But I'm not going to do it."

"Ah. Very bravely spoken indeed," Flobert leered. "I wonder if you will change your mind when you see what pressure we bring to bear on your fiancée, here." He

stooped over, lifted Betty Pelton from the platform. The slender blonde girl whimpered as cruel fingers clamped her flesh, bruised her charms.

Bound and held impotent by two masked bund-members, Jeff Storme felt maniac fury churning through his soul when he saw Flobert plucking at Betty's gossamer nightgown, shredding it to flimsy tatters that no longer concealed the alluring delights of her figure. "Damn you, let her alone—!"

"You dislike the idea, eh, my friend? It will be even worse when I turn her over to my men, one after another."

"God! You wouldn't dare!"

Flobert snickered. "Wrong. Not only will she become the plaything of my followers; but you will be forced to stand here and watch. That should be interesting, *nein?*"

"I'll kill you if you try it. So help me God, I'll kill you if it takes a hundred years." Storme's voice was shrill, reasonless.

BETTY PELTON turned harrowed eyes upon him. "Jeff . . . please! It doesn't matter what happens . . . to m-me. The bomber is more important. Tell them you won't sabotage it! Tell them!"

For a long moment Storme hesitated, pondering and weighing the situation's dire potentials. Presently he reached a decision. He faced Flobert. "You win," he said bitterly.

"Ah. Then you will do what I tell you?"

"Yes. Turn Betty loose and I'm

your man. Your slave, if you want it that way."

The bund-fuhrer's thick lips curled. "She will be released only when you have carried out your part of the bargain. Otherwise what guarantee would I have that you would not inform your FBI superiors?"

Storme had known this would be Flobert's answer. The sergeant was no fool; he could be depended upon to foresee and forestall any efforts to double-cross him. Until the job of sabotage had been accomplished, Betty would be held prisoner. After that. . . well, there wasn't much hope that she would be set free. She'd learned too much; her knowledge was dangerous. All that lay before her was death; it had to be that way, from Flobert's viewpoint. And Jeff Storme realized this: realized that he, himself, would likewise be earmarked for murder as soon as he had finished the Trojan-horse job into which he was being forced.

But the thing couldn't be helped. Surrender was the only way out—for the moment. His hands were tied, literally as well as figuratively. Until they were untied, he was helpless.

Browbeaten, abject, he faced Flobert. "All right. Keep Betty prisoner until I've done your work for you. Now when do I start?"

The burly man said: "Right away, my friend. I kept you under opiates many hours; now it is evening again and time for you to start your shift at the Fleetwind plant. You will go to the tool-house, carrying a substitute set of gauge-blocks with you. When you

come off duty at midnight, you will bring me the factory's genuine gauges to prove you made the substitution. You understand?"

"I understand. Untie me and give me the blocks so I can get started." As he spoke, Storme cast a swift glance at his yellow-haired fiancee; a glance that hungered over her smooth contours and drank in the glories of her perfect breasts under her torn gossamer nightgown. It might be the last time he'd ever see all that enticing sweetness, he told himself grimly; and he wanted the memory of it to be with him in the desperate game to come.

NAZI hands were busy, now, unfastening his bonds. His ankles were freed, then his wrists. He flexed his muscles to restore circulation, revive strength. Then he reached forth to accept the fake Johannsen gauge-blocks that were being extended to him.

They were cleverly counterfeited, those shining steel blocks. Even an expert might not have detected that they were spurious. Ranging in size from wafer-thin rectangles to polished cubes the size of a man's fist, they clung together with surface-adhesion as if magnetized; you separated them only by sliding them apart, for it was impossible to yank them away from each other by main strength, so smooth were they machined.

Jeff Storme took them in his two hands; hefted them as if appraising their perfection. And then he made his move.

He slid a half-pound gauge block from its mate. And then,
(Continued on page 94)

GRASS



By
GRANT LANE

I DON'T know if all reality is ugly. I know that Honolulu is the sweetest dream a girl can have; and Honolulu, actually, is the ugliest nightmare that could possibly happen. But maybe I'm prejudiced.

Paradise of the Pacific? Where? Grass shacks . . . grass skirts . . . Hula heaven . . . Poi feasts . . . bronze giants on surf boards. . . Land of romance and passion? *Where?*

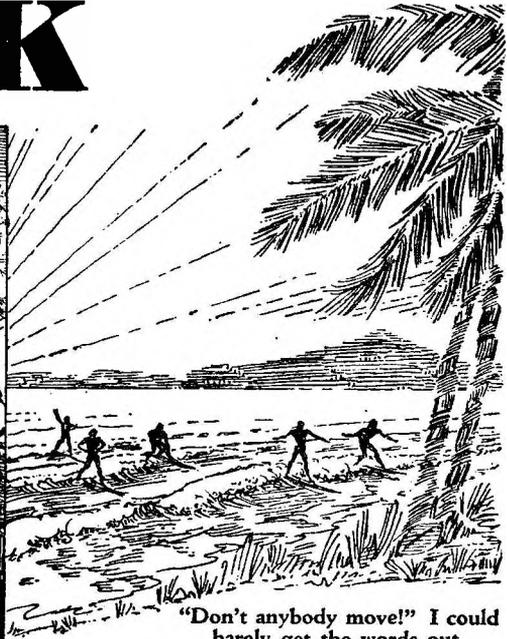
The streets are narrow and squalid and stink of half rotted poi that stands in barrels on the sidewalk. Korean girls run the barber shops . . . instead of men. . . Chinese own and run nine tenths of the commonwealth cafes and from the odor of their places and the taste of the food you can't be sure that cockroaches aren't served with hash.

If you are unfortunate enough to buy a one way ticket and land



here, as I did, try to find a job! I had one promised. Teaching school. A friend of father's on the steamship line knew my family had been in poverty since his death, and fixed it up. But he didn't offer transportation and, by the time I had borrowed from everyone I knew, to get third class fare down with the cattle, the big hearted friend was gone . . . transferred

SHACK



"Don't anybody move!" I could barely get the words out.

to make the best of the situation. I was in Hawaii, I figured, and a lot of girls I knew would envy me. I would "keep my chin up" I said, and make the best of it.

WELL, it was a tough year, let me tell you. The only reason I was able to get through it at all was because I have (why be modest about it) what men think is an unusually well shaped figure. My hair is jet black and I wear it coiled on my neck. I have pale skin, and deep black eyes, and I guess from some of the experiences I had some guys think they are "come on" eyes, although so far they haven't been.

somewhere else, and the teaching position was gone. Political shake up.

So here I was with a swell education, a handful of dollars that belonged to people from whom I had borrowed, and a naive ambition

As I say, it was my figure and face that got me by for awhile because there was a tourist rush. First I shagged barbecues out to

She thought she was working for a private detective agency, and the job was like a taste of heaven. Honolulu, itself, was like a dream. But a rude awakening awaited her . . .

parked cars working for a roadside stand. Then a musical show came to town and I worked three weeks. After that I mixed Sherry Flips and Bacardis at a bar. Then I tramped the streets looking for another job.

My room rent in the little hotel where I had so far managed to keep living, in preference to furnished rooms in Hell's Half Acre, became due, and then kept coming due.

It was about this time the little gray haired man came around to see me. He explained things in a nice polite way.

He had a private detective agency, he said, and needed a good girl operator. His agency, he explained, was high class, and my pay, even though I might work only a few days, would be big. The idea was to get myself acquainted with a certain young naval officer who would that night be at a ball in the swank Royal Hawaiian hotel. The agency would furnish the gown I had to furnish the personality, the face, the lure, the come-on. I was to meet him and make an appointment for lunch the next day.

After that, the gray haired man said, he would communicate with me and tell me what I was to do next. It was none of my business what the agency wanted to know about the officer and he told me so. It was okay with me. There were only a couple of things I wouldn't do for the "big money" the gray haired man spoke about.

I went to the ball and things came out fine. Lieutenant Larry Burris turned out to be a likeable chap, and also a lonesome one. It

was easy to make the luncheon appointment. And I kept it. After that I saw Lieutenant Larry Burris two and three times a day, just talking with him, letting him half make love to me, and all that. That was all I had to do. Just make dates and keep them. Each time I came back the gray haired man was waiting and pumped me dry. He wanted to know everything that had been said for a "report to our client."

There had been a lot said, but none of it important, to my mind. Larry had come to the islands on a navy vessel and was taking a Dollar Liner to China. At the present he was living inside the Navy Yard at Pearl Harbor.

That was all there was to it, and here we are.

Larry was scheduled to leave on the Dollar Liner at ten o'clock that night. At eleven in the morning, nine hours before his ship sailed, I was to meet him in his quarters for luncheon goodbye. I told the gray haired man. And I got my orders, this time much more emphatic than any of his previous orders. *I was to make Larry Burris promise to meet me at my hotel an hour before the ship sailed.*

This sounded okay to me. As a matter of fact, I thought I would like it. I had grown pretty affectionate toward Larry.

SO ON the way to the Navy Yard at eleven that morning I thought about that, and then I thought a lot more about Larry and I found that I was beginning to be sad that he had to leave. Also that I was developing a con-

science because I had to report all of our conversations to the gray haired man.

A big new barracks has been built inside the Pearl Harbor submarine base and one wing is devoted to officers. Larry was waiting for me inside the screened corridor just off the porch. He was a big, good looking fellow. His face was tan, his hair a bronze color. When he smiled it was a flashing whiteness that dazzled you. In his tropic uniform I didn't think anyone—any Clark Gable or Robert Taylor—could be more handsome.

"Diane," he said, holding out his hands, and taking my wrists, holding me so that he could look me over. "You're a treat for sore eyes. In white linen—particularly that kind that hugs your body—"

"Stop it," I said, "be serious. Today you kiss off Hawaii with a *lei* around your neck and *Aloha* ringing in your ears. Why are your eyes sore?"

"I've been deciphering codes all night," he said. "God, what a job."

He had a nice ring to his voice and I liked it. He went on now: "But time for a Rum Collins. Then I'll shake up a good mess boy and we'll have some lunch."

"Twice on the rum for me," I said, "I'm not hungry enough for lunch yet."

So we went to his suite and it wasn't twice on the rum, it was three times with me feeling worse and worse about the fact that he was going to leave. I was so sentimental about it that I felt like confessing why I had originally started keeping dates with him. But he was going away, and I didn't want him to go away hating

me.

Finally he looked at me with a queer burning in his eyes, then he slid over on the divan so that I felt the warmth of his body next to me.

"Diane," he said. His voice was hoarse. "Do you love me?"

I looked up at him, startled. He seemed troubled. I knew in that moment that I did love him, but I thought: if I tell him now, he'll leave being all upset. He'll have a miserable time doing two years duty in China. I can't tell him. After spying on him like I have, I can't tell him I love him or he'll hate me. I thought that, but oh, I did *so much* want to tell him. I said:

"It's not love, Larry, it's—"

"It's what?"

He had me there, I didn't know how to answer. And, while I was trying to think, he swept his arm about me and tilted up my chin and kissed my lips. They were hot kisses, moist. His lips quivered. Then suddenly, and I don't know just how this happened, but he had pushed me over on the divan, and he was holding me close, and kissing my face and neck, and ears.

"You *do* love me, Diane," he said.

All I could feel was the fire of his kisses, and I was holding tighter to him and breathing deeply. "Don't ever leave me. . . Don't ever leave me. . ." I said, though I must have been completely out of my mind when I said this.

There was a knock at the door.

He jerked rigidly and straightened up. I lay there unable to move for a moment. I heard him say, "All right, Mendoza, but hereafter

wait until I ring for you. I don't care if lunch *isn't* served after one thirty . . . I said all right—bring the lunch—now!

HE returned but the spell was broken. I smoothed my dress and sat up. He sat down beside me, wiping sweat from his cheeks.

"I must know, Diane," he said. "Do you love me?"

I thought of my mission. I was to make him meet me an hour before the boat sailed. "I'll tell you at nine tonight," I said.

He turned toward me, his face ashen. "But *this* is goodbye. Don't you see, darling? I can't see you tonight. I— Well, I can't."

The way he said that sounded pretty desperate, but I kept up my end too. "All right then," I said, "if that's how deeply your love runs, then maybe you'd better skip it."

"But, darling—"

I said: "At nine tonight. At my hotel. Our last *real* goodbye."

The lunch came and we argued all through that. It went on with both sides even for awhile. He seemed to have some ghastly fear of being on the streets of Honolulu prior to the sailing of the ship.

But before I left he promised he would meet me before he went aboard the liner. At nine. In my room.

IT WAS triumph, but I went back home feeling pretty cheap about the kind of triumph it was. The way he had acted had put me on my guard. There was nothing to do but wait for the gray haired man. I had always had to wait

until he got in touch with me. He never gave his name, his telephone number, nor his address. He always came to me. Up until now I had thought perhaps that was the way private detectives work. Now I was beginning to think differently.

Well, I paced up and down so long in my hotel room that I thought I would probably be charged extra for wearing the rug thin, when the gray haired man came in. It was six o'clock. As they say in the travel literature "the crimson rays of the dying sun were sinking majestically between the lovely twin peaks at Diamond Head silhouetting the shadow of happy, carefree beachboys standing upright with arms outstretched on a surf board that is flying on the froth of a Waikiki wave. . . ." That's what time it was. Six. Time to eat in the navy. Time to "dine" ashore. Time for very little kids to go to bed. Six o'clock, and then came the gray haired man looking very grim and ugly.

He was squat, with a barrel chest, and slate colored eyes. His gray hair was in a wild mop on his head, although his clothes were always immaculate. But his face now, his face on which he was forcing a faint and very sorry example of a smile, was grim.

"Well, my dear," he said, closing the door behind him. "What have we to report?"

I told him Lieutenant Larry Burris would come at nine o'clock.

He rubbed his hands gingerly. "That is good," he said. He lifted a wallet from his back pocket, carelessly peeled off three hundred dollar bills and put them on



The heavy iron knocked him in a
sprawled heap.

my dresser. That was the most
money I had ever seen. I just
stood and stared at it. "Your work
is through," he said. "You will va-

cate this room at once. You will vacate and get another. Your service with us has ended."

I guess I had been pretty gullible, just a dumb woman, and had it coming to me, but honest, honest to God, I hadn't expected anything like that. "You mean I'm not going to see Larry here tonight?" I blurted. I must have sounded like a sap.

The gray haired man swung about, facing me. "Of course not! Why do you think we have been paying you to make up to him? For your silly reports about the progress of a romance?"

I felt weak when he said that and I dropped into a chair. "Yes," I echoed, "that's what I thought. I see—I see I have been wrong. *Why did you employ me?*"

"Everything," he replied, "has been building up to this night. That is all I can say. You had better not ask too many questions. It might not be healthy. Instead of walking out free with three hundred dollars in your purse you might be found floating off Black Beach or somewhere. That would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would," I said, getting to my feet. I might be dumb, but I wasn't *that* dumb! I had the whole thing figured out now. It had suddenly come to me when he said that everything had been building up to this appointment tonight. I was about to tell him what I knew, when his warning stopped me. Then, infuriated, I was talking. I couldn't help myself.

"Yes," I went on, "it certainly would. But if you think I don't know what your game is your crazy!"

"What do you mean?" he snarled.

I WAS into it now and I plunged on: "You don't represent a private detective agency. That was a lie. A rotten lie. What you are is a spy. Your game is not detective—it's espionage. Larry talked about codes. I get it now. He is carrying orders or some new inventions—or the charts for them—which the government you work for wants.

"But he came in on a government ship that docked in Pearl Harbor. Your men couldn't get into the Navy Yard to steal these papers, so you hired me. I was to get his confidence. Then, when he left the Navy yard on his way through the city to the Dollar Liner, I was to get him to come up here. Because that trip—from the navy yard to the liner dock—is probably the *only* time he would carry the papers. If he made it with a navy guard it would be difficult to waylay him, and, once he is on the ship, the papers would be out of your reach. So you thought that a pretty woman's face could get him to drop the guard, for a few minutes to kiss his sweetheart goodbye. Then you intend to nab him. You intend to take the papers from him and—"

I didn't know how I had gotten all that out. I was gasping for breath. The gray haired man, his face livid, finished for me:

"—To take the papers from him and kill him!" He put a cigarette between his lips. "You are right. And that's too bad. So long as you were dumb you were safe. But now you're smart, and it's just too bad,

baby. Because in this business smart girls, just like smart guys, are bumped off. Catch? You've shot your bolt. So you get yours."

I was so excited that I was shaking with rage. "It's not fair," I shouted. "You *can't* hit at a man through a woman! He trusts me! Trusts me, understand? He'll never suspect that— Oh, you *can't* do that—you can't use a woman to—"

The gray haired man moved toward me, his eyes on my body. "Baby," he said, "in all the wars, and in all the peace time intrigues in the history of the world; the downfall of man has always been woman. Meanwhile—baby, before it is my very sad duty to—to put you in a world where you will have wings instead of such pretty—"

He reached out at me, and I jerked away. He seemed to go a little crazy then. He lunged at me, and with one tremendous pull, tore my dress down the middle. He tore the clothes off, tore them until they were rags on the floor at my feet. I was shaking with rage, not fear. I was thinking about Larry . . . not myself. But now I tried to fight this guy off. I had to fight him off and get to Larry. That was what I had to do!

But it was no cinch. It *certainly* was no cinch! His sweaty hand was pinching my shoulder and the whiteness of one breast was turning red against the roughness of his coat. His other arm was around my waist and he was pressing his wet lips to my neck. I hit him . . . I beat my fists against him, but it didn't do any good.

I felt his hot body next to my own. I was horrified now. I was pressed back against the wall and

this stout, broad shouldered gray haired man, puffing, and catching his breath, was kissing me until I hurt all over. I wanted to scream but somehow had the good sense (or was it good sense?) not to scream. He was whispering to me now . . . mad insane whisperings that meant nothing. I was pinned against the wall. I shoved, I kicked, I did everything I could think of doing but I couldn't get him away.

Then he buried his head in my neck, and it was then that I ducked down and slipped away from his grasp. He ran across the room and he plunged after me. I whirled, but he grabbed me again, swept me into his arms, and now we fell across my studio couch.

I WAS helpless. I could not move. How many minutes I was there, I don't know, but all the time I was edging toward the table at the end of the couch, and then at last, while he was writhing, swaying catching his breath, I managed to grab a flower vase from the table and I brought it down on his head.

He snarled and lifted himself and whipped his hand over to take the vase from me. I brought it down again, this time on his forehead. The vase broke and his head began to bleed. He stumbled to his feet, and almost at once I too was up again. He stumbled toward me and I backed, grabbing my iron this time. I had been ironing underthings earlier in the day.

The iron did the trick. It didn't kill him, but he went down, and by the way he fell, in a sprawled heap, I knew that he wouldn't get up again right away.

I stood there and stared at him for a minute as though I could not believe what I had done, and then I began to snap out of it, but slowly. I went first to the telephone. I called the navy yard. I couldn't explain this sordid business to any officer or Larry would get in trouble for being mixed up with a woman who had been employed by spies. . . . So I asked that he personally be brought to the wire.

But they couldn't find him. He wasn't in the barracks . . . He wasn't in the card room. He wasn't in the mess hall. Still he had not checked out. I might try to the Navy Yard YMCA, I was told. I tried that, with no luck. I tried the hospital, hoping he might be saying goodbye to some friend. I tried the Ford Island air base with the thought that he might be there drinking *Aloha* with another officer who had once been a shipmate of his. But it was no go. I just couldn't get him. And I had wasted all of this valuable time. I had to find him, I knew that. I had to find him myself and tell him to go straight to the liner and to keep his guard with him until the ship sailed.

The gray haired man was still lying on the floor. He wasn't moving, but I could see his lips flutter and knew he was breathing. I dragged him into my clothes closet. It was a hard job, but I had to get him out of the way. I couldn't stand to look at him.

Then I began to dress. I had to get different underthings and a different dress, of course. The gray haired guy had torn my linen outfit to pieces. I dressed quickly,

putting on a pert brown felt hat that had a snap brim. I daubed on a little rouge . . . a little lipstick. My face was so pale that it was almost ghastly. I was shaking.

I left the hotel then. It was seven-thirty. Time drags until you want it, until it is valuable, and then it slips away from you like sand through your fingers.

I had the three hundred dollars and I chartered a taxi with an Hawaiian driver. We made it all the way to Pearl Harbor in twenty minutes which, in the event you are not aware, is somewhat of a record. But I had the same luck as I had by telephone. He wasn't there.

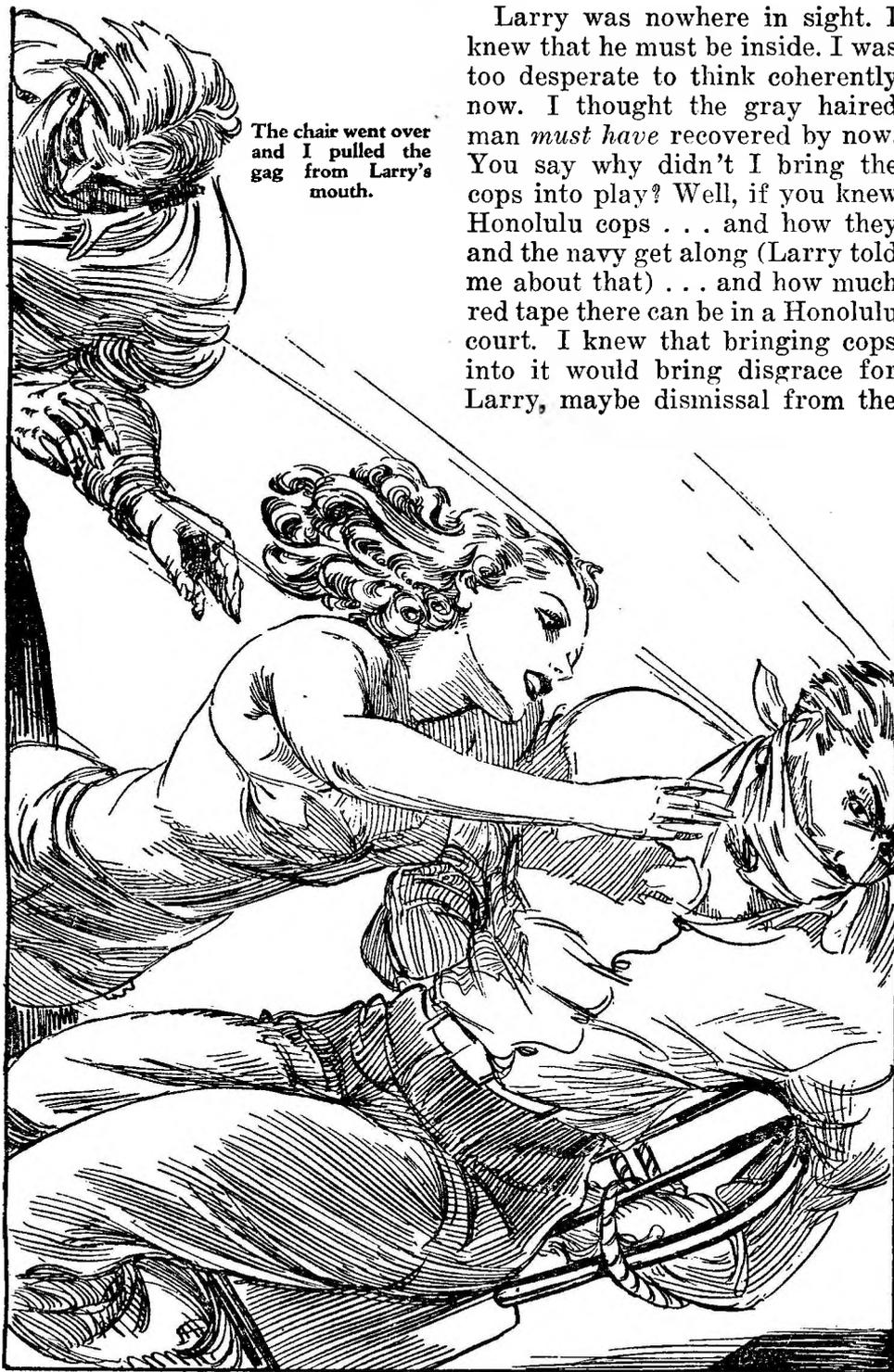
I was frantic.

JOE, the Hawaiian, understood this *had to* business because I greased his palm with plenty of dollars. We tore back down the road toward the city. That: "Hawaiian sky flecked with the silver of stars the dust of which sifts through the lazy palms. . . . The blazing splendor of night, with a Honolulu moon, and soft guitars strumming while waves lap softly on crystal beaches. . ." was the kind of night the steamship blurb writers would have said it was.

Joe, the Hawaiian, and I tried the Officers' Club in Honolulu . . . tried the big hotels . . . tried the bars. We tried everything, and then I was looking at my wrist watch, seeing the hand point to four minutes to nine. We wheeled the car around and opened it up for the hotel. I landed out on the sidewalk, greasing Joe's palm again, at nine o'clock.

The chair went over and I pulled the gag from Larry's mouth.

Larry was nowhere in sight. I knew that he must be inside. I was too desperate to think coherently now. I thought the gray haired man *must have* recovered by now. You say why didn't I bring the cops into play? Well, if you knew Honolulu cops . . . and how they and the navy get along (Larry told me about that) . . . and how much red tape there can be in a Honolulu court. I knew that bringing cops into it would bring disgrace for Larry, maybe dismissal from the



navy for being mixed up with a bunch of spies. And I was still enough of a fool to think I could handle the situation by myself with a little quick thinking. After all, I had gotten Larry into this, and it was up to me to get him out *clean*, not with a Honolulu detective squad hanging around his neck, and a navy court martial waiting for him.

I said to Joe: "Got a gun? . . . You cab drivers *do* carry guns. One told me."

"Sure," he said, "I got gun. Why?"

"Get it and come with me," I said, "and if things get rough don't be afraid to use it. Only use it fast. Don't worry. I'll pay you plenty for your trouble."

He stopped still. "Lady," said he, "one thing I don't do for love or money is murder." He paused. "But I'll sell you the gun for twenty bucks. It's an automatic. Easy to use."

"It's a sale, you coward," I said. Right then I couldn't see the sense in his words. But Joe was a smart boy.

"And I come along with you to help in fistic end of it, if necessary," he added, handing me the weapon, "only no murder. At least not in hotel room."

"All right, Joe," I said, "come along."

WE went up in the elevator managing to look fairly innocent, I hope, and it being my room naturally I had the key. Joe and I tip-toed down to the room, heard voices. Then I shoved the key in; the door opened. I saw a blur of men in front of me—four includ-

ing the gray haired man, and Larry tied in a chair, stripped to the waist. I barged in, said: "Don't anybody move! The first one that does gets a taste of this!"

I heard a thud then, and turned around. The door slammed shut, the lock clinked, and I saw Joe, my Hawaiian friend, sinking to the floor. One of the men had slugged him with a gun butt. Another one of them stepped toward me now. I wasn't fooling a bit. I let go on the trigger, and the guy spun around, holding his shoulder, and landed on the floor all in one big nasty piece.

But if I had hoped for any more luck I didn't have it. The other three were on me. They hadn't bothered to shoot me, I guess, because they didn't take me seriously. The gun was jerked out of my hand. I saw Larry's white face, his popping eyes. But he couldn't speak because, tied there in the chair like that, there was a gag in his mouth. Papers were strewn all over the floor.

The gray haired man laughed. "I knew the little hellcat would come back," he said. Then he stopped laughing and felt his head. I looked at Joe, out cold, on the floor. Then I was pushed back into the room. A tall, bald man who had a scar from his lip to the point of his chin looked me up and down, and then turned around and winked. He reached over and grabbed at my dress.

I backed. It seemed all these guys wanted to do was maul me. But Baldly was nearest. He shoved me into a corner, and he was grabbing at my legs; his arm lifted my dress until the edge of my pink

panties showed. He became really serious now. He crushed his lips on mine . . . he pressed his body so close to mine that I should feel the throb of his whole being.

He was stronger than the gray haired man and I wouldn't have gotten away from him except that at that moment there was a terrible pounding on the door. He stopped, looked around. I dove for Larry's chair. I thought if I could tip it over, smash it, somehow get him out of his ropes, we might have a chance. All of this now was sheer desperation.

Well, the chair went over all right, and I was reaching around and pulling the gag from Larry's mouth. I shouted: "I'm sorry, honey. . . I want to get you out of this. . . . If you can only fight them. . . ."

He didn't answer, he was breaking loose from the chair, breaking the chair into splinters, and then he was on his feet. All of the three spies were excited now. Someone was crashing against the locked door. One of the men fired at Larry. He smashed against him and in a brief struggle wrested away his gun. He swept me aside so that I would be out of their line of fire, and then he opened up. I saw Baldy and the other man go down. Only the gray haired guy remained on his feet.

The gray haired guy was the one on his feet when the door crashed open finally. I looked up, bewildered, as the room suddenly filled with white navy uniforms. Every man was armed.

But, as I just said, the gray haired guy was the only spy left to apprehend. And he didn't have

to be apprehended. He dropped his gun and threw up his hands and screamed for mercy.

WELL, that's what there is of that. Considering everything, I think a year of Honolulu was enough. I am on a boat now headed back for dear old San Francisco. What I forgot to say is that Larry and I both are on this ship. In the honeymoon suite.

You see, a naval officer actually was traveling to China with important papers. Only it was a different officer. One I hadn't even known. He got the liner all right, with his papers intact, and is on his way to China now. Where Larry fits in is here: the navy knew that a group of spies was working in Honolulu and would make a play for this young officer. So they let it out that Larry was the man, and kept the real officer incognito. They figured the spies would get in touch with Larry somehow, and after that it was his job to apprehend them. He thought going to my room and letting them capture him, then have navy guards break in, would be a swell way to get the evidence on 'them. That's where he was when I was looking for him. Making all those preparations.

So what Larry really is (besides my husband now) is a member of the Naval Intelligence, and his assignment was to get the Honolulu spy nest, which he did, though he confesses it was harder than the ordinary job because there were moments—far too many of them—when he believed I was in the spy ring. I'm glad I wasn't. Because Larry understands everything now.

DRUMS of

The leopard men were not afraid of guns, and they acknowledged only one master—until he showed fear. And the girl feared one man—until Steve Nyall taught her something greater



**By
C. A. M.
DONNE**

MADNESS

CROUCHED in the stern of the great *ooka* canoe, with the steering paddle clamped beneath his arm, Steve Nyall listened uneasily to the voice of the

strange drum. From upriver it came, long and insistent, speaking an unknown tongue; its pulsing montone swam with the dark stream between walls of lush jun-



Steve said: "If I don't kill you myself, I'll watch you hang in Nairobi for murder!"

gle foliage and spread outward through groves of umbrella-topped acacias. It must have carried a clear message to black men versed in its secret code, but in Steve's brain its repetitious mutter merged into a single vague, all-embracing word that could mean anything in Africa.

Trouble!

His fingers brushed the holstered revolver at his thigh, his foot nudged the stock of the rifle leaning on a thwart, his gray eyes narrowed beneath the brim of his pith helmet. He saw the straining backs of his four Wadi paddlers, the bales of pelts and the tight bundles that contained quills of gold dust and rough diamonds, and finally the haughty figure of Buru, the Masai warrior, standing erect in the bow.

Dark ostrich plumes waved upon Buru's head. He said in his own dialect, which the sweating Wadis could not understand, "*Bwana*, the witless ones pursue a quarry. Let us hope it is us they follow, so that we may spill their blood on the mangrove roots and feed their craven bodies to the crocodiles! This *assegai* of mine has not pierce the belly of a fool in three moons!"

He flourished the slim spear with its three-foot steel blade and its pennants of monkey hair, matching the ornamental bands about his elbows and knees. He was not a mere braggart, this statuesque Masai; he was a son of one of the fiercest fighting tribes in the world, and feared no thing that walked on two legs or four.

Steve searched the jungle shadows in the waning light. He would

have liked to hear the deeper notes of Zumbga, the sacred drum of Chief Ngoga, at whose village downstream he hoped to spend the night. That would have been a friendly sound, for Ngoga had been Steve's sworn friend ever since the young American trader had saved the headman's fat old body from a fatal goring and trampling by *kifaru*, the horned rhinoceros. But the talking spirit that inhabited Zumbga was silent, as if listening to the challenge of the stranger.

The drums of every village on the river had their own voices, as different as the voices of men, and in three years of trading spearheads and *panga* knives for pelts and gold and diamonds, Steve had come to know them all. This drum was none of them; it must be the instrument of some secret society or cult. Disquieting rumors of such cults, organized by the renegade white man Kurt Hennig for purposes of terrorism, had come to Steve in furtive whispers on this most recent expedition into the trackless wilds of the Uganda.

FOR three months, knowing of the whispers, the fearful Wadis had slept close to their campfires, not daring to venture beyond the protection of *Stevi-Bwana's* guns—except that night they had deserted, and Buru had trailed them into the jungle, beating and bullying them back. And although it had been a profitable voyage, Steve had found the men of most of the villages sullen and unsmiling, where before they had always greeted him with joy.

It would be good, Steve told him-

self, to get back to Nairobi, in Kenya Province, where life was carefree and men and women of his own color would welcome him.

Buru cried suddenly, "Behold the quarry! It is a woman the sons of pigs pursue! See, *Bwana*, she is tired!"

Steve looked. He stifled a profane exclamation and swung the steering paddle, turning the prow of the canoe toward shore, snapping a command to the Wadis.

"Faster, faint ones! There is need of us on land!"

His eyes were wide now, watching the woman who had come out of the forest near a sandspit. She was small and slender and wore breeches and blouse of tattered khaki—and she was white!

Buru was scornful. "Only a woman! It is a thing hardly worth the trouble, *Bwana*—and yet it is an opportunity to teach the weaklings of this place to respect us!"

The girl—for as the distance lessened between them Steve could see that she was scarcely a grown woman—reeled to the tip of the point of sand and fell at the water's edge. She had no helmet and her pale golden hair lay about her head like a halo. Evidently she had not seen the canoe, for she had been looking over her shoulder, back into the jungle.

Then, behind her, appeared the forms of those who had chased her, and once more an oath leaped to Steve's lips. He let the steering paddle sag in its thongs and snatched up the rifle, holding it in the crook of his arm.

"*Mathehebu wa Chui!*" he exclaimed. "The leopard men!"

For the half-dozen figures were black and naked from feet to chest, except for loin cloths, but their heads and shoulders were hidden by conical hoods of straw and on their fingers gleamed the curved metal claws that identified them as the most feared outlaws of East Africa—members of a murderous fraternity sworn to wreak vengeance upon blacks and whites alike for real and fancied wrongs. The British authorities had long ago made membership in the *Mathehebu wa Chui* a capital crime, and little had been heard of it lately, but here was visible evidence that it still flourished.

Buru lifted his spear. He shouted in Uganda to the fearsome apparitions, "Fly, little-children-playing-at-war! It is no woman that turns upon you now, but the strong and fearless *Stevi-Bwana*, slayer of *simba* the lion and *goru* the gorilla and *kifaru*, strangler of leopards with his hands! And here also is his mighty servant Buru, son of a Masai chief, whose *assegai* has taken a hundred lives and thirsts for others!"

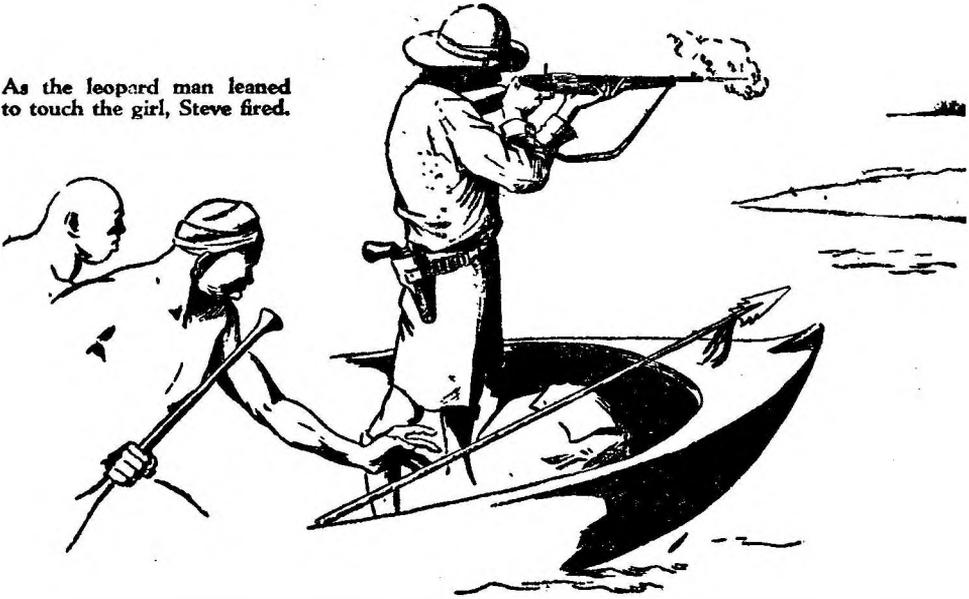
The hooded savages paused, peering uncertainly through wisps of straw. They saw the Wadi paddlers cower, stricken with such fear that they could not drive the canoe; saw the white man and the black warrior unsupported.

Laughter rang across the water—bloodcurdling laughter resembling the *mee-owrrr* of a jungle cat. The leopard men shook their feathered spears and pranced toward the motionless girl. One of them knelt and touched his steel claws to her white throat.

STEVE'S rifle was at his shoulder, its walnut stock nestled against his unshaven cheek. The bellow of it shocked the forest;

second leopard man bent double, grabbing with both hands at his belly. Buru's *assegai* caught a third in the throat, so that the

As the leopard man leaned to touch the girl, Steve fired.



the heavy bullet struck the kneeling man with a 2,000-pound impact, punching a hole the size of a teacup in his chest, flinging him backward.

Buru beat the frightened Wadis about the ears with the shaft of his spear. "Offal of hyenas!" he roared. "Must I drive the point of my *assegai* into your crawling intestines to give you courage?"

The paddles dug into the water once more, thrusting the canoe nearer to shore.

To Steve's amazement the five remaining leopard men stood their ground. They hopped up and down, shouting and gibbering like maniacs. Spears hissed toward the canoe and a Wadi shrieked, dropping his paddle, as a keen blade crashed through his ribs.

The big rifle thundered again. A

straw covering his chest turned crimson.

"Save your bullets, O slayer of thousands!" Buru pleaded. "Now that my *assegai* has drunk of blood, my *panga* is jealous!" He snatched the heavy knife from his loincloth, set his teeth on its blade and plunged into the river. The masked men, their spears thrown, drew knives and waited to meet him as he waded toward the sandspit.

Steve covered the leopard men with his rifle, but held his fire, understanding the fierce pride that drove the tall warrior against three-to-one odds. He watched Buru stride up on the sand, swinging the deadly blade. From Buru's thick lips wailed his tribal warcry, "*Sss-sgheel!*"

It was too much for the outlaws.

They whirled, their insane frenzy evaporating before that ferocious



advance. Steve could have blasted their heads from their shoulders as they sprinted toward the shelter of the undergrowth, but he had no stomach for unnecessary killing. His shout kept Buru from following them.

Before the keel of the canoe grated on bottom, Steve sprang into the water and waded to the girl's side. She was the first white girl he had seen in three months, and as it happened she was the most beautiful one he had seen in all his thirty adventure-crowded years. Her hair was satin-soft beneath his hand, her mouth was like pale coral; her eyes were closed, the golden lashes curling upon her cheeks, but somehow he knew they would be a warm, deep blue. He lifted her in his arms, feeling her soft curves against his chest, and where thorns had torn her blouse and breeches he could see the satin sheen of white skin.

The jungle was silent. The insistent beating of the unfamiliar drum had stopped with the first echoes of the first shot. But there was a new drumming within Steve

—a quick pulsing of his heart, a beat of hot blood in his temples. . . .

The girl came out of her fainting spell as swiftly as she had succumbed to it. For an instant her startled eyes stared at him—and they were of the deep blue he had imagined—and then her small fists thudded against his face and chest.

"Let me go!" she whimpered. "Put me down, you murderer! I'd rather die in the bush!"

He said, "Steady, sister. You're in good hands, Whatever you were running from, it won't bother you any more. Nobody's going to hurt you."

She stared at him again and looked at her surroundings. She saw the sprawled bodies of the three leopard men, saw Buru's disapproving face.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Steve Nyall, trader, bound for Nairobi. You can get a train for the coast there. You can go back to America." He knew by her accent that she was American.

Her eyes closed. She murmured a man's name—"Dave!"—and fainted again. Her body was limp again Steve as he lifted her into the canoe. He held her in his arms all the way to Chief Ngoga's village, wondering meanwhile about that fellow Dave. . . .

THE tropic night had swallowed the world when the deep-laden canoe, with only three Wadis paddling it, ran up on the shore where fires blazed in front of grass huts. Steve arose, supporting the girl with an arm around her shoulders. She was conscious and rested now, and much of her terror had gone.

Steve shouted the Uganda greet-

ing, "May there be much meat and many sons in your house, O Chief Ngoga, and may the skulls of your enemies be white in the moonlight!"

Half a minute passed before an old man's quavering voice replied, "May it be with you as you have wished, my son! May your wives be many and strong!"

The trader lifted the girl to solid land. "Don't be afraid, Connie," he said. "The village is dirty, but the old chief is friendly. You'll be safe here till morning."

He had learned her name and much more in that last hour's run down the black river. Connie Rutledge was twenty and she had come to Africa from Boston with Dave—who was her brother—to find gold. At least, Dave had hoped to find the gold an old prospector had told him about, close to the point where the Nile crosses from Uganda into the Sudan, and Connie had hoped to find the adventure she had read about.

Dave Rutledge had found not gold, but steel—steel claws bound to the fingers of leopard men, tearing away the flesh of his throat, disemboweling him. And Connie had found adventure, but not the rich, glamorous adventure of her dreams.

The hooded killers had carried her to a compound up a branch of the river where the renegade Kurt Hennig lived. Hennig had five native wives, all of whom bored him; he had chuckled with pleased anticipation when he saw the white girl. He had kept her under guard in a room of his bungalow while he bargained with the leopard men, trading for the money and other

loot that had been hers and Dave's. When the natives had gone he had tried to kiss her.

In the room had been a bottle half full of Holland gin. Connie had smashed it over Hennig's bald head. While he lay on the floor, unconscious and bleeding, she slipped from the house without being seen and ran into the thorny jungle.

Perhaps half an hour later the strange drum began to throb. Connie knew nothing of African drum-talk, but some inner sense told her the sounds were seeking her out and swift runners would be on her trail. She ran blindly, tripping over roots and fallen branches, tearing her clothes, hearing sometimes the snarling calls of the beast-men near her. She ran until she reached the edge of the water and knew she could go no farther, and there she collapsed. . . .

A cold rage had swept over Steve. "The district inspector will be glad to know where Hennig is hiding," he said. "He's wanted at Nairobi for other thefts and murders than this. The authorities claim to have proof that he's inciting unrest and rebellion among the natives so that Germany can take back her lost colonies more easily. The Germans used to own Tanganyika; now they want it back, and big slices of territory above Lake Victoria with it!"

He had disliked Hennig when first he met him, before the man had become a fugitive—disliked him for his cruelty to the natives and for his crooked methods of trading. Hearing Connie's story, thinking of her murdered brother and the fate she had so narrowly

escaped, he hated Hennig more than he had ever hated any man.

WHILE Buru carried the more valuable bundles from the canoe into the village for safe-keeping, Steve led the blonde girl up the slope into the circle of huts, and halted before the great hut farthest from the river. Chief Ngoga sat before it on his stool of honor, his fat chest and stomach resplendent in the red coat with the gold epaulets which Steve had given him. Behind Ngoga were four of his wives, fanning the heat and smoke of a great fire from his sweat-streaked face. Other wives brought out palm wine in coconut shells.

Ngoga clucked with delight over the gold penknife Steve had brought him. Gravely the two men spoke the prescribed ceremonial words and made the appropriate gestures. Steve squatted on his heels while Connie stood behind him, bewildered by it all.

"You have a lean and sickly wife," Ngoga commented, with the frankness of all Africans. "She will not be able to work hard, nor will she bear many children. *Stevi-Bwana*, you will do well to get a plump woman next time."

Steve nodded gravely. "It may have been that her beauty dulled my judgment."

Ngoga frowned. "Beauty? But she is pale and thin! She would make scarcely a mouthful for *simba*, and that mouthful would be more bones than meat."

Steve changed the conversation, glad that Connie could not understand. "You have had peace since last I was here, Ngoga?"

The old man's eyes watched the fire. "Such peace as the spirits have wished."

"I have heard tales of strong warriors and mighty hunters dying alone in the forest."

"Some have died. The most wary are sometimes torn by beasts."

"I have heard," Steve persisted, "that not all the beasts are what they seem to be—that some are men with the skins of beasts upon them—and that a white man possessed of a devil is their chief."

Ngoga scowled and his muddy eyes wriggled uncomfortably, not meeting Steve's eyes. "I know nothing of those things," he muttered petulantly. "I am heavy with years and only wish my people to be happy and strong."

But Ngoga knew. All the blacks of the jungle knew of the leopard men. The story of Dave Rutledge's murder and Connie's capture and escape would have spread far and wide within an hour of its happening.

Steve sensed the fear behind Ngoga's restlessness, smelled it in the very atmosphere of the too-quiet village, where there was not even the cry of a baby. He glanced into Buru's scornful face and knew that the Masai smelled terror and was disdainful of it.

Connie gave a little cry. "Look, Steve! Oh, my God, Steve—*look!*"

He swung around, dropping his hand to the butt of his revolver. He saw skulking shapes back in the fringe of trees past the huts, where only the faintest gleams of the village fires reached. They stood upright like men, but their heads were the heads of jungle

cats, fanged and hideous, and their bodies were covered with tawny, black-spotted fur. Yet they carried spears and waved black arms.

Steve had been told how the leopard men, fancying themselves inspired by the savage spirits of the beasts they imitated, preferred to prowl by night. In daylight they contented themselves with hoods which concealed their identity, but in darkness they clothed themselves in the skins of the animals they copied.

Over his shoulder he said. "Ngoga, do you permit the outlaws to come to your village?"

The black man spoke quietly. "*Stevi-Bwana*, what can I do? See how my fighting men creep into their huts or sit by their fires, pretending not to see the *Mathehebu*. There is greater magic here than an old man can defeat."

It was true. The village was utterly silent and only a few men were to be seen. All that moved in the circular space was the invisible serpent of fear!

THERE were many leopard men—forty or fifty, Steve guessed—but they did not enter the village. Instead they formed a close-packed group and waited silently.

Buru snorted through his nostrils. "*Bwana*," he said, "if I go against them alone, will you count the number I kill before I fall?"

"Not yet, great fighter," Steve murmured. He stood beside Connie, his arms around her slender waist, and felt conflicting emotions within him. The warmth of her trembling body thrilled him and awoke a great yearning, but the knowledge of her peril, and of his

own helplessness against overwhelming numbers of enemies, sent icy shivers along his spine.

"Can't we run away?" she asked.

He shook his head. "The spears would get us before we were half-way to the canoe."

The mass of the beast-men parted. A burly figure pushed through—a white man in white man's clothes, with a rifle in his hand and two revolvers in his belt. He strode into the village, arrogant and self-assured, and no one hindered him.

"Hennig!" said the girl, her voice compounded of fright and fury.

Kurt Hennig was powerfully built and heavily bearded. Under shaggy brows his pale eyes were cold and mirthless. There were faint sparks in those eyes as they looked at the clean-limbed girl in her tattered garments, and cruelty and avarice as they looked at Steve.

"You're a damned fool, Nyall!" Hennig snarled. "If you'd been smart, you'd have scuttled back to Nairobi two months ago when you got your first warning. If you'd had a brain in your head you wouldn't have killed those blacks who were after the girl!"

Steve measured him coldly. Steve's hand hovered close to his holster, but he did not want to shoot Hennig. He wanted to strangle Hennig with his bare hands.

"You're lucky you weren't with the blacks," he said. "The first bullet would have been yours!"

Hennig turned to Ngoga. "Old fat man," he said in dialect, "I come to bargain. Tonight the madness comes upon my pack of

He snatched up the revolver and fired hastily—but accurately enough to smash the fingers of the man who was about to kill him.



leopards and they crave blood. Shall it be the blood of your people, or will you deliver to me this troublesome trader, his slaves and the female?"

Ngoga did not look up. His face was unhappy. "Ngoga is blood brother to *Stevi-Bwana*," he mumbled. "Ngoga's life belongs to the white trader. But the woman is not worth fighting over. Take her and leave us in peace!"

"No!" Steve said.

A grin twitched Hennig's beard. "Hell of a lot you've got to say

about it! But I'll make you a proposition to save shooting. Give me the gold and diamonds you've got, turn your worthless Wadis over to the leopard men for sport and the girl over to me, and I'll let you and the Masai go. I'm moving on in a day or two, down into Tanganyika, where the blasted British won't ever find me, so what you tell them won't matter!"

Steve's lip curled. "If I don't kill you myself," he said, "I'll watch you hang in Nairobi for Dave Rutledge's murder!"

"Why be an idiot? I'm top dog here. You can afford to lose the money and you can get all the white girls you want downriver." He appealed to Connie. "Wouldn't you rather be the number one wife of Kurt Hennig, king of the jungle, than see your boy friend's guts ripped out? Not that you have any choice—"

"Don't kill him!" she pleaded. "I—I'll stay, if there isn't any other way!"

"That's the bright girl!" Hennig stretched out a huge paw and pinched her cheek. "You won't be sorry, chum."

Steve stepped between them. "Get out, Hennig!" he said softly. "Get out before I break your filthy neck!"

Hennig laughed unpleasantly. "You're asking for it—"

STEVE'S fist smashed into the man's face. The renegade staggered, dropped his rifle and reached for his revolvers. Before he could draw either of them, Steve struck again, his knuckles battering through the beard to the fatty jaw.

Hennig fell heavily on his back, too stunned to move for a moment. In that moment Steve snatched the rifle and both revolvers. He yanked the big fellow to his feet.

"Get going!" he said. He spun the renegade and shoved him toward the edge of the village. His booted foot lashed out, kicking Hennig's posterior.

Hennig stumbled to the center of the circled huts. He turned there. "You're asking for it!" he warned again—and this time he did not laugh. He joined the silent

leopard men and they vanished into the forest.

Connie leaned against Steve. "You're risking your life for me!" she said wonderingly.

"I've never risked it so willingly," he told her. To Ngoga's intense disgust, he kissed her.

Buru came jogging up from the landing, snorting with anger. "*Bwana*," he said, "the Wadis have fled like rats before the *boo-book* owl! They have taken the canoe!"

Steve swore. "We might have outrun them. But Ngoga's boats are slow and Ngoga's men would not dare help us!"

"You are right, *Stevi-Bwana*," the chief sighed. "My warriors had courage once, but the *Mathehebu* has made timid children of them. There is no way to avoid death, unless you give up the woman, and you will not do that." He spat into the fire. "Because of her the widows will make spirit holes in the roofs of the *bomas*. Take her out of my sight!"

Steve led her into an empty hut, squeezing her hand. "Don't worry," he said. "The blacks can't stand up to guns."

But he had already seen the leopard men stand up to his rifle when they were armed only with knives and spears—and Hennig would surely arm them better for tonight's work.

She saw through his pretended cheerfulness. "There's no need to lie, Steve. You and Buru can't hold off fifty men. Let me go to Hennig, and when you reach Nairobi you can send the colonial police to look for me. It will be better than knowing I have caused your death!"

His voice was harsh. "I can only die once. With that ape you'd die a dozen times a day—"

"Please don't talk, Steve. Kiss me, so that no matter what happens I'll have something to remember!"

He drew her close, and her soft breasts flattened against his chest. Her blouse was in ribbons and he felt the bare flesh of her back, curved in tempting contours. Her lips were moist and clinging beneath his questing mouth.

In the privacy of the hut her lithe body swayed against him, fluid as flame, molding itself to his rugged figure. Her breath was hot on his cheek. Her lips whispered words of endearment: "Precious—darling—sweet—"

He laughed, forgetting the danger that surrounded them. The *boma* seemed to be packed with swirling emotions, savage as Africa, blissful as paradise. . . .

NOT till many minutes later, when the roaring had died out of his ears and his brain had cleared, did he hear the distant threat of the drum across the mysterious jungle.

"Steve, they must be getting ready to attack. You'd better see."

After the loneliness of three months he hated to leave this exquisite creature who had brought love to him in the heart of the wilderness.

"We can put up a good fight," he said. "Keep your chin up and stay here till I come back." He kissed her.

Buru stood outside the hut, his eyes gleaming.

"*Bwana*, the leopard men are sniffing the smoke of madness, which makes them fools. The cowards of this village, whose blood is water, have told me of it. Is it not better that we attack them and kill as many as we can, rather than wait to be slaughtered like pigs?"

Steve would have preferred it that way, but he shook his head. He could neither lead Connie to certain death—nor could he leave her alone in this terror-stricken village.

"We shall wait for the devils to come here, Buru. Arm yourself with Hennig's rifle and one of his revolvers."

He went to where the renegade's weapons still lay before Ngoga's hut, remembering that Connie was not armed, and picked up one of the revolvers. Striding to the door of the hut where he had left her, he called, "How are you on shooting, Connie?"

There was no answer. He peered into the gloom and felt of the couch. The hut was empty! Connie had gone, and a hole in the grass wall behind the couch showed the manner of her going!

For a long minute his brain seemed numb. But when the minute was ended he knew where she had gone, as perhaps he had known subconsciously in that first second of missing her.

Connie had gone to Kurt Hennig, thief and killer. Carrying the memory of that blissful interlude in Steve's arms, she had gone to Hennig to trade her loveliness for the life of the man she loved!

He raced to the edge of the village, where the black forest

huddled. "Connie!" he yelled. "Connie, come back!"

His voice echoed weirdly and the drum-beats punctuated it, but no human answered.

He shouted for Buru. He rasped, "We go to kill the *Mathehebu* and the white murderer! Let us see if we cannot shame some of these blacks into fighting with us!"

BUT Ngoga, when they approached him, hung his head. "When first the leopard men began to flourish," he said, "I myself wished to declare war on them. But out of sixty strong men in my village, not one would go with me. They do not fear men, but they fear the magic of Hennig because they do not understand it!"

"Then," Steve said bitterly, "Buru and I go out to die because the Uganda men are weaklings!"

Ngoga shook his wise old head. "You go out to die because you have let a woman make a fool of you! But even so there may be a way. The drum of the leopard men has bragged and insulted and threatened, but never has it sounded humble. Make it tell my people, in a language they can understand, that the magic of Hennig is less than the magic of *Stevi-Bwana*. Do that, my son, and you shall have sixty sharp spears fighting for you!"

"Let us go," Steve said to Buru. "Ngoga speaks of the impossible. There is nothing to be gained by waiting."

Wordlessly the tall Masai loped into the jungle, his rifle in one hand, his spear in the other, *panga* and revolver at his waist. The

darkness was no obstacle to him; by some weird sixth sense he avoided trees and gnarled roots.

Steve floundered behind him, slashed by thorns, beaten by branches, sprawling over obstructions. He was battered terribly and his lungs gasped for breath long before he saw the glare of fire above a stockade of woven boughs and knelt, panting, beside the black man.

His blood chilled at what he saw through a narrow opening in the stockade. The fence surrounded Hennig's compound, with the thatched bungalow at one end and the conical huts of his servants at the other.

A great fire flamed and smoked in the center of the space between, and about the fire fifty of the *Mathehebu* cavorted like so many creatures out of a nightmare. They wore whole pelts of leopards, which covered their heads and bodies, but their actions were far more horrible than their appearance. They were no longer human, these black men; they had become beasts. With perfect mimicry they crouched and sprang, stalked stiff-legged, feinted with steel-clawed hands, for all the world like jungle cats!

At intervals they bent their heads toward the black smoke that rolled from the fire, and when they had breathed it they snarled and caterwauled until the sound of their shrill voices was madness in Steve's ears. And all the while one of them thumped a long drum that hung beneath a grass roof—a hollow log, gruesomely carved, with skins stretched taut at either end.

A gust of wind swept the smoke

toward Steve. He caught a pungent odor, not unlike the smell of wet leaves burning. Suddenly he knew the secret of Hennig's magic and understood why those who had pursued Connie had not feared a gun.

The stuff that burned there was hemp, the fibrous plant that produces hashish, first cousin to the marijuana of America. Its smoke could induce insanity and make insatiable killers of ordinary men!

Like the legendary Old Man of the Mountain, Hennig turned peaceful natives into kill-crazy fiends by doping them with hashish. No wonder Ngoga and his warriors were terrified at the results!

Even Buru was impressed. His eyes rolling whitely, the Masai muttered, "It is mighty magic, *Bwana!*"

Steve watched the bungalow with slitted eyes. Connie would be there, and Hennig with her. Perhaps at this moment she was in his arms, enduring his brutish caresses in the mistaken belief that she was saving Steve's life!

Blood boiled in his veins and a madness akin to that of the catmen heated his brain. He poked the barrel of his rifle through the withes of the stockade.

"Shoot straight, Buru!" he cautioned.

THE rifles cracked in prison. Beside the fire two leopard men leaped high and dropped, kicking. The screams stopped and even the drum-beat faltered. The rifles spoke again and again, and crazed as they were, the *Mathehebu* began to run for the cover of the huts

—all but half a dozen, who were dead or dying.

Drunk with the excitement of battle, Buru flung aside his rifle and leaped over the stockade.

"*Sss-sgheel!*" he shrieked, streaking across the open space, waving *panga* knife and revolver.

A burly figure in the doorway of the bungalow sighted a rifle. With the shot, Buru stumbled and fell at the fire's edge. He lay motionless, while grief and rage seethed within Steve.

The last shot in Steve's rifle sped toward the bungalow. Kurt Hennig lurched and stumbled back out of sight. For a breathless instant Steve saw Connie framed there, waving and crying words that did not reach him. Then she, too, vanished, as if a hand had snatched her back.

The leopard men had rallied after that first shot. They rushed toward the still form of Buru. Steve felt sick, knowing what those steel claws would do to the helpless giant.

He swung himself over the woven fence. When his feet struck the earth again he had both revolvers in his hands. He triggered lead into the oncoming blacks, saw three or four collapse and the others waver. He dashed for the bungalow.

Bullets came to meet him, burning his thigh and his left arm. The blade of a spear missed him by an inch, its feather ornaments flicking his face.

He glimpsed a bearded face and a khaki shoulder in a window, and sent bullets that way. Hennig yelled. Steve sprang upon the veranda, and a cartridge exploded

just ahead of him and a slug smashed into his shoulder with the force of a driven warclub, knocking him flat.

Lying there, fighting to remain conscious, he saw the hulking figure of Hennig above him. Hennig held Connie with his left arm, and her struggles were futile against his strength. Her blouse had been torn almost from her body, baring the palpitant globes of ivory breasts.

There was blood on Hennig's shirt, but his eyes gloated and his right arm aimed a revolver at Steve.

"This is what I intended to do all along!" Hennig chortled. "You know too much about my business, chum, and I don't want you interrupting my honeymoon!"

His finger tightened on the trigger. Steve waited helplessly for the impact of the bullet. He saw Connie's slender body grow tense, and heard the throbbing of the drum. Somehow the rhythm of the drum seemed to have changed.

The barrel of Hennig's revolver was steady as a rock. Smoke blossomed at its muzzle. . . .

AGONY pierced the side of Steve's head, driving hot knives into his brain. Like a spurred horse he flung himself frantically aside and caught up one of his revolvers. An oath crackled from his lips as he fired, aiming hastily, but accurately enough so that the bullet smashed into the thick fingers that gripped the butt of the gun above him.

Hennig howled as his weapon sailed from his fist. He gazed in horror at Steve's gun, released

Connie and leaped from the porch. He ran toward the leopard men who massed around the drum, and Steve aimed and triggered after him again and again before he realized that his weapon was empty.

As it happened, Hennig had created his own doom. The disguised natives saw him—not as the powerful bully who had lorded it over them and made them fearless with magic smoke, but as a coward fleeing from a wounded man.

Filled with blood-lust as they were, their reaction might have been foreseen by one more perceptive than Hennig. They moved ominously toward him. The renegade's roars broke into a glassy falsetto just before the steel claws ripped through his throat and belly, silencing him forever. . . .

New yells filled the air suddenly. Steve listened with incredulous ears to the war-cry of the Uganda warriors—"Hoko-hoko-kirai!" He watched black bodies vault the stockade, saw powerful arms launch volleys of steel-tipped spears.

Some of the leopard men fled into the forest, pursued by fighters who were starved for vengeance, now that their fear was gone. Some remained to face the spears and clubs and knives—and those died very quickly.

When the horror was over and she could speak again, the girl in Steve's embrace gasped, "I pushed Hennig just as he fired. I tried to make him miss you, but I guess I didn't push hard enough!"

He put his hand to his left ear and brought it away bloody. "If you'd pushed harder and he'd

missed," he said grimly, "he'd have got me with the next shot. But when he nicked my ear, it hurt so much I had to do something!"

The drum still boomed, and all at once Steve recognized its message. It was sending out the victory signal of the Ugandas, and had been for some time!

Chief Ngoga had said, "*Make it tell my people, in a language they can understand, that the magic of Hennig is less than the magic of Stevi-Bwana.*"

And there beside the drum was Buru, his left hand beating out the victory paean with the barrel of a revolver! The Masai's right hand swung a red-dripping *panga* in wild circles, and all about him lay the slashed bodies of leopard men, testifying that the blade had not always cut empty air.

Buru's body dripped with crimson, too, from a dozen wounds. The shaft and point of a feathered spear thrust out at either side of one thigh. But the dark eyes were joyous and the thick lips grinned!

"*Stevi-Bwana!*" he shouted. "The smoke-magic is good! I was close to death when it entered into me and gave me the strength of a hundred elephants. After that I could not count the fools I slew! O mighty chief, breathe of the black smoke and be full of strength, as I am!"

But Steve knew a better magic that even now was pouring strength into him and making his wounds seem as nothing. It had to do with Connie's warm body against him, her rounded arm about his waist, and the soft radiance in her eyes.

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F L O W E R

IT WAS dark under the great marang trees that shaded the river-front in old Spanish-built Cotabato. There, secure in the gloom, a darkly clad figure watched another dressed in white, and softly eased a knife into a throwing position in his palm. The man in white, unaware of the other, studied the house of Kuen Lee Wong.

Behind the grove tropical night was folded like a many-layered blanket over the Rio Grande de Mindanao. Before it light streamed from a building in slanting bars of gold. Thrumming music from stringed instruments flowed out to tinkle and echo among the marang trees.

Bill Cathorne, known to his friends as Cup, free-lance trader and adventurer and also a member of the Insular Secret Service, studied the layout of the pleasure resort with apprehension. He knew it to be the dive of Kuen Lee, and when the dark bands of murder, mystery, and intrigue spread over the Southern Islands they generally radiated from the crafty mind of Wong.

Here, for instance, was the disappearance of John Phipps—knifed without a doubt and thrown to the crocodiles. Was it Wong? Suspicion pointed to the wily Celestial, but the secret agent had as

yet insufficient evidence to convict him.

Idly Cathorne pulled a cigarette from his pocket, but the match that he held remained unlighted. A *calesa* pulled to a stop at the edge of a bar of light and a woman alighted.

THE secret agent stiffened, held by a vision of beauty as voluptuous as it was unexpected. From her shimmering aureole of bronze hair his eyes traveled downward, drinking in the curves of a figure accentuated rather than concealed by the dress of lace and silk that she wore. Even from the distance he could see shoulders smooth as the breast of a dove, a bust rising in perfect mounds, and the smooth dress clinging about hips and torso that would have made the dream lines of an artist.

Why was a woman like this coming to the dive of Wong? His eyes continued to rest on the trim, stockingless ankles above her French-heeled shoes.

The woman paid the driver and turned in toward the lighted door. Her heels clicked with precision in the gravel, and the soft, graceful undulations of her hips swelled upward like a faint and pulsing tide to break and stir into rhythmic motion the firm mounds of her breasts. Queer lights danced before the watchers eyes. Just for

What was a white woman doing in this den of sinister yellow rats? It didn't seem right, and when Cup heard that awful scream . . .

OF EVIL..

one moment she was silhouetted in the lighted portal, and the smooth, round pillars of her thighs were like visions of unmatched beauty.

The unlighted cigarette hung limp and forgotten in Cathorne's mouth. The music gathered in

volume, and a rising chatter of approbation came from the dance hall and saloon.

Cathorne drew his eyes away, his lips attempting to curl themselves in disgust. Out across the turgid river he saw the single rid-

By
BOB
LEESON



"So! You have fooled me; led me on!" he snarled.

ing light of his sloop tugging at her anchor in the slow current.

Just another woman who had sunk to the level of a Far East waterfront, eh? What the deuce! He had his own job marked out for him with Wong. He bent to scratch the match against the sole of his shoe.

And as his body doubled, a keen blade zipped singing by his neck to rip a furrow across the marang tree!

Cup Cathorne dropped as if he had been shot, his right hand traveling toward the holster under his left armpit. He had heard the sing of flipped steel before, and he knew its deadly efficacy. Not a movement or sound came now from among the marang trees.

His mind was a medley of thoughts. Why had he been picked for a target? Was his secret trailing of Wong known? Had the disturbing arrival of the white woman been timed to coincide with the attack, or was it chance? What others lay in wait to use silent steel?

CATHORNE came suddenly to his feet and strode toward the pleasure hall. The thick darkness in which he stood was too good a cover for the assailants. He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he wanted to see his opponents. He wanted light, and the brilliant illumination into which he now stepped was like an island in the murderous sea of night.

A large part of the floor had been cleared for dancing. Native *bailerinas*, or dancehall girls, mingled with the guests. At one side, hedged by a rail, were tables. Be-

yond, in a cut-off from the main room, turbaned waiters prepared food and drinks. A surfeiting odor of perfume and warm flesh hung in the air.

Cathorne strode toward a vacant table. A native dance girl with the rich complexion of creamed coffee gave Cup a bold glance as he passed, idly arranging her skirt to give him a glimpse of a warm, brown thigh. A Filipino, meticulous in his white drill suit, seeing her action, scowled at the intruding white man.

Cup sat down and ordered a drink. He saw no indication of Kuen Lee Wong. Neither did he see the glamorous white woman.

In the center of the floor a Filipino couple were doing a dance, a native adaption of the Spanish *lancersos*. Cup watched the agile, almost machinelike movements without interest, his eyes roving over the crowd searchingly.

A tense expectancy, vibrant as an electric thrill, ran through the spectators. The native couple finished their dance and retired none too graciously before a sprinkling of applause. A man dressed in an excellently tailored linen suit advanced from the barroom and took a seat directly at the rail. His black hair was oiled and brushed into a sleek skull-cap, and his smooth Oriental countenance, bafflingly emotionless, showed indifference to the crowd. Wong! Cathorne placed him immediately. Behind that baffling exterior a thousand villainies might be concealed.

But it was not the entrance of Wong that had stirred the crowd. A native maid had swung around

a door at the farther end of the room. Cathorne's throat muscles became suddenly tense. With a flowered shawl pulled tightly about her shoulders, he saw the white girl enter.

She hesitated for a moment, her rare Caucasian beauty like an unfolding of a white orchid amid the duller flowers of a swamp.

"*El Limocon!* The Dove, the Dove!" shouted the crowd.

It was Wong himself who lifted a hinged section of the rail and bowed for her to enter the dancing floor.

CATHORNE'S fingers raced up and down the moisture at the sides of his glass, but his eyes did not leave her figure. If she saw him she did not betray the fact, but with a smile ripe as bursting cherries she rewarded the Oriental for his attention.

The orchestra struck up a lilting half barbaric tune, a steady beat, beat, beat running through it like the monotony of savage drums.

The girl gave one quick bow and tossed aside the shawl. Wong was forward with a step feline in its quickness to catch the great square of embroidered silk before it touched the floor.

The Dove, as the crowd called her, began to dance.

Cup Cathorne bent forward. He was not unused to the bizarre entertainments of the Orient, but he had expected nothing like this in a low waterfront dive in Cotabato. A restless lethargy crept through his muscles as if he had been drugged by powerful wine.

A hush dropped over the audience. Cathorne could see the

mouths grow slack and the eyes shine as these men looked at the dancing Limocon.

A narrow spangled vest was held loosely beneath her arms by shoulder straps. It was the only garment above her waist, and beneath and around it the velvety skin was like ivory warmed by wine. Her smooth abdomen rose flatly from the waist to burst into breasts firm as white acorns beneath the sleazy vest—pushing out like passion flowers groping for the sun. The vest caught in front by a golden cord exposed the seductive valley between the perfect mounds, like a warm, secluded lover's glen.

Cup Cathorne's gaze was held by an attraction powerless to break. A narrow girdle was hooked about her waist and from it dropped the baggy trousers of a harem inmate. The thin material was like a gossamer web, its transparencies clouding but not concealing the contours of her hips and thighs. Like living, pulsating marble, the legs wove in the beat of the dance. Hips and torso moved like a willow in the breeze, pantomiming the ecstasies of love.

Her vibrant, sensuous figure was for the moment a thing of fire that burned into the brain of Cup Cathorne. The lines of dark faces that circled the room seemed to fade away leaving himself and the girl in the world alone.

Cup saw her suddenly pirouette as the tempo of the dance increased. Her whirling body threw out the thin vest, and Cathorne could see the full beauty of her breasts standing out pink and white as the dawn.

THE secret agent felt something slipped into his hand. Only seconds afterwards did he recognize the feel of folded paper. He turned to see the maid who had opened the door slipping back toward the inner portal. At the door she gave him a meaningful look over her shoulder.

He unfolded the piece of paper and holding it beneath the level of the table read:

"Wait in my dressing room for me. I must see you. Important.

The Dove.

The girl was going faster in the pulsations of the dance. The intoxication of movement was arousing her. The carmined lips parted, the breath quickened, a thin cloud dropped over the brightness of her eyes, and her arms moved outward and in as if she were drawing a lover closer and closer to her.

Cathorne snapped himself back to normal attention. Why this note to him? He didn't know the girl. What could the Dove mean by "important?"

He crushed the note into a ball, and as he did so his eyes rested on Kuen Lee Wong. The Oriental was bending forward absorbed in the white dancer's movements. Unrestrained passion now lighted his face. The slant eyes were devouring her, and Cup could see the long, smooth, hairless fingers gripping the rail until the knuckles stood chalky white.

And over the head of the enthralled Chinese, El Limocon gave one flickering drop of the eyelid to Cup Cathorne.

That Western gesture broke the

spell. Cathorne arose and strode through the door where the maid waited.

The dressing room was small, luxuriously furnished like an alcove in a Chinese *yaman* with cushions, silks, a varnished screen. Intimate feminine garments were carelessly thrown about, and from these came an elusive, individual perfume.

Cathorne had a disturbed feeling of doubt. He was getting into an adventure not prescribed in the regulations. But if this girl was something to Wong, she might open a way for trapping the Oriental.

"Well, big boy, what do you think of me as a dancer?"

Cathorne whirled. The girl had entered silently behind him. The crisp familiarity of her American tone broke the first restraint that close sight of her evoked.

"You're the berries, kid, I'll grant you that. But what in the name of seven devils are you doing in a place like this?"

THE girl tossed down the shawl, shrugged her shoulders. She moved past Cathorne to the dressing table and picked up a cigarette. She was barely a foot in front of him, and he could look down upon the ravishing smoothness of her shoulders.

Even without her turning, there came a throaty whisper. "You got to get out of here!"

"I do? You sent me that note. Say, who are—"

She turned towards him. The siren's look was gone from her face, and real concern chiseled the oval features. The brown eyes

Cup's fists lashed out with overwhelming force.



from between their shields of mascara now looked with frank honesty.

"I don't mean that. I mean out of town—out of Cotabato. They'll—they'll kill you if you don't!"

She was so close to him. The warm aura of her presence clouded the blunt warning of her words. The sheer magnetism of her body swept around him. Nervously he snapped a match, and she drew

even closer as she pulled the cigarette to ignition. The slight heaving of her chest brushed the breast tips across his arm.

"They? Who?"

"Wong. He's got your number. I don't know who you are nor what you're here for, but Wong's laying for you."

"So it's Wong, eh? I thought as much. They've already tried to plant a knife in me out there in the

dark. Say, just what do you know about this?"

She turned up a half provoking smile. Her left hand came up to toy with the lapel of his coat. The perfume of her hair so close to his face was a heating incense. "Not much. He's passed out the sign to get you, that's all."

A moment of silence, her eyes wistfully raised to his. Cathorne's arms spread in an interrogative gesture. "Why are you warning me?"

The hand stilled upon the coat lapel, then crept higher. "Don't get me wrong, please. I'm not all bad. I liked you. I peeped out and saw you before I went on to dance. I don't want to see—to see you get knifed!"

Cathorne's half spread arms closed to enfold her. It was a movement without conscious volition. She did not draw away. The touch of her lovely back tingled the nerves of his hand and arm. They drew closer as if pulled by magnetic power. She turned herself slightly sideways, her left arm lifting to drop about his neck. She snuggled languishingly backward in the curve of his arm, chin and lips rising imploringly, a mist of surrender veiling her eyes.

"You're a man, a real man, big boy. That's why I want to help you. I haven't seen many real men lately."

Cathorne's lips dropped to her pouting mouth. Racing points of fire ran through his muscles. Her arms tightened and her lips clung hungrily to his.

"So sweet, so sweet!" The words were muffled softly against his kiss.

"SO! I find you have a visitor." The uninflected voice of Kuen Lee Wong was a splash of icy air through the room.

Cathorne's eyes looked into the almond slits of the Chinese face. Wong's dark pupils were points of fire in the bleak anger of his countenance.

Cup would have dropped the girl, but she clung to him, her arm tightening about his neck. She became a dead weight upon his movements. Slipped feet were sounding in the corridor behind the leering Chinese. Cathorne could sense the knifemen drawing near.

Then the girl's right hand went diving under Cup's coat. She seized the hidden gun and jerked it free. She stepped back, her full lips curling.

"So you fell for it, sap? Like any dumb egg, you go wild for a little petting. Guess we got him where we want him, eh, Poppa Wong?"

Kuen Lee Wong took a mincing step into the room. The expression of his eyes changed to a forbidding gloating. "The wisdom of the sage says that no beast poaches on the prey of the tiger. We have him, as you say, fair. I bow to your superior wisdom, my Celestial Dove."

The girl held the gun at her side, steadily keeping it pointed at Cup Cathorne. The supreme treachery of her action struck the white man like a sickening flood. To see her lined up with the viperous Wong was like an affront to all white womanhood. The fever in Cathorne's blood turned to hate.

Yet even as Wong moved behind her, Cup could see her lips move

without sound. "Behind the screen, behind the screen," the lip movements read, "the window!"

In the corridor doorway a clip-headed Chinese was coldly fingering a knife.

The odds were too many for an unarmed man. Was the girl lying about the window? There was no alternative for Cup but to take a chance. With a sweep of his arm, he toppled the screen and dived for the window. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Dove sway backward into the arms of Wong, the two of them blocking the way of the knifeman.

Clacking Chinese profanity burst out behind Cathorne. Wong was ripping orders. Men glided silently from the resort, scouring the black shadows. Cup lit tumbled and was on his feet running. He reached the nearest alleyway and lost himself from pursuit in the narrow, dark lanes of the river-front region.

HALF an hour later he was safely on board his sloop, *The Moro Girl*. His mind was coldly cursing and again whipping back to the seeming discrepancies of the adventure. What was the girl working for? Was she a lover of Wong? Had she dropped passionately into Cathorne's arms merely to lure and hold him until the trap was sprung? Why had she silently told him the way to escape?

So Wong had his number! Had Cup's discreet inquiries in regard to John Phipps reached the ears of the wily Chinese and started his killers hunting? If so, Wong was the guilty party! Why had Phipps been made to disappear when

Wong's contrived disappearances meant murder? What was at stake? Cathorne could estimate Oriental character, and he rated Wong as no small stakes player.

And now, this girl who called herself The Dove. Was she playing a deep game or merely an adventuress working the port towns for money? Cup could feel again the yielding luxuriousness of her flesh, and his fingers gripped hard at the thought. That kiss had surely been genuine; the heat of it still raged in his blood. Under other circumstances he would have said that he had found his woman; they had been drawn together by the deep undercurrents of nature, by a power irresistible as the tides.

He straightened from the coaming of the hatch where he had been sitting. No, that girl had shot square. He came to that decision by a route intuitive and beyond logic. She had disarmed him for no other reason than to force him to escape. With a gun in his hands he would not have run from the dogs of Wong.

And she knew something—that was the hunch. If he could get to her, talk with her alone, he would find why the Chinese were on his trail.

Cathorne changed into a dark suit and trousers. His white attire had almost been fatal under the marang trees. He gave orders to his Filipino mate, and then was quietly rowed ashore in the sloop's dinghy.

THE Visayan maid who had carried the note to Cup, emitted a scream, but it was stifled by a

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PAINKILLER

By RANDOLPH BARR

THE slant-eyed crew that milled on the sidewalk of Grand Avenue in San Francisco's Chinatown turned in its steps to watch the trim-ankled young woman who hurried along, her thin dress whipping about tapering thighs and hugging sinuous hips. Yellow faces were blank but almond eyes glittered while they estimated the curves of white-fleshed symmetries under the scrap of silk clothing.

Matt Rider, a clean-cut young American in the saffron stream, also watched. He decided that those hips and thighs and silk-sheathed legs, as judged from behind, could belong only to Elaine Fenton, daughter of Selby Fenton, the rich ship owner.

Matt Rider had occasion to know a great deal about Elaine Fenton. Once or twice she had allowed him to build up expectations that in another minute or two he would be knowing even much more about her. But each time she had laughed and called quits just when his veins were on fire.

To make himself sure that it was Elaine who walked ahead of him in a neighborhood where it wasn't so good for a girl as rich and blood-stirring as she be alone, he caught up with her.

"Just to think," he said to the side of her face, "out of two ways to go we should both choose the same one."

She turned her face and his

pulse skipped a beat. She was even more beautiful than last time. Her little breasts, outlined in round mounds that pressed jointly against her thin blouse were even more impudent. But when she spoke, Matt Rider went cold.

"Since you admit that there are two ways to go, why not let me have one of them to myself?"

BEFORE he could come up from that blow, she turned in at the door of an imposing curio shop, showing him her shapely back. He looked after her, beginning to grow hot clear through. She was Selby Fenton's society struck daughter and he was only top-string reporter for the *Globe* which it was rumored her father half owned, but there had been those occasions when she hadn't let that stay between them, or much of anything else.

While he was staring through the shop window, past a display of vases and teakwood Buddhas, she stopped near a counter to give her two hands to a customer, a thin, sleek man with black, oiled hair and a white-toothed grin.

"Now what in the name of Hell," Matt Rider muttered to himself, "does it mean when Elaine Fenton keeps a hand-holding date in Chinatown with a rat like that?"

He gave a shrug and walked

The struggle had been brief, but furious.

Once a girl has breathed the breath of the Dragon, she can speak nothing but the truth—no longer deceive husband or sweetheart . . .



away from the shop. After getting that cold shoulder he guessed he would hunt up a warm one, and there was cute little Si Si at the top of the next flight of stairs that mounted from the pavement.

Si Si was the young and delectable American-born wife of Meng Toh Fu, presiding elder of the Seven Family Tong. As a rule Matt Rider gave a skip to other men's wives. But with Si Si it was different. Meng Toh Fu, estimable as he might be, was old. Si Si was a luscious fruit just beginning to ripen. She had the soft, silken hair of a Danish mother and the waxen skin and sloe-black eyes of a Mongol father. Her blood ran hot and her delicious body of tinted flesh quivered to the slightest touch. She was like a rainbow bubble floating in the puddles of Chinatown vice.

And, at this time of day, Si Si would be alone in her cage, while Meng Toh Fu went about the furtive business of his Tong.

Matt Rider turned up the flight of steps and presently felt the warmth of Si Si's shoulder against his own and the throbbing of her breasts against his chest. He bent to kiss the curve of a shoulder through the silk of Si Si's jacket and when she gave a little scream of delight he silenced her with the pressure of his seeking lips over her soft moist ones. She pointed to a pile of cushions in the corner of her bird-cage room.

"See? I have made ready for us. I knew you would come this day."

He picked her up and carried her to the cushions.

if in the depths of the earth, and was still echoing like lingering music. But the girl who had given Matt Rider the cold shoulder was not in the shop.

The sleek dark man was still there, and a fat Chinese who fingered a small gold locket. The sleek man was saying, "You see, it worked, Li Ping. I was taking her home yesterday when we found the locket at her door where you had it dropped. Looked too cheap to advertise. When I told her this morning that by strange luck I had run onto you and told you of finding the locket, and you'd recognized it as belonging to a friend who would insist upon her returning it herself and receiving a gift of a jewel, I explained that you said it was a trinket highly valued by your friend's young wife. She swallowed it."

The fat Chinese looked deep into the shop. In the shadows a great wooden Buddha occupied almost the whole of a wall. The Chinese regarded the Buddha for a long movement, then said in singsong, "The swallowings of the white lily continue my friend. By now the Honorable Meng Toh Fu presides under the Dragon."

The sleek man snarled. "The old—won't let me see the show."

Said the Chinese stolidly, "The secrets of the Dragon are not for the eyes of the profane."

In a deep underground chamber, hung with rich embroidered silks, far below the raucous noises of Grant Avenue, the girl whom Matt Rider had recognized was stretched on cushions spread on a long teakwood table. Her wrists hung over the sides of the table

IN THE curio shop the note of a golden bell sounded afar off, as

and were bound, but her feet were not fastened. Her silk dress had been torn from her white body and lay in shreds on the floor. She was naked save for stockings, a wisp of lacy silk about her hips, and the strand of transparent brassiere.

A yellow light tinted her flesh down to the snug ring of her garter tops where they girdled her smooth round thighs. Above and below the band of her brassiere the hillocks of her breasts almost escaped.

OVER the prostrate form a huge gilt Dragon reached down its red-fanged head from an enormous coil that wound around the chamber ceiling. Out of the mouth of the Dragon a steady stream of hot vapor poured to caress the hollows and curves of the body on the cushions and fill the room with a pungent perfume.

At the foot of the table, silently watching the girl's frantic struggles against her cruelly bound wrists, the convulsions of her lithe young body, the desperate writhings of slim legs swelling from her garters into flattened columns of creamy flesh, stood a tall elderly Chinese in a long black robe. His face was saturnine and flushed by the heat sent through his blood at the sight of delicate white youth so helplessly displayed to his eyes.

On either side of the table lesser Chinese stood, their hands folded in their black sleeves, their beady eyes searching out every beauty of the "lily white lady" they had stripped and bound.

As the warm vapor from the Dragon's mouth deepened its cloud over the girl's face, her strug-

glings died down; she relaxed and was quiet.

The tall elderly Chinese spoke. "Kwin Tsing, the Dragon Goddess, takes the white one to her bosom. Soon Kwin Tsing will open her lips to my bidding."

Now the girl lay still. Her eyes moved, but they were no longer frightened. Her wrists did not tug at their bonds. Her legs lay straight, yellow tinted from the lacy edge of the scanty silk about her middle to the dark embrace of her garters. Her breasts rose and fell in rhythm, tugging at the filmy lace that held them. The Chinese watched those breasts with hungry eyes and twitching fingers. And all the time more of the pungent vapor from the Dragon's mouth was drawn in by the girl's quivering nostrils.

The tall Chinese spoke again.

"Lily White one, heed the voice of Meng Toh Fu, keeper of the Dragon of Kwin Tsing. Of that which I asked you in the outer chamber and of which you refused to talk, you will talk now. At my commands, Kwin Tsing has given you the Tongue of the Dragon. With the Dragon's Tongue you will talk and tell to Meng Toh Fu all that he desires to know."

And the girl on the cushioned altar under the Dragon began to talk. At first quietly, but not against her will. It seemed that she made no effort to tell Meng Toh Fu all that he had wanted to know when he questioned her in the outer chamber after taking her from the shop into the underground labyrinth that still remains of old Chinatown.

In a little while she became ex-

cited with her flow of talk. The tall Chinese murmured, "Meng Toh Fu would know more."

Her words came rushingly, trying to make him understand that she wanted to please him. When she recited certain figures, his eyes shone and with a gesture he commanded one of the lesser Chinese to copy down those figures.

At last he was through. Another gesture and a movement by a lesser Chinese and the great gilt Dragon closed its mouth. The girl's head dropped back and her eyes closed wearily.

Meng Toh Fu lifted a hand and one of the others held out to him a slender bladed knife with a jade hilt. The tall Chinese walked around the teakwood table and stood for an instant over the girl's bosom. His eyes traveled the full length of the slim white body that glowed under the yellow lamps. On the lifting breasts his gaze lingered, then dropped down to the flattened stomach, followed the curve of swelling hips and traced the taper of satin smooth thighs.

It was as if he glugged himself for the last time with the view of enchantments that soon would be without warmth.

With a sigh for the delights that age must sometime relinquish, Meng Toh Fu at last made a quick sudden movement with the slender knife. The blade entered just below a round breast. Its hilt was green and venomous against the tinted whiteness of skin.

He stood away from the table and turned to the lesser Chinese.

"May Buddha be blessed and watch over you while you dispose

of the body that has no memories of the Dragon's Tongue."

UPSTAIRS, in the cage-like room, little Si Si rested on the cushions in the corner like a bright-plumed bird with quivering wings. Matt Rider bent over her, propped on an elbow while a hand toyed with the smooth sculpture of her throat, and strayed again and again to touch the delicate down of her rose-petal cheeks.

Si Si was breathing fast to the tumult within her delectable body, and determination was deep in Matt Rider's eyes. Si Si was curled close to him, as if to mold her pliant body to his. Her skirt had crawled up to her knees and above where a little space of saffron thigh was revealed. Matt's own blood was racing in chaos and he caught her in a fierce grip at last, crushing her whole body to his, drinking of her burning breath that came now in fevered gasps.

Into her shell-like ear he whispered ardently. His anger at Elaine Fenton for snubbing him was still in his mind, embittering him. Si Si wouldn't snub him, and he might as well be recompensed for that cold shoulder in the street. After all, Si Si was only an old Chink's young wife. Elaine Fenton didn't keep the rules. She made you feel like she'd given you a promise and then laughed in your face. Why keep any rules with Si Si? Here she was, eager, yielding. . . .

But Si Si suddenly slipped out of his arms as smoothly as an eel. She was on her knees, her little hands pushing at his chest.

"It can not be, my beloved. Per-

haps you like the feel of me in your arms, but the body you feel is not strong. Easily it would be broken by the wrath of Meng Toh Fu."

The flame she had aroused in Matt Rider still held him in its fire. "How could that old codger count the kisses you might spare me?" he demanded.

Si Si looked wise. "Do you know of the Dragon of Kwin Tsing, my beloved?"

"All I know about dragons is that feel as if you were one. You sure got me in coils."

"It is very sad for the young wives of old husbands that there is a Dragon of Kwin Tsing," Si Si said solemnly. "I am to be forever denied the delight of being dishonorable to the aged Meng Toh Fu."

"Of all the poppycock—" Matt Rider began but Si Si interrupted.

"I will explain. If it should please Meng Toh Fu to cause me to breathe the breath of the Dragon, of which he is the altar elder, to such every question as he might ask me I would have to speak the truth. It is the power of the Dragon's breath to make much talk and all talk is true talk. Should my honorable husband ask, 'Have you been guilty, my rosebud,' I would say to him, 'I have done a great wrong to your honorable house, O Worthy Husband.'

"Then I would have to tell who shared with me in the doing of that wrong and Meng Toh Fu's vengeance would be swift. Do you understand that I should be so very sad? I am not permitted to do the wrongs young wives should do to their honorably elder husbands."

MATT RIDER had many arguments but Si Si was firm. "It is very sad for me that I must be good," she insisted.

Matt agreed that it was very sad indeed. He was brooding with sympathy for the thwarted Si Si while he descended the dark stairs toward the sunshine in the street. He stopped suddenly and some instinct made him drop to one knee.

Just as he bent, there came a swish through the air and the sharp thud and twang of a knife point sinking into wood. He leaped back with a curse and stared at the step below the one on which he had paused.

A stiletto still quivered in the rotting wood. He looked up the dark stair-well. The knife had not come from the floor above, Si Si's floor. That was plain. Above there was only inky blackness. A blackness from which another knife might come singing at any second. For a flashing second he debated leaping up the stairs, but dismissed the idea. Not so good to be caught in Si Si's corridor under any circumstances. He leaped into the street and recaptured his breath.

Sight of the tall Meng Toh Fu coming down the street toward his home reassured him so far as Si Si was concerned. Her husband was still absent from his house. He could not have known of Matt's visit. The knife he decided could not have been meant for him.

Just the same he idled in the neighborhood where he could watch the windows of Si Si's room. Usually she spent much of

her time at her window watching the Grant Avenue flux. In fact, the first message that had passed between them, from her eyes to his understanding, had come from her at her window to him in the street below. It had brought about their meeting.

With the fall of darkness he was beginning to be alarmed. Si Si had not come to her window, nor had Meng Toh Fu returned to the street. He was raking his mind for pretext to send a messenger to her door when he was relieved to see her emerging from her stair door onto the sidewalk. She was dressed in native pantaloons and black silk jacket. Matt had never seen her in native garb before. The play of her hips and the sweep of her legs enchanted him anew. He watched while she entered a taxi before he could attract her attention.

HE REMEMBERED, now, that he had not 'phoned the *Globe* office for more than an hour. At the nearest booth he put in his call.

"Glad you called, Rider," said the voice at the city desk. "There's a sweet little murder that's right up your alley. Body found a few minutes ago in Golden Gate Park, hidden in a clump of willows. Girl in nothing but pants and bra. She's at the morgue by now."

"On my way, chief," Matt Rider grunted and hung up. After Elaine Fenton and Si Si both being such disappointments, he felt like handling a good murder, and a victim in panties made any murder good. A reader could have so many in-

teresting ideas about what had happened before the crime.

An assistant medical examiner met him in the mortuary antechamber. "Looks promising," the M. E. said. "You couldn't stick a postage stamp in what she had on. Police are looking over her apartment now."

"You've identified her, then? How? Recognize any moles or birth marks or appendicitis scars?"

"Whoever dumped her dumped her purse, after taking everything out but a card with a name and address. The cops took it for granted that was for identification purposes. Her killers were afraid she'd catch her death of cold the way she was."

Matt Rider grunted. "Let's have a look. I'll be satisfied with her face. I've already seen a lot today."

The M. E. led him into the cold clamminess of the morgue. Down a long row of white covered slabs the M. E. stopped and drew back a sheet.

"Good God!" Matt Rider cried. "That's Elaine Fenton!"

"Not the name on the card," said the M. E. He threw the sheet down farther, exposing the white body now without even the wisps it had worn. He looked at a wrist tag. "Says here the name is Phelps—Corliss Phelps. Here's the number on Beck Street."

"Corliss Phelps and Beck Street, hell! It's Selby Fenton's daughter and she lived at Lands' End in a palace. And I saw her, only a few hours ago!"

He 'phoned the *Globe* with his news. That done, he would take

time to reflect upon seeing Elaine that day in Grant Street, entering a Chinese shop to meet there a sleek haired rat. But the city desk was curt. "You're off your nut, Rider. We sent a man to the apartment address found on a card in her purse. She lived there and she was Corliss Phelps, a warm baby our man judges by the size of her wardrobe. Get up there and take over."

Matt's head reeled. There was no doubt but that the girl on the slab was Elaine. What was she doing, keeping a separate apartment and using another name. He put in a call for the Land's End home of the Fenton's just to make sure.

He was wondering what excuse he would give for his call when they told him Elaine wasn't home. "Damned if I will be the one to break the news to the family," he muttered.

He needn't have sought an excuse. A servant said at once that Miss Fenton would take the phone in a minute and she did.

WHEN Matt steadied himself after hearing her voice, he was aware that she was pouring an appeal through the wire. "Please come at once, Matt," she was crying, her voice tense with alarm. "Somebody's got to help me and you are just the one."

"When I saw you a little while ago, you sure needed help," Matt grunted.

"You didn't see me! I haven't been away from home."

"Not even on Grant Avenue?"

"I never go to Chinatown. You ought to know that."

"All right. All right. I'm cuckoo. I'll be out. But I've got a job to do first."

Elaine's voice held him. "Wait, Matt. Tell me. Is the job—has it anything to do with—murder?"

Matt spoke slowly, precisely. "Now let me get this straight. You know something about a murder done today?"

"It's what I want to see you about, Matt. I hope there wasn't one—but if there was—"

"Thinking of a Corliss Phelps, by any chance?" Matt shot into the 'phone. He heard a little moan come over the wire, then Elaine's trembling voice. "Come as quick as you can, Matt."

THE police were still searching for clues in the apartment of Corliss Phelps in Beck Street. It was an expensive apartment. But there were no pictures and no letters—no papers that could begin to put the finger on any of her acquaintances. A police lieutenant pointed to the opened door of a wall safe hidden behind a movable bathroom cabinet where no one would think of looking for it.

"The murderer came here after dumping her," the lieutenant said, "and rifled her safe. Must have known the combination and where to find it. And knew just what he was after, because he didn't disturb anything else. Plenty of ways for him to get into and out of this building without being seen, and he didn't leave any prints. Looks like a dead end."

Matt took a taxi out to Land's End. Elaine Fenton received him on the grounds of the estate, in a

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The Crawling

SWAYING from side to side with insidious grace, the mottled-gray head of a huge python slid along the thick branch of a *baobab* tree, coiled its sleek, scaled body about the smooth trunk and dropped silently to the soft, matted floor of the jungle. Its beady, lidless eyes gleamed like two onyx chips in the flat wedge of its skull. Viscous saliva dripped from the pink flaps fringing its cavernous jaws. Like some great felled oak, suddenly given motion, it moved across the jungle floor, hissing through pools of stagnant rain water, and piercing the labyrinth of twisted vines with slimy dexterity.

It paused and raised its head as it neared a clearing in the tropical denseness. Thin pencils of sunlight filtered through the towering sago-palms and danced on the giant corkscrew of its black and gray body. The reptile tensed and quivered. A woman's voice, raised in a monotonous chant, came from the interior of a crudely thatched hut, set in the center of the clearing. Clustered about it were other smaller huts, primitive habitations consisting of four rough-hewn posts covered over with dry, knotted palm leaves.

With almost human fidelity, the python's head dipped and swayed to the rhythms of the song. When it ceased suddenly, leaving a faint

echo to melt into the jungle, the snake crawled across the clearing and into the door of the central hut. Coiled, ring on ring, on the dirt floor, it watched the smiling approach of the copper-hued woman who had been singing, with fascinated intentness.

Moolah, the Abyssinian, leaned over and offered her round, ecru arm for the python's head. Its white underjaw laved the smooth surface, sliding up until it rested in the deep hollow between the woman's breasts, its dark, sparkling eyes vying with the flashing orbs of the woman. The reptile's muscular coils shifted from the floor to Moolah's full-fleshed thighs and lyred hips, twining about her with exotic symbolism.

Footfalls sounded outside the hut, but the huge, sweat-soaked black who was about to enter, paused at the threshold, the alabaster whites of his eyes rolling in a mute frenzy of fear. He dropped to his knees as the python's head shot out venomously, only to spring back as Moolah tapped its skull with her fingertips. A smile curled the sensual fullness of her red lips. It was cruel amusement to Moolah to see the *Wamasai* savages cringe before the serpent. Cunningly, she realized it was her one superstitious hold over these cannibals of the jungle.

Diamond loot and death—a beautiful witch of strange powers—a demon of evil and terror. Strange things happen that the jungle will never tell!

Death •

By RALPH
CARLE



"Are you sure
you want to go
farther?" he
asked.

"Bring food for the Devil God, Muwambi," she ordered curtly. "In some of the *magalia* there are still young. Bring two of them; fat ones."

The black retreated slowly, his bone-pierced nostrils dragging along the ground. In a moment he had returned, a naked infant under each arm. The python's eyes glittered and he made an effort to disentwine himself from about Moolah's body, but she held his head firmly, the forefinger and thumb of one hand pressing hard behind his jaws.

Muwambi dropped the infants to the floor. Saliva poured from the reptile's mouth as he watched their coal-black legs and arms make motion. A tremor shot through his entire length, causing Moowah's body to shiver and her breasts to swing voluptuously.

"Go, Muwambi!" she ordered, releasing the python. In a flash, one of the black infants' bullet-shaped heads disappeared into the wet maw of the serpent's mouth, the tiny legs protruding grotesquely from between pink-flapped jaws. There was a sucking noise and the python's neck distended as the little body slipped by its throat and began working its way down. Again the flat head shot out and the second infant slid across the floor to form another indicative bulge in the huge snake's torpid body. Blood dripped from the creature's jaws, mixing with the rapid flow of thick digestive juice and forming mounds of pink froth on the dirt floor. It lay quiet now, the under-surface of its head resting on the ground.

Moowah, silent witness to the python's greed, came over to it, kneeled down and stroked its back. Her breasts seemed to swell as her fingers ran over the slippery scales.

TARKOFF, the wizened, Johannesburg diamond dealer, suspicious as always of callers who came to the barred door of his musty shop after sundown, peered through the stout iron grating for a long time before admitting Carl Hoffman.

Once he was inside, Hoffman brought his massive hand hard down on the Russian Jew's shoulder.

"Didn't know me, eh, did you?" he boomed, leering stupidly behind a two weeks' growth of black, unkempt whiskers. "Thought I came to rob you of your damned precious chips, eh?" Stale brown tobacco juice was caked at the hard corners of Hoffman's mouth. He was dressed in the sailcloth pants and blue denim shirt of the Kimberley diggers.

Tarkoff murmured a filthy idiomatic curse under his breath. He never had liked Hoffman even when he brought him stolen gems from the diamond-fields and sold them to him for a tenth of their value. He was a coarse, ignorant pig; loud and blustering. Once, Tarkoff had seen him strike down a Nubian woman because she had not stepped into the garbage-clogged gutter when he came along. True, the blacks of Johannesburg were stinking, sweating animals, but so was Hoffman.

Throwing the bolt into place, the

diamond dealer shuffled into the back room, closed the door and drew the rattan blind over the window.

"Well, what is it, Hoffman?" he queried.

The German ran the back of one hairy paw over his mouth. His pea-green eyes shimmered in the semi-darkness.

"Plenty this time, Tarkoff," he muttered. "This time I gave the dirty capitalistic swine a good, fat trimming. No chips this time, Tarkoff. No one karat yellow stones, either. I gave it to them good and right. For five years they sweated me in their damned hell holes but I saw my chance and I took it." He grinned appreciatively. "By the time they wake up I'll be sailing through the Indian Ocean and it'll be good riddance to bad rubbish!"

The diamond dealer fingered the lean, cadaverous hollows of his cheeks. He was accustomed to Hoffman's bluff and bluster. Like as not he had a few uncut gems—one, two, three karats at the most—and probably poor ones at that. Lately, they had been pretty careful at the mines. A nigger had even swallowed an uncut stone, he had heard, but that too was discovered.

"Well, come, come, what is it, Hoffman?" he urged. "I have dinner to get to, you know."

"Dinner be damned!" Hoffman bellowed. "You'll give a million dinners when you lay eyes on what I've got, Tarkoff. You won't believe what you see, I tell you!" His right hand slid into his shirt and came out with a chamois bag.

Pulling the draw-string, he turned the bag upside down with a triumphant smile. Like a magic cascade of iridescent stars, the mouth of the bag spewed forth a cataract of brilliant, blue-white diamonds, one as large as a walnut, the others like multi-faceted globs of transparent dew.

The diamond dealer gasped in amazement. His thin fingers slid out and curled themselves about the largest of the gems. It was a thing of red, green and white fire in the palm of his trembling hand.

"The—the *Kohler Diamond!*" he gasped.

Hoffman leaned across the table. "Yes, the *Kohler Diamond!*" he echoed. "Fifty-one karats and every speck of it perfect! Ha! That's a haul, isn't it?"

TARKOFF'S eyes did not leave the gem. It was the first time he had ever seen a diamond so big, but he knew of its discovery just a week before. The Nubian who had dug it from the soil had been given an extra day's pay. Fifty-one karats! Hoffman was right. It was as perfect and pure as it could be. Still uncut, it shot off a rainbow of living colors.

"Where did you get it, Hoffman?" Tarkoff whispered huskily.

The German's eyes narrowed. "That's none of your damned business, Tarkoff. I got it and here it is." He ran his gnarled fingers over the smaller stones. "And thirty-eight karats besides. What's it all worth?"

The dealer was reluctant to place the big stone on the table, but he

did so, his finger tips lingering to touch its brilliance.

"I couldn't touch the stuff, Hoffman," he replied, his voice a nervous tremolo. "It's too big for me. They'll be after that *Kohler Diamond* like vultures on a desert corpse." He shook his head. "No, I couldn't touch it."

Hoffman sneered deprecatingly. "No guts, eh? I had guts enough to make the haul but you get cold feet about taking it off my hands, eh?" He pushed the glittering pile of gems towards Tarkoff. "It's all yours for two thousand pounds! Eighty-four karats for two thousand pounds! God, man, even if you cut the big one up, it'll net you six thousand pounds all told. How about it, Tarkoff? I want to get away in a hurry! In fact, I've got to!" His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "You see, Tarkoff, I had to kill a man to get this haul! Maybe they found out already! There's a freighter to Cairo pulling out of Lourenco tonight. I can make it if you come across."

The dealer trembled and licked his dry lips. "No, Hoffman, I can't take a chance. They'll search every diamond shop in the city. I can't do it, I tell you."

Hoffman's yellow teeth gnawed at his under-lip. "Then what about some of the smaller stones? I need money to get me to Cairo." He separated five gems from the pile. "Here, that's about ten karats. You can have 'em for a hundred pounds, but make it quick!"

Tarkoff shook his head. "No, I can't touch any of this lot, Hoffman. It's all the same lot and they can trace them. The price is good

enough, but I can't take a chance." He cringed as the burly German snarled viciously. "You know I'd take them quicker than anything, Hoffman," he whined, "if—if I thought it wouldn't mean trouble." His sharp eyes darted from Hoffman's face to the heap of diamonds. "You know I took them from you before without question. But this—this is different. They're too hot, Hoffman. If you could hide away some place until the thing blows over. Then maybe—"

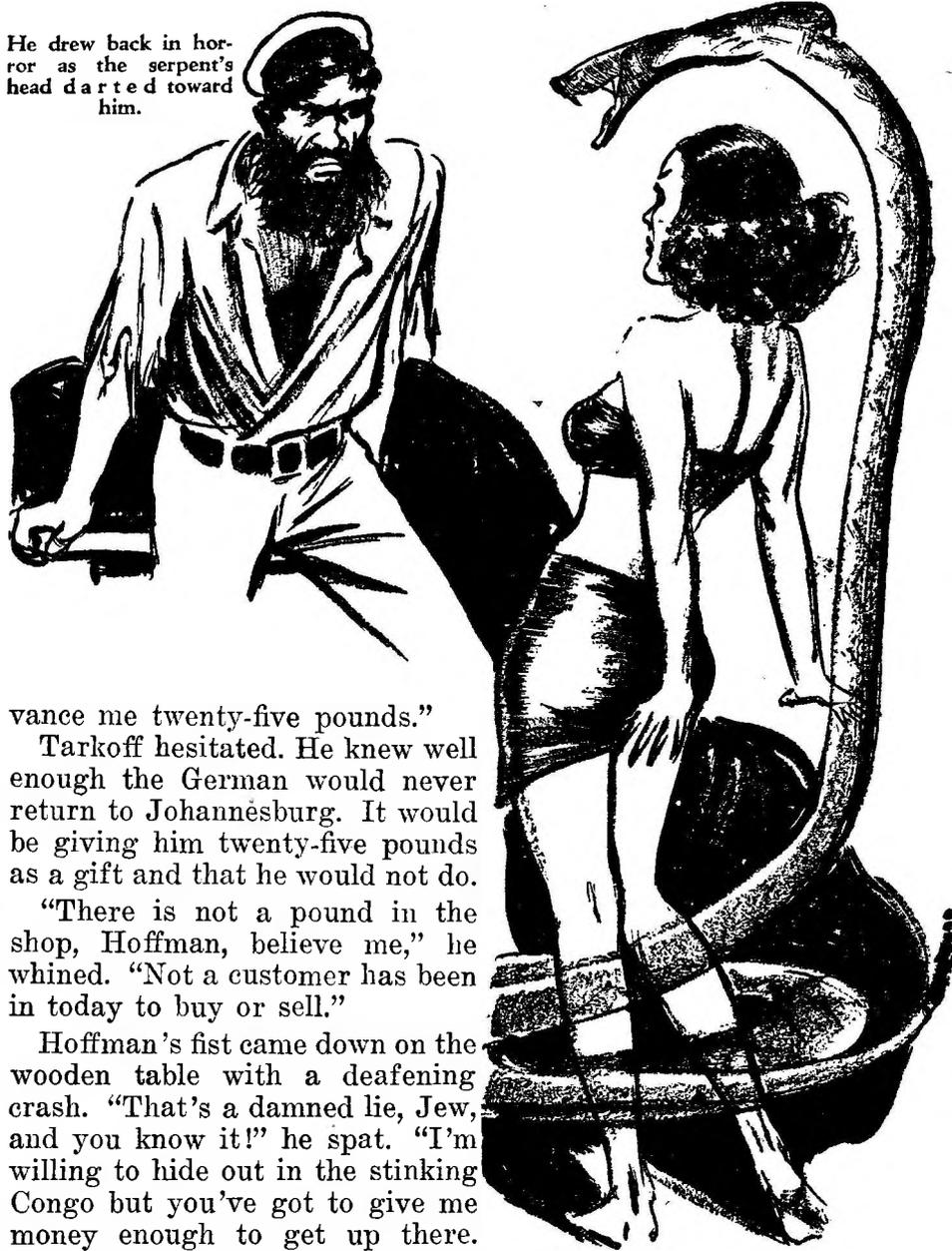
"Where?" Hoffman spat "Where could I hide out in this damned country? Sure, in the desert and starve to death!"

Tarkoff rubbed his gaunt chin. "I've got a place for you to hide out, Hoffman. When I had my place at Sakota in Abyssinia, there was a woman—Moolah—I knew. She was a fakir and she worked in the bazaars, charming snakes. A month ago a trader from the Congo came in and he told me there was such a woman—Moolah, by name—at the head of a *Wamasai* tribe in the Sankuru Jungle. He described her to me and it is the same woman. You go to her and tell her that Tarkoff has sent you. She will give you protection, because I am told the savages think she is a devil god. Stay there a year or more and then when the trail is cold, we can do something."

HOFFMAN rose and swept the diamonds into the chamois bag. He drew the drawstring tight, knotted it and slipped the bag back inside his shirt thoughtfully.

"I'll need money anyway," he grumbled. "You'll have to ad-

He drew back in horror as the serpent's head darted toward him.



vance me twenty-five pounds."

Tarkoff hesitated. He knew well enough the German would never return to Johannesburg. It would be giving him twenty-five pounds as a gift and that he would not do.

"There is not a pound in the shop, Hoffman, believe me," he whined. "Not a customer has been in today to buy or sell."

Hoffman's fist came down on the wooden table with a deafening crash. "That's a damned lie, Jew, and you know it!" he spat. "I'm willing to hide out in the stinking Congo but you've got to give me money enough to get up there. It's a good two thousand miles and I'll have to circle through the Angola Mountains which makes it more. I need more than twenty-five pounds. I need fifty!"

"I swear to you, Hoffman," Tarkoff protested, "I don't have it."

Hoffman's ape arms shot out and his fingers closed about the diamond dealer's throat. He shook the frail Jew like a cat shakes a mouse.

"You're a yellow-bellied liar!"

he screamed. "Get that money for me, or—" He held Tarkoff with one hand and reached back to the hip pocket of his trousers with the other. Seizing the opportunity, Tarkoff wriggled loose and dashed for the door. But Hoffman was on top of him like a raging lion before he could swing it open, gripping the long barrel of a heavy German revolver in his right hand.

Tarkoff fought with the fury of a beast at bay, tearing at Hoffman's face with taloned fingers and swinging at him with his feet. Once, his knee grazed a sensitive spot and Hoffman bellowed with the enraged fury of a gored bull. The revolver flashed through the air, butt first, and crashed down on the diamond dealer's head. Without a sound he slid to the floor, blood pouring from an ear-to-ear crack in his skull.

Without waiting to see whether Tarkoff was dead or alive, Hoffman ransacked the shop, finally cracking open a wooden closet to find a steel cash box. Three blows from the butt of the revolver and the box was split. Stacks of five pound notes spilled out. Gathering them up, Hoffman jammed them into his shirt. A moment later he slipped the front door bolt and vanished into the Johannesburg night.

It was an hour before a native policeman, trying the doors of the diamond shops, found Tarkoff slumped in his back office, babbling in the final agony of death. The officer leaned close to his ear.

"Who do it, *Effendi*?" he questioned.

Blood seeped from between the

Jew's pale lips. "Kohler . . . Hoffman . . . Sankuru Jungle. . ." he mumbled. The black leaned closer. Tarkoff coughed and a blob of red spattered on the floor. "Devil God!" . . . he gasped as his split head lolled in death.

INSPECTOR-GENERAL FOSDICK of the British Sudan Patrol glared malevolently at the official communication he held in his hand. His long, gray mustaches danced fitfully on his upper lip.

"Why in God's name those blighters down there can't attend to their own reeking messes is a mystery to me. My God and baked truffles! I'm sick of playing nursemaid to the damned South African office!"

Captain Roy Winston, second in command of the Sudan territory, smiled. "Hold on, Inspector," he said, "or all of Khartum will hear you."

Fosdick's cheeks puffed up. "Damn it, man, I jolly well wish they'd hear me up to Buckingham Palace and Ten Downing Street! Ainslee, the blithering fool, thinks it's up to us to handle this case." He pounded on the desk vehemently. "You'll have to take it, Winston, old man. The blighter's name is Hoffman—Carl Hoffman—and he skipped with ten thousand pounds worth of diamonds and laid out two men in the act." He tossed the communication over to Winston. "Here, damn it, read the blarsted thing yourself!"

Roy Winston permitted the paper to flutter to the desk. His jaw set hard. "I'm being married tomorrow, Inspector," he said

coldly. "You seem to forget that."

Fosdick colored. "Blimey, no, I haven't forgotten it, old man, but duty's duty and blarst it, *someone* has to go! I'm willing to shut my eyes to a little bit and let you take Joan along, but hang it all, man, you've just got to make this blarsted trip! Damn it, I'll not stand for any more of this shifting responsibility business from Ainslee, but the Foreign Office must have notification of this communication by now and we can't let 'em down. Take Willoughby and Fitzroy with you. You can pick native guides up at Stanley Falls. The bloomin' Hoffman blighter, if he's down there, will probably give himself up at the first sniff of gunpowder." He came around the desk and twined a comradely arm about his assistant's shoulders. "It'll be sort of a honeymoon trip for you and Joan, eh wot?"

Roy Winston's lips narrowed. "Yes, sort of," he muttered.

"**D**O YOU think it's absolutely wise to take Joan into the Congo, Roy?" Major Barrett, Joan's father, queried that night. "That heathenish country is no place for a woman, is it?"

Joan Barrett, her bright blue eyes alive with excitement, laughed musically.

"I'm not just an ordinary woman, Dad. I've spent a fortnight in and about your dirty salt mines and if they're not worse than the Congo, I don't know what is!"

"I'm taking two men with me, Sir," Roy added. "Sergeant Willoughby and Private Fitzroy.

There won't be any discomfort, I can assure you, sir."

Major Barrett shrugged his capable shoulders. "So be it," he replied. "I can see you're quite different from you mother, Joan. A tram ride through Piccadilly was harrowing to her." He paused at the foot of the stairs preparatory to going up for the night. "But, mind you, young man, be on time for the ceremony tomorrow because it cost me a mint of money to get a civilized clergyman down from Cairo. Two o'clock, promptly!"

Alone, Roy led Joan to the large overstuffed couch. She cradled the blonde softness of her head on his shoulder and cuddled close as he slipped one arm about the hourglass slimness of her waist.

Roy's lips brushed her hair, drinking in the subtle perfume of it. It was like spun silk, delicately scented.

"Are you sure you want to go, Joan?" he whispered.

Her eyes met his with the brightness of winter stars. "Of course I do, darling. I think it will be divinely thrilling. I'll probably be the first woman to honeymoon in the Congo!" She laughed with the melodic resonance of tiny silver bells, twisting her body so that the fullness of her bosom pressed hard against his chest. "It doesn't matter where we go or where we are," she murmured. "I love you!"

The young British officer's lips swooped down to cover the poppybud dampness of Joan's mouth.

"*Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . this will be all mine . . . forever,*" he was thinking.

(Continued on page 110)

ACRE of BLOOD

By JOHN PHILLIPS

THE jitney from Twin Rivers had three passengers that afternoon. One was Mrs. Larrabee, the second was Alex King, a traveling man from Duluth, and the third was a tall, light-haired stranger who didn't open his mouth from the time the jitney left Twin River until it pulled up in front of the Seneca Hotel in Mooseville.

"Last stop," Matty Owen, the jitney driver, sang out.

The stranger waited until Mrs. Larrabee and Alex King left the rickety Ford bus. Then he unlimbered himself, reached for the banged-up yellow satchel on the rack, walked up to front. He was a big man—better than six feet—with powerful shoulders that sloped into muscular upper arms.

"How long do I wait for the bus to Fort Nelson? Was that two hours you said?"

Matty nodded. "'Bout that."

He hitched up his dark brown corduroy trousers. "Where do I get a drink in town?"

"Most any place. Chet Davis serves up good liquor in the hotel or there's the *Silver Dollar* down the street. It's cheaper."

"Thanks." He stepped out of the jitney, got up on the sidewalk. Matty watched him. He looked

into the hotel, peered down at his dusty shoes. Then he swung along the street toward the *Silver Dollar*.

It was too early in the day for the Silver Dollar. Along about seven when the hunkies came in from the lumber camps, things would begin to hum. Now the mechanical piano was quiet and most of the chairs were up on the tables. The tow-headed stranger sauntered up to the bar, set his bag down.

GORILLA PETE grunted as he got up from the chair behind the bar. An ex-pug who had come up to the lumber camps to pick up a little spare change in the weekly fights, he had landed behind the Silver Dollar bar, but not before his face was bashed until it looked like a smear. He eyed the stranger out of squinting pig eyes.

"Wot'll it be?"

"Rye."

"Ten cents or two bits?"

A smile played about the stranger's lips. "What's the difference?"

"Plenty. The two bits rye is bonded stuff."

"I'll take it."

Gorilla Pete poured out a drink. The stranger downed it. His hand

It was safer to leave town, with more than one man ready to spill his blood. But the one good reason for his staying to fight it out was a girl. He couldn't know that his stubbornness would risk her life as well as his own



Whitey ducked the slashing blade and came up with his fist.

Sokal's

went into his pocket, came out with some silver. He dropped a dime on the counter.

"You asked for the two bit rye," Gorilla Pete said. He leaned over the bar, shoulders hunched.

"I asked for it, all right, but I didn't get it."

Gorilla Pete's cauliflower ears twitched. "Don't pull none of that stuff on me, buddy! Pony up fifteen cents or I'll—"

Again the smile—just a hint of it. "Or you'll what?"

Gorilla Pete didn't answer. He kicked the chair out of his way, started around the bar. His fists were clenched when he came out into the open. His long arms swung menacingly like those of the animal whose name he bore.

"Get that dough up," he warned.

The stranger made no move. He leaned against the bar, completely relaxed. Only the pupils of his gray eyes displayed emotion. They were steel hard.

"I don't pay for what I don't get," he said quietly.

Gorilla Pete lunged. All the weight of his thick, muscle-bound body was behind the slugging fist. The punch, if it had landed, would have felled a horse. But it didn't land. The stranger side-stepped gracefully, clipped Gorilla Pete on the side of the head as he went by. It was just a short blow but it knocked the ex-pug against the bar, stunned him momentarily.

"Better lay off, mister," the stranger said. He held up both fists. "These are rat poison."

Gorilla Pete came up from a crouch, growling. He fainted, crossed with his left, shot his right to the stranger's jaw. It wasn't

there when the fist arrived. Instead, he caught a pile-driver punch, on his own glass chin, a punch that smashed his lip up against his teeth, drew blood.

It was enough for Gorilla Pete. He dropped to his knees, glassy-eyed. Nobody had ever hit him that hard. He could feel it in his toes.

The stranger rubbed his knuckles into his palm. "Try playing on the level, mister," he said. "It's good medicine." He reached for his bag, shot erect as a piercing scream sounded from the floor above the saloon. The ceiling shook as though a body had fallen. Bits of plaster dropped to the bar. Again the scream knifed out, shrill and high-pitched.

The stranger spun around, headed for an open door at the rear of the saloon. He took the narrow steps three at a time, reached a dim-lit hall.

"Stop!" a girl's voice shrieked. "Stop!"

THE stranger picked one of the doors running along the hall, kicked it open. A half-naked girl was down on the floor. Blood from a slashed lip had splattered over her face. A livid streak crossed one of her thighs. Standing over her, a black, oiled pack strap swinging from his upraised hand, was Big Mike, owner of the Silver Dollar. He ripped out a vile curse, lashed the strap across the girl's shrinking flesh.

A split second later the stranger jerked him back off his feet, smashed him against the wall. Big Mike was stunned. He gaped at the intruder.

"That alla you got to do, mister?" the stranger queried.

The sound of his voice brought Big Mike out of his stupor. His dark face twisted in a murderous snarl. He lashed out with the oil-soaked belt. The stranger ducked but the heavy leather caught him across one shoulder, drove hot daggers of pain through his body. He dropped to one knee, clutched his left arm, almost paralyzed from the strap blow.

Big Mike roared, came at him like a bull. He didn't see the fist thunderbolting up, Big Mike didn't. But he felt it, buried to the wrist in his stomach. He doubled up, howling, fell to the floor.

The stranger stood erect, looked at the girl. She was cowering in a corner, the torn strip of a silk nightgown across her; her whole body was trembling. Matted blonde hair fell across her eyes.

He leaned over, picked up the strap Big Mike had dropped. The saloon owner was writhing on the floor, both hands pressed against his solar plexus, groaning in pain.

"You'd better go," the girl gasped. "He'll kill you."

The stranger smiled, hooked his fingers in the back of Big Mike's shirt, dragged him to the door, along the hall, down the steps, through the saloon and out into the dusty road.

He raised the strap, whipped it across Big Mike's flanks. The saloon keeper howled. Again and again the strap fell. Big Mike's screaming drew people from the hotel, from the stores along the street. They formed a ring about the stranger and his yowling victim. Finally the punishment was

at an end. Big Mike was lying face down in the dust. His shirt had been torn to shreds. There was blood on his sweaty back.

THE stranger walked back to the Silver Dollar, came out carrying his bag. In the meantime a gray touring car had driven up to the curb. There was a girl behind the wheel and a middle-aged man seated beside her. He stepped out, tapped the stranger's shoulder.

"My name is Bradley Corbin, sir. Do you know what you've done?"

"Sure. Just gave a bully a taste of his own leather."

"Yes, I saw that, but do you know who that man is?" He pointed to the knot of people clustered about Big Mike.

"No, and I don't care."

Bradley Corbin gulped. "You'd better let me get you out of town. That man you whipped is dangerous. He's a killer."

"Women beaters don't make good killers."

"But—but he'll shoot you in the back! I have my car here. Won't you let me drive you to where you're going?"

The stranger smiled. "Thanks, but it's a long way. I'm heading for Hudson Bay—Fort Nelson."

"Well, the bus doesn't leave until five. I'd like to have a chat with you, Mr.—er—"

"Whitey Clarke."

"Won't you come to the house, Mr. Clarke? We can have a cool drink and chat."

Whitey glanced toward the car. The girl behind the wheel smiled at him. It was an infectious smile.

The corners of her strawberry mouth turned up and her eyes sparkled. She pushed a strand of brown hair away from her cheek.

"All right," Whitey said.

The bus to Fort Nelson left at five o'clock but Whitey Clarke wasn't on it. He was sitting on the porch of the Corbin house sipping a cool gin fizz and listening to the mill owner and stealing glances at Viola Corbin, his daughter.

There's nothing on the Bay, Clarke," Corbin said. "There won't be anything until the Fall and even then jobs are scarce. Why don't you stay on? We need a man like you in Mooseville."

Whitey looked at Viola Corbin. He could see the surge of prominent breasts under the bodice of her seersucker dress. His eyes moved up the white column of her throat.

"Dorsey Brown needs a deputy," the mill owner said. "He's the sheriff. I'll get him down here this evening. No doubt he's heard about how you handled Big Mike. He'll be glad to take you on. As for living quarters, why, I've got a bungalow down the road. We might fix it up temporarily anyway."

WHITEY hesitated. He wasn't thinking of Big Mike or his crew of hunkies and murderous Canucks. During the last three years he had been in some pretty tight places and always managed to squeeze out. He was thinking of the girl seated opposite him, her slim, white hands, resting in her lap, her firm young breasts swelling with each breath she took. He'd seen a lot of women from the

Mexican border on up. But none of them had ever made his pulses pound the way just looking at Viola Corbin did. She was different from the rest. Her eyes were clean and bright.

"I don't often pitch camp in one place for long," he said. "I kind of need to keep moving."

"You'll be kept moving around here, all right. Big Mike won't forget that public whipping!" Bradley Corbin shrugged. "Of course, it might be wiser for you to get out of town as fast as you can."

Whitey set his glass down. The muscles of his jaw tightened. "I'll stay on," he said.

"I knew you would! I'll call the sheriff and have him come right over."

There was a long minute of silence after the mill owner stepped into the house. Whitey fingered the frosted fizz glass, shuffled his feet awkwardly.

Viola broke the silence. "I'm glad you're staying," she said.

Whitey looked up. His eyes met hers. He felt warm all over and the tips of his fingers tingled. "Thanks," he mumbled.

The sheriff looked Whitey over as he came up on the porch. He was a tall, gangling individual with sharp gray eyes under shaggy brows.

"Heard about your fracas in town today," he said. "You ain't the most popular person around these parts."

"Mr. Clarke has consented to act as your deputy, Dorsey," Bradley Corbin said.

"Who's payin' his salary?"

"I am."

The sheriff pushed his hat back. "They'll be gunnin' for you, Clarke."

Whitey smiled. "Rats don't come gunning. They come creeping."

Dorsey Brown shrugged. "Just so you know what you're headin' into I guess it's all right. I'll see

that you get a badge and a gun."

When his Ford pulled away from the front of the house, Whitey turned to Bradley Corbin. "How come you're footing the bill, Mr. Corbin?"

A gun jammed into his ribs. A sneering voice said: "So you were a sucker for a woman, huh?"



"It will be worth every penny, Whitey. You see, Dorsey Brown has been sheriff for two years. During that time Mooseville has gone to the dogs. A decent woman isn't safe on the streets after dark. Big Mike and his crew of murderers practically own the town. Not a week goes by that something doesn't happen. Either a logger is found dead in the river or a girl is assaulted. Dorsey means well enough but he can't keep them under his thumb. He's too easy."

Whitey spent the night at the Corbin house. The following day the bungalow up the road was put in order. He moved in with his worn satchel and Ma Crimmer, a cook and housekeeper Mr. Corbin got for him. Late in the afternoon Viola rode over to see how things were. Whitey was down on his knees mopping and scrubbing the kitchen floor. He blushed under his tan, wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers.

Viola's eyes twinkled. "Is that the customary position for a deputy sheriff to assume?"

Whitey avoided her eyes. "The lady your dad sent over don't look none too strong," he said. "Thought I'd kind of give her a hand."

She dropped her gloved fingers on Whitey's arm. "You're precious," she whispered. Whitey's blood pounded in his veins.

HE WORRIED about Viola Corbin for a few days—and nights. It wouldn't do to get tangled up with her. She wasn't the kind of woman he was used to.

That blonde girl at the *Silver Dollar* was more his speed.

On the morning of his fourth day in Mooseville, Whitey walked into the sheriff's office to find Big Mike there. Dorsey Brown introduced them. Mike shook Whitey's hand vigorously.

"Thought I'd step in an' kind of smooth things over, Clarke. No sense havin' hard feelings, is there?"

Whitey didn't like the smirk on the saloon keeper's face. It was like a Mardi Gras mask. "Not unless you make them," he replied.

Dorsey Brown rose from his desk. "I got an attachment to serve over to Mercersburg, Clarke. Be back in an hour."

Big Mike sat up on the desk, waited until the sheriff had gone. He fingered the huge yellow diamond in his stickpin.

"You're a nice young feller, Clarke," he said. "Be too bad if somethin' happened to you." He grinned. "Of course, that ain't likely just as long as you mind your own business. I don't hold nothin' against you for that little to-do the other afternoon. Maybe I shouldn't have took the strap to the girl. But, damn it, she was robbin' me. Collectin' money from the loggers an' holdin' out."

Big Mike stuck his hand into his pocket, brought out a greenback folded into a square. He placed it on the desk. It was a hundred dollar bill.

"Buy yourself some drinks, Clarke," he said.

Whitey pointed to the bill. "Pick that up, rat, and get the hell out of here!"

Big Mike spluttered. "Listen here, Clarke—"

"Pick it up!" Whitey warned. His voice was brittle.

The saloon keeper reached for the bill. His face was gray-white. "You'll be sorry for this, Clarke. You can't—"

Whitey nodded to the door. "Get out!" Big Mike went.

IT WAS ten o'clock that night. Whitey was alone in the sheriff's office. He could hear the tinny jangling of the mechanical piano in the *Silver Dollar* across the street. A stoop-shouldered man peered through the office door, stepped inside. He shuffled up to the desk. In an almost unintelligible Canuck jargon he explained that his daughter, Cecile, was in the *Silver Dollar* drinking and carrying on with the men from the logging camps. Twice he had been thrown out when he went in for her. She was only a child and he did not want her in such a place.

Whitey rose. "Wait here," he said. He crossed the road, walked into the *Silver Dollar*. Gorilla Pete, behind the bar, dropped a glass when he saw him, but the crash was lost in all the noise. Two or three couples were dancing in the rear. A dozen unshaven loggers were lined up at the bar. Others drank at the tables. In one corner a bull-necked hunkie was mouthing the blonde girl Whitey had seen in that upstairs room. His big, thick-fingered hands pawed callously over her white skin. His eyes licked greedily at the heavy bosom under the silvered material.

Whitey approached the bar, motioned to Pete. "Where's Big Mike?"

"Upstairs."

"Get him down. I want to see him."

Whitey knew all eyes were on him while he waited. A strange, foreboding silence fell over the saloon. Only the jangling piano broke it. Whitey's hand slid to his hip, moved around to his back pocket. He felt the cold butt of his gun.

Big Mike came out of the door leading to the floor above. The diamond on his hand sparkled as he rubbed the moist palms together.

"What's up, Clarke?"

"You've got a Canuck girl here, haven't you?"

Big Mike grinned. "You can't never tell. Maybe I got five of 'em."

"This one's named Cecile."

"What about her?"

"Send her home."

"An' supposin' she won't go home? Supposin' she likes it here?"

"You heard what I said."

Big Mike shrugged. "Talk to her. What the hell do I care? One dame more or less don't mean nothin' to me. She's upstairs drinkin' with a logger."

Whitey followed him up the stairway. Big Mike opened a door, looked in. "Someone to see you, baby." He nodded to Whitey. "Go ahead, Clarke."

WHITEY entered the room. Seated on the chair was a thick-headed Swede logger. A girl was sitting on his lap. Her dress

had been pushed off her shoulders. Long, black hair fell about her shoulders.

"Your father's waiting for you, kid," Whitey said.

The girl's too-red lips parted. She laughed raucously. "Tell him to go home to his pigs!" The Swede guffawed.

"Swell chance you got, Clarke," Big Mike said.

Whitey motioned to the Swede. "Get out!"

The man shot to his feet pushing the girl aside. He was inches taller than Whitey and he had great, hulking shoulders. "Who say I get out?" he snarled.

"You heard me. Get out!"

Whitey saw the punch coming. He took it on his upraised arm, crossed a right to the Swede's jaw. The blow landed but there wasn't enough behind it to do much damage. The logger tossed it off, came in slashing wildly. Whitey looped one into the Swede's stomach. The man grunted, fell back, sucked air into his lungs. Whitey set himself. He knew the way men fought in this part of the country. The Swede would rush him, try to smash him down under a hail of flying fists.

He figured it right. The Swede lunged like a bull. Whitey's hips slipped to the right. He threw his body behind a fistful of dynamite, felt the impact of his knuckles against hard bone. The Swede spun like a top, went down. He was out cold. Whitey turned to the girl.

"Come on!" he snapped.

"Not so fast, Clarke!" Big Mike muttered.

Whitey wheeled. There was a

big, blue-steel .44 in the saloon keeper's hand. His forefinger worked on the trigger.

"Reach for the ceiling and turn around!" Big Mike's lips curled in a sneer. "So you were dumb enough to fall for a phony steer. Too bad Sven didn't stretch you out and save me the trouble. Get 'em up!"

Whitey raised his arms. "I might have expected this from a rat like you."

"Shut up! Turn around!"

Whitey turned slowly. He was facing the girl. He thought of Viola. There wouldn't be much to worry about now. They had him where they wanted him. He would probably be floating face down in the river by morning.

Big Mike's .44 jammed into his back. His own gun was jerked out of his pocket. Whitey knew he had one chance in a million. He took it. His arms flew back over his head. His locked hands caught Big Mike at the base of the skull. Every last ounce of strength in his muscular body went behind the jerk that catapulted the saloon keeper over his hunched shoulders, sent him crashing headlong into the wall. The gun in Big Mike's hand roared but the bullet went wild.

Whitey leaped on the killer like a cat, smashing his fist into Big Mike's ugly face. He didn't see the girl slide to the floor and retrieve his own gun Big Mike had dropped. All he saw were brilliant flashes of red and green light when the butt conked down on his head. He tried to struggle to his feet but his legs were made of soft putty. The dazzling lights went

out and the darkness was stygian.

EVEN before he cracked his heavy, leaden eyelids Whitey knew he was no longer in the *Silver Dollar* room. He could hear the whine of the wind and the rattle of loose windows. He tried to move, found that his arms and legs were bound. He opened his eyes. Big Mike leered down at him.

"Took a dame to lay you out, didn't it, wise guy?" he sneered.

There were two other men in the room—Gorilla Pete and a slimy, shifty-eyed French Canadian named DuBois. Whitey looked around. He was stretched out on the floor of a logging hut.

"Finish him an' let's get the hell out of here," DuBois muttered.



Big Mike licked his swollen lower lip. It was a memento of Whitey's smashing fist. "Nothin' doin'! He's dyin' slow. String him up!"

Gorilla Pete and DuBois laid heavy hands on Whitey, lifted him from the floor. A rope was passed under his arms, slip-knotted between his shoulder blades, the end tossed over a rough-hewn beam that ran the length of the hut. In a moment Whitey was strung up, his feet dangling six inches from the floor, the rope cutting cruelly into his arm-pits.

Gorilla Pete smacked his shapeless lips. "How do yuh like it, Rat Poison?" The palm of his hand whipped across Whitey's face, spinning him around like a top and leaving the livid marks of four fingers on his cheek.

"Can it, Gorilla!" Big Mike growled. He wanted all the pleasure for himself. The oiled strap he had used to whip the blonde girl uncoiled from his hand like a black snake. But this time he gripped it by the narrow end, letting the brass buckle swing clear.

Whitey knew what was coming. He gritted his teeth, waited for the first blow. There was a warning hiss. Whitey's body arched as the buckle bit into his back, slashing through his shirt and ripping away skin and flesh. Again and again the strap lashed out. Now across his stomach, now his thighs. Each time it fell, Big Mike grunted with the exertion. Blood dripped from the open gashes, spattered to the floor.

Gorilla Pete's pig eyes glowed with fiendish hate as he watched

the ghastly punishment. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"Gimme the strap!" he screamed.

Big Mike offered the blood-stained leather. The ex-pug set himself on bowed legs, sent the strap screaming across Whitey's chest. Only the ropes that bound Whitey saved him from being opened to the ribs by the brass buckle. As it was, the pain tied his nerves into excruciating knots, squeezed sweat out of his pores. And yet, not a sound escaped his tight drawn lips. Gradually the physical agony became its own numbing opiate. He could feel the strap blows, but only dully. His chin dropped to his bloody chest. Soon it would be over. Soon his tortured body would give up fighting off the hell of suffering. Soon . . . soon . . . soon . . .

Faintly, he heard Big Mike's voice "Lay off, Gorilla. He'll be dead by morning."

FEET tramped across the floor. The door swung open on rusty hinges. A cool blast of air chilled the sweat on Whitey's face. The door slammed shut and he was alone—helplessly alone.

"*Dead by morning!*" Big Mike's parting words rang in his ears. He would be dead before morning. Blood was still seeping from the jagged rips in his flesh. His legs were throbbing madly and his upper torso was cold. It was an effort to raise his head and open his eyes. One of Gorilla Pete's insane slashes had caught him across the forehead. Each movement of a face muscle was like a knife stabbing through his brain.

Escape from this demon's death trap was out of the question. Time had no meaning. Outside the hut the wind whistled through the thick spruce. Once Whitey twisted around, looked up to see whether the rope by which he was suspended might be rubbed through on the beam. The braided hemp was too thick. He dropped his chin on his chest, closed his eyes.

The sound of the door opening and a rush of cold air aroused him from the coma into which he had been gradually slipping. Through a gray haze he saw someone fumbling with the rope end that had been tied to a floor plank. He felt it give. The beam above him creaked. His feet touched the floor and he toppled over.

Slim, white fingers wielded the knife that cut his bonds away. White fingers that soon were wet with blood.

"They beat you!" a feminine voice gasped.

The haze cleared. For a moment Whitey couldn't believe his eyes. The girl kneeling beside him was the blonde he had caught Big Mike whipping at the *Silver Dollar!*

"I heard them planning it!" she panted. "Big Mike and DuBois. I didn't see you come into the saloon or I would have warned you." She rushed outside, came back with a bucket of water. "You're hurt bad."

Whitey managed to sit up. The pain of his wounds was nothing now. "You shouldn't have done this," he said. "They'll find out."

She patted cool water on the deep gashes. "You stopped him from beating me."

It was strange how different she looked now. Her lips were still heavily coated with rouge and her eyes were belladonna bright, but some of the cheapness of her was gone.

"You'd better leave town tonight, mister," she said.

Whitey looked down at her. "I'll leave," he said. "But not until those rats are swimming in their own blood!"

It was a long four miles from the logging hut to the wooden bridge over the Winisk River. There, Whitey and the girl parted. Ma Crimmer was asleep when he reached the bungalow. He eased his aching body into bed. There was one thing troubling him. Why, instead of risking her life coming to the logging hut, hadn't the girl notified the sheriff?

SUN streaming into the window awakened him. Every muscle in his body was agonizingly drawn. The wounds inflicted by the strap buckle throbbed painfully. Whitey dressed. As he stepped out of his room, the sheriff's car drew up in a cloud of dust. Viola Corbin jumped out of the front seat, ran toward the bungalow.

Whitey met her at the door. Her face turned pale when she looked at him, saw the gash across his forehead. She flew into his arms, pressed the soft warmth of her body close.

"Whitey! Are you all right?"

The suddenness of the embrace left Whitey speechless. Viola was wearing a light cotton blouse. Her firm breasts were crushed madly

(Continued on page 95)

By **FRANK
DECKER**

• **BOX**

His best friend had disappeared, and in carrying on the search he found that all the glamour and mystery of Old Mexico doesn't belong to the native women. It took an American girl to show him dangerous adventure

HONKY tonk music. Mazdas subdued to a yellow murky glow by swirling smoke. Swarthy Mexican waiters, a dozen girls in evening dress, and a handful of pimps, cutthroats, and riffraff hanging around to give the place an aristocratic tone: that's *El Palacio Real*, a hundred yards south of the Mexican Border.

"Royal Palace, hell!" grumbled Dan Cragston, leaning back against the upholstery of his booth and pouring a hooker of rum. "It's just another knocking shop run by a monkey in purple pants!"

He shot a trenchant glance at the tall, handsome Mexican who lounged in a booth near the end of the bar: Carlos Mendoza, the king of San Luisito dives, resplendent in gold brocaded vest and purple velvet trousers weighted with huge silver buttons the size of *pesos*.

"If I could make that greasy Handsome Harry talk, I'd know what happened to Jim." He spat on the floor, watched Mendoza twist his waxed black moustache and eye the cigarette girl who passed from table to table, then added, "The ——— ——— *puta-ñero!*"

Cragston's face was what his name suggested: craggy, rugged,

and squarish like his broad shoulders. The usual good humored twinkle of his blue eyes and the amiable grin of his broad mouth were in cold storage. Cragston had not come to San Luisito for pleasure. He was looking for some trace of Jim Gregory, an old friend who had disappeared like a puff of smoke. The trail ended in this filthy border town.

Cragston did not *know* that Gregory was dead; but it all pointed that way.

He eyed the girls circulating from table to table, hustling drinks. They knew all about San Luisito, all the undercurrents and gossip.

"These *muchachas* 'll talk. Get 'em drunk enough and treat 'em nice."

His glance shifted like swords in swift play. The cigarette girl was at once eliminated. She was all American, with soft chestnut hair and blue eyes that would be friendly if she were not so reserved. She was built like the girls you begin dreaming about after you've battled jungles and deserts for blistering, weary months. Cragston knew she was selling nothing but cigarettes. She would know nothing about the sinister, inside dirt that circulated in the 'dobe shacks clustered about *El*

OF DEATH



A hail of knives flew around them suddenly. He shouted: "Get out! Run! I'll hold them!"

Palacio Real. He wondered why she was in a dump like San Luisito.

A SLENDER, dark eyed Mexican girl with black hair

aglean with rhinestone combs emerged from an adjoining booth, abandoning the piker who was not buying enough drinks. She had tiny feet, her shapely breasts made her white satin evening gown blossom into alluring curves, and her hips were just right.

"Have to take 'em all on, sooner

or later—might as well start with this one,” said Cragston to himself. He grinned amiably, caught her by the hand and drew her into the booth. “*Con’ est’ ai, chiquita?*”

“*’Sta ’ueno!*” Her lips were too red, but her smile was a string of matched pearls. “You buy me drink?”

He bought her several—out of his own bottle. He wasn’t going to have her drink the diluted swill which the bartenders served the house girls so they ran up higher scores on the suckers. Antonia quickly decided that hustling drinks was stupid.

“Come weeth me, beeg boy,” she murmured. She led the way to the side door, and toward a straggling line of *’dobe* shacks.

Antonia’s house had thick white-washed walls, a hard packed dirt floor, and a few pieces of Grand Rapids furniture. She struck light to a kerosene lamp, dug out a flask of *tequila*, and perched herself on the arm of Cragston’s chair. As she snuggled closer, the overpowering sweetness of *Jasmin du Cachemire* dizzied him more than the rum he had drunk. Antonia ran caressing fingers through his sandy hair, murmured blood inflaming things in his ear—and unobtrusively slipped a slender hand to his inside coat pocket to appraise the thickness of the wad of bills she had noticed when he paid for the last bottle of rum.

Cragston perceived the gesture. In that state of mind, she was a dead loss as far as investigation was concerned. His arm closed about her until she gasped and instinctively abandoned her prob-

ing. As she slid from the arm of the chair to Cragston’s lap, the white satin skirt crept up over her knees, leaving her fine, shapely legs gleaming silkily in the mellow lamplight. Cragston fiercely kissed her, and with one hand crushed a supple waist. She shivered and yielded thirsty red lips.

“That’s more like it,” was Cragston’s thought. “She’ll be okay, if she can get her mind offa bank rolls.”

Antonia finally broke away. She realized that she had been impulsive. Cash was still in her mind.

Cragston had to break her of avaricious notions, or she would not become confidential. Before she could tack back toward the wallet, his arm closed about her. She could not tell him to stop because his kisses choked the words back.

SO Cragston didn’t stop . . . until Antonia was clinging to him like a wet handkerchief on a window pane. Finally he had to catch his breath for a fresh start.

“What do you say, *carissima?*” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh . . . don’t! My lover is terribly jealous—oh, if Miguel came in now—”

Cragston did not know whether that was bona fide, or whether it was a play for bigger payoff. Neither did Cragston care. He crushed her to him passionately, pressing burning kisses on her face, shoulders, throat.

“—he kill me!” she protested. But she liked it.

“You’ll die happy,” countered Cragston, his heart now very much in his work. But he heard a

faint rustling and scratching as of some rodent furtively gnawing. The sound was not alarming, but it startled him. He turned. The back door was slightly ajar. Sky glow outlined a figure huddled on the threshold.

Cragston lunged. The door crashed open. Cragston booted the prowler, stumbled over him, and landed headlong in the sand. A curse—a guttural exclamation—and before Cragston could recover, the stumbling block was on him. A knife gleamed. Cragston swept the armed hand aside. His fist popped home like a pistol shot. He shook his limp opponent aside and scrambled to his knees. Two others closed in.

FOR a moment it was deadly. Cragston felt the sting of cold steel, ducked a hurled knife, side stepped, and ploughed in, his fists driving like sledge hammers. Then it became too close for knives. Grunts, groans, thudding impacts—one man catapulted into the darkness, out cold before he left the ground. The other closed in, seeing a chance for his knife. Cragston whirled, tripped over the first prowler. But before the survivor could drive home, Cragston rolled to his back, jackknifed and kicked him in the stomach.

The deck was clear. Then Cragston realized that Antonia was beside him, amazed and incoherent.

"Get a light!"

She brought the lamp.

"Didn't I told you! Ees Miguel—he ees so jealous."

"So I notice," grinned Cragston, indicating the hooked wire with which Miguel had been trying

to draw his coat from the floor, where he had dropped it. "You two work that nicely, don't you?"

Antonia looked embarrassed.

"I forgot to tell heem you were *muy simpatico*, that you would not be robbed. That peeg. That *ca-brón!*"

She looked as if she meant it. Miguel was stirring and groaning. But what caught Cragston's eye was a silver cigar lighter lying near the doorway. Three initials in black enamel were worked into a cipher in the corner.

His fists clenched, but his tone was casual as he picked it up and asked, "Who's this belong to?"

"Oh, that's Miguel's," said Antonia, relieved at changing the subject.

"Which one of these saddle colored — — —s is Miguel?" he wondered. She pointed him out. "Get some *tequila*."

She left him standing in the moonlight, staring with hard, frosty eyes at the initials, "J.H.G." No doubt about it; that was the cigar lighter he had sent Jim Gregory the last Christmas.

Cragston jerked Miguel to his feet, poured some *tequila* down his throat. Miguel coughed, blinked, and looked foolish.

"You greasy —, where'd you get this cigar lighter?"

Miguel was happy to talk about cigar lighters. He had expected to be torn to pieces by hand.

"I steel heem from the cigarette girl. That Gringo weeth the what you call eet—chestnuts hair."

And then Antonia turned to Miguel. Her voice rose to an ear piercing shriek. "What do you mean, trying to make heem be-

lieve I told you to go through his pockets?"

Cragston wondered at the outburst until he caught the look in Antonia's eyes, once the object of her wrath had slunk out of sight.

"To theenk that that *cabrón* was my lover, w'en I love those cave man. . . ." She sighed, caught his hand.

Cragston, however, was wondering how the cigarette girl had gotten hold of Gregory's cigar lighter. He was eager to follow it up; but he couldn't very well leave Antonia. And the cigarette girl wouldn't evaporate. . . .

ANTONIA'S profane dismissal of Miguel plainly declared that she had taken a new lover. Cragston, however, had made the most of the situation. By dint of cursing Miguel, he had caught Antonia off guard and learned a few things about the cigarette girl.

He knew which was her cabin. He knew that she sold nothing but cigarettes, and that she wouldn't play a-tall with anyone. In short, Antonia described her as a mysterious though utterly inconsequential person called Bernice. . . . He would learn more about Bernice.

El Palacio Real was silent and dark. San Luisito slept, and the desert night was fairly clean.

Cragston tapped at the door of Bernice's *'dobe*.

"Who is it?" wondered a wary, but pleasant feminine voice.

Cragston told her his name and convinced her that his business was on the up and up.

The door opened. Bernice eyed him for a moment, then laid aside

her automatic pistol. Her qualms vanished at first sight of him. Cragston wondered if she was as unapproachable as he had heard.

She still wore the cigarette girl's severely simple black costume, but it could not disguise enchanting curves. Bernice's face was not beautiful, but you began to think it was after looking at her for a few moments.

He produced Jim Gregory's cigar lighter. Bernice's expression changed.

"Where did you get that?" she exclaimed.

"That," countered Cragston, "is what I'm asking you: who did you get this trinket from?"

Her eyes widened as she saw his face harden into grim lines. She was thinking fast. She made several false starts at speech. Then she reached for the lighter, eagerly as though it were something of infinite value.

Cragston shook his head.

"Nothing doing. You tell me a few things. This means as much to me as it does to you. A damn sight more. I'm trusting no one. So sing your song."

Bernice did not resent his tone. But she still wavered between conflicting thoughts. A flash of triumph for an instant blazed in her eyes. Cragston repeated his queries.

"Please wait. Just a minute," Bernice evaded. "Till I get out of this uniform. Then I'll feel more like talking."

She gestured toward glasses and a decanter of brandy. Cragston helped himself. He did not hear her stirring about in the other room. He was pondering. Her

possession of the lighter proved beyond all doubt that Jim Gregory had been in San Luisito during his prospecting trips in the Gila Mountains. According to Gregory's letter to Cragston, he had struck the lost vein of the once rich Aces Up mine; and according to all evidence awaiting Cragston on his arrival from Burma to join his partner, Gregory had found death as well as gold.

He wondered if this Bernice had known Jim; if she knew whether Jim had really died—when, where, and how? What was she holding out? She knew something. It did not seem to be guilty knowledge; yet she was evasive.

BERNICE'S return from the other room put a sudden halt to Cragston's pondering. Her dressing gown was chaste, severely simple, and devoid of provocative frills pretending to conceal what they advertised. She stretched herself on the lounge. She seemed embarrassed, and groping for the next move. Cragston was puzzled. She did not act as though she were staging a show to distract him from his questioning.

"Now, about this cigar lighter," Cragston began. And then he realized, as his pulse quickened, that her reserve was more inflaming than any flaunting display. The sudden rise and fall of her breasts brought them momentarily into tantalizing relief against the unadorned silk masking their perfection.

Bernice's lashes drooped to conceal her eyes. She faintly flushed as she saw Cragston's glance



"I'll tell you all about it in a moment," she said, and disappeared through the door.

caress the curve of her hips and the graceful length of her legs. He had been in Burma too long not to have a hungry look in his eyes. Cragston hitched his chair toward the lounge; then he checked himself and felt foolish.

She wasn't a bum, and she was not giving him a play.

There was an awkward, wordless pause. Their eyes met. Cragston read in them a reflection of his own. Neither knew who moved first to break the deadlock. She was in his arms, hungrily seeking his lips, clinging to him with possessive eagerness. Cragston suddenly realized that the throaty, inarticulate sounds that took the place of speech had become hysterical sobs. Then, just as abruptly, she relaxed. Cragston's resolve faded. He forgot the mystery of Gregory's cigarette lighter. . . .

The first pallor of dawn was sweeping away the desert night before either of them spoke. Cragston poured himself a drink, drained it at a gulp and demanded, "Now tell me about this cigarette lighter?"

He pocketed the trinket and regarded her with frosty eyes. He looked as though he had forgotten the firm, fine flesh he had embraced.

"It belonged to . . . Jim Gregory," she said in a low voice. "A mining engineer—"

"God damn it, I know that!" he exploded. "How did you get it?"

"Oh, I may as well tell you. I'm a Department of Justice operator, investigating narcotic smuggling. On the side, I'm investigating Jim Gregory's disappearance, on behalf of his wife."

"Wife?"

"Yes. Very dear friend of mine. Didn't you know Gregory was married?"

"I came from Burma as fast as I could when I got his letter," said Cragston. "Hadn't heard of him

for several years. When I got to Yuma, he was not there. Vanished without a trace. Suitcase abandoned at his hotel. So I'm looking."

She nodded.

"He's dead. If I can find the *corpus delicti*, I can make a case. Otherwise, I can't. And I've got to work single handed. This is outside of my official duty, so I can get no help."

"How do you know he's dead?" demanded Cragston.

"I've heard things. I'm certain that Mendoza—the king of San Luisito—knows who did it. If he didn't actually kill Gregory himself. It was something about mines. But I don't know the kinks—"

"To hell with the kinks!" exclaimed Cragston, reaching for his hat. "Jim wrote me just enough to make your tip a hot one. Just one link is missing. When I get that, I'll kill him myself!"

Cragston's voice rang like a bugle, and his eyes blazed fiercely.

"I'd better clear out before dawn. Otherwise you'd get in bad with me being seen leaving here." Cragston stopped short and reddened. "Say, why the hell did you give me a play? You're not—"

"No, I'm not one of them," said Bernice, smiling at his embarrassment. "It's just in the air. The damned place gets under one's skin. And Mendoza waiting for me to crack. And I leading him on, yet keeping him at a distance while trying to trip him. I hate him—but—Oh, Lord, I'm only human—and when I saw you tonight, you looked like an honest to God

white man, and a long lost friend—and I—”

“And you hadn’t seen anyone who was regular for so long that I looked like the right answer?”

She nodded. The crashing of the front door punctuated the pause.

A TALL, handsome Mexican in purple velvet all aglitter with silver buttons burst into the room, pistol in hand. Mendoza. Behind him was Antonia, her dark eyes were ablaze with wrath.

“That’s the Gringo pig!” she exclaimed. “Just as I told you!”

Cragston caught it all in a flash. Antonia, in a jealous rage, had told Mendoza about Cragston’s interest in a cigarette lighter. He knew that Mendoza had heard enough to cost them their lives. Behind the Mexican were four swarthy ruffians, Miguel to the front.

All in a flash, Mendoza’s pistol crackled. Cragston flung himself aside. He felt the searing stab of lead as his hands closed on an *olla* of sun dried clay. He hurled the bulbous jar as the pistol coughed fire and lead past his ear. It crashed across the Mexican’s head. He dropped like a sack of meal.

“Get out!” shouted Cragston, flinging Bernice aside. “I’ll hold ‘em!”

He turned just in time to meet the rush. Miguel and his ruffians were armed with knives. Cragston snatched a chair and flailed it like a two handed sword. Wood splintered. A man dropped, but Miguel and his two cronies darted forward, overwhelming Cragston by

sheer weight and ferocity. Knives raked him in the milling press. He sank for a moment. Bernice screamed and hurled an alarm clock. It caught Miguel on the forehead. He jerked back. Cragston kicked clear, wrenched a descending knife to one side, and sent a heavy fist dynamiting against a swarthy chin.

“Get out!” shrieked Bernice. “More of them are on the way!”

Cragston ducked a knife, countered with a sizzling left that sounded like a pistol shot. Bernice’s automatic was beyond reach. During his momentary respite, he saw a squad of dark forms running across the street. Bernice snatched the kerosene lamp from its bracket, hurled it at the leader of the reinforcements. Her forward pass missed its mark, but connected with the door jamb. In an instant the room was ablaze.

Cragston cursed and wrenched the leg from a table. Bernice caught his arm. He saw that two Mexicans were dragging Mendoza clear of the blazing oil. Empty handed, the odds were suicidal. He followed Bernice out the back door. Their move was so sudden that the enemy for a moment did not realize that they had fled. The groans and yells of their fellows, who had recovered from Cragston’s hammering and found themselves surrounded by lapping flames, covered the retreat.

The fence that marked the border was but a few yards distant. Before the pursuit was fairly organized, Cragston had helped Bernice through the barbed wires.

“Meet me on the road! They

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X-B 391-A

[Continued from page 21]

more swiftly than the eye could follow, he balanced it and hurled it full at Flobert's face.

The thing was done unexpectedly, frantically. But Flobert seemed to possess a demoniac ability at mind-reading. Even as the shining steel cube bashed at him, he ducked—and came up with his automatic drawn from its holster. He took a snap-shot at Storme.

It was a clean miss; Storme had already jerked aside. From somewhere beyond the platform a shrill scream knifed the cellar. A woman's scream, gurgly, agonized.

Flobert's glance flicked in the direction of the sound; his hot eyes widened. "Sonya—!" he roared.

That instant of inattention gave Jeff Storme one more opportunity. He smashed another fist-sized block at his enemy's head. And this time he connected. Steel struck skull with a sickening *tunk*-sound. Flobert gasped, staggered. Blood and a sticky horror of released brain-matter oozed from his split-open cranial bones. The mess welled downward into his eyes, his sagging mouth. He took two staggering steps and collapsed. He would not get up again, ever.

Storme pivoted to face the remaining dozen red-masked bundsters. Released from the first inertia of surprise, they were surging forward like a rising tide of murder. Some of them tugged at pocketed guns.

"Come on, you swine!" Jeff Storme thundered. And he

smashed a barrage of steel gauge blocks at them, picking off the foremost. Two went down, moaning. Another stared stupidly at his shattered gun-hand, turned and swayed toward the wall for support.

But there were at least eight or nine of them remaining, milling toward the platform like madmen. And Storme had hurled his last steel block. Empty-handed he faced them.

Empty-handed? "No, by God!" he shouted. He stooped, grabbed the automatic from Sergeant Flobert's dead fingers. Then he straightened, triggered a flaming squirt of .44 slugs at his enemies.

THEY broke in confusion before that lethal bullet-hail; dropped like ninepins. One, wounded, blasted a final shot at Jeff Storme, a shot that caught Storme in the shoulder and spun him around as if he'd been sledgehammered. But he regained his balance and put a tunnel through the bundster's heart. And that finished it.

Only four masked Nazis remained upright. They threw away their weapons, raised their arms. "*Kamarad*—we surrender—!"

Storme's automatic was empty now. But he did not let them guess that. He kept them covered while he stooped to release Betty Pelton from her fetters. Then he panted: "Quick, hon. Grab a gun. Get upstairs to a phone. Call the FBI. Tell them to come and pick up the pieces. Tell them Sonya Valenska

is dead; killed by Flobert's bullet. Tell them Flobert won't make any more trouble. Tell them the X-B 391-A is safe. Tell—"

The blonde girl pressed herself close to Jeff Storme for a single thrilling instant, her warm breasts taut against his body. "I'll tell

them my future husband is the bravest man on their list," she whispered, starry-eyed. Then she kissed him lightly and made her way from the underground room.

Storme surveyed his prisoners. And they shivered under the curious smile that came to his triumphant lips.

Acre of Blood

[Continued from page 85]

against his chest. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. His head swam and the roof of his mouth went dry. Pain was forgotten in the ecstasy of her nearness.

"What happened, Whitey?" she gasped. "Dorsey heard they tried to murder you!"

The sheriff walked up. Whitey tried to draw away but Viola held him. Before he knew it her moist lips were pressed to his mouth.

He was blushing furiously when Viola backed out of his arms. "Hello, Dorsey," he mumbled.

The sheriff's eyes flickered. "Got a report Big Mike and his gang bore down on you."

Whitey smiled. "Sort of, Dorsey. You'd better get three graves dug."

"You're not going after them!" Viola cried. "You're not!"

"She's right, Clarke," sheriff said. "You better steer clear of Big Mike. We found one of his girls in the river this mornin'."

Whitey stiffened. "A girl with blonde hair?"

"That's right."

Whitey's heart was lead in his breast. "So, they killed her," he

mumbled. The pupils of his eyes went flint hard. "Better dig those graves good and deep, Dorsey."

"You're coming back to the house with me, Whitey," Viola said. "I want dad to talk to you."

"Talking won't help."

"You've got to come with me. Dorsey will drive us over."

AN HOUR later Whitey and Viola were alone in a room of the Corbin house. The girl's eyes were wet with tears and her voice was choked.

"I don't want you to take any chances, Whitey. Can't you understand? Can't you see that—that I love you?" Her cool fingertips touched his cheek. She moved closer to him on the couch, let the soft warmth of her press against him. "Whitey!"

Again her lips burned against his mouth. His hand touched her back, slid down toward the slope of her hip; then his arms gathered her close and the throbbing softness under her blouse flattened against him. For long blissful moments they were one, their bodies tense with the ecstasy of each other's touch.

When he spoke again his voice was low. "They killed that girl because she helped me. I couldn't rest until I wiped them out. This time they won't trick me. I think I know what's behind it all."

IT WAS close to midnight. The lights were out in the sheriff's office. Whitey stood at the door, peering through the glass pane at the *Silver Dollar* across the street. He had come into town under cover of darkness and was waiting for the crowd at the saloon to thin out.

On the porch of the Corbin house, Viola sat huddled in a chair, a coat thrown over her shoulders. Whitey had promised to stop back. Hours had gone by. She was nervous.

The dim headlights of a car coming up the road brought her to her feet. She ran down the steps. The car stopped in front of the house. A short man with his hat pulled down over his eyes came toward her. "Miss Corbin?"

"Yes, what is it?"

The man came closer. "Got a message for you from—" His arm shot out. Instinctively, Viola jerked back, but not soon enough. She tried to scream. It was too late. The sweet, pungent odor of chloroform sickened her. Feebly, she beat at the man's head. Another shrouded figure leaped out of the car, whisked her off her feet. She felt herself being carried, heard hushed voices. The rest was lost in unconsciousness.

THE cut ropes that had bound Whitey were still on the floor of the logger's hut. Viola, seated

in a chair, cringed away from Big Mike. At the door, DuBois and Gorilla Pete were feasting their eyes on her, licking their lips.

"You'll be doin' him a favor," the saloon keeper growled. "Write the note like I said. Tell him to get out of town if he wants you to keep on livin'."

The pencil in Viola's hand touched the scrap of paper Big Mike had given her. Her hand trembled as she guided it. Each word she wrote ripped something out of her heart. When she was done she leaned back, closed her eyes.

Big Mike snatched the note read it, folded it in half. "You and DuBois see that he gets this, Gorilla. You know how."

Viola heard the killers' car rattle down the wagon road. Big Mike eyed her up and down.

"Never thought I'd get a babe like you alone," he chuckled.

Viola's heart pounded. "You—you wouldn't touch me!" she gasped. Her breasts were trembling.

"Oh, wouldn't I?" How about a kiss?" He leaned forward, slid his lips wetly over her face.

The touch of his mouth was repulsive. Viola slipped from the chair, came behind it. Big Mike kicked it aside.

"No use makin' a fuss, kid. I always wondered what it was like to play around with a classy dame. This is my chance. You can yell your head off for all the good it'll do you." He lunged forward, fastened steel fingers about Viola's wrist, jerked her into his arms.

His mouth jammed down on her lips. Even if she had wanted to

scream, the nauseating gag of his mouth made it impossible. She felt his hands like white-hot pokers, burning her flesh. The next few moments were moments of ghastly horror. Big Mike tore at her clothes, ripping them to shreds. She stifled under his crushing embrace.

She was sorry, now, she had written the note. Death would have been better than this. Quicker . . . painless. She had no strength to fight him off. It was all she could do to breathe. . . .

WHITEY glanced at the radium dial of his watch. Twelve-thirty. Most of the trucks had rolled away from the *Silver Dollar* with their loads of loggers. Now was the time to pay Big Mike a visit. He had his hand on the door knob when the phone rang.

Dorsey Brown's voice rasped over the wire. "They kidnapped Viola Corbin! I'm at Corbin's now! Come right over!"

Bradley Corbin and the sheriff were waiting in the living-room. The former's face was ashen. Dorsey Brown offered the note Viola had written.

"Someone shoved it under my door and knocked."

Whitey read the penciled message:

*They threaten to kill me
unless Whitey leaves town.
Viola*

"It — it's her handwriting," Bradley Corbin gasped. "She was waiting for you. I heard a car drive up about midnight. That's when they took her. You'll go,

Whitey? You won't endanger her life?"

"I'll go."

"There's a bus North in the morning," the sheriff said.

"I'll hike it tonight." He slipped the deputy's badge off his shirt, dropped it in Dorsey Brown's hand, turned over the second revolver he had received. "Say good-bye to her when you see her, Mr. Corbin," he said.

The mill owner gripped Whitey's hand. "I will, Whitey."

Whitey walked out into the night.

TEN minutes later the sheriff came out of the house, slipped behind the wheel of his Ford roadster, headed it into the hills. He drove steadily until he reached a wagon road that branched off the main highway. The car bumped over the ruts as it ran between two groves of dense spruce. A pinpoint of light gleamed in the darkness ahead. The car stopped. Headlights and ignition went off.

Dorsey Brown didn't hear the rumble seat cover come up. Neither did he see the hands that reached for his throat. He screamed when he felt them but it was too late. Whitey shot to the front seat, pummeled the sheriff's face. A short, driving blow to the point of the jaw finished Dorsey Brown.

Carrying the sheriff's gun, Whitey approached the logger's hut. Through a cracked window pane he saw Big Mike towering over the limp figure of Viola, stretched on the floor.

Whitey's blood ran cold. He threw caution to the winds, raced to the door, crashed it open. Big

Mike spun around. His hand snapped to his hip. Whitey's gun roared. A screaming bullet ripped into the saloon keeper's chest. He stumbled back. Again the gun spoke. Hot lead bored a black hole in Big Mike's skull. His legs buckled and he dropped.

Whitey went down on his knees beside Viola. He lifted her up, kissed her cold, moaning lips. There were red streaks across her arms and shoulders, ghastly black and blue marks on the velvet smoothness of her flesh.

The sound of an automobile motor brought Whitey to attention. He pulled off his jacket, draped it about Viola's shoulders, carried her to a corner of the hut. Then he crouched behind the door, forefinger tense on the trigger of his gun.

DuBois, the French Canadian, burst into the hut, revolver in hand. He drew up short when he saw Big Mike's crumpled body, the ugly head belching blood. His mouth gaped open.

Flame spat from the muzzle of Whitey's gun. The bullet splintered DuBois' jaw, went on up into his brain. He died without uttering a sound.

Whitey stepped from behind the door. Gorilla Pete, unarmed, was frozen on the threshold. Panic-stricken, he dropped to his knees.

"Don't kill me!" he screamed. "Don't kill me!" His punch-bashed face was yellow.

Whitey tossed the hot, smoking revolver behind him. "No, not

with a bullet, Gorilla." He held up his fists. "With these!"

Gorilla Pete shot erect. He jerked a knife from his pocket, flipped the blade out. The bright steel flashed in the light of a kerosene lamp as he charged Whitey. There was murder in his eyes; the lust to kill in his maniacal scream.

Whitey ducked under the slashing blade. It ripped his shirt off his shoulder, cut into the flesh. He came up, both fists flying, buried one in Gorilla Pete's stomach. The ex-pug doubled up, dropped the knife. But his eyes, glazed with pain, lit on the revolver. He lurched for it. Whitey swooped the knife from the floor, struck with it. Five inches of steel went into Gorilla Pete's back.

BRADLEY CORBIN shook his head slowly. "I can't believe Dorsey was mixed up with them. It—it seems impossible."

"You can get it from his own lips in the morning," Whitey replied. "I suspected it the moment Big Mike offered me a bribe. Your sheriff was probably taking them all along."

"Hadn't you better go to bed, dad?" Viola queried.

Barley Corbin smiled. "I understand. Good-night."

Alone in the living room, Whitey produced the crumpled note. "Does this still hold good? Must I leave town?"

Viola melted into his arms. Warm lips brushed his cheek. It was answer enough.

Flower of Evil

[Continued from page 57]

hand over her mouth. A dark figure had reached for her as she left the dancehall by the back door. "Don't fear. You will not be hurt. It is I, the white man to whom you brought the note. Where is your mistress? Inside?"

"Ah, no, she have gone to the house of Wong. They have many loves."

"Wong's house? So he's got another establishment, eh? Does she live with him?"

"No, meester. This night she go for the first time." Fright had gone from the maid's voice. "You think that all right, huh? At her house there is no one now. You like come with me?"

Cup seized the plumb brown arms. The girl laughed a little breathlessly. "Where is this house of Wong?"

"Along the road by the shore, far out. Oh, it is much distance. She will not be back for long time. Her house near. You, me, we go there. All alone. Like?"

Cathorne shoved aside the snuggling girl. She whimpered a little after him, pleading. But he was gone, a dark figure striding down the river road.

The house of the Chinaman identified itself by its very size, standing dark and sinister against a cluster of mango trees. Slender, graceful betel palms, like punka fans, formed a lacing across the front, and steps ran upward to a broad veranda.

The shutters were closed and only at the west wing did pencil-

ings of light trace themselves through the reed shades.

Cathorne knew there would be servants about. He slipped to the rear and carefully studied the edifice. A Chinese dozed in a siesta chair on the back porch, his silvered pipe cold beside him. Cup went like a shadow up the steps. His fist struck once, twice on the sagging jaw, and the cook grunted with a single, stertorous explosion of breath, his body slouching over the broad chair arm. Cathorne bound and gagged the fellow with strips torn from the victim's jacket.

A WIDE hall ran laterally through the building. Cup slipped into the dark interior. From a little room to the right he heard the heavy sucking breath of a person sleeping. He passed silently by the sleeper's room and came to the door with lights behind it. An odor of incense and tobacco smoke exuded.

Voices were in earnest conversation beyond the closed portal. He could hear the throaty utterances of a girl breaking into the monotoned conversation of the other.

The door was locked. Cathorne knelt to find too that the key had been removed. Through the small aperture he got a telescopic view of the occupants. His fingers gripped at the sight disclosed.

The woman was half reclining on a rattan couch piled thick with cushions and over the back of which she had thrown her em-

broidered shawl. The thin silken dress she had again donned, and her legs, thrust languorously over the cushions, had by their position pulled the skirt well above one knee, exposing the gleaming white skin of her thigh to the sleek-haired man who bent above her.

The Dove smoked a perfumed cigarette. Cup could not see her face as the couch was angling away from him, but he could see the face of Wong, so different from its usual blankness, passion seeming to spread over it like an unhealthy dew. A few feet from the couch, a heavy brass tray, resting on a low stand, held siphon and drinks.

Cathorne's first impulse was to leave in disgust. This woman who had fired him was a consort of yellow men, eh? Let her wallow, then, in her own ungodly stew. But the words of the girl caught him, held him at his listening post.

"Yes, just like the rest of the men—big promise and no performance. I've been around, Chinese boy. If you talk with me, you've got to talk with cash."

"My Dove, you are rarer than the lotus flowers of the Middle Kingdom. I can give you great wealth. Wait, just wait."

His head was bending lower. The girl let a mouthful of smoke case indolently upward into the impassioned face. She moved over a little and he sat beside her, his hand softly stroking the skin above her knee.

"Wong, you're a great disappointment to me. I thought you were one who could shower me with the wealth, the luxury I crave. Your dance hall income wouldn't keep me in perfume. Wait? That's

all I've been doing—waiting for some of this sugar you've been promising to hand out. Piker stuff. The man who gets me has got to be a man—an *hombre* that won't stop at anything to get what he wants. Get me? You haven't showed your stuff."

WONG'S hand was creeping slowly farther up the velvety thigh. His left hand was slipping under her shoulder.

"You call me weak, afraid. Dove, I have killed to get what I want."

"Don't kid me. You hire your dirty work done for a few pesos."

She stretched like a smug, contented feline. The strap of her dress slipped down to reveal a tantalizing glimpse.

Wong stiffened and for a moment held himself still as if he were a hawk ready to swoop.

The Dove suddenly shifted, drawing up the strap and shoving his hand off her thigh. "Words. It's no go, Wong. Force me and my love will be but ashes in your mouth." Her hand came up reassuringly to pat his cheek. "Make good on your promise and I'll show you what heaven can be like. I'm an ambitious woman, boy."

Wong was a man deep in the wine of anticipation. "For you, you," he whispered, "I show my secret."

He was gone into the corner of the room, returning with a lacquered box. He lifted the lid before her waiting eyes. Cathorne could see her mass of gorgeous hair come up, her eyes lifting in surprise to Wong.

"What's this, a Chinese joke? I don't savvy. It's empty."

The Chinese bent beside her. "Ah, so you would think, so anyone would think. It is a masterpiece from my own country." His fingers opened a secret compartment, so cleverly constructed that none would have suspected it. From the secret recess he took a pice of paper.

"Here, here," his breath was almost a pant, "is the location of the richest pearling bed south of the Sulu Islands. A buried reef. Soon, when things have quieted I go to strip its wealth. Thousands, millions, no doubt. I adorn you with gems. I place you in a house of a thousand delights. I make your life one vast treasure of love."

She was sitting up now, one hand buried under a cushion. Her profile disclosed to Cathorne an intense, almost agonized interest.

"How—how did you get this?"

"My Dove, you want a man who goes for what he wants. For this I have slain—a spineless American by the name of Phipps, too weak to guard what he had found. It is now for us and our many roomed mansion of love."

HIS arms were again reaching for her. But the girl's actions were quicker. Her hand came from beneath the cushion bearing a blunt-nosed automatic. The other hand snatched the paper from the Oriental's fingers.

"Just what I've been waiting for, you yellow cowardly murderer. Not a one of those pearls will you get. They're mine."

Wong was caught, stopped like a thieving dog cornered in his depredations. But he was quick to assume his Oriental poise.

"So! You have fooled me, led me on. I should have known better than to be lured by a white siren. 'Beware the beak of the white heron,' says the wise man."

The girl was on her feet attempting to edge around the couch to the door. The clear mask of her face was strained and she was biting at her lower lip.

Cup Cathorne's muscles went tense. So the girl, too, had been playing a game, ensnaring by flesh, bargaining for the wealth of the unfortunate Phipps.

Wong's voice went on, a low, malicious monotone. "Do you think for a moment you can get out of this room? You think yourself clever, as all Americans do. I have honored you by courting you after the manner of your countrymen. You lied to me in every movement you made. Now, you shall know love as my countrymen can make it!"

Swift as a lashing snake's head, his foot went out, hurling over the tray of drinks. The thick brass platter struck cruelly across her knees, and the spilled drinks slopped her legs and ankles. This small moment of diversion was enough. Wong's darting hand jerked the automatic from her fingers and hurled it across the room.

He was upon her like a resistless madman. One hand clutching at the low yoke of her dress ripped downward. The silk split, the straps broke, and the garment dropped about her feet. She was attempting to fight back, but ineffectually.

The Oriental's sibilant laugh rose high. The sight of her glowing skin urged him on.

Cup Cathorne took one tremendous lunge at the locked door. The bolt latch snapped before his weight, and he staggered, half unbalanced, into the room.

KUEN LEE snapped a cackling yell in Chinese that brought an answer from the rear of the house. Then Cathorne was upon him. Wong seized a heavy incense burner and brought it down upon the head of the charging man.

Cup went to his hands and knees almost at the feet of the woman. The concussion of the blow almost blinded him. He shook his head to clear the daze and was up at the Chinese. Wong was fumbling at the table for a knife he could not reach.

A squat servant, clad only in singlet and shorts, appeared at the door, a long glinting kitchen blade in his hands.

The two men had gone down, Wong underneath. Cup's fists were lashing at Kuen's jaw. The Oriental's thin, long-fingered hands could not return the blows of the larger American, but he was slippery as oiled leather, twisting away from the blows, and Cup's fists caromed harmlessly off the pomaded hair.

The girl screamed. Cup struck heavily and hard, landing at last on the hairless chin. He twisted to look upward and saw the long, keen kitchen knife slicing down upon him. The girl had grabbed up the heavy tray and was raising it double-handed above her head. As she stood, poised to strike, Cathorne caught one quick, perfect view of her that he was always to remember.

Cathorne twisted sideways as the knife came down. The tray crashed upon the servant's head, and the heavy, hammered brass sent out a note like a sombre bell.

The three men were down in a heap. A sting like hot water passed across Cup's lower ribs. He tried to pull himself away, but his shirt caught and he was forced to rip it loose. He got to his feet, queer twitchings at the corners of his mouth as he looked at the floor.

The descending knife, just grazing Cathorne, had gone into the chest of the unconscious Wong. The servant, dazed by the blow of the tray, had fallen as dead weight upon his own weapon, pinning his master to the floor.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Cathorne seized the shawl and threw it about the girl. She quickly picked up the secret paper and scurried with him to the door. From the rear porch came muted thuds as the other servant tried to free himself.

HALFWAY back to town, they were overtaken by a *calesa*, the driver returning sleepily with his empty cab toward the city. Cup commandeered the vehicle. The brown eyes of the driver opened wide as the girl, draped only in a shawl, clambered inside.

"We'll get aboard my sloop," announced Cup. "Neither of us would be safe ashore."

The short walk and release from the locked room had brought reassurance to the girl. "Drive past my house. I'll need some clothes. I can't conventionally go *bon voyage* with only a shawl. But I won't be long."

"Okay," agreed Cup, "but make it snappy. Grab up your bag, that's all. No time to dress."

Twenty minutes later they were in the master's cabin of *The Moro Girl*.

The mate and the two deck hands, who had been aroused to swing up the dinghy, smiled knowingly to themselves. The Filipino top-kicker nodded approvingly. "That is well, much better. It is not good for man to live alone."

Lush darkness filled the after cabin. Only the starlight dropping through the open ports outlined the girl like a wraith in her white shawl. Cup struck a match and lighted the swinging lamp.

"Well, that's that." His lower lip dropped suddenly in surprise. He had set her bag upon the little table, and his eyes caught the letters on the baggage tag.

"Wanda Phipps! Phipps? Then you're—"

"John Phipp's sister. Do you think I've been putting on this song and dance for fun?"

Cathorne stood by the table nonplussed. Then he laughed. "I'm damned! Girl you're a brick. But what made you suspect Wong?"

His hand fell in a friendly manner on her shoulder.

"You might rustle me a cigarette. Why suspect Wong? Easy. John wrote me plenty before he suddenly disappeared. Told me he'd struck it rich, richer than he dreamed of, and that he was suspicious of the Chink himself. When I was certain something had happened, I headed straight for the yellow boy's wickiup."

"Then there really wasn't anything between you and Wong?"

"Me and that fellow? What do you take me for, big boy? Wong got the farthest tonight he ever got. I couldn't stand his hands."

CATHORNE was seeing the situation in another light. Relief and admiration were running through him. "Why did you frisk me? I could have got him then."

"And then were would I have been? Say, who are you, anyway. We've never been introduced."

"Just a fellow by the name of Cathorne. Do trading with my sloop here. Incidentally, I look into affairs for the Insular Government."

"Hm, now it's my time to be surprised. Secret Service, eh? Well, that don't keep me from liking you."

"I was after the murderer of John Phipps myself."

"Yes? If I'd only known. I warned you tonight because I didn't want to see you stabbed in the back. When Wong surprised us, I had to get your gun. If you'd plugged that boy, I'd never have found out what I wanted to know. Savvy, now? How about a light?"

She bent in front of him as she lowered the cigarette to the match. Again the tantalizing fragrance of her hair engulfed him.

"Then that was just acting, play-acting there in your dressing room?"

She straightened, her lips a provoking smile. As she lifted her hand to her cigarette, the shawl slipped down over one shoulder.

"What do you think?"

The cabin lamp was burning down from lack of kerosene. A soft half darkness was enwrapping

them. His hand slid beneath her bared arm and drew her closer. Her hand with the cigarette went over his shoulder.

"I don't think it was all acting."

Both her arms came up to encircle his neck, the cigarette dropping to the table. "It wasn't, man." The shawl, no longer held by her fingers, dropped back and to the floor. She turned her face up for his kiss.

"Funny," she murmured, "you and I both after the same man, but

we got him. That's teamwork, ain't it?"

The pulse of his left arm was throbbing as it tightened across her back. The vibrant warmth from her body permeated him. His right hand slid lower over the cushioned curves of her hips. He pulled her more tightly to him. A tremor quivered her frame. The light flickered lower and out.

"Let's go ahead doing that, kid."

A throaty broken laugh was his only answer from the now enveloping darkness.

Painkiller

[Continued from page 65]

summer house. She had been swimming in the Fenton private pool and still wore her bathing suit with a loose robe thrown around her shoulders. It was a one piece suit, backless and frontless save for two thin straps that came down from her shoulders to her waist, just wide enough to do scanty duty over her blooming breasts.

She motioned Matt to a bench beside her and moved close, so that her thighs brushed the length of his. The fresh perfume of her, the expanse of bare shoulders and chest, the sensuous outline of her hips, got into his head. Particularly when she forgot the robe and let it fall. He made up his mind that the next time Elaine played with him, let him go along, she wouldn't call quits so soon.

He asked her, "Now then—what's your talk of murder?"

"It's hard to tell you, Matt, but

I must tell somebody who can help. Maybe you can. Corliss Phelps was my sister."

"Pull things like that slower," Matt muttered. "Don't knock me out all at once."

"WHEN you thought you saw me on Grant Avenue, it must have been Corliss. I have known about her for a long time but I never saw her. Father told me after mother died—Corliss was his daughter by the wife of a dear friend of his—and she was born just about the time I was. So you see, father had been carrying on after he married mother. Corliss' mother had other children, Corliss' half sisters and brothers, but they are poor now, and Corliss, who found out who her true father was, has been keeping them at their old home with money she has had from father."

"Blackmailer, eh?"

"No, Matt. She has never blackmailed father. She only asked for part of her rights. She had all kinds of letters from father to her mother, and her birth certificate, and everything like that. She could have held father up for thousands of dollars but she promised she never would want more than just ease for her half sisters and brothers, and their father, who thinks he is her father, too.

"Now that she's dead, they're in hard luck," Matt said. "I'll say she looked enough like you to make me want—well, want a lot of things."

Elaine smiled sadly. "Don't think of those things now, Matt. The worst of my story is to come. This afternoon, father came home and told me this—he was to meet Corliss at the *Emporium*, the department store, where they sometimes met in the crowd. Someone had telephoned him as if from her. But she didn't come to the *Emporium*. And when father went out and called a taxi, a girl slipped in behind him and closed the door just as the car started off. A Chinese girl. She had a message for father. She said—"

Elaine faltered for a moment, then steadied herself. "She said Corliss had been murdered and that all her papers had been taken from her safe by a blackmailer who had found out somehow where she kept them. The Chinese girl told father that he would be asked to pay a hundred thousand dollars to the blackmailer for the papers or else the whole story would go to the police and then the police would think father committed the crime."

Matt Rider sat straight. He put a hand on Elaine's bare knee but for once didn't know it was Elaine's skin he was touching. "Sure your father went to the *Emporium*? That Chinese girl yarn sounds fishy."

Elaine nodded, "It would sound fishy to the police, too. But he did. He could never prove it, but he did. The Chinese girl said the blackmailers were counting upon his not being able to explain where he was—and then it would be father who would want those papers. The Chinese girl said the leader of the blackmailers was the Keeper of the Dragon of some Goddess whose followers told the truth and that therefore he told the truth when he said what would happen to father."

"Keeper of the Dragon!" Matt echoed. "Chinese girl—"

He remembered Si Si slipping out and into a taxi. He remembered that she had told him her husband was Keeper of the Dragon!

Corliss Phelps going into Chinatown to meet a sleek haired rat! A man with oiled hair, shiny like anthracite, and a white-toothed grin who bows over a woman's hands as that rat had bowed over Corliss Phelps', would be in on any murder that looked profitable.

Now he was conscious of Elaine's knee. He looked down at it and along the bare thigh to the high hem of her bathing trunks. He patted it softly and felt the quick breath Elaine took in response.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "It all depends upon whether your father is telling the truth."

Elaine moved closer. Her body leaned toward him and she nestled against him with a sigh when he caught her in his arms and buried his face in the soft hollow of her shoulder.

"If you can help me, Matt, I'll do anything in the world."

"You won't cry quits again?"

She lifted her lips to his and didn't stir when his arms reached hungrily around her waist.

"I really never wanted to—cry quits."

THROUGH the night Matt and two detective lieutenants watched the entrance of the curio shop in Grant Street, from shadowed doorways. With the coming of morning they had to be content with occasionally passing the windows. At midmorning Matt grunted with satisfaction. The sleek-haired rat came up the street and turned into the shop.

To Detective Lieutenant Hogan he said, "I'm going up now to call on an old Chinaman's young wife. If you hear knives swishing in the hallway, they're for me. Watch the window and come up if I signal."

Si Si came to the door. She was as delectable as ever, in brief skirt and tight blouse. Her little breasts were outthrust like two heavenly temptations. She frowned when she saw who had knocked, and gasped when Matt pushed in.

"Meng Toh Fu is below in the curio shop," she said quickly. "Honorable husband may come at any minute. Yesterday I think he had a knife sent after you. Today I am afraid I will go to the Dragon."

"Make believe you are breathing the Dragon's breath now—for me," Matt pleaded, catching her and holding her against him so that her breath quickened. "Maybe if you tell me the truth, I'll fix it so you can dishonor the house of Meng Toh Fu as much as you want to. First—you carried a message from the Keeper of the Dragon to a white man, at the *Emporium* department store?"

Si Si squirmed but he held her tight. At last she pouted. "My honorable husband surely will take me to the Dragon to find out who was with me yesterday. It will be bad for me in the Dragon's sight if I go with lies already on my tongue. So I say the truth. I carried a message for Honorable Husband, and for one other."

"That other, Si Si?"

"For very shiny hair man Si Si do not like."

"You love me, Si Si?"

"Oh, very much beloved."

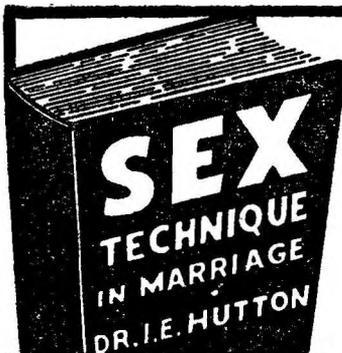
"Yes, yes. I know. But all right. Some time, maybe. That one with shiny hair, he is a very bad enemy of mine. Of me and of a girl who has promised not to cry quits."

"What you mean, cry quits? Do I ever cry quits when I should not?"

"I'll say you do! When you particularly shouldn't." She was troubled until she felt his hands sliding over her curved back, seeking the softness of her lithe little body. Then she sighed contentedly again.

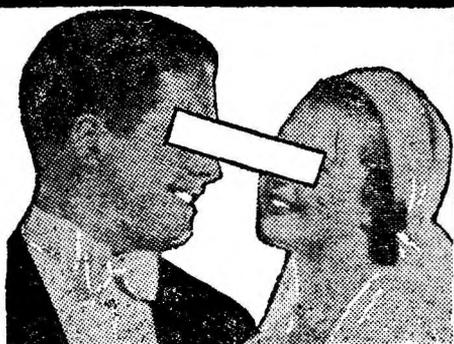
"I will help you to stop other girl from crying quits."

HE SIGNALLED from the window to Lieutenant Hogan and



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pointed toward the curio shop. Lieutenant Hogan called his partner and the two detectives pushed in the curio shop door. It was then Matt explained to Si Si that he wanted her to show him to where the Dragon was and show him also how to get the sleek haired man into the Dragon chamber.

"You mean to make him breathe the Dragon's breath?"

"Yes."

"I will show you. But first you must promise that you will ask one question for me. One day when I will not be dishonorable, he say, 'Si, Si, you make me sick.' I want to know if ever I could make a man sick."

Down a dark inside flight of stairs Si Si led him. Far down into the bowels of the earth. Along a narrow corridor heavy with the odors of musk and opium. At an iron door she listened and there was no sound. "In there," she said, "is Dragon's altar. At the end of Dragon's tail is little button. It makes the Dragon breathe. And there is a door that leads to steps. The steps lead to the curio shop. When you have asked question I want, then you give me answer."

Matt promised and left her to scurry back to her bird cage room. He pushed through the perfumed silence of the Dragon chamber, into another room, and up the stairs Corliss Phelps had descended. A lever in what appeared to be a blank wall seemed his only hope and he pulled it. The big Buddha that faced the interior of the shop slid apart.

Lieutenant Hogan had the sleek-haired man in his grasp. His companion had Meng Toh Fu.

"There were other Chinese around," Hogan said, "but we couldn't hold 'em."

"We'll do enough business with these," Matt growled.

"Funny," said Hogan, "you didn't recognize this black-haired baby. Badger Ricardo? Sometimes called Manuel. Used to be the best badger artist in the country. Department's heard lately that he's turned to blackmail, just like you think."

"We'll find out, maybe," Matt grunted.

When the cursing, struggling Ricardo had been stretched on the teakwood table and bound, Matt found the tail button and twisted it. Immediately the pungent hot vapor began to pour from the Dragon's fangs, "All you've got to do to protect yourself, according to Si Si," Matt said, "is to keep your nose out from under the Dragon. The real fumes—kief or hashish or whatever they are, won't reach you except directly underneath. They break down in the air too quickly."

THREE minutes they waited for the fumes to take effect on the man tied to the table. His struggles stopped. His body relaxed. Matt searched his mind for the formula Si Si had recited to him. Meng Toh Fu who took his situation calmly smiled and said, softly, "It is needful only to start him talking. He will dwell upon the subject you indicate. The opened safe, is it not, that you prefer him to talk about? When he has finished perhaps you will ask him if he knows of my rosebud wife

ever having dishonored my house. It is particular that I know, since, as it is, I only suspect him."

"I can answer that," Matt snapped. "She hasn't. When you are out of the way, she will enjoy herself immensely."

"When I am out of the way, I shall be content. As Buddha decides, so it is wise to accept."

The hurried, excited, drug-stirred voice of the man on the table filled the room, reading his own doom.

"Meng Toh Fu killed her. I lured her here with a locket. I could never get out of her where she kept her papers. Meng Toh Fu got it out of her. Then he killed her. He wouldn't let me watch. She must have been very beautiful on the table. Too bad she had to die. But it must be made to look like Selby Fenton—then we can get a hundred thousand dollars. I will kill Meng Toh Fu and keep it all. I will take Si Si for a while and then kill her. Si Si is very exquisite. The papers are hidden in Meng Toh Fu's desk in Si Si's room. She does not know. Si Si has much to learn. I shall teach her and then kill her."

Lieutenant Hogan gave a cry just as Meng Toh Fu broke loose from his captor. A knife flashed. A green hilt protruded from the breast of Manuel Ricardo. Meng Toh Fu said, softly, "The delectable Si Si is delightful love. She shall live and love in honor."

MATT RIDER went back upstairs to find Si Si waiting. She had discarded her skirt and blouse and was in a thin Chinese

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robe. She stood up to smile when Matt stumbled upon her and the robe fell away.

"I see by your face," Si Si said, "it is so now that I may safely dishonor the house of my honorable but very old husband."

Matt took hold of her, but roughly. He was determined to hold onto any tenderness his hands might have for another and a whiter form.

"Your husband soon will have

no house," he said sternly. "Therefore you will obey me. You will love with honor, always."

She pouted. "Is it better so?"

When she was persuaded much against her will that it was better so, she was smiles again. "Then you must hurry. You must hurry to that lily white one who has promised not to say quits any more."

And Matt hurried.

The Crawling Death

[Continued from page 73]

MOOLAH sat in her hut, rubbing palm oil over the conical perfection of her brown breasts. The day was hot, and the amber grease mixed with the perspiration dotting the valley of the Abyssinian's bosom, forming tiny globules that clung to her velvet skin.

And yet, Moolah realized as the tips of her fingers rubbed the oil into the resilient hillocks, all this trouble was wasted in the jungle fastness of the Sankuru, surrounded as she was by *Wamasai* savages. Some day . . . soon . . . she would go back to Sakota, or maybe to Khartum. There were many white in Khartum, she had heard.

Her mid-day reveries were interrupted as Muwambi's coal-black figure loomed in the doorway. The savage's thick lips spread back to reveal two rows of sharp, filed teeth.

"Man coming through jungle trail," he announced gutturally.

Moolah came to her feet.

"*Wakwavi?*" she queried, her brown eyes flashing. The *Wakwavi* savages occupied the high plateau above the Sankuru River and were constantly descending into the jungle valley to attack the *Wamasai* tribe. But they were in deathly fear of the python and Moolah had used the twenty foot reptile again and again to rout them.

Muwambi shook his huge, misshaped head. "No, not *Wakwavi*," he muttered. "Man with skin like Moolah, almost white maybe."

A white man! Moolah tensed. Had her prayer been answered? "Catch him quick, Muwambi," she ordered. "Bring him here!"

CARL HOFFMAN, wan and haggard, his clothes in shreds, faced the Queen of the *Wamasai* with treacherous misgivings. For the occasion, Moolah had donned a loin cloth fashioned from the skin of a young jackal, which was scant protection.

"What you come for, white man?" Moolah demanded imperiously.

Hoffman explained his mission. When he mentioned Tarkoff's name, the Abyssinian's brown eyes lit up. She motioned to the three towering blacks flanking Hoffman. Silently they slid from the tent.

"Tarkoff said you'd hide me out here until this thing blows over," Hoffman concluded. "He's a good friend of mine, Tarkoff."

"Tarkoff... Tarkoff..." Moolah whispered. It brought visions of Sakota and the gay, colorful bazaars. She looked at Carl Hoffman's broad, bull shoulders and his heavy-set, Teuton physique. Sensual thoughts licked at her brain like white-hot flames. Her breast rose and fell.

"Yes, you may stay here," she said quietly. "Where are the diamonds?"

Hoffman patted his chest. "I've got them all right."

Moolah held out her hand. "Let me see."

Suspiciously, Hoffman brought out the chamois bag. He wished now he had had sense enough to separate the *Kohler Diamond* from the smaller gems. That one, above all, he wanted to keep.

Moolah gasped as he spilled the contents of the bag into his palm. The big stone sparkled like a huge eye. The Abyssinian's fingers closed about it and she cradled it against her breasts. It was a thing of fire, alive with color.

"This one—this one I will keep," she panted, her heaving bosom a mute indication of her emotion. "The rest are yours."

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Hoffman stepped forward to protest, but a low, ominous hiss at the hut door behind him froze him to the ground. He twisted his head slowly, screaming out in horror as the raised head of the python crossed his path of vision. The creature's beady black eyes shot venom. Moolah stepped in front of the German and dropped on her knees to the floor. The python moved forward slowly until his wedge head swayed before the woman's lips. Her hand came out and stroked the snake's white belly.

Suddenly, from outside the hut, came the excited screaming of the savages. Moolah heard only one word—"Wakwavi"—but it was enough. Twining the python's neck about her arm she moved to the door.

"Come," she said, waving her hand to Hoffman. The German followed, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

OUTSIDE, the cluster of huts was alive with blacks—men, women and children. The male savages brandished long spears, the sharp quartz tips of which were rubbed with the poison of the *Diosma* berry. Some carried hardwood *kerries*, knobbed at the end. The women huddled in a little group, clutching babies to their flabby black breasts.

From the jungle came the blood-curdling war-cry of the *Wakwavi* tribe. A spear hurtled through the air, its tapered end whistling an eerie message of death as it passed through the belly of a *Wamasai*. Slithering entrails hung from the hooked tip protruding

out the back of the impaled savage.

Like wraiths appearing from nowhere, the painted bodies of the *Wakwavi* killers shot out from behind the *baobab* trees. Moolah tightened her grip about the python's neck as it struggled to loose itself, beating its tail against the ground. The attacking savages were drawing close. Already their hurtling spears had accounted for two *Wamasai* men and a fat woman, stuck through the neck with an infant clinging to her swollen breast. The ring of *kerrie* knobs cracking against bony skulls marked the hand-to-hand clash of the two tribes.

At that moment, Moolah released the thrashing python. "*Allokah!*" she called out. The *Wamasai* savages fell back to a man.

Hoffman, at the door of Moolah's hut, watched in petrified amazement as the mottled reptile slid across the ground to meet the shrieking, blood-thirsty invaders. Their leader, a giant black whose body was a mass of ceremonial cuts and slashes filled with colorful pigments, stopped short as he saw the python coming towards him with lightning speed. His spear dropped to the ground and he turned, but moments too late. Quicker than the eye could follow, the snake's tail whipped around, circled the savage's waist and swung him off his feet as though he were a straw. There was a distinct snap as python's muscles tightened, breaking the *Wakwavi's* spine. Dropping the limp body, the python reached out again and caught two more in his thick coils. These he treated more harshly, squeezing them until blood spurted

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from their eyes and their broken bodies were ghastly human hour-glasses.

Fleeing before the slimy monster, the balance of the invaders lost themselves in the jungle depths. Moolah, a cruel smile playing about her lips, instructed Muwambi to cut the bodies of the victims up so that the reptile might gorge himself on them. The *Wakwavi* warriors were too big for the python to take at one swallow. Walking back to her hut, she led Hoffman inside. In her right hand was clasped the *Kohler Diamond*.

"You have said that I will keep this one, White Man?" she queried meaningfully.

Hoffman licked his parched lips. "Yes," he gasped.

Moolah raised her arms, lifting the copper cones of her breasts.

"The White Man likes Moolah?" she whispered.

Hoffman nodded vacantly.

"Then come," she murmured, sinking down on a tiger-skin pallet.

CAPTAIN ROY WINSTON paced restlessly outside the pup tent. His eyes were glassy from lack of sleep and radiating worry lines burst from their corners. He could hear the husky wheeze of Joan's labored breathing as she lay beneath the taut stretch of khaki canvas, burning up with jungle fever.

From Stanley Falls, where Roy had decided to give up the camels and continue the rest of the journey into the interior on foot, he had cursed himself for bringing Joan along. The entire trip was a fool's errand, a needless trek into the hot hell of the jungle. There

was no news of Hoffman along the trail. Friendly Nubian tribes had supplied the information that a Devil God ruled the savage *Wamasais* on the Sankuru River. On that flimsy lead, Roy had forged on. But now, he was up against a blank wall. The blacks he had hired *en route* refused to go any further. They, too, had heard about the Devil God of the Sankuru. And on top of everything, Joan was deathly sick.

Allan Willoughby, who had spent two years in medical college, came out of the pup tent. Roy faced him.

"Well?" he queried anxiously. "How is she?"

Willoughby forced a wan smile. "I think she's over the crisis, sir," he replied. "The fever's down and she's resting easier. I wouldn't worry if I were you."

"Worry? Damn it, man, that's all I've done since we started from Khartum. This is the last trip I take out of the Sudan for anyone!" His jaw set hard. "Think you can leave her for an hour or two, Willoughby?"

The Sergeant nodded. "Yes, sir, easily. She's sleeping now."

Roy looked towards the circle of blacks seated cross-legged under the crude lean-to they had constructed. "All right. Wake Fitz up and tell him to keep an eye on things. You and I are going on a little expedition." He walked over to the lean-to and motioned to one of the natives. The ebony giant sprang up and ran to Roy's side.

"Listen, Hagu," Roy said, "I want to go through the jungle and see if we can't locate that *Wamasai* village." From his pocket he

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produced a string of gayly colored beads and a handful of bright silver coins. "You come with us, for this, Hagu?"

The black shook his head negatively. "No. Devil God no good. *Wamasai* kill and Devil God eat."

Roy frowned. "You superstitious black beast!" he blurted. "There isn't any Devil God! It's just a mad dream!"

Hagu's face was an impassive mask. "No go," he mumbled. "Black man no like Devil God."

"All right, to hell with you!"

Roy spat. Willoughby and Fitzroy joined him. "They won't move a step further and that's all there is to it," he said. "And I'm not going to spend a minute too many in this jungle. You stay behind, Fitz, and keep an eye on things. Willoughby and I will try to locate this *Wamasai* place. If we don't we'll turn back, and to hell with Ainslee, Fosdick and the whole Foreign Service! In case Mrs. Winston awakens before we return, tell her not to worry."

WITH only Hagu's indefinite directions to guide them, Roy and Willoughby plunged through the dense underbrush of the jungle. High-powered carbines were slung over their shoulders and .44's stuck from their hip holsters. An hour out, Roy, who was breaking trail with a short, curved sabre, stopped suddenly and motioned to Willoughby to draw up. A thousand feet ahead, the jungle pall was broken by the oblique rays of the sun.

"I think I see huts," Roy whispered. "Come on, but take it easy."

They moved on, their right

hands resting on the heavy butts of their revolvers. A hundred yards from the clearing, Roy stopped again. Now, the cluster of jungle dwellings was plainly visible. He could see figures moving about between the huts. Out came his field glasses and he trained them on the colony.

"There's a white man there!" he gasped. "It looks like Hoffman! Damn it, if it is we're sure playing in luck!" He passed the glasses over to Willoughby. "Here, take a look."

Willoughby raised the glasses to his eyes. Roy looked up as an unusual noise in the thick branches of the *baobab* tree above him attracted his attention. His face froze.

"Willoughby! *Look out!*" he screamed, ducking and drawing his .44 in the same motion. *Crack!* A shot rang out, but the singing pellet of lead missed the weaving target sliding down from the tree branch. Before Roy could pull the trigger again, the tentacle of the python's tail was wrapped around Willoughby's body, drawing it into the air. Trapped in the bone-crushing coil of muscle, Willoughby shrieked. His feet kicked frantically as he fought to release his arms, pinned to his sides by the reptile's spring-steel body.

Roy's revolver barked again but the shot went wide. The blacks in the *Wamasai* village had already heard Willoughby's cries and were coming on the run, spears poised.

Cold sweat poured out all over Roy's body. He knew he was trapped between two deaths. For a fleeting moment he thought of

Joan. Willoughby's agonized screams beat against his eardrums. He slipped the carbine from his shoulders, leveled it at the Sergeant's suspended body and pumped three bullets into it. The cries died with the echo of the shots. It was better that way, Roy thought. Now he turned the gleaming barrel toward the advancing blacks.

They were massed and for every twitch of his forefinger on the light trigger, one of them stepped into a pellet of hot lead. They dropped like flies, but there were too many of them. A spear whistled through the air and buried itself in a tree trunk behind Roy's shoulder. The carbine was almost too hot to hold. The barrel scorched his fingers. He heard a crash and saw Willoughby's body spin through the air and hit the ground. Above him, the python hissed. Saliva dripped from its pink-and-black jaws.

Another spear hurtled towards him, its stone tip cutting a searing, red-hot path through the flesh of his thigh. Out of the welter of noises came the sound of a woman's voice. The python swung down from the tree and in a flash its body was wrapped around Roy's waist. He beat at the sealed coils with the butt of his carbine, but the rifle dropped from his inert fingers as the air was forced from his chest. A black film formed before his eyes. Again he heard the woman's voice . . . faintly. His lips shaped a fitful cry. "Joan . . . Joan!"

Darkness settled over him.

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Joan stirred in her coma. Her breasts, full and white, jutted from the torn bodice of her blouse. The lush woman-flesh of her thighs, their alabaster smoothness marred by bramble scratches, drew the German like a magnet. It was cool now, free of the ravaging heat of fever.

Hoffman rose and peered out the door of the hut Moolah had given him. A few black women were in sight, nobody else. Returning to Joan's side, he dropped down beside her again. She moaned softly.

IT WAS dark when Roy Winston cracked the tortured lids of his eyes and looked up into the admiring face of Moolah. A pine pitch torch burned at one end of the hut, giving off a ghostly light and clouds of acrid smoke. He remembered everything vividly. The python . . . poor Willoughby's death shrieks . . . and the slimy coils about his own body. How . . . how had he escaped? Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the flickering light. He tried to move, but a sharp pain in his thigh

weakened him. The spear!

"Moolah save you from Devil God," a voice whispered.

Roy's mind shot back to Joan. Was she all right? Safe? By some miracle, he was alive. He *had* to get back to the encampment! He sat up.

"Rest, White man," Moolah cautioned.

Roy's arms shot out and twisted about Moolah's neck. Mistaking the movement for a sign of affection, the sensual Abyssinian parted her thick lips to receive his carresses. But Roy had no such plan in mind. Spinning her to the ground, he curled his fingers about her throat.

An Indian had once taught him how to render an enemy unconscious by thumb pressure on the esophagus. A cry escaped Moolah's lips before Roy could find the spot. It died in her throat as he bore down hard, but the damage had been done.

The night became alive with weird savage yells. Unmindful of the excruciating pain in his thigh, Roy scrambled over to the torch and jammed its flaming tip into the dirt. The interior of the hut became pitch dark. He glued his body to the wall, his right hand still clutching the smoking torch. Something metallic brushed against his foot. Bending, he groped for it. A gasp of amazement escaped his lips as his fingers contacted cold steel . . . a revolver . . . *his* revolver. The butt slipped into his palm and he stood erect again.

Dark figures appeared at the hut door. Roy aimed, set himself for the backlash of the heavy gun and



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waited for the first savage to enter the door. He was thinking how lucky he was the entrance was narrow. He could pop them one at a time until the weapon was empty. Then . . . then . . . He tried not to think of what would happen after that.

Tensed, he waited. Why in hell didn't they start coming in? The answer came with a familiar hiss and the weaving outline of the python's head against the gray-black sky. Roy's finger clicked on the trigger. The revolver spat flame but the zooming bullet tore harmlessly through the palm leaf wall. It was impossible to score a hit on that dipping, swaying target and he was wasting bullets.

A thought flashed through Roy's mind. Leaping to the center of the hut he lifted Moolah's supine body in his arms and flung it at the reptile. The flat head shot forward, the jaws gaped and the woman's brown legs vanished into the wet maw. Roy slid along the wall until he was close to the door. Then, summoning all his strength, he left the ground, hurtled over the python's coils and out the door. He could hear the snake threshing about inside the hut. A torch one of the savages had dropped smouldered on the dry ground. Roy picked it up, swung it to fan the flame and then hurled it to the roof of the hut.

Instantly the dry thatch caught. In a moment the hut was a blazing inferno and from the heart of it came a maniacal scream. A coil of fire shot out the door as the py-

thon, its body burning, strove madly to escape. In the eerie light, its head seemed to have grown and taken on human shape. Roy chilled as he realized what it was. It was Moolah's head, protruding from the snake's mouth! Her body was wedged tight in the python's throat! He was choking to death on his mistress!

Roy turned away as the fire licked at the woman's face. The savages were all down on their stomachs, prostrated at the weird vision. Only one of them stood erect and a rifle was glued to his shoulder.

Roy ducked as the gun spoke. From his new position he could see a white hand on the barrel of the rifle. Hoffman! *Ping!* A bullet spat into the dirt at his feet. Up came the revolver. It roared into the flame-lit night and Hoffman crumpled up, a bullet through his left eye.

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Roy's arm came about Joan's waist and he drew her close. "We'll take it, sir," he replied, "but from now on it's the Devil God Diamond, just to remind us of things."

Joan shivered perceptibly. Disregarding the presence of the blustering Inspector, she twined her arms about Roy's neck and gave him her lips.



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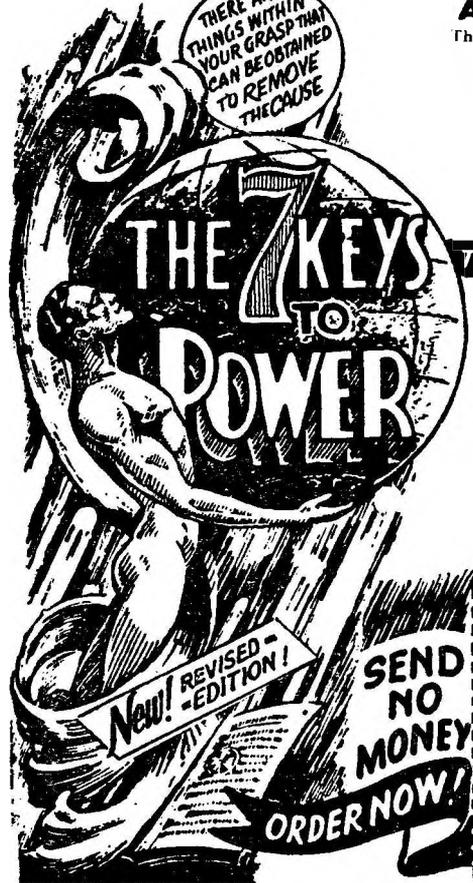
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Box of Death

[Continued from page 93]

won't cross the line." He dashed around the clump of buildings on the United States side, took the wheel of his parked car and in a moment had it whipped around. Bernice swung to the running board before he could slow down to pick her up.

THEY drove toward Yuma. Cragston engaged a cabin at a tourist's camp. At that early hour, it was easy to slip Bernice from the car without her tattered negligée being noticed. Later in the morning, Cragston went out and returned with enough clothing to permit her to appear in public.

Half an hour later Cragston was heading his V-8 across an *arroyo* and toward a cleft in the foothills of the Gil range. Thorn-bridling *ocatillas* swayed like menacing clusters of flame crested serpents in the blistering desert breeze, and gigantic *sahuaros* lifted grotesque, threatening arms. Cragston braked to a halt at the foot of a knoll that was crowned by the graying timbers and rusting machinery of a twenty-stamp mill: the abandoned Aces-Up mine in whose barren depths Jim Gregory claimed to have discovered a fresh outcropping of ore.

The walls of the adjoining ravine were pock-marked with prospect shafts, but the only sign of life was a horned toad darting for cover. Cragston halted at one of the wooden columns of the towering ore bin. He indicated a non-

liability notice posted there, which stated that the Aces-Up Mining Company had leased to James H. Gregory "all that certain mine and mining property situated in the Gila Mining District, County of Yuma, and described as follows—"

He glanced at the date. Then he scaled the steep wall of the ravine, and from an adjoining knoll studied the lay of the land. He found a recently staked claim. A vein cropped out there, and as far as Cragston could tell at that stage of the work, it dipped down and toward the Aces-Up. He estimated the distance, and began to see a motive for murdering Jim Gregory. The names posted on the new claim bore no resemblance to Mendoza; but that meant nothing. He fairly slid down the steep slope.

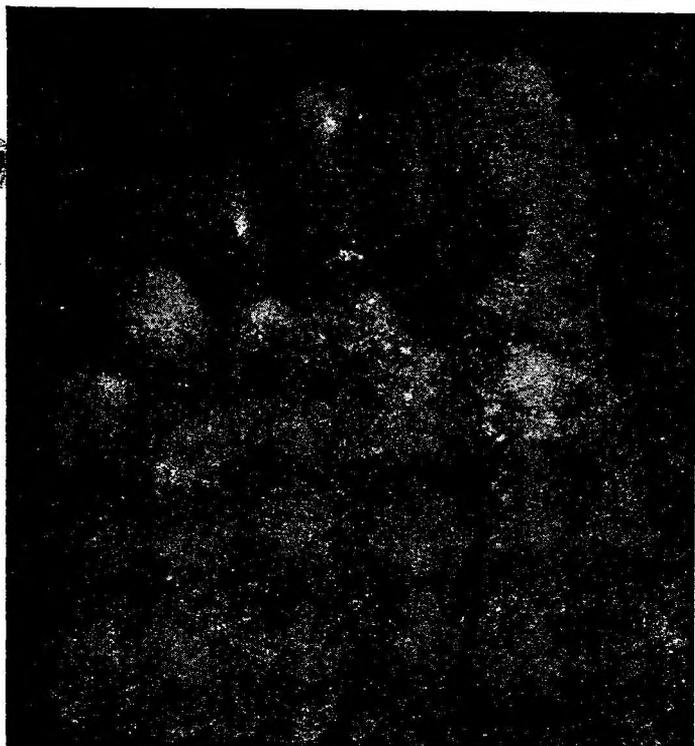
"Just one more move, and I'll have it," Cragston said. "Here's the point: if Jim Gregory relocated a new vein in the abandoned Aces-Up, by law he is entitled to work that vein for three thousand feet, *no matter where it leads*. In other words, the fellow up on the knoll discovered the other end of the vein that Jim found underground. The distance is less than three thousand feet from the Aces-Up drifts. So Gregory was killed to keep him from invalidating the claim up on the hill. Get it?"

Bernice took it for granted.

"I'm going down," continued

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Cragston, "to see what Jim Gregory found. Then I'm declaring open season on the guys that staked that claim up there."

He turned to the winze, which sloped at a steep slant into the black depths of the earth. Bernice shivered as she saw the unplumbed darkness. Cragston seized the hoist cable to give him a hold for the descent of the slippery slope. Despite his protests, Bernice followed him. "I'd rather be with you than alone, up here."

AT LAST they reached the bottom level; but before following the drift that led to the discovery shaft, near the stamp mill, Cragston saw that something had broken the fine film of dust that still coated the other passages. Occasional chunks of quartz lay in the trail. The direction indicated was toward the claim he had seen on the adjoining knoll. Cragston presently halted, jabbed the beam of his light here and there as though seeking a missing landmark.

"Looks like just another tunnel," said Bernice. "Only it's lower than the others."

"That's just it! He followed a hunch and working single handed, he cut a drift in an entirely new direction."

Cragston sank to his knees. "Stay here."

"Oh, Lord," she protested. "It's so dark."

"Stay here!" barked Cragston, "or I'll sock you! You can't tell what I'll find. Something not so pleasant to look at."

Cragston's advance was short. The white glare revealed streaked,

brown quartz. A hammer and drill lay close at hand. In the face of the drift Cragston saw a round hole that had been bored for the blast that was to loosen another yard of the glass hard rock. He snatched a hammer, pounded off a chunk and saw dull, yellowish flakes.

Gold. Lots of it.

He crawled back. He found Bernice looking sick and white-faced.

"What's the matter?"

"I caught a whiff of air coming from the other direction. It set me thinking." She shuddered. "I struck some matches and followed the odor"—Cragston caught her by the arm. He knew what she had found.

"Jim?"

"Yes. Oh . . . it was awful—" She swallowed hard, then added, "Knifed. Lying near a case of dynamite he'd been opening."

"Let's go," said Cragston. "Nothing to do but get Mendoza."

And then Cragston saw that they had blundered into a trap. There was a wavering gleam that stopped just short of the turn around which Bernice had ventured. He heard a muffled footfall, and voices muttering in Spanish.

"Run for the ladder!" he whispered. "I'll hold 'em."

The harshness of his voice forbade protest. But Bernice presently returned. By the momentary flicker of his carefully shaded flashlight Cragston saw the pallor of her face and the despair in her eyes.

"The first length of the ladder is gone," she said. "They must have taken it out."

"Flatten out!" he hissed as a lantern just cleared the angle to tempt him to fire. "If the Aces-Up is going to be a graveyard, I'll make it one in a big way. Listen, Funny Face—keep out of sight, and if they get me, you can sneak out after them, when they leave. They came in through the other shaft."

A pistol echoed in the drift. Lead smacked against the wall. Cragston's .45 jumped into line. He poured bullets at the dark figure that had ventured beyond cover. He dropped to the floor as the enemy fairly hosed the drift with lead; but the jets of fire came from the opposite wall of the passage-way.

They had tricked him with a dummy.

The lantern glow winked out. Cragston heard a stealthy rustling in the dark. He listened, localized it, and fired from the shelter of the outcropping rock. He heard his bullets ricochet. Fire again spurted from the blackness, but it was nearer, and now came from the other side of the tunnel. They were zigzagging in on him.

Cragston was nearly out of cartridges. There was a deadly, sinister silence. He suddenly felt utterly alone in the darkness. Bernice must have taken his advice. If she escaped, vengeance would be assured. She knew enough. Then he heard a faint rustling behind him.

HE HAD to advance. If they got him now, they would discover Bernice before she found a hiding place. Cragston muffled the flashlight with his hat. Then he locked

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the catch, and laid light and hat on the floor against the opposite wall. He removed his shoe laces, spliced them, and tied one end into a hole he punched into his hat brim. That done, he crept forward, holding the lace.

He gained a yard before the hat was jerked clear. Pistols crackled. Lead spattered about the flashlight. He bounded forward, his advance masked by the echoing fire; but halfway to the enemy, his trick was discovered. He heard a yell, rolled clear as bullets smacked against the rocky walls. He felt the searing stab of lead and the stinging laceration of splintered quartz; but before the snipers could pick him off, Cragston leaped to his feet, pistol blazing. A slug tore into his shoulder. White hot jabs grazed his ribs and seared his legs. Cragston, desperate with pain and wrath, jerked his last shot into the confusion.

He heard a mortal yell and gurgling exhalation. His final shot had doubled someone in a heap. Cragston flung himself aside as a volley riddled the darkness.

"Pedro! Tomas! You fools, kill him!" yelled a frenzied voice. "His gun's empty."

Their fire had not extinguished the flashlight he had laid on the floor. By its beam Cragston recognized Mendoza, following his men into the open. His brain exploded in a simmering fire of rage. Half blinded by blood streaming from his creased scalp, he plunged forward, smashing right and left with his empty pistol. Mendoza's men were caught off guard. Their hastily jerked shots went wild.

Cragston's insane, zigzagging charge carried him through the swaying line. The force of his rush brought him crashing against the angle of the drift, half a dozen yards beyond, before he could turn to close in again. The impact knocked him flat, stunned and helpless.

Mendoza yelled. They whirled; but before they could close in, an explosion shook the drift. There was a surge of flame and a roar that drowned all outcries. Cragston felt as though he had been crushed by a pile driver. Hot, nitrous fumes seared his eyes and nostrils. Blackness closed about him.

Cragston's next perception was a gleam of light. He stirred, cursed, seized his empty pistol.

"It's all over," said a trembling voice. Bernice was beside him. "I thought you were still by the flashlight. The shadows fooled me. I'd gone back to where Jim's body lay by the case of dynamite. I took a couple of sticks and put on a short fuse. Lit it with Jim's cigarette lighter which I took when you weren't looking this morning. I thought I was throwing the bomb over your shoulder, not at you, in the midst of the tangle. Oh, Lord, I might have blown you to pieces if you hadn't broken through them!"

She was sobbing hysterically.

"Nuts!" grumbled Cragston. "I'm leaking like a sieve, but otherwise okay. Give me a lift. I can find the way out."

Half leading, half dragging Cragston, Bernice picked the way with the flashlight which had somehow survived the explosion.

"The blast got Mendoza," she said as they emerged from a tunnel opening into the ravine. She boosted him into the car. Then, taking the wheel: "Did Jim really find a rich vein?"

"Filthy with gold," said Cragston. "So Jim's widow is damn well taken care of."

"She's already been taken care of."

There was something odd about Bernice's soft laugh. Cragston shook off his dizziness and sharply eyed her.

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking of last night, in San Luisito. You see, I'm Jim's widow—"

"What? Why the devil—how—"

"Because," she explained, "I'd seen Jim's snapshots of you. He left the cigarette lighter at home when he went to Yuma. I lied about being a narcotic agent, otherwise you'd never have let me carry on with my scheme. I didn't know it'd wind up this quick."

"And another thing. I knew last night that until you'd actually found Jim's body, you'd keep me at a distance, instead of—"

"Never mind the other reasons," said Cragston. "When we get back to that tourist's camp, you'll find out Jim's widow hadn't even begun to be taken care of! And that goes from now on and always."

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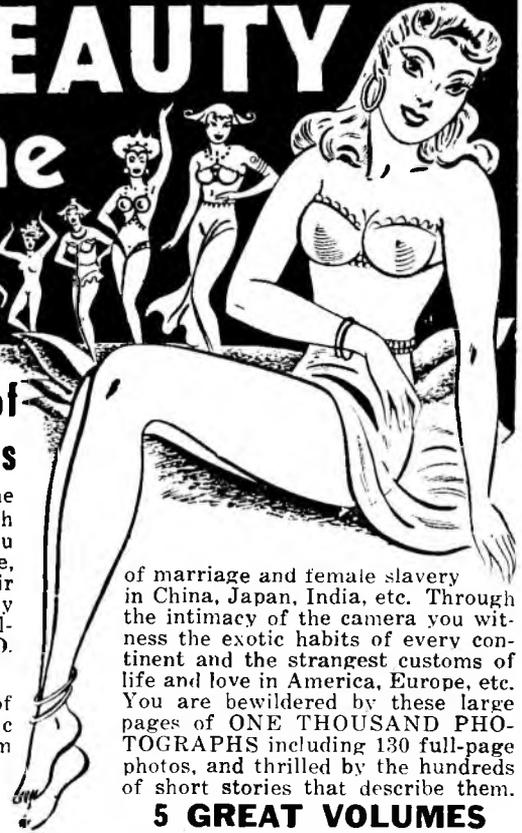
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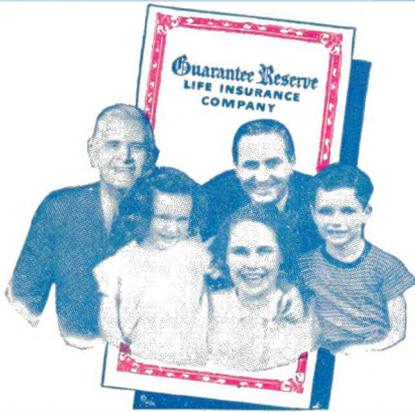


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