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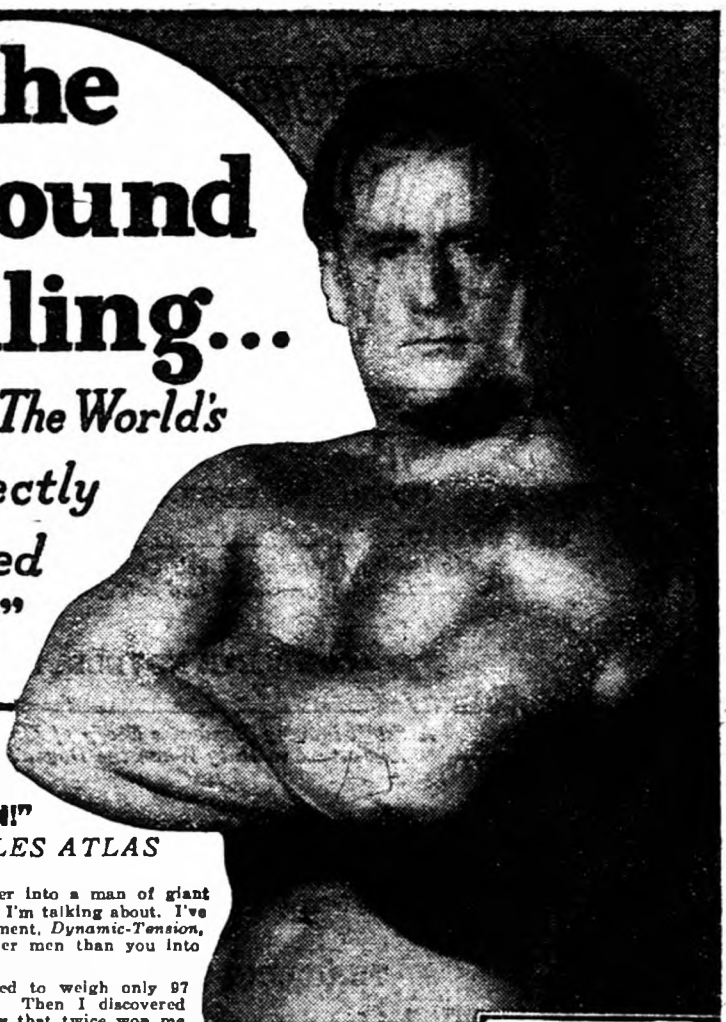

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THRILLING ADVENTURES

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CHAPTER I

One Black Cat On a Dead Man's Chest

R-r-r-r-ow-w-w-w!

The clear, thin, mournful sound, now rising, now falling, fled through the stillness of the tropical night like a wailing cry of a soul lost in hell.

Sergeant Flaherty looked up from the pages of *The History of Panama* reposing on his knees and transfixed the clock on the guard house wall with a blue-eyed stare. The black hands of its aged, brown-streaked face indicated the hour of four in the morning.

The clock ticked loudly, tinnily, normally. Through the darkened doorway on the sergeant's right spurted the snores of the men of the two guard reliefs off duty for the moment. Glancing through this doorway, Flaherty saw dim forms of soldiers stretched out on dim cots.

MAGIC

By
LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER
Author of "Dangerous Heritage," etc.

The sergeant of the guard recrossed his stubby legs on the top of the desk and resumed the reading of the book. An unshaded electric bulb, the sole light in the guard house, hung down from the ceiling at the end of a black cord and cast a glare on the book's white pages.

It also illuminated the bald top of Flaherty's head.

"The City of Panama was the richest city in the New World. From its treasure houses came much gold, silver, and jewels, which were transported to the Mother Country by the galleons of Old Spain.

"In the year 1671, the notorious English buccaneer, Henry Morgan, sacked Panama with much cruelty and bloodshed. The capture of the city was followed by a terrible conflagration, which leveled nearly all of it to the ground. Only the blackened, smoking walls of the stone government buildings, churches, and monasteries were left standing. To this day, visitors to Panama may travel to the outskirts of the new city and view the old, a large area of gray, ghostly ruins presided over by the lonely, square tower of Saint Anastasio.

"The wealth which Morgan and his buccaneers derived from wrecking the city is incalculable. There were gold and silver bullion, hundreds of thousands of 'pieces of eight,' precious church ornaments, priceless emeralds. It is known that over two hundred asses were used to carry this booty across the Isthmus.

"Yet it is a fact that the English buccaneers secured only a part of the vast wealth that had been in the city. Prior to the entry to the city by the pirates, many Spaniards fled to ship, taking with them their families and their fortunes. These hid themselves in the jungles of the near-by islands of Panama Bay. Most of them were later found by the pirates and tortured cruelly to make them give over the hiding places of their valuables. Some yielded, but there were also some who did not, preferring to suffer all manner of death than to enrich further the fiends that had already brought them so much of hell.

"Even to this time, it is said that the lovely tropical islands in the Bay of Panama keep well the secret of the hiding places of the treasures deposited on them by the long-forgotten Dons of New

Spain. Many treasure hunts have been organized. . . . "

At this point in his reading, Sergeant Flaherty lifted his big head. His blue eyes stared dreamily at the wall. Buried treasure. His heart quickened a little. There came into his mind's eye a picture of vivid green islands embedded in a hard blue, glittering sea.

In the course of radio maneuvers, he had been on nearly all of them. Perhaps he had been within a stone's throw of the treasure of some old Don undisturbed these last three centuries.

R-r-r-r-ow-w-w-w!

The prolonged cry swelled and died, carried on the invisible wings of darkness. It cut through the night, and through the screened door of the guard house. It seemed a wail that could come from no earthly throat.

Flaherty's eyes lost their dreamy look. He could not repress a quick, cold shiver. A frown established itself on his broad, reddish face.

"Bulaski!" he called softly. "Corporal Bulaski!"

There was a stir in the room where the soldiers lay sleeping, a creaking of cot springs. There were sounds of feet stumbling across the floor, and then Bulaski, corporal of the relief on post, stood in the connecting doorway.

"Yes, Sergeant?"

HIS hands passed up and down his long, lean body in effort to smooth down the wrinkles in his crumpled uniform. They went finally to his shock of thick, black, disordered hair and pushed it up from his thin, flushed, sleep-strained face.

At that moment, the weird cry from outside occurred again.

"Sergeant, what's that?" demanded the corporal hoarsely. His black eyes glittered in a face suddenly gone white. He trembled visibly.

Flaherty laughed grimly, a little contemptuously.

"It's a cat. What did you think it was?"

"Oh!" Bulaski's faint grin was sheepish. "It sounded—it sounded like—well, these tropical nights give me the creeps anyway!"

"Yes, I know." Flaherty was slightly sarcastic. "It sounded like the old devil himself. The confounded thing is howling bloody murder some place along the Officers' Line. If we don't get busy, first thing we know we'll be getting a telephone call to shut him up—and a bawling out besides. Who's sentry on that post?"

"Kennedy, I think, out of D Battery."

Flaherty took his feet from the desk and replaced them with the *History of Panama.*

"He must be asleep or he'd have chased that yowling beast before now. Hold down this chair while I go have a look-see."

Flaherty took his campaign hat from a peg in the wall and his rifle from a rack in a corner.

"I'll teach these recruits to fall asleep on post!" he muttered.

FLAHERTY took the road behind the officers' quarters. To one side of him the backs of the two-story cement houses showed a ghostly gray through the darkness. No lights burned in any of them. To his other side was a hedge, a high wall, blacker than the night.

Intensified by the newly fallen dew, the strange, exotic scent of frangipani, somewhat like the perfume of red jasmine, came from the hedge and persisted in Flaherty's wide, Hibernian nose.

The moon and the stars had withdrawn their silver glow from the

world. The road was deep in pitch blackness and more silent than a cemetery path at midnight. The hour, the darkness, the silence occasionally ruptured by the irregularly spaced wails of the cat, could not help but eerily impress the sergeant of the guard. He shifted his Springfield rifle from his right shoulder to his left, said a few mental curses against the delinquent sentry, and groped nervously at his pocket for his flashlight.

Halfway down the line of houses he paused to listen. If the sentry were about and moving, the sounds he made should be heard. Flaherty strained his ears but heard nothing.

THEN, suddenly and startingly, seeming to come from under his very feet, there was a cry that began low, and rapidly rose higher and stronger until it punctured Flaherty's eardrums, rasped over his strained nerves like a file, and caused him to leap backward as if he were attacked.

With crawling scalp and with his blood tingling in his arms and legs, he leveled his flashlight and pushed the button.

What the white beam revealed on the smooth, green lawn of the house slowed the beating of his heart and nearly pulled his eyes from his head. Just off the corner of the house the sentry lay on his back, both arms outflung.

The part of the sight most horrible, most chilling, most revolting, was the huge, black cat sitting on its haunches on the sentry's chest. The animal was as motionless as a gleaming, carved, ebony image. But its eyes were the eyes of a devil as they glowed a phosphorescent green and stared, rounded full and unblinking, into the flashlight's glare.

For a long, silent moment the man and the cat regarded each other. Then with suddenness and flowing speed, with the silence and unreality of an apparition, the cat raised itself to four feet, arched its back to a high, short bridge, and lifted its tail to a stiff, thick brush.

It hissed and spat. It gave a single, great bound, which took it from the sentry's chest into the nothing of the night's blackness. It was gone.

FOR another moment Flaherty, as one under a hypnotic spell, stared at the spot into which the black cat had vanished.

Fear's icy hands fondled Flaherty's heart and his knees trembled. For the first time in many, many adult years, his memory revived phantoms out of the weird tales he had heard as an awed child at an Irish hearth while the winter wind from over the black, leprechaun-haunted moors whined and groaned around the eaves of his father's cote.

This sudden releasing of the superstitions of his forebears had such a tremendous influence on Flaherty that a conviction momentarily rose within him that he had seen the devil himself.

Then Flaherty shook his head violently and became again Sergeant Flaherty, U. S. Army. Ghosts, leprechauns, evil spirits and devils belonged to an old and distant Ireland. This was an American army post, very solidly and matter-of-factly placed at the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal.

He approached the sentry and squatted beside him to make an examination. The body was warm, but the heart had ceased to beat. Flaherty had seen enough dead men to know one when he saw him. Pri-

vate Kennedy, Battery D, was surely dead.

Flaherty straightened. It looked like a death from natural cause. Possibly heart failure. It must have been that Private Kennedy had been suddenly seized by a heart attack while walking post, and had collapsed in his tracks. Flaherty noted that Kennedy's body was well in on the lawn of an officer's house.

THE sergeant played the beam of his flashlight across the side of the house. His eyebrows lifted when he recognized the dwelling. It was the quarters of Colonel Richardson, commanding officer of the fort.

The grim and testy colonel would get into a fine stew when he was made acquainted with the information that a sentinel had died on his lawn during the night!

Flaherty halted the light beam. It was focused on an upper story window, out of which a pair of lace curtains fluttered to the will of the breeze that was growing stronger with the coming dawn.

The sergeant puckered his eyebrows. He felt that there was something odd about those curtains, yet he could not determine why. Suddenly it burst into his mind. All windows in the tropics were kept religiously screened. Here was one that was not!

Flaherty looked up again. The wraith-like curtains billowing out through the open window impressed him considerably. They gave him an unreasonable, unwelcome feeling that something was decidedly not right about them.

His mind took a strange belief that they were visible sleeves for invisible arms, waving, beckoning, appealing.

The other windows of the upper story of the house were screened. The curtains beyond them were neat and natural, restrained by tiebacks.

At last Flaherty lowered his light. He shrugged his broad shoulders slightly. What was so unnatural about a window without a screen? Perhaps it had been taken out for a hole to be mended.

That was common enough. And certainly the house looked as if its occupants were sleeping soundly and securely. They would be unaware until the day that a sentry had died on their lawn.

Flaherty was somewhat irritated with himself. He diagnosed his trouble as a bad case of nerves brought on by finding the sentry—and the cat.

ODD that it had been a black cat, an omen of disaster and death! He could not recall ever having seen a black cat like that around the post. But who knew what cats there were? Certainly that one had lived up to the reputation of its kind—sitting there on a dead man's chest and wailing like a lost soul.

"Poor fellow!" muttered Flaherty, turning his light on the dead man's face again. For the first time he closely examined the sentry's features. Kennedy was hardly more than a boy. He had been a recruit out of the last batch from the States.

Now his campaign hat was crushed beneath his blond head. His staring eyes gleamed like blue marbles in the white glare of the flashlight. His mouth was opened wide and his youthful face somewhat distorted, as if he had struggled hard to hold on to his last breath.

Suddenly Flaherty stared and bent closer, pushing the light to within a foot of the dead sentry's right cheek. Prominently on the cheek bone were several thin scratches, in shape and

direction much like the ribs on the top of a cockleshell or a scallop. Faint traces of blood were in the bottoms of the grooves of the scratches. They looked very much to be the work of an angry cat's paw.

The sergeant drew in his breath sharply, and an icicle seemed to drop from his heart to the pit of his stomach.

"You—down there! What's the trouble?"

The voice, laden with irritation, coming so unexpectedly out of the still darkness, jolted every nerve in Flaherty's thick frame. He straightened to his feet immediately.

CHAPTER II

The Second Black Cat

THE beam of Flaherty's flashlight, darting up the vall of the house, discovered the lean, pajama-clad form of Colonel Richardson at a window next to the one where curtains were still billowing. The officer's thin, gray hair was in wispy disorder. His long, grim face was suspicious.

"Sergeant of the guard, sir," explained Flaherty respectfully. "I was looking for Private Kennedy and I found him—dead here, on post, sir."

"What! Wait till I get down there!"

The colonel vanished from the window. A moment later the back door of the house banged, and he appeared coming across the lawn, his dressing gown flapping around his thin, bare shanks. His slippers pressed the wet grass without a sound.

For a moment he silently surveyed the body outstretched on the ground.

"Tell me what happened, Sergeant."

Flaherty inclined his head toward the body.

"I found him here, sir—and a big black cat sitting on him."

Colonel Richardson glanced obliquely at the sergeant of the guard.

"A black cat!"

"Yes, sir. A black cat," insisted Flaherty stubbornly. "It must have scratched him, too. See the claw marks on his face."

THE sergeant held the light while the officer bent over to look. The colonel's old, gaunt body doubled over, made a curious, black shadow on the lawn. Flaherty's eyes started to pass over it, and then hesitated. The shadow brought to his mind another shadow he had once seen—a shadow of a vulture on a rock.

The officer straightened.

"Sergeant, this is very strange!"

"Yes, sir."

"No marks of violence of any kind?"

"None, sir—unless you can call that cat scratch one."

Colonel Richardson shook his head impatiently.

"Gruesome, damned cat!" he said. "I hate the creatures!"

He glanced at Sergeant Flaherty.

"I'm going into the house and telephone the hospital. You stay here with the body."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant hesitated, and then threw his light upon the window with the fluttering curtain. The colonel stopped and stared at him questioningly.

"Those curtains, sir," began Flaherty doubtfully. "I was wondering—"

"Wondering what?" snapped the officer irritably. "That's my daughter's room."

Flaherty was plainly embarrassed,

but the colonel, grim-faced, waited for him to go on.

"I guess it's just nerves, sir. Finding this man dead like this, and all. But those curtains looked kind of funny to me. There's no screen on the window."

Now Colonel Richardson studied the window.

"No screen! That *is* odd, Sergeant! The last time I noticed, it was there.

"Well," he concluded briskly, evidently dismissing the absent screen from his mind, "you stay here until the ambulance comes."

The colonel melted into the darkness and Flaherty heard the back door close behind him.

It was less than a minute when Flaherty heard the colonel's voice again.

"Sergeant!"

THE hoarse tone of that single word caused Flaherty to jerk his light upward and his eyes to stare in the track of the beam. They saw the officer's gray head between the loose curtains.

"Come up here!"

Colonel Richardson and his wife were standing together by the door when Flaherty, out of breath, entered the bedroom. Mrs. Richardson, in contrast with her husband, was short and stout.

He had his arm about her and she was sniffling in terror against his bony shoulder. For once she had no care if another man besides her husband saw her thin, frizzy, blonde hair in tin curlers, and her plump, ridged figure let loose in a nonconfining pink, silk nightgown.

"Agnes!" she whimpered over and over again. "Oh, Agnes! My poor, little girl! Find her, Harry!" she begged her husband.

"There! There! Hush, now. We'll find her."

Colonel Richardson's bony hand patted his wife's plump, sloped shoulder. His blue eyes, from beneath gray, shaggy bushes of eyebrows, stared into Sergeant Flaherty's face.

With one look Flaherty comprehended the room. It was completely feminine, frilly. There were pink, satin-shaded boudoir lamps. On the vanity dresser silver frames boxed photographs of boyish faces surmounting smart uniforms. Agnes Richardson had barely turned eighteen, and possessed more than enough golden beauty to attract all eligible lieutenants.

What drew the sergeant's stare, like a target draws a bullet, was that which sat on the bed. The silken coverlet was turned down; the pillows were indented. The bed had been occupied by a human being.

But no human being occupied it now. Flaherty felt the short hairs rise at the back of his neck. Once more his heart pumped ice water in place of blood. Just below a pillow sat a big, black cat.

The immobile animal was an exact counterpart of the one which had sat astride the chest of Kennedy, the dead sentry.

Gravely the cat's sea-green, unblinking eyes studied the trio by the door. Within their depths there seemed to be a mockery, a silent, sinister calculation.

SUDDENLY Flaherty dived for it. might as well have attempted to catch the wind. The animal became two silent, black arcs, one of which began in the bed and terminated on top of the vanity, the other from the vanity through the window into the night.

The colonel swallowed thickly and

audibly. He tried to speak, but nothing passed out of his thin, gray lips but a hoarse "Uh—uh."

Then Mrs. Richardson fainted suddenly.

CHAPTER III

Suspicion In the High Places

DETECTIVE James Hoarlogue of the Canal Zone Police was the unfortunate possessor of that type of personality which instantly grates for no definite reason, upon introduction.

It does not become less obnoxious as acquaintanceship progresses. Apparently Detective Hoarlogue was unaware of this himself, for he blustered on with all whom he knew as if he were the most prized acquaintance anyone could have.

Naturally he was not popular, either with the civilian workers of the Panama Canal Zone, or with the members of the military garrison protecting that greatest artery of international commerce. It was said, behind his back, that he had been run out of the New York City detective force for want of a certain amount of decent discrimination in politics.

He was a heavy-built man of medium height. His dark-complexioned face showed purplish pimples just under the skin. His thick, dark red, sensual lips were forever nursing the stub of a cigar which never knew the light of a match.

He should have worn a black derby, but since this was Panama, six degrees north of the Equator, he wore a generous-brimmed, and more than slightly-soiled, Panama hat.

THIS he now pushed over his forehead and on to his greasy-looking, black hair. His shrewd, bright, black, little eyes shot around the meager furnishings of Colonel Richardson's office on the second floor of the headquarters building of the fort.

His gaze finally came to rest on the colonel's drawn, gray face behind the desk. The stubby cigar rolled from one corner of the detective's mouth to the other.

"Colonel Richardson, in the last two days since the disappearance of *your* daughter—"

Hoarlogue paused, took the cigar out of his mouth and squinted at it. Nevertheless, from under his black eyebrows he saw the officer start at the emphasis he had laid on the personal pronoun.

"—I have secured some rather peculiar information," continued the detective, looking up again. "Why is it not generally known in the Army that your daughter is not your daughter at all? Her name is not Agnes Richardson, but Agnes Stoner. She is no relation to you other than by marriage. She is the daughter of your wife by a previous marriage."

COLONEL RICHARDSON leaned tensely over his desk, his bloodshot eyes staring at the detective. Across his narrow chest his polished Sam Browne belt and its brass buckle gleamed and glittered in the midday glare of the tropical sunlight pouring into the office.

"How did you find that out?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Humph! That's my business."

Colonel Richardson's long gray fingers clasped together convulsively on the top of his desk. For a moment he bowed his lean, gray head upon them.

"Yes," he said. "It is true. Agnes is not my daughter, but," he added, "I could have loved her no more if she had been my flesh-and-blood

child. Her father was a rake, a dissolute good-for-nothing—"

AH, well," the officer controlled himself. "My wife divorced him when Agnes was just a baby. Not long afterward we were married. Agnes has always preferred my name, and to be known as my daughter."

"Her father was very wealthy?" asked Hoarlogue smoothly.

Richardson shot him a lightning glance.

"He was," he answered shortly.

The detective watched the officer keenly. There was that in Hoarlogue's manner which would have reminded an observer of a sleek, confident kitchen tabby toying with an old, gray, bony mouse.

"William Stoner never remarried," stated Hoarlogue, as if he were telling a story of a friend. "He died in the United States; New York City, to be exact, about three months ago. He left behind him a rather tremendous fortune, about a million dollars.

"A lot of money," reflected Hoarlogue thoughtfully, sucking at his cigar.

The colonel was pointedly silent.

"William Stoner had no relatives near enough to matter—only his daughter, Agnes Stoner. He left all that money to her. It was left in trust for her until she became eighteen years of age. Then she was to have complete control of that vast fortune."

Hoarlogue sighed.

"Three days after she became eighteen, she disappeared."

There was a full minute of silence. Both men remained practically immobile, the colonel staring fixedly at some point on the top of his desk; Hoarlogue closing his lips lovingly around his cigar and narrowing his eyes upon the officer.

"Is it not strange, Colonel," asked Hoarlogue, taking the cigar from his lips and leaning forward, "that apparently no one in the Canal Zone knew anything about this huge bequest? Most people would have been somewhat affected by inheriting that amount of money. They would have talked. Yet—" He shrugged his thick shoulders.

BY heaven!" The colonel smote his desk with his fist. "Agnes wanted to forget that she was a daughter of William Stoner. She didn't want anyone to know. He was a drunken—"

Richardson stopped suddenly. He had looked deeply into Hoarlogue's black eyes.

"By—by—heaven!" he gasped. His face went ashy white. "You—you think I had something to do with Agnes' disappearance! You—you—"

Hoarlogue stood up to leave. His Panama hat was in his hand. A faint, a very faint sarcastic smile curved around his cigar.

"A million dollars," he said significantly, "is a lot of money—a lot of money. Less than that has caused stranger things than this to happen. Such a sum might tempt—a saint even."

He got as far as the door when Colonel Richardson left his desk precipitously, like a man who had suddenly made up his mind, and ran across the room. Hoarlogue turned at the tug on his arm.

"Well?" he asked gruffly.

"I don't know whether I should speak of this," began Richardson hesitatingly.

Hoarlogue took his chair again and waited.

"I think, I feel," said the officer at last, "that there might be a man

mixed up in this. A young officer, a first lieutenant in one of the batteries here. His name is John Graling, Lieutenant John Graling."

He paused to eye the detective uncertainly, a little fearfully.

"Ah, well!" he sighed resignedly. "I've been so afraid of scandal. You don't realize how it is in the Army. But I guess enough will come out of this anyway, so a little more won't make any difference.

"Ever since Graling arrived here for duty—that was about a year ago—he has been paying attention to my daughter, that is, Agnes. She seemed to like him well enough, although she knew a number of other junior officers also. Agnes was very pretty, and very popular.

GRALING seemed more serious than the rest. So much so that I finally felt constrained to warn him. Agnes was really just a child, and it would have been foolhardy for her to think of marriage yet. It was a mistake her mother made.

"Graling took it rather hard. So about two weeks ago I gave him a leave of absence to go up into the mountains for a little rest and hunting. I felt sure that when he returned he would see matters sensibly as I did.

"I know that he and Agnes have been corresponding frequently. She was disturbed also. I think—she did like him."

The colonel looked at the detective.

"That's all there is to it. I thought that you should know the truth of it before," emphasized the officer bitterly, "you found out for yourself and drew—worse conclusions. As far as I know, Graling is still up in the mountains. His leave doesn't expire until next Wednesday. What he may know about this disappearance of Agnes—"

Colonel Richardson paused and looked full into Hoarlogue's black gaze.

Hoarlogue took the cigar out of his mouth and laughed unpleasantly.

"Graling isn't up in the mountains," he said, shaking his head. "He's in jail in Balboa. I had him brought down yesterday."

"What!"

Colonel Richardson leaped up from his chair.

HOARLOGUE extracted from a pocket a small object which shone and scintillated in the sunlight, and placed it on the desk in front of the colonel. His eyes watched the officer narrowly.

"Ever see that before?"

Colonel Richardson's thin hands trembled as he picked it up. His eyes were staring out of his head.

"Agnes' r i n g!" he exclaimed hoarsely. He turned accusing, horror-filled eyes on the detective. "Then she is—she is—dead?"

Hoarlogue shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered briefly.

He took the ring between thick thumb and forefinger and examined it. Its plain gold circumference was small. It had fitted a tiny finger. Prongs held a small diamond flanked by two sapphires.

"When did you last see this ring, Colonel Richardson?"

The colonel could not keep his eyes from it. It seemed to fascinate him. When he spoke his voice was hardly stronger than a whisper.

"That, last night at dinner. I saw it on her hand."

"You mean the night she disappeared?"

Richardson nodded his head silently.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Well," Detective Hoarlogue said grimly, "Lieutenant Graling had this ring in his possession when he was taken into custody."

Colonel Richardson wilted into his chair and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Oh, my child!" he groaned. "He murdered her because she wouldn't marry him. He was after her money."

For a long moment Detective Hoarlogue looked down at the officer. The cigar, caressed by his thick lips, remained as steady as if it were some unnatural body growth. Then Hoarlogue turned and silently left the office.

CHAPTER IV

"Where's the Body?"

THE Balboa jail, Panama Canal Zone, is not a pleasant place. The front part of it is given over to a room containing the police sergeant's desk, the detectives' room, an office and a waiting room. The cells are in the rear.

There is a block of them, with a narrow, dark corridor in front. The illumination is very poor. Even when the day outside is brightest, with that strong brilliancy of the tropics, the cells are deep in gloom. The windows are high up, barred, small and dirty.

And it gets terrifically hot in the cells. That makes the smell worse. Unwashed bodies of prisoners hailing from every port of the world. The waterfronts of Balboa and Panama City draws them as a piece of rotten fish draws flies. There are South and Central Americans; Latins; maybe a Nord or two; Indians and Negroes. Many are merely vagrants, but some are criminals: sneak thieves, robbers and murderers.

Lieutenant Graling sat on an iron bunk, with his head buried in his hands. He had been sitting like that for upward of an hour. The heat was stifling in the narrow box of his cell.

A key grated in the lock of the iron door. Graling looked up instantly, his young face a stage for many emotions: hope, dread and fear.

The keeper clanged the door shut behind Sergeant Flaherty and locked it.

Graling sank back on the bunk.

"Oh, Flaherty," he said. He did not attempt to hide his disappointment.

Flaherty's broad face was sober. He removed his campaign hat and wiped the beads of perspiration from his bald head with a huge khaki bandanna. All the while his blue eyes remained fixed upon the officer.

Graling was in Cordovan boots, green drill breeches and a soiled white shirt open at the throat. His uniform blouse and Sam Browne belt lay across the bunk.

WITH a feeling akin to shock, Flaherty studied his lieutenant. He remembered Graling as a tall, stalwart young man, shoulders squared and head up. He saw now an older man, one whose shoulders bent in toward his chest, whose head drooped.

He had never seen Graling's jet black hair other than meticulously combed. Now a barber could not have told where the part had been.

"Lieutenant, sir." Flaherty's voice sounded strange and hollow in the cell. "I came over to see if there was anything we could do for you, sir. Anything at all. The men in the battery are all with you, sir. They don't believe none of this mess of lies flying around."

Flaherty's throat became suddenly

tight, and he found himself unable to utter another word.

Lieutenant Graling stood up. He reached forward and grasped the old sergeant's hard hand.

"I know it, Flaherty," he said huskily. "It—it makes me feel so darned funny to know that the men —my men—are for me. It makes me feel—"

Now his throat, too, got tight. He shook his head and dropped Flaherty's hand.

"A bottle of whisky, sir?" asked the sergeant anxiously. "Sure I could smuggle it in here as easy as pie."

Lieutenant Graling shook his head again.

"Or—a gun, sir?"

Graling stared at Flaherty, and horror grew in his brown eyes.

"A—gun!" he whispered. "So—so that's what you think, too?"

Flaherty said nothing.

"A gun with one shot in it!" Graling cried bitterly. "For an *officer and a gentleman* to blow out his brains with! So he won't have to dangle at the end of a hangman's noose—like any other common murderer.

"Oh!"

The groan was wrenched out of the fibers of his soul. He dropped on the bunk and buried his face in his hands.

FLAHERTY looked down to the floor at his feet. Definitely he felt ashamed of himself. Yet he muttered:

"A man with men is one thing, sir. But a man with a woman is another. The men don't blame you, Lieutenant. It is what you were with us that counts. A woman can turn the best man crazy."

Graling leaped to his feet with blazing eyes and contorted face.

"Get out, Flaherty! Get out of my sight before I—"

The sergeant fell back before the officer's mad fury.

"Lieutenant!" he begged.

Graling's rage left him as suddenly as it had come. His arms fell to his sides. His body became limp. Flaherty thought he would fall.

"I loved her!" cried the officer brokenly. "Can't anybody see that I loved her? How could a man kill the woman he loves? Agnes—*Agnes!*"

Flaherty's big face twitched. His blue eyes stared long and hard at the tortured officer.

Finally, without another word, he turned and rapped on the cell door. The keeper let him out.

FOR a matter of two hours or more Sergeant Flaherty walked the blistering streets of Balboa. His mouth was set in his big, heat-flushed face, in a straight, thinking line. His blue eyes stared down in front of him at the sidewalk, out of which the heat waves danced and shimmered in the sunlight's glare.

Now and then, as a particularly strong thought struck him, he would pause in his tracks, unmindful of passers-by jostling his portly form. He would solemnly remove his campaign hat and wipe his beaded, bald head with the huge khaki bandanna.

As his thoughts led him, his feet finally turned in at the Balboa jail again. He found Detective James Hoarlogue in the office, seated in his shirt sleeves in front of a large roll-top desk.

Sergeant Flaherty took a chair.

"Well?"

Detective Hoarlogue's voice was anything but friendly when he revolved his chair and saw his visitor. There was no love between the Canal Zone police and the military.

"I came to see you about the Richardson case," said Flaherty.

HOARLOGUE was grimly suspicious. His black eyes studied Flaherty keenly. He rolled a stub of a cigar to the opposite corner of his thick lips.

"Yeah? What about it? What do *you* know?"

"Lieutenant Graling had nothing to do with it. He's innocent. And it's a shame to keep him locked up like that. He'll go crazy. He loved that girl."

For a long moment Hoarlogue looked his astonishment.

"What the hell do you know about it?" he finally burst out. "Get out of here and don't waste my time."

"I know Lieutenant Graling," said Flaherty grimly.

"Oh, you do, eh?" sneered Hoarlogue. "Well," he snapped, leaning forward, his eyes mere black pin heads and his cigar clenched between yellow teeth, "I suppose you know we found a ring on him that the girl's father swears was on her hand the night she disappeared?"

Flaherty was visibly taken aback, but he managed to shake his head stubbornly.

"People make mistakes sometimes," he said. "And," he added slowly, "sometimes they make 'em knowingly."

"Eh? What's that? What do you mean by that?"

Flaherty refused to go further, and only shook his big head.

Hoarlogue was exasperated. His black eyes glinted fury.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he spat. "You Army people make me tired. A bunch of stiff-necked dumbbells. Well, we've got you in a hole this time, and it will take a long while for the stink to blow over. You won't be going around here so high and mighty after this, I can tell you."

He stopped for breath and jammed the cigar between his lips. A second later he pulled it out again.

"We've got your lieutenant dead to rights, soldier!"

HE revolved to his desk and turned back with a letter he had pulled from a pigeon-hole.

"This is a letter he wrote her from the mountains. We found it in her room the day after she disappeared."

Taking it, Flaherty was sober-faced. Reading it, his sandy eyebrows lowered into a frown, which grew tighter as he progressed.

Dearest Agnes—

I cannot live without you any longer, I love you so much. Up here in the mountains where it is so quiet, and there is nothing at all to do, the days and nights are torments worse than before.

Your father is wrong, darling. I do not want your money, only you. It is he who is after your money. Can't you see it? That is why he does not want us to get married.

Agnes, come to me. We shall be married up here before anyone knows about it. After that, your father cannot do anything. Please, please. I think I shall go crazy if you don't.

Forever yours,

Jack.

Flaherty handed back the letter in silence.

"Well, what do you think of that?" demanded Hoarlogue. "But wait until you see this one!"

He replaced Graling's letter and drew another one from the pigeon-hole.

"It's from her to him. We found

it in his coat pocket when we nabbed him."

FLAHERTY took the small, delicately tinted and still faintly scented note paper and read:

Jack, dear—

Oh, darling, I don't know what to do or say! Of course I love you—with all my heart—and of course I know it is not the money that matters.

But I'm afraid, Jack. Daddy Richardson is always talking about the terrible mistake mother made in marrying my father. You see, he does not want the same thing to happen to me. I am so young.

I can't get married without Daddy Richardson's consent. I just couldn't, that's all. Please try to understand, Jack, darling.

You poor boy! I will come to you. There is no reason why I, too, should not go to the mountains for a rest.

I don't know whether I should tell Daddy Richardson or not. I think he would try to keep me from going.

But I shall be with you, whether he likes it or not. He will have to take my word that I shall not get married.

So expect me Friday night. I shall be there without fail. Oh, darling—

Always your
Agnes.

Hoarlogue was grinning, the cigar between his teeth, when Sergeant Flaherty looked up from the letter. Hoarlogue's eyelids narrowed his eyes to black slits.

"And on Thursday night she vanished from the face of the earth," he said.

He leaned forward.

"Don't be a fool, Sergeant. The whole thing is as plain as the nose on your face—and, by gosh, that's plain enough!" he laughed, eyeing Flaherty's Hibernian protuberance.

"The girl skipped out Thursday night, doubtlessly intending to write to her parents *after* she got to the mountains. She didn't want to take any chances on being stopped.

"After she met Graling"—Hoarlogue shrugged his sloping shoulders—"who knows what happened?" His eyes hardened. "But I got a good idea. She wouldn't marry Graling. Evidently she was a girl of some character.

"Well, he killed her. It was what the froggies call a *crime passionel.* If he was after her money which I think he was, it makes the cheese more binding. A million bucks is a lot of dough to lose just on account of the obstinacy of a young girl sticking to what might have seemed to him a foolish principle."

Flaherty listened soberly. Then he asked quietly:

"Where's the body?"

CHAPTER V

Follow the Cat

DETECTIVE JAMES HOARLOGUE frowned. He knew, as well as Flaherty, that that was the greatest stumbling block of the case. No murder without a corpse. Hoarlogue took the cigar from his lips and squinted along its length.

"Oh," he said, "we'll find it, don't you worry. Lots of jungle up in the mountains. Plenty of places to hide her. But we'll find it. I got a bunch up there working night and day."

Flaherty considered well before he spoke next. What he was about to say was to him, an old soldier, al-

most like treason to his superior officer. But Flaherty had made up his mind. He had attached his fidelity and unswerving belief to Graling. All others must take their rightful share of suspicion.

"What about her father—Colonel Richardson?"

Hoarlogue's eyes narrowed.

"What about him?" he challenged.

"Well, mightn't he have had some interest in the girl's money? He tried terribly hard to keep her from getting married. If he found out that she intended going up to the mountains to see Graling—well, he might not have believed that she wasn't going up there to get married. He might have tried to stop her, and—well, sometimes a woman is a pretty fragile piece of machinery."

I'VE thought of that," said Hoarlogue slowly. "But there's no evidence against the old man. As far as the money was concerned, the girl's marriage or death wouldn't make any difference to him. In case of her marriage, the money, of course, would go with her. In case of her death, the money reverts back to the nearest blood relative of William Stoner."

"Oh!"

It was Flaherty's turn to be thoughtful.

"What about the girl's clothes?" he asked, after a moment. "There must be some missing. If she were going to the mountains, she would naturally take along—"

"No," interrupted Hoarlogue. "Not a thing is missing except a pair of pajamas, which she probably wore that night."

"Doesn't that strike you as funny?"

"It did, at first," admitted Hoarlogue. "But later, when I got to thinking it over, it didn't. She had plenty of money. If she had planned to do a quiet skip to the mountains, she might have bought a whole new outfit and sneaked it into the house. First, as a measure of precaution, so she wouldn't arouse suspicions by any packing. Second, well, all women in love like to appear in new things."

"But the stores should show a record—" persisted Flaherty.

Hoarlogue again interrupted.

"We're checking up on that now." Suddenly he broke off to exclaim, "What the hell is this? A third degree? I don't know why I'm talking to you about this stuff for. Say, what's your game, anyway?"

Flaherty wiped his bald head with the bandanna.

"No game, Hoarlogue. This is pretty serious business."

The sergeant paused.

"Now," he continued, "I'll tell you something. The screen for the young lady's window had been jimmied from the *outside*. I saw it the next morning. It was on the ground leaning against the house."

YOU'RE not telling me anything," sneered Hoarlogue. "I know that myself. I also saw the marks of the ladder that had been used to help her out. Of course she had to have somebody to help her.

"She probably hired some nigger, who's been under cover ever since, in fear of his life. But we'll get him," concluded the detective grimly.

"What about the dead man?"

"Who? The sentry? Nothing wrong there. Plain case of heart failure from excitement, or whatever you want. The hospital checked him over and found nothing wrong.

"My guess is, he saw the colonel's daughter in the escaping act and the sudden shock killed him. After all, the sight must have been rather un-

usual and unexpected, in the middle of the night that way. She didn't even know he was there."

Flaherty lifted his sandy eyebrows.

"Are you sure that was all he saw? Hoarlogue, I looked up the battery records. Kennedy had a heart that was as good as yours or mine. Better. He was young."

"Ah!" rejected the detective impatiently.

"Kennedy was murdered."

Hoarlogue leaped to his feet and towered angrily over the calm-faced sergeant.

"You clear out of here! I've listened to your crazy talk long enough! I suppose," he demanded with fine sarcasm, "that the hospital doesn't know whether a man was murdered or not?"

Flaherty refused to argue, and also refused to budge out of his chair.

"What about the black cats?"

DETECTIVE HOARLOGUE settled back into his swivel chair again. His big, yellow teeth were clamped viciously on the cigar stub. This persistent Army sergeant had touched his fingers to quite a few things about which Detective Hoarlogue was not easy in his own mind.

"The sentry," he said, "was just one of those coincidences which happen sometimes. The hospital report shows death from natural causes.

"The black cat was another. I am convinced that there was only one cat. The same one you saw on Kennedy's body was the one in the girl's bedroom. Cats are funny animals, and they're always turning up in unexpected places.

"This one slipped into the house, either when the colonel was coming out or going in. It was natural for the beast to find the bedroom. I never saw one yet that didn't make for the most comfortable place in the house to curl into. I hate the sneaky things."

Flaherty shook his bald head soberly.

"Too many coincidences."

HOARLOGUE was watching him closely. Suddenly he leaned forward and stared full into Flaherty's face.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before? I mean, somewhere outside the Canal Zone?"

"Very probably," replied Flaherty imperturbably, answering the stare steadily. "I used to be a flatfoot, down in the old Bowery, before I joined up with the Army."

Hoarlogue sat back in his chair. A dark red flush crept into his face. His black eyes showed a momentary fear.

"You remember me?" he asked, with a huskiness that was not due to a cold.

Flaherty nodded his head carelessly.

"I do. You got me fined a month's pay once—for deserting my beat. But it was all right. It was worth it. The kid got well."

"Oh, yeah?" said Hoarlogue harshly. "That's what you told the captain; that you were sitting up with a sick kid while its mother went for some medicine. But it didn't get over, did it?" Hoarlogue jeered.

"No, it didn't," agreed Flaherty quietly.

Hoarlogue stood up.

"Well, flatfoot," he ordered harshly, "take a walk. And keep your nosey nose out of this case—if you know where you're well off."

Flaherty went calmly and unhurriedly.

With ill-concealed hatred, Hoarlogue watched him go. Then he darted into the detectives' room and hailed the man lounging there.

"Bill! Trail that soldier who just went out of here. I think he knows something about the Richardson case."

Hoarlogue returned to the office and found another detective waiting impatiently for him.

"Well, what did you find?" demanded Hoarlogue surlily.

"Gee, Jim, everything!" The man was in a state of great excitement. "This will bust the case wide open. It'll be the biggest scandal the United States Army ever had. I went to the bank like you told me to, and they let me see Colonel Richardson's safety deposit box."

"What did you find? What did you find?" demanded Hoarlogue impatiently.

"Jim, a will. It was made by this here Agnes Stoner, or Richardson, leaving every penny she's got to old man Richardson, if anything happens to her."

"Let me see it."

Hoarlogue snatched the document from the detective's fingers.

It was true. "I, Agnes Stone . . . in appreciation of the care and affection bestowed upon me by my stepfather, Colonel Harry Richardson. . . ."

"Didn't I tell you! Didn't I tell you!" The detective nearly danced in the joy of his discovery. "There's a motive for you! A million bucks! What a motive!"

HOARLOGUE was reading avidly down the typewritten pages. He came to: ". . . in the event of my marriage, however, this will shall be null and void."

Hoarlogue looked up.

"Yeah," he snarled. "It's a motive, all right. But it's just as good for Lieutenant Graling as it is for Colonel Richardson. Which one of them did it?"

The joy vanished from the detective like wind from a punctured bag. He collapsed into a chair.

"Darned if I can figure it out, Jim! It's the strangest thing I ever heard of. And I been in the Army myself. If we could only find the girl!"

"Or what's left of her," amended Hoarlogue grimly, sinking into his swivel chair.

When the tropical sun was a red ball of fire tipping bluff Ancon Hill, Detective James Hoarlogue was presented with more information which annoyed him, and yet sent his mind worrying along a thousand different trails.

BILL, whom he had sent to shadow Sergeant Flaherty, came in with a report.

"The man is goofy, Jim! Positively off his nut! I'm telling you! I trailed him out of here and back to the fort. He went straight to a garage and got out an old flivver, which, I guess, must belong to him.

"I trailed him in a taxi—which cost a pretty penny—into Panama City, but he didn't do anything but drive all over the city, sort of aimless like.

"Then he drove back out here to Balboa, to the docks. There were a couple of old freighters tied up and he went aboard each of them. I saw him come down the gangplank of the last one, and what do you think he had in his arms?"

"I don't know," answered Hoarlogue sarcastically. "A baby? A cow? A horse? An elephant?"

"I ain't kidding, Jim," complained the detective in an injured tone. "He had a cat. A big, black cat with a patch of white fur on its chest."

Hoarlogue's big feet came down off the desk with a bang.

"A cat!" he cried.

"Yes, sir. A cat," insisted Bill virtuously. "I went aboard the ship after he left, and talked to the captain. He was a funny duck; thin, with white whiskers and a corncob pipe.

"'Yes, sir,' he says to me, 'that feller wanted a black cat an' he said the nearest thing to a black cat he'd seen all day was my old tabby, whose been ketchin' rats in the galley for nigh on to five year now. 'Course she warn't all black, but the feller said he'd fix that.

I HATED to let the old cat go, she'd been with the ship so long. But the feller insisted, an', by gosh, he paid me a long price fer her. Twenty dollars, gold. A heap sight more'n the critter's wuth. What d'ye suppose he wanted with a black cat anyway. Shoulda thought any old tom 'ud do as well. Seems mighty funny t' me that there ain't no black cats in Panama City!'"

James Hoarlogue was much more interested in the details of the story than he was in Bill's fairly creditable imitation, in both speech and gesture, of the old sea captain.

Visibly disappointed because his histrionic efforts had not been appreciated, Bill continued.

"I tailed him back to the fort again. And darned if he didn't go to a paint shop and paint that white patch on the cat's chest black! I guess he wanted a black cat all right!"

"Then what did he do?"

"Here comes the goofiest part of all. He drove back to Panama City as soon as the paint, or whatever he had used, had dried on the cat. He parked his flivver in front of the International Hotel, and got out, taking the cat with him. He walked over to the edge of the Forbidden District—you know, down by Cocoa Grove—and looked around very careful, as if he didn't want anybody to notice what he was doing—and let the cat go.

"Well, Jim, he tailed that cat all the rest of the afternoon, and me tailing along behind him. He's just plain nuts, that's all I can figure out. After awhile, Jim, I got tired of it and came on in. Christmas! There was no use in tailing a nutty guy who was tailing a black cat, was there?"

Hoarlogue sucked on the pulpy stub of his unlighted cigar. He would have liked to believe, like Bill, that the old sergeant was a bit "goofy," but just the same, he was worried.

"Better go and pick up our boyfriend again," he said finally, "I'm curious to know what he wants with that cat."

"Okay, Chief!"

CHAPTER VI

Sinister House in Forbidden District

THE Forbidden District of Panama City was the blackest of many black areas. A purely white face was seldom seen within its compass. For a good reason. The possessor of a white face, in the Forbidden District, was always under suspicion and frequently in danger, day or night—unless he knew the ropes, and some of the denizens who counted.

Of muddy-skinned half-breeds—Chinese Negroes, Spanish Negroes, Indian Negroes, and Spanish Indians—there was more than a fair sprinkling.

By day the squalid, stinking flats, huts, and hovels lay sweltering under the white hot glare of the tropical sun. Black and half-caste children ran in and out of dark,

dirty, littered hallways and played in droves on the refuse-strewn streets.

At night the Forbidden District was silent, mysterious, sinister. The ragged, dirty children no longer played and shouted in a babble of strange tongues. Only furtive shadows slinked along the dimly-lighted, gloomy streets.

Most of the doors of the dwellings were closed tightly, to front the shadowed sidewalks blankly, enigmatically. Thin bars of light outlined windows where dark curtains were drawn.

Now it was dusk, that quick, momentary period of twilight which precedes the swiftly-dropping, velvet, tropic night.

Sergeant Flaherty was in a narrow alleyway between two wooden houses. He leaned against one of the houses to place himself more in a shadow, and peered out to the street. His cat was still visible. It was toying with a rotting, half-cooked fish in the gutter.

THE darkness deepened and so did Flaherty's thoughts. The black cat was becoming a black blot.

Flaherty wondered if after all he were not a bit crazy to follow this idea which had suddenly struck him earlier that afternoon while he had been driving aimlessly about the city digesting his interview with Detective James Hoarlogue.

The idea had come at the same time his consciousness had been permeated by the peculiar fact that there were no black cats in Panama City. He had had black cats on his mind.

A black cat should not have been a rare animal, especially when there were as many cats in Panama as he had seen. Gray ones, gray and white ones, brown, brown and white, even black and white ones, but no pure black.

Flaherty had gradually figured that such an abnormal dearth of black cats must indicate a reason. Biology could not have been responsible for such an omission.

The thought had hit him hard. Could it be possible that some one was very much interested in black cats, and had a purpose in keeping them out of circulation? A ridiculous idea! Yet—the only living things that had been present at the death of Sentry Kennedy out of D Battery, and the disappearance of Miss Agnes Richardson, nee Stoner, had been two black cats!

IT was night. Now Flaherty could barely see the little, dark outline of the cat he had purchased and manufactured black. The old sergeant sighed. He had builded a hypothesis on a silly, whimsical idea, and naturally it had borne no fruit. He started to move out of the alleyway to retrieve his animal and go home. He was glad enough. His quartermaster brogans had been an inch in putrid garbage for the past hour.

Suddenly he checked himself. A thin, furtive figure had started to pass the sidewalk in front of the alleyway's black mouth when he evidently noted the cat in the gutter.

Flaherty heard a sibilant exclamation. The man had stopped and peered quickly about him. Then, with catlike strides himself, he crossed to the gutter and lifted the unresisting cat into his arms. He looked it over swiftly and carefully.

Flaherty, whose heart was bumping against his Adam's apple, silently prayed that none of the India ink had worn off the cat's white chest during its peregrinations.

Apparently the furtive one was

satisfied with his examination. He stepped back to the sidewalk and glanced around him again. There was a solitary street light down the road at an angle to the alleyway.

The feeble gleams it shed enabled Flaherty to discern a lean, brown face and a pair of strange, magnetic eyes. Those eyes held Flaherty's gaze fascinated. They were large, and round, and green. They glowed phosphorescently. They were like cat's eyes!

Flaherty shrank back against the house and held his breath fearfully. It seemed that those eyes must surely discover him, despite the thick shadow.

BUT apparently the mouth of the alleyway was too black even for those terrible, penetrating eyes to pierce. The man finally moved off silently.

Flaherty immediately issued from the alleyway and trailed behind, slipping silently into doorway and doorway, and dodging behind house corner and house corner. He would have been greatly perturbed and no little alarmed if he had ever looked backward in time to catch sight of the dark shadow following him and duplicating his movements almost exactly.

The man did not go far. He came to a two-story, sagging, weather-beaten house, which was separated from its neighbors on one side by a vacant lot strewn with rubbish and garbage. On the other side was a small shed, whose broken roof gaped blackly at the night sky.

The man hesitated for a moment in front of the door of the house and looked backward. Then, still carrying the cat in his arms, he vanished within.

In the black, protecting shadow of a corner of the house across the street, Flaherty had waited for over an hour. A slight drizzle had begun, which was gradually increasing in intensity. Lightning fluttered vividly in the sky, at each flash greenishly illuminating the house, showing it dark, ruined, and certainly ominous-looking. Thunder growled continuously.

THE month was the time for the beginning of the rainy season. Flaherty feared that the night was in for one of those intense, tropical storms common to that latitude. He debated upon going back to the fort and leaving the house for another day's observation.

He had almost made up his mind when a flickering, lightning flash revealed that the door of the house was open, and that a man was coming out. Waiting for another flash of lightning, Flaherty strained his eyes and thought he perceived the same individual who had picked up the cat. This time, the cat was missing. Evidently it had been left behind in the house.

For a moment Flaherty was undecided whether he should follow the man, or remain and watch the house. Many thoughts came to him. It certainly would be unwise to try to enter this house, in the heart of the Forbidden District, alone and unarmed. Further, he had not seen enough to justify that.

Perhaps the man's intentions upon picking up the cat had been merely to secure for himself a pet, or a mouser.

One of the best ways to find out, Flaherty thought to himself, was to trail the cat collector and judge from future actions of the man what he was. Accordingly Flaherty started secretively through the rain behind his man. And behind Flaherty another also went secretively.

Flaherty was surprised when the trail led out of the Forbidden District into the better lighted, more cheerful sections of the city. Finally the quarry halted at a taxi beside a curb and, after giving brief instructions to the driver, was whisked off.

The sergeant jumped into another taxi and followed. Then, there was soon a third taxi in the unconscious procession.

Flaherty was further astonished when the first taxi soon left the city and sped along the country road which led to the night-shrouded, deserted ruins of Old Panama, which the English buccaneer, Sir Henry Morgan, had sacked in 1671.

CHAPTER VII

Storm, Ruins and Horror

AT the end of the dirt road which leads to Old Panama, there is a sort of roadhouse. It has a bar downstairs and a room upstairs which contains a few, battered tables and an old-fashioned phonograph with a pile of dusty records of long-forgotten songs beside it.

Even in torrid daytime and sunshiny weather, the patronage of this roadhouse is not heavy. The tourists who come out to view the ruins do not go near it because it possesses a definite, dirty appearance, and an indescribable, indefinite air of something quite different, a something which does not appeal to timid people. Perhaps it is not the fault of the proprietor whatsoever.

Perhaps it is just the gloomy, unconsciously sobering influence of the ancient, mouldy ruins which stretch away in the distance from both sides of the roadhouse.

The proprietor was a Panaman, with possibly not more than a quarter of Negro blood flowing in his veins with that of his Spanish forebears. He was short and thickset, with a heavy, brown face decorated by a drooping, black mustache.

His conjugal consort possessed a build like himself, but her face was darker, and, of course, there was no mustache. Possibly her veins contained more of the black blood.

IT was the proprietor himself who nodded across the imitation mahogany bar to the thin, lean-faced man who had come in out of the storm.

The stranger took one drink, and without saying as much as goodnight, passed out again into the darkness, filled with hard driving rain. The proprietor picked up the piece of silver from the bar, shrugged his shoulders, and began to rinse out the glass.

In the darkness outside, the man saw that the taxi which had brought him to this place had gone back to the city. He stood motionless for a minute, slowly turning his head and peering in all directions through the rain and the night. Evidently his observations satisfied him for he turned and struck along a cowpath which led into pitch blackness and into the very heart of the grass-overgrown, palm-guarded ruins of the ancient city.

Sergeant Flaherty, soaked to the skin, his uniform plastered to his portly body, rose out of a clump of bushes that grew beside the road a few feet beyond the roadhouse, and followed after silently.

The sky was alive with flickering flashes now. One moment the world was filled with blackness that looked solid enough to touch. The next, it was illuminated by a ghastly, greenish light that made objects everywhere stand out with amazing clearness against the blackness and through the slashing rain.

The earth reverberated with the heavy cannonade of the heaven's artillery.

Sergeant Flaherty kept his footing with difficulty on the slick mud of the cowpath and crouched motionless against whatever cover was at hand at every flash of lightning. During those momentary intervals of light, he saw the man ahead of him moving along silently and swiftly, with never a backward glance.

Beside the cowpath, the sea which fronted this ruined city, dead for three centuries, boomed and hissed across mudflats. Flaherty glimpsed the scene by lightning flash. The dark combers lashing in angrily from the bay were capped with long, curling ridges of greenish white.

THEIR fury seemed well in the mood of this weird spot. The other side of the cowpath, in a glare of lightning, revealed crumbling walls of whitish-gray masonry. Against the blackness of the night, they had a ghostly, sinister appearance.

It was as if they were ready, by some supernatural means, to repel any invasions upon their broodings and memories of three centuries long.

At the next lightning flash, Flaherty peered ahead and his heart beat once strongly and then seemed to stop beating altogether. The man he had been following had vanished.

Flaherty proceeded cautiously onward and finally discovered an explanation of the stranger's disappearance. A very slight gap in the waist-high bushes revealed a narrow footpath leading off directly to the ruins. Flaherty took this new path, unaware that a dark figure was following him also.

The footpath ended in a ruined building. Perplexedly, Flaherty stared around him. This time his quarry had vanished completely.

Flaherty found himself in a large building which was in a fairly good state of preservation. Evidently it had been a church, a monastery, or some public building. Three walls were standing, and of the fourth, only a jagged, knee-high line of masonry marked where it had been. There was no roof, and the rain drove down within as much as without.

THERE were, however, several vaulted doorways whose black mouths evidently led to wings of the main building. Due to the debris of centuries cluttering the thresholds of these, their heights were less than that of a man.

It was when Flaherty was standing still, peering and listening, that he heard a weird sound issuing from one of these archways. The cause of it was apparently approaching the entrance, and as it came nearer Flaherty's blood turned cold in his body.

The sound had a base of what seemed to be a human half-chanting, half-singing. Yet there was a steady, ominous beat in it, a savage tone, that bespoke the supernatural, the unreal. It could well have been a realization of an imagination of a dirge of marching dead.

For a moment unreasoning horror rooted Flaherty to the spot. Rain poured over him but he was no more aware of it than he would have been of the smell of beer in a saloon.

Reason came to him only in the last instant of time. With a sudden shock, he saw that if he remained where he was, he would be in the direct line of sight of whoever, or whatever, was on the point of issuing out of the cavern.

Glancing quickly around him, he spied the trunk of a huge tree, whose roots had taken hold under

the near wall of the ruins. Barely had he attained concealment behind this trunk when he saw appear from the arched stone doorway a sight that was never to wholly leave his dreams in the future.

First there appeared huge black men, whose white eyeballs rolled wildly in cadence with the uncanny words which their thick lips mouthed. There were about a half dozen of them, and each carried high aloft in one hand a torch whose flames flared a lurid red and gave off quantities of black smoke.

THE weird sight shook Flaherty to his marrow. With his eyes bulging out of their sockets, with his breath bated, he peered from behind the wet, slimy tree trunk at the scene slowly unfolding.

Following behind the torch bearers came rank after rank of dark-skinned men who chanted a short refrain over and over again, deep in their chests. So close was the sergeant to them that he could plainly see the whites of their distended eyeballs, and the rain streaks glistening brightly on their black and brown faces.

The six carrying torches arranged themselves equidistantly around the main chamber of the ruined building. Their followers formed a packed circle in front of them, leaving a small gap before the entrance out of which they had emerged.

The deep chant ceased abruptly. All eyes were fixed upon the vaulted, black-mouthed entrance. Overhead, lightning flashed and thunder boomed. The rain slashed down with unabated fury.

Yet, despite the noisy disturbance of the elements, an invisible current of something portentous flowed around the ancient, ruined chamber. It gripped the mass of black men and held them rigid in the ruddy glow of the hissing torches.

Flaherty felt it and hardly dared to take a breath lest that would break the spell and make known his presence. Like the rest, he too stared at the vaulted opening in the dingy wall far to his right.

The strange figure it finally disgorged forced Flaherty to draw unwittingly a sharp, audible breath. At first, he took the thing to be a gigantic, black cat that walked upright like a man.

Then the huge monstrosity turned about to face the stricken circle of onlookers, and Flaherty saw, where feline features should have been, the face and eyes of the man who had picked the decoy cat from the gutter in the Forbidden District.

There was no mistaking the round, green eyes that swept unblinkingly around and caused those upon whom they fell to shrink back and mutter incantations.

Now the cat-man turned toward the arched doorway again. He raised in signal his cat-like leg, upon which he wore a black glove.

FLAHERTY, staring in the direction of the arch, breathed hoarsely. In the shadows appeared a *white* face. About that dim face, the bloody glare from the torches glinted redly on something that was golden. The face of a golden-haired girl!

Then the very heavens seemed to drop. The walls seemed to rush together and crush Flaherty between them. The darkness, like a tangible shroud, enveloped him, smothered him.

As he descended sickeningly among brilliant stars and flashing constellations, he heard a voice hiss in his ear:

"The cat scratches . . ."

The rest of it was lost to him in the onrushing oblivion.

CHAPTER VIII

Black Religion

SERGEANT FLAHERTY gradually became aware of cool water pattering gently on his face. There was in his nostrils the scent of damp, muddy earth, and of pungent, green, growing things. He opened his eyes and stared for an uncomprehending moment upward into the darkness. The rain was falling softly now. In the distance, thunder mumbled only occasionally. Lightning flashed briefly low on the horizon. The tropical storm was over.

Flaherty became aware of a bulky figure bending over him.

"There!" said a voice. "How do you feel now?"

The words snapped Flaherty's memory into action all at once. He struggled to his feet, pushing the other's soft, fat body away from him. He swayed dizzily. His head seemed to be on the point of cracking open.

"The girl!" he gasped. "Where is she? Where did they go?"

Bill, the detective, looked around the deserted ruins perplexedly, apprehensively.

"What girl?" he demanded suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

Flaherty did not answer, but thrust the detective out of his path. Like a madman, the sergeant staggered around the main chamber of the building.

It was empty. Dripping with rain water, it had the forlorn appearance of not having held an occupant since the last monk or nun was murdered within its walls that fateful night in 1671.

Flaherty stumbled over lumps of stone, tripped over ground creepers and vegetation, until he gained the archway which had given entrance to the weird procession. Beyond this he saw an ante-chamber, whose walls were in worse state of ruin than the main room of the building. It, too, was dark, desolate, and empty.

Flaherty, bewildered, turned slowly back and sat down on a crumbling wall.

"What girl?" questioned the detective. "I didn't see nothing."

"Colonel Richardson's daughter."

Detective Bill Devoe jumped.

"You come along, you!" he said almost fearfully. "Hoarlogue will want to know about this."

Flaherty endeavored to wrench his arm free.

"No!" he cried. "The house in the Forbidden District! We can't lose any time!"

A black automatic appeared in Bill's fist.

"Come on!" he ordered gruffly. "We'll see Hoarlogue first."

DETECTIVE JAMES HOARLOGUE entered the Balboa Police Station in a state of vile humor. Bill had broken in on his first decent night's sleep since the Richardson case had commenced.

He seated himself in front of his desk and whirled about to glare at Flaherty.

"Well," he snapped at Bill, "what's it all about?"

Both Bill and Flaherty possessed bedraggled appearances. Their clothes were soggy with wet, and liberally plastered with the mud of Old Panama.

"I tailed him like you said, Chief," began Bill. "I picked him up about dark down in the Forbidden District. He followed a guy who had picked up his cat out of a gutter.

"The guy went into a house and

the soldier here watched for about an hour or so. Then the guy came out and the soldier followed him out to Old Panama. I tailed them both back into the ruins.

"I lost sight of 'em once. It was as black as the ace of spades and raining pitchforks. I was looking around for 'em when I heard this soldier yell. I beat it over and found him dead to the world lying on the ground in one of them ruins. He came to, and started acting like a nut, running all over the place. He claimed he'd seen a girl."

"Yeah," commented Hoarlogue. He turned on Flaherty. "What girl?"

"Miss Richardson."

Hoarlogue leaped at Flaherty and shook his fist violently in front of the sergeant's face.

"Listen, you!" he stormed. "Come clean! What the hell's going on? Don't lie to me now! I know you Army bunch! You're sticking together—but it won't do you any good. We'll get you sooner or later. Let's have it now—if you want to save your own dirty skin. Sergeants hang as good as colonels—or lieutenants."

"Listen, Hoarlogue!" pleaded Flaherty. "I've seen the girl. Some niggers had her out in Old Panama." Flaherty shuddered. "Hoarlogue, you know what voodooism is! That's who's got her! Voodoo worshipers!"

FOR a long minute, Hoarlogue looked at Flaherty. Then the detective pulled a cigar out of his coat pocket and jammed it into his mouth.

"Flaherty," he sneered, "you're either a double-dyed liar—or you're just plain drunk."

The sergeant was on his feet. His arms went forward in desperate appeal.

"I saw them! I saw them with my own eyes! I just had a glimpse of the girl—but I swear it was Agnes Richardson. The light of the torches showed her golden hair. Hoarlogue, don't you believe me?"

Hoarlogue did not answer. He looked at his assistant, Bill, and Bill shook his head and made circular motions with his right forefinger beside his right temple. Hoarlogue then faced the sergeant again.

"Naw, I don't believe you! I believe you were drunk and had the D. T.'s!"

HOARLOGUE," replied Flaherty quietly, "if that girl is murdered tonight, her blood will be on your hands."

There was no denying that Hoarlogue now felt uncomfortable. Nervously he shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth.

"What did you see, Flaherty?" he asked, in a somewhat concilatory tone.

Flaherty told him.

At the finish of the sergeant's story, Hoarlogue sat down in his chair. His yellow teeth clamped on his cigar.

"I've heard," he admitted at last, "that the natives practice some kind of voodooism, but I never believed much in it."

"They do in Haiti. They do in all the West Indies," replied Flaherty. "Black men are black men. And all of them in this part of the world are related.

"They were brought in by the same slavers out of the same tribes, and sold all over these tropics. I've seen some mighty suspicious things myself when I've been in the interior or out on the islands during radio maneuvers. But it's hard to catch them at it."

Hoarlogue had been thinking. Now he shook his head.

"It ain't logical. What would they want with the girl? They wouldn't dare. Anybody knows these natives are as yellow as a pack of sunflowers."

Flaherty leaned forward out of his chair.

"Human sacrifice."

Hoarlogue's hand jerked in front of him involuntarily. His heavy, black eyebrows drew together.

"You know how it goes in Haiti," added Flaherty.

Bill sat rigid in his chair, his mouth open. He was breathing hard. His blue eyes in his flabby face were abnormally wide.

Hoarlogue suddenly snapped his fingers. A smile parted around the cigar.

"IT'S a pretty good story, Flaherty," he said. "But it don't get you a blamed thing. No niggers are going to kidnap any *white* girl for a human sacrifice. I *know* that. Especially the daughter of an American Army colonel."

Flaherty was on his feet trembling.

"Then . . . then you won't go down to that . . . that house in the District?"

"No, Flaherty. I wouldn't be such a fool."

The sergeant swayed perceptibly on his feet. The stare he held on the indifferent-seeming Hoarlogue was ghastly to behold.

Suddenly the soldier uttered a choked cry and whirled about. He rushed for the door.

Bill made as if to stop him but ceased abruptly upon a sign from Hoarlogue.

"Let him go," said the detective. "He's more valuable to us loose and running around. He'll lead us into something yet."

When Flaherty was well on his way, Hoarlogue spoke again.

"You know where this house is in the Forbidden District, Bill? Okay. Rout out some of the boys and we'll take the big car."

"Chief," said Bill huskily, "you don't think what he said about the girl is true, do you? Gee! A human sacrifice!"

Bill's fat belly quivered like a bowl of jelly.

"Naw," replied Hoarlogue gruffly. "Bill," he added sarcastically, "you're as dumb as they make 'em! But I ain't saying that it's not possible that niggers might have been *hired* to put a little, white girl out of the way. They'll do things if a white man is behind 'em."

Flaherty hit the sidewalk in front of the Balboa Police Station arunning. He found that the rain had ceased entirely, and that the night was as cool and fragrant and velvety as a June night in the States. High in the sky, a full-rounded, silver moon was sailing through a shredded, misty, translucent cloud.

Flaherty kept running up the desolate, tree-shadowed, Balboa street. His heart pounded in his portly chest, and his breath began to enter and leave his lungs by sobbing gasps.

HE prayed only that he might get to that sagging, weather-beaten house in the Forbidden District in time. Why his impulses were driving him so relentlessly to that house, he had not taken time to analyze.

He only knew that inside him a nameless, cold dread was ever growing, and that dread, beyond argument, was definitely associated with the sinister house.

He neared the small park which fronted the Balboa Canal Zone Commissary and spied a dilapidated touring car, which caused his heart to leap. He recognized an all-night

taxi. Its driver was a Negro, as were most chauffeurs in Panama.

Breathlessly Flaherty gave him the address.

CHAPTER IX

Murder In the Middle Room

FLAHERTY dismissed the driver at the head of the street and made his way on foot to the house of mystery. The hour was late now, long after midnight. The street was silent and deserted, populated only by dense shadows cast by the moon.

At either end, a yellow street light combatted ineffectually with the gloom. The houses along the way were all dark. Their doorways were shuttered.

For a minute or two Flaherty stood before the house wondering anxiously what he had best do. It had the same appearance as when he had left it some hours ago. It sagged there, lightless, between the empty lot and the roof-broken shed like a dirty, ragged thing awaiting an unfortunate, late wayfarer.

Entrance into the house was what Flaherty desired. An unknown, silent entrance.

He made a quick, cautious circuit of the house. He stepped into piles of mushy, putrid garbage that stunk as his feet stirred them. He listened at windows and heard no sound. He tried them all and found none that yielded.

Once more he was around in front, hugging the pitch blackness of the shadow by the doorstep. He glanced at the front door and gave a great start. Before he had begun his tour around the house that door had been tightly closed. Now it was half open, displaying a vertical, gaping bar of black.

Flaherty's heart pounded heavily. Unpleasant chills began at his armpits and ripped across his body. During the short interval he had been out of sight of the door, someone had entered or left the house, and had left the door half yawning behind him.

Still the house was as dark and silent as before. It was ominous, sinister and rackingly disturbing.

Flaherty tiptoed up the crumbling wooden steps and slipped inside the door.

He stood listening for a moment in the dense darkness of what he took to be the lower hallway. He could dimly make out, just ahead of him, the black outline of a stairway.

Through a small, uncurtained window at the top of it the moon outside cast a pale silver radiance.

A damp, mouldy smell was in Flaherty's nostrils. It was as if the house hadn't been aired in years, in decades. There was another smell also. It was living and warm, but putrid and animal-like. Flaherty recognized it suddenly with a prickling of the hairs at the back of his neck. Definitely, it was a smell of—cats!

AT that moment, some force or power of the sixth sense inexorably drew the sergeant's attention toward the wan bath of moonlight at the top of the stairs. Only by a great, quick effort of will was he able to stifle the involuntary cry of terror that came surging to his lips.

In the moonlight stood a tall, motionless figure, which seemingly possessed no head. The figure glowed a pale, luminous green.

Sergeant Flaherty believed that a young girl was in mortal danger in this very house. He breathed the most sincere and appealing prayer of his life and started for the stairs.

The weird figure had vanished,

drifting slowly across the path of the moonlight. As it had moved, Flaherty had seen the phosphorescent green of it glow and fade.

Breathing deeply, and trying to keep silent, Flaherty at last gained the second landing. The entire upper hallway was under the dominance of the moonlight, which flowed softly through the solitary window. Its dim radiance showed a narrow corridor, barren, blank, except for the closed doors of three rooms.

Even as Flaherty looked, while he hugged against a plaster, cobweb-smeared wall, the greenish apparition floated out of the end room and floated into the middle, leaving the door open behind it.

It was then that Sergeant Flaherty did the most courageous thing of his life. He followed the apparition into the middle room.

In this room he stood in blackness. His ears were tensely alert for any sound. But he saw nothing and heard nothing.

Suddenly he felt a pair of hands seize his throat.

Taken so suddenly, Flaherty was hurled backward against a wall, where he rested his back and fought. He was genuinely surprised to find that his hands had found flesh and blood.

THE unknown assailant, invisible in the darkness, having had first advantage, was pressing Flaherty sorely. No matter how furiously the sergeant lashed out with his fists, or how strongly he pulled against the hands that clutched his windpipe, he could not get free.

All the while the steel fingers tightened mercilessly and sank into flesh more deeply.

Flaherty soon could not breathe. A haze of red filled his brain.

The red now began slipping into patches of black; and the black was occurring at more frequent intervals and deepening in density. Flaherty knew that he was going.

Suddenly the white, sparkling beam of a flashlight cut through his dim senses. At the same instant he became aware that the murderous fingers had dropped from his throat. Caring for nothing except air, which he took into his lungs in large, hoarse gulps, Flaherty leaned shakily against the wall.

The room seemed to be filled with men now; men who stamped about and talked together excitedly. Several more flashlight beams joined the first, and all were focused on one man in the center of the room, who glared into them.

Through the still persistent buzzing in his head, Flaherty heard the sarcastic, triumphant voice of Detective James Hoarlogue, Canal Zone police.

"Well, well! This *is* a surprise, Colonel! How did you get here? And Sergeant Flaherty, too!"

COLONEL? Colonel? Flaherty's senses at last snapped into attention. The man in the center of the room, who stood alone facing the squad of detectives like a wolf facing a pack of hounds, was Colonel Richardson! His tall, lean figure was cloaked by a green, transparent oilskin raincoat.

"When thieves fall out—" grinned Hoarlogue suggestively, glancing at Flaherty. "What's the matter, Sergeant? The colonel trying to put you out of the way, too? He sure would have done it," commented Hoarlogue, eyeing Flaherty's bruised throat, "if we hadn't showed up when we did!"

Flaherty's brain seemed paralyzed. He stared stupidly at his commanding officer.

Hoarlogue turned away from Flaherty and threateningly faced the colonel.

"Well, Colonel," he said roughly, "the jig's up! What have you done with the girl?"

"That's what I came here for!" exploded the officer. "About an hour ago a young Negro came to my quarters at the fort. He seemed very frightened. He said that if I wanted to know where my daughter was to come to this house.

"Naturally I was suspicious, so I asked him what he knew about it, and who had sent him. He mumbled something to me which sounded like, 'The lootinunt did.' I started to question him further, but he simply ran down off the steps and into the night."

"A swell story, Colonel!" sneered Hoarlogue. "You are almost as good at telling 'em as the sergeant here is.

"But you're lying!" he shouted angrily. "There never was a black boy. You came here to do away with the girl, or to see that she was done away with. Now come clean, or by—"

In a paroxysm of rage, Hoarlogue raised his fist to strike the officer.

Colonel Richardson's features underwent a swift change. The lines of worry and apprehension became long, straight lines of dignity, hardened somewhat by a trace of hatred.

"Be careful, Mr. Hoarlogue," he said.

With obvious reluctance Hoarlogue slowly let his fists fall.

SO the nigger said the lieutenant sent him?" he snarled. Now he took a cigar out of a pocket of his coat, jammed it between his teeth and slid it into a corner of his mouth.

"It's Lieutenant Graling I suppose you're hinting at?" He narrowed his eyes over his cigar. "Lieutenant Graling happens to be safe in jail, as I told you before."

The colonel's face was impassive.

THERE are ways," he said, "of getting messages sent—even from jail."

"If it's true, then why didn't you tell us," demanded Hoarlogue, "instead of coming down here by yourself?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"The messenger said 'hurry.'"

"Yeah!" Hoarlogue snarled. "So you hurry down here and start choking Sergeant Flaherty to death! Colonel, I'm going to arrest you and put you where you won't do no more damage."

Richardson recoiled. His eyes dilated and his chest heaved.

"You can't," he whispered. "You can't do that! I'm an officer—of the army. I command a military post."

"Take him, boys," commanded Hoarlogue.

"Chief!"

Fat Bill, his blue eyes popping, pushed excitedly into the glare of the flashlight.

"There's a dead man—right in this room! I found him!"

All flashlights swept precipitously away from the colonel to the direction in which Bill pointed. There, in a distant corner of the barren, dusty room, was huddled the body of a man.

The colonel looked down upon the young, chocolate brown face of the dead man.

"It is the messenger," he said.

From bended knee beside the body, Hoarlogue glared upward. The cigar, almost half chewed, protruded at an acute angle from his mouth.

"Murdered!" he announced.

He pointed at a pool of blood which had drained out of the bullet hole hidden by short, curly, black hair at the back of the youth's head.

On the other side of the body Detective Bill cried out:

"My heavens, Jim! His face! Look at his face! See! The cat scratch!"

At the same instant there lifted through the house a wail so high, so weird, so prolonged, that there was not a spine up and down which fear's icy hands did not run. All in the room stared at one another with blanched, strained faces.

Hoarlogue was the first to recover.

"Downstairs!" he shouted, directing his flashlight beam at the door and brandishing his pistol. "Bill, you stay here with the body—and the colonel!"

CHAPTER X

Gold for Gold

SERGEANT FLAHERTY attempted to pile through the door with the rest, but Hoarlogue's grim glance abruptly halted him.

After the noisy rush of detectives down the stairs, Flaherty walked over to where Bill was going through the pockets of the murdered man. There was no doubt about it. On one rich brown cheek several long, thin, pinkish scratches were plainly visible. The cat had scratched again.

The detective held up a large, dull silver coin.

"There's a funny one!" he remarked. "I ain't never seen money like that before."

Bill permitted the sergeant to take the coin between his fingers, and even to study it for a moment under the glow of a flashlight.

It was a piece so worn that the engravings on its surfaces were almost obliterated. Flaherty could not recall ever having seen its like before. What was left of the words of the inscription on it formed an unfamiliar language. Above an all but effaced date was a faint profile of what appeared to be a monarch.

Suddenly Flaherty bent closer to the coin and screwed his eyesight upon the date. Two numbers of it were quite visible. They were "—66." The sergeant strained his eyes the harder.

He thought he could trace a very faint outline of a third 6. "666." The missing number, that one which would naturally come first and make the date complete, was wholly effaced.

FLAHERTY'S brain was functioning rapidly now. Only one number could logically complete that date. The number was one. Beyond doubt the original date which had been on the coin had been "1666."

The sergeant's hand trembled slightly as he returned the coin to Bill.

"It certainly is a funny piece of silver," he said.

"Yeah," agreed Bill, pocketing it. "These spiggoty republics down here put out more funny kinds of money. And none of it is good for much."

Footsteps approached the room. Bill raised his flashlight. Hoarlogue blinked angrily at them.

"Cats!" he cursed. "A whole cellar full of 'em! Meow-ing, climbing all over each other, stinking together. Must be nearly a hundred of them—and every last one as black as a lump of coal! Every other room is as empty as a barn."

There was, reflected Flaherty, a great deal to irritate a more even-tempered man than Detective James Hoarlogue. A deserted, ruined house in the Forbidden District, a

cellar full of black cats; a murdered man in the middle room of the second floor; and Colonel Harry Richardson.

There was one item more, and that item Sergeant Flaherty was not forgetting. It was the curious silver coin found in the murdered man's pocket. Money, Flaherty had read, was the key to all life's transactions, good or bad. Was that lone, silver coin the key to unlock the terrible mysteries that hemmed them close?

MIDNIGHT. Somwhere in the miscellaneous mass of buildings that comprised the City of Panama a clock on a church steeple sonorously struck the hour—twelve, deep, vibrating, portentous strokes.

The trade wind carried the sound of them and deposited it faintly in the crooked, narrow streets, among the clutter of dismal buildings and the darkened, foul-smelling markets that fronted the Bay of Panama. The ghostly shrouds of tangled shipping showed beyond the waterfront.

A boat was making ready to cast off. Among the heterogeneous collection of native craft it alone offered an active deck. Running, bare feet thumped bare boards; a windlass clanked and ropes creaked; a lowered voice issued commands with hoarse gruffness.

The coastal trading ship, *Los Tres Hermanos*, with her auxiliary engine coughing steadily and awakening muffled, protesting echoes all along the ancient sea wall of the city, knifed whitely through the ebony and silver waters.

The captain and owner of *Los Tres Hermanos* was a breed. How many races, nationalities and creeds mingled in his blood he himself could not have told. Usually his name was Pedro Gomez.

He was big, black and swaggering. He made no bones about dominating his brown and black crew with his huge, liver-colored fists.

Los Tres Hermanos existed solely for gold. It smuggled bad rum, worse whisky, and the worst women to stinking, muddy hell-holes up and down the coast of Central America. It had carried a president or two away from revengeful, revolutionary rifles.

For gold, *Los Tres Hermanos* would snip a man's worst enemy, or his wife's best friend, neatly out of the teeming city of Panama and drop him into the bay with his throat slit from ear to ear. Thus it is seen that Pedro Gomez was a man of few business scruples.

NOW, with a companion he stood on the after-deck of the sloop and watched the city's lights dropping behind, like a golden diadem receding into black, silver-starred velvet. Off the port side of the ship the hump-backed, fortified islands protecting the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal rose blackly out of the sea. Beyond lay Taboga Island.

Gomez sneered aloud.

"Take a good look at the twinkling lights of Panama, *mi amigo*," he said to the man beside him. "It may be your last."

Gomez' companion was smaller, lighter than he. The burly captain could have broken his passenger with one twist of his gigantic paws. Yet Gomez shrank inwardly from the eyes, luminous green in the starshine, turned calmly and coldly upon him.

"Take care, Gomez," replied a soft voice, silky with smooth menace, "that it is not you who will never see the lights of Panama again."

Pedro started another sneer, but quickly thought the better of it.

Here was a man whom he could fell to the deck with one blow of the fist. Yet Pedro was afraid of him.

Black blood was strong in Pedro, and while he would have liked to batter the little man cringing to the deck, that blood held him back inexorably. There was no doubt that the little man had "powers."

"I seek only to warn you," grumbled Pedro surlily. "In Panama there was little danger. Now you go to the pit of snakes."

"Even the snakes have their charmers," replied the little man cryptically.

He placed his hands upon the rail and leaned forward slightly as if to catch a last glimpse of Panama.

"Fools!" he gritted in a low voice. "Blundering fools! It should have been over with tonight."

Pedro heard him.

"It should," he agreed. "Old Panama was the place."

"Who told the police?" hissed the man at the rail. His unblinking green eyes bored into Pedro's face. "They were told. They have not brains enough to find out for themselves!" He spat viciously and contemptuously.

"THE police?" Pedro laughed nervously. "What would I have to do with the police? Especially the American police?"

"No," said the little man softly. "It was not you, Pedro. You know that an American gunboat would make kindling wood out of this stinking hulk of yours."

"Then it must have been the boy Juan," offered Pedro relievedly.

"No. It was not Juan. It was I who sent him to the girl's father."

The hardened Pedro shuddered a little. His mind's eye saw young Juan lying on his back in the middle room of the deserted house in the Forbidden District. There was a bullet hole in the back of his head and the mark of the cat on his face.

THOSE had come to him simply for carrying out the orders of the little man now standing beside Pedro. Gomez was merciless and a killer, but he did not murder people without a reason. There was always gold at least.

"He had to die," said the little man calmly, as if he had read Pedro's thoughts. "The police are suspecting the white girl's father and her lover. Juan knew too much, and he was becoming afraid.

"He had to die so that we could be sure of one more night. The bullet in the back of the head was unfortunate." The little man shrugged his slender shoulders. "But Juan felt the cat scratch."

Gomez did not hear him.

"Ah!" breathed the black captain. His large eyes glittered greedily in the starlight. "One more night!"

"It would not have been necessary," said his companion, narrowing his eyes to green slits, "if the cat had scratched in Old Panama. We were seen, and the one who saw us is still *alive*." The green eyes widened balefully.

"*Madre de Dios!*" burst fearfully from Gomez. "A white man?"

"Yes—a white man. And the cat's paw was too palsied with cowardly fear to strike."

"*Madre de Dios!*" repeated Gomez. "We shall all hang!"

"Fool! Coward!" his companion cut it. "*We* shall not hang. They will hang her father or that silly lover of hers."

"But the police—"

"The police are imbeciles. They are no match for the Great Cat. Tomorrow night the girl dies. And gold will be paid for gold."

"Gold for gold," repeated Gomez thickly.

The little man's eyes somberly watched the heavy-breathing breed.

"Let us go," he suggested softly, "into the cabin."

"Yes, into the cabin," agreed Pedro. The saliva began to drool over his thick lips.

THE cabin of *Los Tres Hermanos* was a dingy room. Kerosene lamps, in wall brackets, made yellow light and shadows. There was a spotted and scarred table in the center, a cheap sideboard with a cracked mirror against a wall, and a half dozen battered chairs.

One of these, beside the table, held the slender figure of a wretched, dejected girl. The head of Agnes Stoner, or Richardson, drooped so that her chin touched her chest. Her mass of golden hair was loose about her frail shoulders. She wore a simple cotton gown of white. Her sole ornament was about her pale throat —a curious gold necklace.

A tall, massive-bosomed Negress stood beside her. A gaudy turban of red and blue tightly bound the hair of her black head.

The Negress stolidly eyed the two men who entered the cabin.

The little man gave her a slight nod.

"You will be rewarded, Maud. The Great Cat sees all and knows all. The girl has been safe in your care."

"Yes, master," intoned the Negress dully. "She has been safe."

The little man was as cold and impassive as a graven image. His little, pointed ears stood out like the ears of a watchful cat. He stared at the girl steadily.

Suddenly the girl flung herself out of her chair. She went down on her knees on the cabin floor. She raised slender white arms in agony of supplication.

"Oh, let me go! Where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me? If it's money you want, my father—"

The Cat-Man smiled, while Gomez laughed coarsely.

"Your father!" sneered the captain.

The girl became wildly hysterical.

"What does it all mean? The chanting, the torches, all the black men and women? And the cats, the cats, oh, the black cats!" she moaned.

The Cat-Man surveyed her unmoved. He raised a black-gloved hand to his cheeks. It was as if he were stroking invisible cat whiskers.

"You have been chosen," he said, "to be bride of the Great Cat."

CHAPTER XI

"Murderer!"

WHILE the white-painted *Los Tres Hermanos*, like a ghost ship, was cutting her whispering passage through the black wastes of Panama Bay, Sergeant Flaherty was sitting thoughtfully in the little, box-like room that was his home in the D Company barracks in the fort.

The night's happenings bulked heavily in Flaherty's mind. He somberly reviewed them, one by one. Again he felt himself in the driving rain, saw the weird, red-lit scene among the ruins of Old Panama, heard the blood-chilling chant. That he had caught a glimpse of the missing girl, there was no doubt in his mind.

He speculated upon the voice he had heard just as the crushing blow had struck him unconscious. "The cat scratches . . ." Instinctively Flaherty put a hand to his cheek.

He knew, without understanding

the reason for it, that if the cat had left its marks on his face, he would now be as dead as Kennedy the sentry, as the black youth in the house in the Forbidden District.

A cold shudder passed through Flaherty's bulky body. Death from a cat's paw—the mysteries of voodooism.

From Old Panama, Flaherty's thoughts went on to the Canal Zone Police Station where he had sat with Detective Hoarlogue. The sergeant found himself fuming mentally, and clenching his fists subconsciously.

Hoarlogue was egotistical, self-sufficient—and dumb. Before he and his detectives found out anything, or did something, Agnes Richardson would be dead, if she were not dead already.

Next Flaherty's mind carried him to the sinister house in the Forbidden District. Although the cool trade wind was blowing steadily through the barrack's window, Flaherty mopped his glistening bald head with his big, khaki bandanna.

THE mysteries he had come across in that house were inexplicable. What had brought Colonel Richardson stealthily, in the dead of night, there? Had his explanation of the summons delivered by the messenger been true or false?

Richardson had said that the messenger had come from Lieutenant Graling, who was lying in a cell in the Balboa jail.

Sergeant Flaherty slowly shook his head in weariness and bafflement. What was Richardson's secret? What was Graling's? Who had murdered the black boy, the messenger, and why? What was the significance of the cellar full of black cats? Where was the girl, Agnes Richardson? Was she dead or alive?

These questions pounded through Flaherty's brain and elicited no answers or explanations. About the whole mystery there was something elusive which he could not quite grasp.

Could Colonel Richardson or Lieutenant Graling, either one, furnish the clue if he so desired? Was money, the million the girl had inherited from her dissolute father, the golden wax which sealed the door of the mystery?

Suddenly Flaherty hit his thick thigh with his broad fist. Gold! Money! If it were the substance which kept the mystery sealed, might it not also be the key to release the door?

THE old sergeant got to his feet and padded to the home-made book shelf nailed to the wall over his narrow, white, Quartermaster cot. From it, he selected a solid volume. The unshaded electric bulb in the center of the room glinted on the gold letters of its title: *THE HISTORY OF PANAMA.*

Flaherty sat in his rickety, barrack's chair again and thumbed the pages. His calloused forefinger ran along these lines: *"In the year 1671, the notorious English buccaneer, Henry Morgan, sacked Panama with much cruelty and bloodshed. . . . The wealth which Morgan and his buccaneers derived from wrecking the city is incalculable. . . . Prior to the entry to the city by the pirates, many Spaniards fled to ship, taking with them their families and their fortunes. These hid themselves in the jungles of the near-by islands of Panama Bay. . . . Even to this time, it is said that the lovely tropical islands in the Bay of Panama keep well the secret of the hiding places of the treasures deposited on them by the long forgotten Dons of New Spain."*

Flaherty looked up from the printed pages. In his blue eyes, there was a distant stare of preoccupation. The coin which the fat detective, Bill Devoe, had taken from the pocket of the murdered Negro.

Flaherty was more certain than ever that the date on the coin had been 1666—five years before the pirate Morgan had sacked Old Panama.

As Flaherty closed the book, he knew that he had another clue, and one as indefinite and seemingly as foolhardy as the clue of the black cat.

Early the next morning, Sergeant Flaherty appeared before the new commanding officer of the fort and respectively requested that a radio maneuver be held that day, giving as his excuse that the radio detail of the regiment, of which he was in charge, needed more training.

The permission was granted, so Flaherty spent the day in getting the maneuver under way. There were boats to be arranged for from the mine battery; there were the radio men themselves to be gathered from all the line batteries of the fort.

He decided to send out approximately six details to as many selected islands. Each detail had a minimum of five men, with complete equipment for both sending messages and receiving them.

And, Flaherty determined, the details must be in their positions and reported in to the headquarters radio station on the parade ground of the fort before dusk.

CHAPTER XII

Murder in the Air

DUSK came fast upon the heels of the setting, tropical sun. The brief, lush, tropic twilight enveloped the fort. Through the entrance of the little tent, the radio receiving headquarters, in the middle of the wide, level parade ground, Flaherty could dimly discern the outlines of the series of two-story barracks. Already yellow lights were appearing behind the screens that protected day rooms and squad rooms.

In the intervals between the barracks, the sergeant could see the dull silver sheen of the Canal as it wended its smooth way to the Bay a few hundred yards distant.

A tramp steamer, lights twinkling in her portholes, the last ship to complete the passage of the locks for the day, glided peacefully past the fortified islands, past Taboga, on her way to the broad Pacific, bound for Honolulu, Tokio, or beyond.

Across the Canal, jungle-covered Bruja Point glowered in increasing darkness.

The tall, antenna pole that rose up beside the tent and towered into the air, crackled. Inside the tent, a soldier operator sitting in front of the black enamel control board, listened intently. Then, removing his headset for an instant, he turned to Flaherty, who sat beside the tent entrance as silent and as unmoving as a Buddha.

"OTOQUE reports in, Sergeant."

"Good. That's the last, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. All stations have reported in. Otoque is the last. The detail going there had farthest to travel."

"Yes, I know," answered Flaherty, still staring thoughtfully into the soft night.

The operator replaced the headset over his ears and lit a cigarette.

"That's a cheerful place, Sergeant. Otoque Island. I like it—nit. I went out there once with a detail.

The island's too big and gloomy. It gave me the creeps. I never saw such thick jungle.

"And that native village down on the shore, near where we set up the radio set. It was full of starved, mangy dogs. And talk about smell! It stunk to heaven.

"And the way the black beggars looked at us you'd have thought we came to steal something! There was an old graveyard behind the village. Weirdest spot you ever saw. The place was full of snakes, too, and—"

Such rambling conversation began to annoy the sergeant.

"Watch your business!" he ordered sharply. "Might be a message coming in any time."

"Naw," disbelieved the garrulous soldier good-naturedly. Nevertheless, he adjusted the phones more tightly. "They won't be sending any messages unless we send 'em some for drill. Ain't no airplanes out for them to pick up.

"Funny, anyway, this having a maneuver in the middle of the month. We have enough to do besides this stuff," he grumbled.

"Say, Sergeant," he started off suddenly on another track, "did you see that feller whose been around here a dozen times today looking for you? What have you been doing, Sergeant? He said he was a detective from the Canal Zone Police. Hoarlogue, I think he said his name was."

FLAHERTY smiled to himself.

"A military post is a bad place to look for a soldier," he remarked, "when the soldier doesn't want to be found."

"Hum!" said the operator, glancing obliquely at Flaherty. Changing the subject, he added, "What's that book you've got there, Sarge?"

Flaherty touched the heavy volume which lay on his knees.

"Oh, a little book about poisons. Some of them are very interesting, very."

"Gee, Sarge, you read everything, don't you!" exclaimed the operator.

The early hours of the evening passed slowly. Flaherty became more and more visibly nervous as the time went on. No messages filtered through the air other than perfunctory check-ups with home station.

Eleven o'clock. The casual noises of the fort were dying away. One by one the barracks became dark. The headlights of automobiles flashing along the road in front of the barracks became more infrequent. The operator seemed to be dozing over the panel of the set.

Flaherty was making up his mind whether or not to shake him, when the operator suddenly crouched forward, listening intently.

Flaherty waited in an agony of apprehension. What words were the humming dots and dashes forming?

WHEN the operator turned a white, strained face toward him, Flaherty knew that he had won. The coin, the ancient, Spanish "piece of eight," which Bill the Canal Zone detective had found in the pocket of the murdered black youth, had meant something. Buried treasure of the old Spanish Dons on the outlying islands of Panama Bay.

"What? What?" Flaherty almost shouted the words as he waited for the operator to speak.

"Sergeant!" The operator's voice was a hoarse whisper. "There's hell to pay on Otoque. Simmons is dead. He stepped out of the radio tent for a moment. When he didn't come back, one of the others went to look for him.

"He found Simmons at the edge of the jungle. Simmons had a funny, gold necklace clutched in one fist.

There wasn't a mark on him except a scratch on his face."

Flaherty, too, had gone white. The news was more than he had bargained for.

"The cat scratch!" he cried.

He leaped for the radio control board. The trembling operator slid out of his way. Flaherty donned the head phones. He knew the code of dots and dashes.

They came to him, and as they hummed into his ears, his brain transmitted them into words.

"Send help! Send help! There's something terrible going on here. We don't know what it is. Otoque speaking. Simmons is dead. Send help! Send. . . ."

The flow of dots and dashes ceased suddenly. With perspiration streaming down his broad face, Flaherty waited for them to commence again, meanwhile pounding Otoque's call signal with the transmitter key.

NO answer. No answer. What had happened?

Then, at last, he heard faint signals again. While he strained his ears to catch them, they gradually grew stronger.

"Otoque speaking. Otoque speaking. Calling Headquarters. Calling Headquarters. Break in sending due to Marinelli dying at generator crank. Simmons and Marinelli dead. Come quickly. Come quickly. Otoque speaking. Calling Headquarters. Otoque. . . ."

Flaherty didn't wait to hear any more. There were two men dead out of the detail of five that had been sent to Otoque! Dead—*murdered!* Wholesale murder.

He tore off the headset and thrust it at the worried operator.

"Stay on the board!" he cried. "And listen to Otoque. I'm going there in the L-Boat. Listen for messages from us, too. And stay here—if it takes your life!"

"Yes, sir!" assented the white-faced, trembling operator.

OUT of breath, Flaherty reached the D Battery barracks. He pounded up the stairs leading to the squad room on the second floor. He groped his way through darkness, down an aisle between bunks on which lay soldiers sleeping, totally unconscious of the tragic happenings on a dark, tropical island in the midnight Bay.

At the far end of the squad room, Flaherty found his own small, private chamber. He opened its door and snapped on the light. A black cat curled on the olive-drab blanket of the narrow, white cot, opened its green eyes to stare at the sergeant unblinkingly.

Flaherty snatched the animal up, and then precipitously left the room, not even taking time to turn out the light.

Downstairs again, the sergeant made his way to the battery kitchen. His hand found the light switch on the wall near the door. When he had turned it, the kitchen leaped into being. From a rack of gleaming pots and pans, which stood near the long, black, cooking range, Flaherty took a small pot.

Next he ransacked the pantry until he found a burlap bag, which had once contained potatoes. Into this, Flaherty thrust the cat.

From the kitchen, the sergeant went to the battery tool shed, which was outside the barracks in the backyard. He was forced to light a match there to find what he sought.

Amidst a clutter of broken barracks' chairs, which had been placed

in the shed for mending, Flaherty found a small pail containing a brownish-black, viscous fluid. Some of this he poured into the kitchen pot, taking very great care to get none of it on his fingers.

Lastly, Flaherty went to a garage which stood beside the tool shed. Into his flivver he dropped the burlap bag containing the cat, and the kitchen pot containing the fluid. It was the work of a moment to back the car out of the garage and into the road which passed along behind the barracks.

Down this road, he pushed the flivver to its limit of speed. The way led through the fort and out upon a long causeway, which connected the fort with the fortified islands in the Bay.

At the end of the narrow, dark causeway, which the black, silvered waters of the Bay lapped on both sides, there was a large boathouse. This belonged to the mine command of the fort. Against a dock was the L-Boat, her lights on and her engine throbbing. Flaherty had arranged for this earlier in the day.

THE sergeant hurried from his car into the boathouse, where he found a wall telephone. First he called the post guard house. Then he asked for a number in Balboa.

His telephoning done, he emerged to the dock again, to wait as patiently as he could.

Fortunately, the guard house had been prepared. Within a few minutes, a truck lumbered down to the edge of the dock. In the dim light, twenty soldiers clambered out of it. Silently they filed aboard the L-Boat, their Springfield rifles in their hands.

Already the crew of the L-Boat were going about the business of casting off. Flaherty, however, was at his flivver. From it he extracted the kitchen pot and the burlap bag.

Having possessed himself of those curious articles, he ran for the L-Boat.

At the same moment, a touring car careened down the last stretch of the causeway. It turned in at the dock and stopped with a terrific screeching of brakes, only when it was alongside the boat. Immediately it disgorged dark figures.

James Hoarlogue's voice shouted through the night.

"Stop! Sergeant Flaherty! You're under arrest! Don't try to escape!"

Hoarlogue charged the sergeant viciously.

Flaherty seemed to give way, but his powerful arms reached out, seizing Hoarlogue and dragging him bodily aboard the L-Boat.

Water widened between the boat and the dock. Hoarlogue's detectives gesticulated and danced impotently. Aboard the boat, Flaherty's soldiers jeered heartily.

"You'll pay for this, Flaherty!" gritted Hoarlogue, picking himself up from the deck.

"Shut up!" ordered Sergeant Flaherty, calmly possessing himself of the detective's automatic. "You're going for a ride."

"A . . . a ride!" gasped Detective Hoarlogue fearfully.

CHAPTER XIII

Four Dead—And One Mad

THE sturdy L-Boat, whose ordinary labors consisted of assisting a mine planter to lay down a field of mines, pushed her nose steadily through the tossing, moonlit waters of the Bay. Flaherty, in the wheelhouse, paced the floor impatiently behind the stolid pilot.

"Is this the best we can do?" he fumed.

The pilot replied without turning his head.

"Yes, Sergeant. We're doing top speed now. We'll reach Otoque in another hour."

Flaherty groaned.

"Two men dead," he muttered. "They'll all be dead before we get there! And the girl with them!"

He sat down on the leather seat that ran across the back wall of the wheelhouse. His big fists clenched and unclenched. What deadly, horrible scene were they approaching?

Would its perpetrators be brought to bay this time, or would they vanish as mysteriously as they had vanished from the house in the Forbidden District?

What manner of men were those fiends, whose trade mark was the scratch of a cat? What were their aims and purposes? They killed ruthlessly. They were masters of the black art. They held a white girl in their possession.

The wheelhouse door opened and in stepped a soldier.

"Message from Otoque," he said. His voice was strained. "They report that Burnham is dead. The detail is going crazy."

FLAHERTY jerked to his feet. Simmons, Marinelli, Burnham, three of them dead, murdered insidiously and mysteriously in the tropical night enfolding the island of Otoque!

"Tell them we're coming," he replied thickly to the wireless operator. "Tell them to hold on, and to watch out for—for cats, black cats."

The operator touched his campaign hat.

"Yes, sir."

Flaherty paced the narrow confines of the wheelhouse like a caged animal. Thoughts raced in his brain. Three men murdered! He felt that he himself had sent those men to death.

He could take scant comfort in the knowledge that he had not dreamed of such serious results from the radio maneuver. He cursed the Panama Canal Department regulation that forbade the carrying of arms by American soldiery into the territory of Panama except in case of emergency.

He wished that he could have provided a boat to stand by each of the islands while the radio detail was ashore. But there hadn't been enough boats for that. So the radio detail on Otoque were left defenseless, and unable to escape the unknown horror that stalked silently through the night and struck men down to death by the paw of a cat.

FLAHERTY glanced at the burlap bag and the kitchen pot reposing on the grated flooring of the wheelhouse. Every now and then the burlap bag moved, seemingly of its own accord.

"Otoque," laconically announced the pilot.

Flaherty sprang to a window of the wheelhouse. A large, dark, gloomy island bulked out of the night sea. Its width appeared to be a matter of two or three miles.

Its length could not be estimated, as it extended in prolongation with the nose of the L-Boat. In the center of the shore was a cluster of dim, yellow lights marking the native village. The round, white moon in the sky hovered close to the top of the island.

Silhouetted against its circular surface were several palm trees, their bushy heads black, forlorn, mysterious-looking.

As Flaherty watched, he wondered what was transpiring in the radio tent, in the native village and, per-

haps, beyond in the jungle's blackness.

Sergeant Flaherty was among the first boatload to go ashore. He sat impatiently in the prow, with his kitchen pot and the burlap bag at his feet. When the small boat grated against the sandy beach, a hundred yards or so in front of the radio tent, Flaherty leaped out of it at once.

Several soldiers tumbled out after him, pushing the detective, Hoarlogue, along with them. While the small boat went back to the L-Boat for more men, the party on the beach fell in behind Flaherty, their rifles at the ready.

NO words were spoken as the little group moved off over the soft sand. The small wall tent ahead was dark. Its canvas flap was parted to reveal a black interior.

With its guy wires, the antenna pole rose alongside the tent like a gaunt, ribbed, clothless umbrella.

The region of Flaherty's breast was cold with dread. Surely the survivors of the radio detail should have appeared by now to give relieved welcome to the newcomers. But the radio tent, and all about it, remained somberly silent.

In the distance, up the shore, the native village, too, was silent. This was most unusual, sinister. At least the starved, half-savage curs of the place should be about by now, snarling and howling.

As they approached the tent, Flaherty shouted aloud, his voice cracking with strain. No answer came back.

Now the sergeant brought out a flashlight, whose white beam he directed at the tent. He stifled an exclamation, and hastened forward. The bodies of three men, sprawled in grotesque attitude, lay near the generator outside the tent, whose crank had to be turned in order to generate the power necessary to send signals.

He looked down upon the dead soldiers silently, while the men with him formed an awed semi-circle behind his back.

Marinelli, Burnham, and Powers. Powers must have been the last of the three to die, as his name had not been reported in a wireless message.

Flaherty's flashlight covered each one in turn. All bore the scratches of a cat's claw on their faces. None showed evidences of death by any other means.

With eyes wide, glassy, and horror-filled, Detective James Hoarlogue stared at the bodies.

Sergeant Flaherty glanced at him once.

"Murder!" said the old soldier bitterly. "Out and out, cold-blooded murder. But a cat scratch was only a cat scratch to you!"

Flaherty turned, and went into the radio tent. There he found the body of Simmons, the first man of the detail to die. Simmons was slumped in a camp chair, to which his comrades had probably brought him from the jungle. His fist still clutched a necklace of dull gold.

FLAHERTY raised the cold, stiff hand and looked at the necklace. It was made of round, beaten gold pieces, each piece supporting a design of odd nature.

The sergeant let down the dead hand gently. His blue eyes grew cold and hard. His mouth, good-humored ordinarily, set in a straight, firm line.

By now the rest of the soldiers had come up from the landing point on the beach. There was a commotion outside the tent, and finally

two men entered supporting between them a soldier whose uniform was torn and dirt-covered, whose face and hands were masses of bloody scratches and livid welts.

His hair was in tangled disorder. His eyes rolled wildly in his white face. In him, Flaherty recognized the operator of the detail, the only man to live out of the five.

"We found him," reported a burly corporal, "in the jungle in back of the tent here. When he saw us, he fell on his knees and begged us not to kill him. I don't think he recognized us, Sergeant. We had to drag him here."

Sergeant Flaherty looked pityingly upon the crazed soldier.

"What happened, Johnson?" he asked gently. "Tell us about it."

Private Johnson, the wireless operator, stared fearfully at Flaherty.

"I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know."

Suddenly he shrieked.

"I'm afraid! Take me away from here! Oh, it was terrible! Every time the juice went weak, there was another one of them dead."

IN a ghastly tone, he said their names.

"Marinelli . . . Burnham . . . Powers . . .

"They all died at the crank. I couldn't see what killed them. They just—died. Every time the juice went low, I went out to see, and there was another—dead. Marinelli . . . Burnham . . . Powers . . . "

Johnson's voice rose to a high, terrorful pitch.

"Let me go! Don't hold me! Let me get away from here!" He tugged desperately at the two soldiers restraining him. "This place is haunted! Men die and—"

Flaherty wearily gave the order to have the operator taken to the L-Boat. When the escort had forcibly dragged the screaming soldier away, the sergeant spoke bitterly.

"So that was the way of it! Simmons went wandering in the jungle and saw something he was not supposed to see. He was discovered, and in the tussle he grabbed that gold necklace off of someone. A cat scratched him, but it must have been a light scratch, for he managed to get back almost to the tent before he died.

"The explanation of what happened afterward is simple. The men were murdered at the generator in an effort to stop the station from sending."

"But," expostulated Hoarlogue, "how was it possible that those men were killed without—?"

"Without putting up a fight, eh?" Sergeant Flaherty finished for him grimly. "In the same way," he added, "that the sentry was murdered on Colonel Richardson's lawn."

"But . . . but why?" insisted Hoarlogue. "There must be a reason!"

"There must be," agreed Flaherty shortly. "And now we're going over to the village and see what the headman knows."

Sergeant Flaherty picked up his burlap bag and the kitchen pot. His men strode after him, gripping their rifles savagely.

CHAPTER XIV

The Bluff That Failed

THE native village of Otoque consisted of approximately a half a hundred squalid huts divided into unequal, irregular sections by paths deep in mud and filth. The stench of the place was almost beyond bearing.

Otoque owed a nominal allegiance to the government of Panama, which

did try half-heartedly to operate a school, and whole-heartedly to collect taxes. The population kept law, order, and observance of its own peculiar customs, under the leadership of one of its number, whom they called the head-man.

Flaherty and his men found the place apparently deserted, though in many of the huts kerosene lamps or candles burned. The sergeant led the way to the largest hut of all.

Its wretchedly furnished interior was devoid of life. In a crude stone fireplace, the embers of a driftwood fire glowed. The illumination was given by a smoky kerosene lamp on a rickety table made of box wood.

The sergeant selected ten men.

"Fix bayonets," he ordered. "Go through this rotten hole. There ought to be somebody around. Bring in anybody you find."

A few minutes later, nine out of the ten soliders had returned. Each had reported, as he entered the hut, "Not a soul in the place, Sergeant."

Flaherty gnawed at his under lip and waited for the tenth man. He arrived shortly, dragging with him a creature that looked more bestial than human.

I FOUND this thing," said the soldier contemptuously, "hiding under a bunch of rags in one of the huts."

The native, for such he was, stood cringing abjectly in front of Flaherty. He was clothed literally in rags, which were crusty with filth. Eyes that expressed only utmost terror stared out of a black, almost inhuman face.

There was no doubt, thought Flaherty, but that the native was an imbecile. Probably that accounted for his being left alone in the village. But where were the others?

Flaherty caught him with a merciless glance from his blue eyes.

"Where is the head-man?"

The imbecile mouthed uncouth sounds and drooled.

"No understand English, uh?"

The native made unintelligible sounds again.

"All right," agreed Flaherty indifferently. He turned to several of the soldiers.

"Take him outside and shoot him."

The soldiers stared at Flaherty, but the sergeant's broad face was impassive.

"You can give him the cold steel, if you like," added the Irishman relentlessly. "No use in wasting good bullets."

The soldiers saw Flaherty's left eyelid droop a trifle. Their astonished expressions changed. Suddenly their faces took on looks of extreme ferocity. They seized the terrified half-wit and handled him roughly.

The native sagged to his knees.

"'Ave mercee!" he implored in English. "Francisco do notheeng!"

I THOUGHT so," said Flaherty, nodding his head. "All these natives speak a little English when they have to. Even the half-wits."

Flaherty signed to the soldiers to release the man.

"Where is the head-man?" he demanded inexorably. "Where are the others."

"Francisco do not know," mumbled the imbecile sullenly. "They go 'way. All go far 'way."

Flaherty shrugged his big shoulders.

"Take him out, boys. No bullets. Let him have it in the belly."

Two soldiers seized the miserable native again. Others ostentatiously polished their gleaming bayonets with handkerchiefs.

"Por l'amor de Dios!" screamed

the half-wit. "'Ave mercee on poor Francisco, *Señor!* Truely I know not where they 'ave gone. But," a look of hope appeared in his eyes, "I go find them, *Señor*. Maybe I find them. Do not keel poor Francisco, *Señor*."

Flaherty stared at him long and hard.

"Listen," rasped the sergeant. "You find head-man, *comprendez?* Bring him here or I burn whole village. Get that? Now, beat it, *pronto!*"

Two soldiers dragged the agonized, profusely perspiring native to the door, and kicked him through it.

Flaherty wiped the top of his head with his bandanna.

"Maybe it'll work," he commented. "I don't believe he really knows where the rest of them are, but I think he's got a good idea. They must have left him behind because he was too dumb to take along, and they figured he was too dumb to do us any good.

"We can't take a chance on following him because we don't know where he'll lead us. Too much jungle to get lost in."

"Flaherty," asked Hoarlogue incredulously, "would you really burn the village?"

"Maybe."

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Sergeant Flaherty had seated himself on a blackened, three-legged stool at the edge of the fireplace.

AS the minutes slowly passed, doubt increased in Flaherty that he would ever see the head-man. Probably the half-wit had not been able to find him, or had become lost, or had summoned enough courage to disregard the order of the *Americano* and seek safety in the jungle depths.

Flaherty frowned. It was a worried frown. What to do then? He had unearthed the trail this far. Was this to be the end?

Thinking bitterly, savagely, futilely, Flaherty did not see the newcomer enter the hut until a soldier loudly and pointedly cleared his throat. The sergeant then looked up to see a tall, powerfully built native approaching him with sober dignity.

"You want to see me? I have come."

Flaherty knew that the head-man of the village was before him. The man had come alone.

THE sergeant inspected him coolly. He saw a face that was as dark and silky as black satin. He saw a pair of unusually fine, large, black eyes regarding him challengingly. The head-man's thick, dark lips made a line that was faintly sarcastic.

Flaherty stood up. The head-man towered above him. Hard, blue eyes met deep, inscrutable, black ones.

"Where are your people?" asked Flaherty.

"They have gone to celebrate the rising of the full moon," answered the head-man imperturbably.

"Where?"

The head-man gazed at the sergeant steadily.

"It is a secret. The rites of the full moon are sacred."

Flaherty's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Four of our men," he began, speaking slowly and distinctly, "were murdered here tonight. I have come for the murderers."

The head-man shrugged his wide, massive shoulders.

"It is unfortunate, *Americano*, but neither I nor my people know anything about it. We have nothing to do with American soldiers."

The head-man's eyes flashed.

"They come to our island without our permission. That they have died, it is the will of—"

He hesitated.

"Yes?" said Flaherty. "The will of whom?"

"God," finished the head-man sullenly.

Rage began to swell in Flaherty's breast, but he managed to hold himself in control.

"The Government of Panama," he said, "gives American soldiers permission to come here for radio maneuvers."

The head-man said nothing, remaining disdainfully stolid.

FLAHERTY took a step forward. His big fist shot out to seize the native's cotton shirt where it was open at the throat.

"I want those murderers! And I want the white girl!"

The head-man made no move of resistance. He merely glanced down at Flaherty's upturned face, his black eyes smouldering with hatred. Then he shrugged his shoulders again.

"You are crazy," he said.

"Oh, yes!"

Now fury blazed in Flaherty like a fire in dry brush. His left hand still maintaining a fierce hold on the head-man's shirt, his right hand tore at the holster of his .45 automatic.

The ugly blue weapon came out, and Flaherty jammed its cold muzzle against the grizzled, black hair and the bare, black skin of the head-man's chest.

"Now," commanded the sergeant, "talk—*fast!*"

The head-man stared down unmoved. No sign of fear appeared in him.

"Talk!" cried Flaherty, pressing the gun into the native's chest. "I'll send you to hell if you don't. I want to know where those murderers are—and the white girl."

Hoarlogue, white of face, flung himself on the sergeant.

"Flaherty, what are you doing! For heaven's sake, man, come to your senses! You can't get away with this! It'll cause international trouble. Panama and the United States!"

Flaherty kicked him away.

"Get back into your hole, Hoarlogue! I'm handling this. No blasted voodoo worshipers are going to get away with killing four of my men and kidnaping a white girl if I know it. International complications be hanged!"

"You'll be hanged!" muttered Hoarlogue.

The head-man ended the tense situation. He calmly raised his hand and removed the gun from his chest.

"You don't kill me, *Americano*, or any of my people. We have not murdered your soldiers and we know nothing about a white girl."

Sergeant Flaherty lowered his pistol. He knew that his bluff had been called.

CHAPTER XV

The Bride of the Great Cat

MEANWHILE, hardly more than a mile from where this was taking place, a weird ceremony was in progress. The spot was a small plateau, the highest level stretch of the island.

On three sides it was enclosed by the high, dense walls of the jungle. On the fourth, there was nothing but the wall of the night. It was on this side that the plateau ended at the edge of the cliff, whose base was laved by the somnolent, moon-touched waters of the bay.

In the center of this plateau, a huge bonfire was blazing fiercely, shooting hungry tongues of flame seemingly to the star-dusted tropical sky. From the native village,

this fire could be seen, due to the steep hill that led up to the plateau, the tall palm trees, and the thick, tropical vegetation.

The open edge of the plateau looked out on a part of the bay that washed a different side of the island than the one on which was situated the village.

Shadowy forms danced around and around the fire, capering madly, chanting deliriously, and flinging arms up at the full moon, which was, by now, almost directly overhead. Men and women were there together, and as they danced, leaped and gesticulated, they flung pieces of clothing from their bodies. It was an orgy, a mad night, a zenith of black religion.

However, not all were engaged in frantic doings about the fire. A sober procession emerged from the jungle and started across the plateau. The ruddy glow of the huge fire bathed the heavy, ancient chests they carried a blood red.

Behind the chest-carrying black men, whose muscular shoulders seemed to drip red perspiration, came a small group, at the sight of which the mob on the plateau sent up a loud, savage cry.

OF the group, the Cat-Man walked first. Again he was a great, black cat that walked upright just like a man.

Behind him was the full-bosomed Negro giantess, Maud, who was half carrying the wisp of white girl beside her.

Agnes Richardson still wore the virginal white dress. It clung simply to her youthful, fragile form, delicately implying the gentle curves of it. Her hair, still unbound, rippled down around her pale lovely face, upon which a mask of horror seemed indelibly imprinted.

At the sight of her, the concourse of natives cried out fierce, passionate, guttural words wholly unintelligible to Agnes. But the way they looked at her and gesticulated, made her heart a throbbing lump of lead, and her blood a thin stream of coldest fluid.

Behind Agnes Richardson walked two large, powerfully built natives. Both wore garments of flowing white cloth, wrapped around them in the effect of Roman togas.

THE hair of one was white and woolly. It contrasted oddly with his black, somber face. It was he who walked to the right. His companion at his left hand was much younger. His short, wiry, black hair was cropped close to his head.

He could not keep his glittering black eyes from the slender girl who faltered on ahead of him.

Now the official group of this kind of black mass reached a point on the plateau about half the distance between the fire and the cliff edge. Here it halted. Many of the natives deserted the fire and crowded around, jostling one another and drooling incantations.

The Cat-Man looked at the half-dozen chests which had been placed on the ground by the bearers. Then he turned to the white-haired native.

"Open!" he demanded, his immense green eyes in his lean, brown, feline face glowing with an unholy, greedy light.

The older native regarded the Cat-Man solemnly for a moment. Slowly he shook his head.

"No," he refused, in a deep, majestic voice. "Not until the God Girl has become the bride of the Great Cat."

The Cat-Man's eyes flashed green fury. He drew himself to his full

height so that his cat costume fell into long, sinuous, black lines. The feline tail which curled on the ground behind him quivered. The little, pointed ears sewed to the top of the black helmet he wore stood up straight. He presented a sight of fantastic, fascinating horror.

BOTH the white-haired native and his younger companion were visibly affected, as was the crowd behind them.

"Open!" demanded the Cat-Man, "lest the Great Cat wreak his vengeance upon you through me, his apostle on earth, who has come to you. Full too long have you kept the contents of these chests as a barren sacrifice to the Great Cat.

"Long has he been angry with your people because you have not sent him warm, living gold to solace him in the black regions where he rules.

"He has sent me to tell you that which you have been too blind to see. I have shown you the way to propitiate him. I, his apostle. The warm sun shall shine on you, and on your children's children until the end of time.

"You shall possess the world. Your women shall be faithful and multiply. The land and the trees shall give forth food in plenty. The sickness shall not enter your houses."

In awed, tense silence the natives listened to the Cat-Man's impassioned words.

"I have come to you," he continued, "to take away the cursed, cold, barren gold and dump it into the depths of the sea. A boat awaits me at the foot of the cliff.

"I have brought you the living gold. Gold for gold, as it is written in the secret book."

The Cat-Man ceased speaking and glared full into the troubled eyes of the white-haired man. The rest of the natives, breathless, crowded closer.

"The moon is high," said the native slowly, "but not high enough. It is written in the secret and most sacred book that the Bride of Gold must go to the Great Cat in storm, in thunder, in lightning, in the places of our ancestors—amid the ruins of an ancient city.

"That has been denied us. It is also written in the book that the Great Cat will accept a bride when the full moon is at its zenith."

The native pointed up at the moon.

"The moon has not far to travel. Soon it will be at the top of the heavens, where the Great Cat is waiting. It is accursed to send the Golden Girl on her journey before. Then, and only then, shall these chests be opened. I have spoken."

The Cat-Man's green eyes blazed. His feline face contorted in lines of bafflement and anger.

"Come!" he choked. "The moon is nearly overhead. The Great Cat waits."

AT this, the younger native flung off his enveloping wrap. He stepped forth, a magnificent, black figure clad only in a brief loin cloth. Meanwhile, his white-haired companion drew from the folds of his garment a sword, whose long blade gleamed, and whose oddly shaped, iron hilt was dull with ancient rust.

Before the fire, on the side facing the sea, a square stone altar had been placed. To this, in strutting majesty, walked the young native, bearing in his hands the sword. The leaping flames glowed on his body, scintillated on the sword blade.

The Negress Maud, muttering to herself, dragged the white girl, who had become hysterical, to the altar

block. The rabid black crowd packed after them.

Agnes, held in a grip of iron by the Negress, was pushed to her knees, her golden head forced down upon the block.

"The moon is high," said the Cat-Man. His mouth was set in a sardonic, malevolent line.

With both hands, the executioner raised the sword high over his head. The throng of natives moaned in ecstacy.

The white-haired man held up a restraining hand.

"Wait!" he commanded. "Let there be no mistake. The moon is yet a short space from its zenith. When I give the signal, let the sword fall."

Agnes Richardson screamed, and twisted futilely in the hands of the grim-faced Maud.

CHAPTER XVI

The Black Cat's Paw

DOWN in the village, in the hut of the head-man, Sergeant Flaherty slowly replaced his pistol in its holster. He stepped back a pace from the head-man and soberly mopped his bald head with the bandanna.

"So," said Flaherty, "you won't talk, eh? You know I don't dare shoot you. You know I can't travel the length and breadth of this island tonight. You know that I shall have to go back to Panama to get authority to tackle you.

"And by that time whatever monkey business is going on here will be over, all traces will be hidden, and you'll be safe."

The head-man was silent. In the depth of his steady black eyes twin sparks of triumph glowed.

Flaherty was thoughtful. From time to time his glance strayed to the fireplace, in front of which was the kitchen pot and the burlap bag.

Finally the sergeant picked up the pot and placed it on the home-made boxwood table. All in the hut watched him in silence.

"You've got us stumped, eh?" remarked Flaherty to the head-man.

The native did not deign to reply.

However, his eyes widened perceptibly when Flaherty went to the burlap bag and drew from it a perplexed black cat. The green-eyed animal draped across the sergeant's big hand stared curiously around the room.

THE head-man's eyes grew wider, as he watched Flaherty carry the cat to the table and dip its paw into the kitchen pot.

The cat's paw dripped brownish liquid.

"Poison," commented Flaherty, turning with the cat in his hands toward the head-man. "A derivative of *curare*. The Indians in this part of the world tip the points of cute, little arrows in it.

"They shoot arrows out of blow-guns. Death is always swift and sure. *Curare* is very hard to detect in the human body. You went the Indians one better. You experimented with it, distilling and redistilling until it couldn't be detected.

"It's a good thing," finished Sergeant Flaherty mildly, "that it's been a habit of mine to do quite a lot of reading now and then. It also happens that I've served quite a few years down in these here tropics.

"I've kept my eyes and ears open which, it seems," he cast a look at the pop-eyed Hoarlogue, "some people whose business it is to do so, don't.

"All of that," he concluded, "*and* a stubborn, Irish belief that a

healthy man doesn't ordinarily kick the bucket from a cat scratch unless there's something wrong with the cat." He glanced again at Hoarlogue.

"Now," continued Flaherty again, smiling at the head-man, "I want you to get acquainted with this black cat. It came from the cellar of that nice house in the Forbidden District."

THE sergeant took up the cat with his left hand and grasped its paw gingerly but firmly in his right. He stepped close to the head-man, who shrank back in great fear.

"As you said," began Flaherty, "I don't dare shoot you. But if this harmless little cat should happen to scratch you, what then? Nothing. The poison leaves no trace.

"The Government of Panama would hardly get excited over a man who had nothing the matter with him when he died except a cat scratch on his cheek. The Canal Zone Police didn't."

Flaherty's face became coldly grim.

"Now," he said, "you'd better talk. The murderers and the white girl. Quick!"

The head-man crowded back against the wall of the hut. He could not tear his eyes from the cat, who was regarding him with total indifference. Huge beads of perspiration leaped out on his broad, low forehead, which was wrinkled with terror.

"I—I—don't know!" he gasped. "I tell you—I don't know!"

"Game to the last, eh?" commented Flaherty.

He placed the cat's velvet paw against the side of the head-man's face.

Hoarlogue was leaning forward, breathing hard. The cigar had dropped unnoticed from his mouth. All the soldiers were gripping their rifles so tightly that the knuckles of their fists showed white through the skin.

"Hoarlogue," rasped Flaherty, "give this cat's tail a yank. I want him to show his claws—and scratch!"

Like a man hypnotized, Hoarlogue stumbled across the room.

The head-man's eyeballs rolled with agony.

"I'll tell!" he shrieked suddenly. "The girl is up on the plateau in back of the village. Carlo, the Cat-Man, the messenger of the Great Cat, it was he who killed your soldiers.

"He used the dried leg of a dead cat, which had been dipped in the poison. It is he who is responsible for everything. He stole the white girl. He promised us living gold for the Great Cat, living gold for cold, dead gold.

"Mercy! Mercy, *Senor!* Take the cat away!"

THE head-man slumped blubbering to his knees. Flaherty kicked him flat on his face.

"Come on!" he shouted to his soldiers.

The moon lifted higher over the plateau on the top of the island.

"The moon is on her throne at the top of the heavens," said the Cat-Man impatiently. "Strike now. The Great Cat is waiting for his bride."

This time the white-haired native did not stay proceedings. He raised his black arm. The voluminous sleeves of his white garment fell back to his shoulders.

"O, Great Cat," he cried in a loud voice, "accept this, a Golden Bride from thy people!"

All the natives fell on their knees and prostrated their faces to the ground. At that moment, logs in the fire chose to crash together, sending

flames and sparks high into the air.

The scene was etched in red against the black curtain of night. Among the kneeling crowd, four stood erect: the Cat-Man, lean, sinister figure; the white-haired patriarch; the Negress Maud, impassive and huge; and the nearly naked executioner, his two-handed sword gleaming aloft.

Agnes Richardson, mercifully, had fainted. Her fair head lay supine on the block.

"Strike!" commanded the patriarch.

Crack! Crack-crack!

A LONG rifle report. And then two, in quick succession. The executioner spun around, the sword dropping from his hands. He crashed over sideways to fall, in a shower of noisy sparks, into the fire.

The white-haired native clutched at his toga, upon whose surface a red splotch slowly widened. He staggered a little way, and then fell headlong.

The bewildered natives leaped to their feet to rush shrieking hither and thither in terrified confusion.

On a run, Sergeant Flaherty led his men out of the jungle. They saw the grotesque figure of the Cat-Man dart for the altar and seize the limp girl in its cat-like limbs.

The Cat-Man turned and raced for the edge of the plateau. He hesitated on the brink of the cliff for an instant, and then he jumped.

Flaherty and Hoarlogue reached the cliff's edge together. They stared down at the black waters swirling at the bottom of the sheer drop.

"Oh," groaned Hoarlogue shakily.

Flaherty was not addicted to groans. He continued to peer down through the darkness. Suddenly he clutched the detective's arm.

"There! See! There they are!"

Hoarlogue looked and saw a whitish dot on the surface of the water.

"There's a boat out there!" said Flaherty. "He had a boat out there to pick him up."

"He'll get away—with the girl," breathed Hoarlogue.

"Not much!"

Flaherty seized a rifle from a nearby soldier. He pointed it at the sky and fired three times in quick succession. He jammed into the chamber of the gun another cartridge torn from the soldier's belt and fired three times again.

Immediately following the second series of shots, the wide, brilliant beam of a powerful searchlight swept across the water.

"That," said Flaherty, as he handed the rifle back to the soldier, "is the battle cruiser *Rochester.* She's been standing by ever since we've been here.

"I telephoned the Fifth Naval District before I left the mainland. I kind of figured there might be a boat to be picked up."

"You think of everything!" exclaimed Hoarlogue.

"Yeah," said Flaherty. "You have to, in this sort of business."

Detective Hoarlogue scowled and bit his lip.

CHAPTER XVII

Deadly Poison

A SMART young naval lieutenant, at the head of a half-dozen trim, business-like marines, reported to Sergeant Flaherty at the head-man's hut in the village.

"We picked up a girl and a man, Sergeant. Then we overhauled a suspicious looking ship named *Los Tres Hermanos.*"

"The girl?" asked Sergeant Flaherty anxiously.

"Is all right," said the naval of-

ficer. "Very badly frightened, though. And hysterical to find herself out of the mess at last."

Flaherty wiped his bald head with the khaki bandanna.

"The man?" he answered grimly.

"If you can call him a man," replied the officer. "He looked more like a drowned cat when we fished him out of the bay. He's all right, too. Sullen dog. Won't say anything."

The officer's youthful face grew hard.

"Miss Richardson says he kidnaped her."

"He'll hang for murder, too," added Flaherty. "I've got the truth out of these natives. His name is Carlo. He's a breed, born in this part of the world. He got wind that the natives on this island had found some buried treasure.

"He fixed up a lot of hocus pocus to get it away from them. They practice voodooism to some extent, and they got it into their heads that they must have a living sacrifice for their god, living gold for the treasure.

"Agnes Richardson was a blonde, the nearest one to dark Panama. Carlo stole her."

"Great Scott!" cried the amazed officer. "And the treasure?"

"Nothing to it. The natives must have been taking Carlo for a ride. Six chests up on the plateau. All they had in them was a bunch of dust and old buttons and mouldy gold and silver lace.

"I believe at one time the chests might have contained a few old, silver coins, Spanish 'pieces of eight,' and a few bits of jewelry. But the natives even took those things out before turning the chests over to Carlo."

While listening to Flaherty, the officer was toying absent-mindedly with the kitchen pot on the table. Hoarlogue suddenly noticed him.

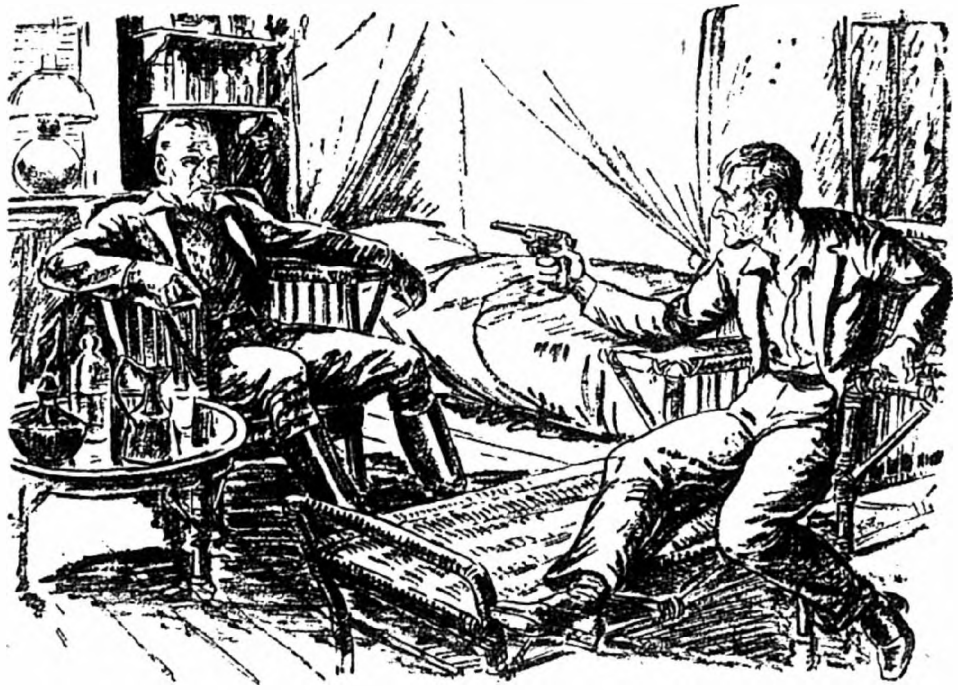
"Look out," he cried, leaping forward. "That's deadly poison!"

The officer paled, and jerked his hand away.

"Poison, me eye!" grinned Flaherty, wiping his bald head with the khaki bandanna. "That's nothing but a pot of pitch."

"Pitch!" cried Detective James Hoarlogue.

RETRIBUTION



A Strange Story of the African Jungles in Which Fate Tricks the Avenger of an Imagined Wrong

By JACK BLACKBURN

THE INSTANT that night fell over the African jungle, where his enemy lay hidden, "Queensland Joe" rose from his recumbent position and stepped lightly into the dark mist rising from the rotting vegetation.

A moment later he paused, listening. Somewhere ahead the sad, melancholy call of a hornbill stirred the night. Queensland Joe shivered. Glancing over his shoulder, in the direction of the settlement, he could faintly see the light of the antiquated oil-beacon located at the end of the little promontory. This somewhat cheered him, and dreading an attack of fever, he pushed on with a low growl.

For some time he picked his way cautiously through the tangled growth, then swerved slightly to the right, following a trail that snaked toward the hazy, distant clearing where the rising moon penetrated the leafy foliage with shafts of mellow light. When finally he emerged at the fringe of forest he whistled softly between his teeth and leaned with folded arms against a gnarled tree trunk. His mouth slitted in a slow grin as he stared at the yellow square distinctly visible across the clearing. There was a face to be seen at that

lamp-lit window of the rude shack. A face that Joe caught enprofile, and surveyed in silent satisfaction.

Murdock!

So the information was correct. Murdock had been seen on the "Gold Coast." The "boys" had not been mistaken. Joe stared from the tense quiet of the shadows at the face, cameo-like in its yellow frame, and marveled at his luck. As Murdock turned away, the bushman's keen eyes caught a momentary glimpse of the gray, tousled head, parchment-like skin, and red-shot eyes that peered from the window. Then he was gone. The sight roused a soundless chuckle in the watcher's throat. He was about to pay back an old debt, a wrong that he, Joe, had carried from Australia to Capetown, from Capetown to the Gold Coast.

Murdock would be alone. Alone and over three miles from the nearest village. No one to hear. No one to know. Fate had provided a stage whose setting was absolutely in accordance with the principle of safety. He grinned and moved forward stealthily through the tangled vines and creepers.

ATTAINING a position where he could see directly into the shack, see unseen, right over the bent shoulders of the man who had now returned to the window, he studied the interior thoughtfully. He saw a small, square apartment, with a rude bunk built into the log wall. On shelves were bottles and books and small boxes marked with a "red-cross." "Doc" Murdock occupied a chair by the window whose broad inside ledge provided a makeshift desk.

Cat-like Joe strode forward through the brush, caught his foot and stumbled. He swore involuntarily as thorns penetrated his outflung hands, and there came a swift, stabbing pain to his ankle as he tripped over cloying creepers. Gritting his teeth he ducked low, avoiding the window which permitted yellow oil-lamp radiance to shaft through into the night, and threw open the door. Doc Murdock heard the protesting creak of rusted hinges. He looked up, peered uncertainly past the lamp at his elbow.

Joe rested a hand lightly at his hip. He stared at the other man with narrowed eyes and a faint lifting of his mouth corners that was suggestive of the snarl of a cur.

"Queensland!"

JOE stood for a moment, staring with eyes that smiled with a mirthless light in them.

"Africa," he drawled softly, "is a large country, Doc. A large place in which a man might almost lose his entity and become another being!" He never took his eyes off the other man whilst he slowly drew an automatic from his hip pocket and swung it lazily on a forefinger speared through the curve of the trigger-guard. "But it is not large enough to conceal you from . . . Queensland Joe!"

Doc Murdock rose from the window ledge.

"No monkey tricks," snapped Joe, raising the weapon. "Come away from that window. Sit over here, see, on the edge of the bunk."

"Ten years," remarked Murdock musingly, lazily obeying the other's commands.

"Since we struck it rich?"

"Exactly."

Joe pulled up a chair, swung a leg across it, and then glanced towards the window.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," he said slowly. "This is loaded." He waved the automatic and regarded the other dispassionately. "It might go off."

Doc watched the shutter swung into position over the window, now isolat-

ing the interior of the shack from any outside vision.

"Are you mad, Joe?" Doc Murdock's tone was not devoid of humor.

"You came out here to escape it, Doc."

Doc crossed his legs and stared at the rafters.

MAYBE I was a little mad—once. Revenge is a damned ridiculous thing at its best. But you've got to remember you left me to die of thirst in the Queensland mineral country. An error, Doc. Any man can make errors, but errors like that in the medical profession are not tolerated. They bring disgrace and ruin."

Doc Murdock sighed and shrugged. "Mind if I smoke?"

Joe scowled and bit his lip. He nodded.

"Go ahead. Your last, anyway. You might have guessed it had to come sometime? Queensland Joe doesn't forget, Doc. One pipe, then. . . ."

He stopped and showed his teeth in a grin whose pleasantness was menacing.

Doc Murdock gazed from shrewd eyes as he stuffed a huge pipe with native tobacco.

"I got lost," he said quietly. "When your horse died on the ridges I left you all the water we had. You knew that critter of mine was nearly dead from thirst. It couldn't carry two of us. And that about the draw, Joe? Wasn't that square?"

"I'm not kicking about the cards, Murdock. A Queen beats a nine spot any day. That's not why I'm here."

Murdock scratched the stubble on his chin and continued:

"Well, I got lost. I wandered about for hours, for days, and finally reached a cattle station more or less crazed. You know what thirst is, Joe? My tongue stuck out like a blackened stick. It choked me. I saw lakes and rivers and oceans of clear water. Fountains of it poured from the sky and sank into the blistering rocks under my feet. My skin dried like parchment paper. My body shriveled. For months my mind was a blank. They told me I babbled about a mountain of silver lead, and a partner lost in the dry-country. But they couldn't make sense of my rambling. They put it down to a crazed mind."

Doc Murdock paused and re-filled his pipe. Joe raised his hand.

"That trick's played out," he snarled. "I'm not here for the good of my health. Get on with it."

"I wanted to tell them you were up there," Murdock continued, "in the desert, but my brain wouldn't act properly. When I finally recovered I searched all over the ridges, tried to locate you, but there was no signs or word to show were you had gone. I reckoned your bones were bleaching in the sun, like those others that litter the ridges of that God forsaken land. No need to tell you that, Joe."

Doc Murdock paused and met the other's gaze with a level look.

"You married her and sold the claim," Joe said steadily. "Thought I was dead, eh? Well, you see I'm not. Your story won't hold water, Murdock. You wanted my girl—always wanted her. Any children?"

"No need to regretfully contemplate the distress of a widow, Joe. She died in Queensland soon after we were married."

"Ah! I understand."

I BURIED her and took up my medical work again. I'd had more than enough of prospecting. Came out here to study tropical diseases—and try to forget. There's three cases of 'yellow jack' in the settlement. Maybe you know this part is called 'the white man's grave,' Joe? It doesn't pay to hang about here long."

"You can't scare me, Murdock. No one knows I'm here. No one will see me go. I'll be away after . . . this."

"There's no retribution, Joe. It's all a mistake. If I could have found you out there I wouldn't have married your girl. It was her choice, Joe, not mine. We had much in common. That's all."

"Well, I've sought you for ten years, Murdock, and I've found you at last. What you say doesn't count with me. It's a pack of lies. The scores are to be leveled." Joe rubbed his achin leg and scowled. "You have five minutes to smoke . . . and live. No longer."

"I don't care," Murdock shrugged and laugned easily. "I'm getting old. My studies are almost complete. My life work done. Some poor beggar will find this hole more pleasant to live in if I'm not mistaken. Don't destroy those papers, Joe." He pointed to the ledge and inclined his head sideways in deprecation. "In the desolation of Africa, life is scarcely a priceless gem. I did it for medical science, Joe. You count the cost, of course?"

"Cost? What cost?"

Murdock sat thoughtfully and considered the question.

"You aim at survival. By my death at your hands, you remain safe. I have no living relations. There is none to avenge me. You have not forgotten that fate is an impish ally, liable to throw in her lot when least expected."

Joe studied that.

INSIDE a few minutes you will settle the debt," Doc went on slowly and without emotion. "That is, apparently, irrevocable. That you are wrong doesn't appear to count. It's the dead girl you're thinking of, Joe."

A shrewd guess. Joe started.

"I wonder," Murdock dropped his thatch of brows. "Remember Kelly, the sheep man? He died very mysteriously after his trip with you, Joe. He was found on the ridges, with a bullet wound in his head, and he never regained consciousness. The case was paralleled later. In a succeeding year. Seems like the savagery of a mentally unbalanced."

"You whine?"

NOT on my life, Joe. I draw your attention to precedent wherein deaths from partnership with you have been decidedly out of the ordinary. Your father, if I remember correctly, died violently in a bush feud. Your brother also. What are you going to do with me afterwards . . . when you've pulled the trigger?"

Joe stared down at the weapon in his hand. Its muzzle pointed unwaveringly at the other's chest.

"Nothing."

"There are men in the settlements and villages who will be quick to miss me and exact vengeance on my—murderer."

"Suicide," said Joe coolly. "They'll think so, anyway. I'll leave this weapon—a very common make and much in use here—in your hand. Finding the door locked, and the key still on the inside, and finding the window shuttered and latched on the inside, it must obviously be suicide, I should think?"

"Locked on the inside? The door? Impossible."

"Don't kid yourself, Doc," Joe grinned. "I've had ten years to think it over. Are you ready to pay the debt? Time is up. You see, I shall need to go to the nearest settlement or village. I'm a stranger in this district, and I need supplies. Even in Africa a stranger would excite suspicion where a murdered man, and especially a doctor, is concerned—unless the murder was obviously just undoubted suicide."

Doc Murdock drew his breath be-

tween his teeth. So it had come to this? He was unarmed and at the mercy of a crazed man who wouldn't listen to reason. There was no way out.

"I wonder if it is intuition?" he said gently, his eyes becoming introspective. "Do you believe that a man can avenge himself after death, Joe? I do."

Joe raised the automatic.

"George Murdock," muttered Doc. "My full name. Remember that Joe. You are about to shoot. Shoot, damn you. . . ." He laughed insolently, fearlessly. "I may count . . . even after death. Who knows?"

"I'll risk it," growled Joe decisively, and pulled the trigger. The streaming jungle blanketed the sharp report that whipped the silence of the rough shack.

Queensland Joe looked around. He arranged the body so that it was seated at the window ledge that served Murdock as a desk. In the stiffening fingers he inserted the butt of the automatic. Suddenly he started. There was still a smile on Murdock's lips, and the eyes were half-opened in a queerly fixed gaze which held humor, a terrible suggestion of humor, somehow within them as he leaned over the ledge.

Joe shivered and turned away. He looked at the shutters. They were fastened on the inside of the window and a catch dropped into place—a catch that could only be worked from the inside of the shack.

HE crossed to the door, studied the old-fashioned box-shaped lock and key and grinned in quiet satisfaction. His leg still hurt where he had stumbled amongst the thorns and the undergrowth earlier, but he scarcely noticed any discomfort from that or his torn hands in the cunning enjoyment of the ingenious scheme he was now putting into operation.

For a second he had considered knocking the lamp over, but changed his mind quickly. The jungle was dry as tinder. It would fire and make his escape dangerous. He picked up the lamp and passed outside; noticing that the door left a half-inch space between the bottom and the floor boards.

FROM his pocket he drew a large jack-knife and cut a thin branch of thorn. Returning to the door he whittled one end of the branch and placed the point into the thumb-ring of the key, so that it held loosely at an angle of about forty-five degrees. On the other end of the branch he tied a piece of string which dangled to the floor.

Joe pushed the end of string under the door, went outside, pulled the door after him, and took hold of the string.

He pulled gently, visualizing the lever through the key end. Steadily he increased the pull, thus forcing the key to turn. He felt the string coming by degrees. There was a sudden click as the lock went home, and, being now vertical, the stick fell to the floor.

Everything was perfectly carried through. Joe secured his device by simply pulling it beneath the door on its length of string.

With a last look round he went into the night, his lips set in a mould of grim enjoyment. He had nothing to fear. The most astute brains would be easily fooled. Doc Murdock had paid the price. And in his going he had left indisputable evidence of suicide. The locked door and shuttered window was the only means of access to the shack. It was only natural that no man could leave the shack and have the door locked on the inside and the shutters fastened in addition.

Joe pushed on quickly toward the settlement, treading the same snake-

like path that he had come by. In the thickets he orientated his way by the distant beacon, now showing dully through the trees, now hidden from sight by the dense foliage.

FOR half an hour he hurried, losing his way and finding it again with venomous curses as he strove to maintain direction through clinging tree-streamers and matted undergrowth. His leg was now hurting intolerably, and he cursed his foolishness for not attending to it from Doc Murdock's medical supplies. At intervals his senses reeled, his mind wandered with more and more recurrent attacks.

He was almost out of the jungle when he sank with a cry of pain. In agony he gripped his leg with tearing fingers. He knew it was going to be impossible to stagger further. He gazed about him fearfully in the darkness, and his throat contracted in fear of the shadows and desolation that knew a thousand indiscernable noises. . . .

Unconsciously almost he cried for help. Again and again his voice shattered the stillness. A light flickered in the distance, others followed. Presently he heard voices; answering shouts and calls that sounded more welcome than anything he had ever heard. He yelled back, directing the searchers from time to time. He was still shouting and nursing his leg when a group of whites and natives came upon him.

Without explanation he pointed to his swollen ankle. With flash lamps and torches they gathered round and examined him, and a native spoke rapidly after one look at Joe's face. It was drawn up and of a livid hue. They cut away his clothes and looked at his hip. The whole of his leg was swelling quickly, and near his ankle were two, tiny welling drops of blood, no bigger than a pin-prick, but surrounded with a great, discolored lump.

Joe stared with awful eyes at the small punctures. There was no need to tell him what had happened. He had seen it hundreds of times before. He cringed back and groaned throatilly. His voice grated like sandpaper drawn across wood.

"I know it! Snake bite. No, no! Don't say it's that."

THE men stood around regarding him in the torchlight, but the gravity of their faces was lightened by the knowledge of the jungle. They whispered together, but Joe couldn't understand their words. Then, dumbly, as from far away, he heard someone shout:

"Snake bite. Deadly poison. Fatal, but you can thank your lucky stars there is just the one man within reach who can save your life."

There was a short pause, then the voice continued.

"Lift him up, boys. Follow me. I want to get him to old Doc Murdock as soon as possible."

Famous Soldiers of Fortune

By Stookie Allen

PEDRO LOZANO

BORN AND EDUCATED IN MADRID, SPAIN, LOZANO WENT TO LONDON IN 1875 TO BECOME A STAR NEWSPAPER MAN ON THE LONDON EXPRESS

WHEN THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR BROKE OUT, LOZANO WAS SENT BY THE EXPRESS AS WAR CORRESPONDENT BECAUSE OF HIS ABILITY TO SPEAK SPANISH

LOZANO, WITH HIS EXCEPTIONAL FIERY SPIRIT WAS UNABLE TO STICK TO HIS WRITINGS BUT SEIZED A GUN AND ENTERED INTO THE FIGHTING.

HE SERVED WITH DISTINCTION IN THE SPANISH ARMY... ...WAS AWARDED TWO MEDALS FOR BRAVERY AND WAS MADE A CAPTAIN.... WAR WAS NOW HIS GOD AND HE SOUGHT IT IN EVERY CORNER OF THE GLOBE.


NEXT....
HE WENT TO ALGERIA AND JOINED THE FOREIGN LEGION — IN A FIERCE BATTLE WITH THE RIFFS AT FORT WHICH AN ENTIRE COMPANY OF THE LEGION WAS WIPED OUT - HE WAS TAKEN PRISONER
AFTER STAYING IN PRISON FOR 3 MONTHS THE LEGION TOOK THE TOWN - THE RIFFS LEFT HIM BEHIND WHEN THEY FLED — FINISHING HIS TERM IN THE LEGION, AND WITH NO WARS IN SIGHT HE WENT TO BUENOS AIRES TO WORK ON A NEWSPAPER
IN 1904 A REVOLUTION STARTED IN VENEZUELA AND AWAY HE WENT TO FIGHT WITH GENERAL MATOS AGAINST THE RULING TYRANT OF THE COUNTRY AT THAT TIME WHO WAS CASTRO
GEN. MATOS HEAD OF THE LIBERATORS
AT THE CLOSE OF THE REVOLUTION HE TOOK THE MONEY AWARDED FOR HIS SERVICES AND WENT TO ALASKA TO PROSPECT FOR GOLD AFTER SPENDING SIX YEARS IN THE YUKON COUNTRY OF ICE AND SNOW HIS HEALTH BECAME SO BAD HE WAS FORCED TO SEEK A WARMER CLIMATE. . HE WENT TO KOREA AND WAS MADE BODYGUARD TO THE EMPEROR... IN 1911 HE FOUNDED A MILITARY SCHOOL FOR THE TRAINING OF CHINESE SOLDIERS

High Carnival

A Swift-Moving Romantic Story of Glamorous Adventure in Italy When the Doges Ruled

A Complete Novelette

By JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

Author of "The River of Darkness," "Butterfly of Death," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Rippling Highroad

"TO Padua!" murmured young Stefano Lanza, as he reclined in the gondola and dreamily regarded the sparkling waters of the Grand Canal. "To Padua—and dusty books—and dusty doctors of philosophy! But we've yet to cross the lagoon, Paolo. Who knows what may happen before we climb the Padua hills?"

Fra Paolo, the young monk, his tutor, was in a sedate and reflective mood.

"Idle fancies, Stefano! Resign yourself to duty. When you're done with the professors at Padua you'll be—well, a little older at any rate. Let us pray that you may be a little wiser."

Student and tutor had set out on their journey to the university in modest fashion, for a young gentleman not yet established in Venetian society did not indulge in the display that signalized the formal life of his elders. The *Bucentaur*, state barge of the Doge of Venice, had a hundred and seventy-eight men to row it through the canals and lagoons, and the gondolas of lesser lights flaunted canopies of satin and cloth of gold, and had gondoliers in sumptuous liveries; but the son of Senator Zaccaria Lanza had to be content with the conventional plain black skiff in common use.

Stefano and Fra Paolo had left the Palazzo Lanza by night, and were passing out of the city by the northern loop of the Grand Canal. The senator had made arrangements for their reception on the mainland by a guide with saddle horses and a pack mule, and they were due at the University of Padua the following day.

TO the high-spirited Stefano the prospect of academic drudgery was not alluring, yet there was a certain thrill in leaving home, even in skimming over the waters of the Grand Canal by night. He stared at the lights in the palaces and churches along the way, and the broad, shimmering bands of radiance in the rippling water; then glanced longingly into the deep shadows which led off into infinities of mystery.

"Look there, Paolo!" he cried suddenly. "The lady rides alone, it appears, and the hour is late. She's young; I saw a lovely face in a flash of light."

"Peace!" muttered Paolo sourly. "You're in my charge till you reach the university. We've had enough—too much!—of play and foolishness."

"Ah, yes, *Father* Paolo!" mocked the student. "I hear thee, my pious master! But who was it that taught me to fence with rapier and dagger? Who recited to me the sprightly adventures of the knights and troubadours of Spain, of Touraine, and Gascony?"

"Silence!" cried the tutor. "I was a soldier in my godless years, and I taught you to fence with skill, lest you fall into the hands of a clumsy master. Don't forget, young sir, that I want you to avoid the follies of the heroes I described."

"Look there! That other gondola—the dark one. It's coming on; it's following the lady. There's yet another, too! There's no good in it, at this time of night. The maiden may have been lured from her home; her gondolier may be a rascal."

FRA PAOLO was now peering over the water at the three boats passing them so briskly.

"That last one, Stefano!" he exclaimed. "See that fellow standing up? He's excited; he's urging his man to catch up. Oh, blessed St. Mark forgive me!" he gasped, "What have I to do with these crazy Venetians and their frivolities?"

But Stefano stood up, steadying himself with a hand on the top of the *felse* and leaned forward, trembling at the thrill of midnight mystery.

"I have a sword, Paolo," he confessed in his excitement. "I smuggled it from the armory before leaving the palace. No man should travel abroad unarmed in these times. It's rolled up in my cloak; I must have it ready. Look there."

The man who stood erect in his gondola, was holding up a lantern which glowed like a small, pale star, and moving it back and forth in an arc above his head.

"A signal!" breathed Stefano. "It's not to the other gondolas; he's within speaking distance of them."

"Crime and corruption! There's some foul business here," fumed the tutor. "Look you!—another night-hawk yonder. Are all the scurvy cut-throats in Venice gathering about us? I'd clip their wings for them! Let 'em come! I was soldier before I was priest; I can fight a man's fight."

"You and I, Paolo! we can handle them!" cried Stefano, jubilant at the mounting rage of his companion. "It's some great lady—a princess—it's an abduction. Let us shout to her that we're coming. She is saved!"

"Silence!—for the love of the saints!" hissed Fra Paolo. "Romance—or the Devil's own mischief, we've no part in it, I tell you, Stefano."

THE younger man shrugged disdainfully and glanced over the port gunwale. Suddenly he saw the dark silhouette of a two-masted fishing vessel—a *bragozzo*—which came about, the sails filled, and it rode athwart the part of shimmering moonlight.

"Ha! an answer to the signal!" Stefano muttered sullenly. "Do you see the ship? Tell me, is the defenseless lady to be spirited away, to Greece or Africa, while we tell our beads?"

"Peace! Who knows but the damsel might welcome such a fate? A woman's life could be no worse in an alien land, or on another planet, believe me."

The leading skiff, carrying the lady, swung off sharply on the port quarter of the ship, leaping to the frenzied sweeps of its oar, but its near pursuer followed into its wake with skill and determination.

A woman's shriek shattered the midnight silence, and from the confused jumble of boats, which seemed to merge in the darker bulk of the sailing craft, came sharp cries and savage oaths.

THE pious tutor gave utterance to sentiments ill-fitted to a churchman's mind or vocabulary.

"Come then!" cried Stefano.

"Lord, have mercy!" groaned the other, beating his head with his fists. "We should turn back to the city—summon the police. We're two jackdaws against a flock of hawks and vultures."

"Men die in meaner causes, Paolo."

The *bragozzo* drifted eastward, engaged with the gondolas, and Stefano's gondolier discreetly swung the beak of his craft to port, heading for darker, quieter waters.

Again the shrill scream of terror pierced the night, and from the fishing boat came sounds of a desperate struggle.

"By St. Mark!" Stefano growled, "the lady is not making such a fight. There are factions. Men are fighting one another there."

Suddenly Fra Paolo went down on his knees. He seemed about to address frantic supplications to his guardian angels; but the gaping Stefano saw him tear furiously at the cords of a hamper of luggage.

An instant of rummaging, and he dragged out a rapier with its sheath and girdle.

"Paolo, my friend!" yelled Stefano, with joy.

"Stand back! I am a thing of evil. Pray for me, good Stefano. I go!"

"Not alone, Paolo! You taught me the sword, and I'm neither monk nor sluggard. Two good men against a swarm of water rats!"

"You'll stay here, stripling!" roared the maddened tutor. "No time for youngsters to play at fencing! These are ruffians, I tell you!"

"Quick! set us aboard the ship!" Stefano shouted, turning to the gondolier.

Obediently the silent lackey sent the light skiff toward the dark bulk on the starboard bow. In a moment the skiff ranged smoothly alongside.

"Paolo!" the student shouted wildly, clutching at the folds of his friend's cloak; but the cloak was cast off into his hands, and the belligerent tutor leaped up and vaulted the rail of the vessel.

Stefano flung off his own cloak, which he had donned but a moment before, and jerked his rapier from its scabbard, then bounded to the frail roof of the *felse* and sprang nimbly to the larger craft's deck.

CHAPTER II

Marco Monti

THE scrimmage waxed fierce, with a pandemonium of yells and curses, the slithering of steel, the stamping and shuffling of boots on the smooth planks.

Paolo was already in the thick of the general combat, and it was not hard to single out his tall, lithe form in hose and doublet. The other men wore plumed hats, or the turbans and caps of sailors, but Paolo's flowing raven locks were uncovered.

The young monk was vigorously threshing about him with his rapier, seeking out a proper enemy to engage, but a dozen cavaliers and fishermen were battling blindly in the semi-darkness.

Somewhere in the seething mass a woman cried faintly and prayed for mercy and succor. On the narrow deck three men writhed and floundered, cursing their wounds and the ones who made them.

The gallant cavalier-monk cut a man out of the mêlée and stretched him on the deck. Another man, in a feathered hat, rushed on Paolo, thrusting fiercely at his breast, taking him by surprise.

Then Stefano, scarcely conscious of what he did, leaped at the man and skewered him through the ribs.

Paolo emerged once more from the welter, clearing a passage with his sword while he dragged a shrieking woman after him, trying to save her from the mob, but she recognized no friends, and struggled to free herself.

It was no time for gentle measures, and Paolo flung her into Stefano's arms.

"The gondola!" he gasped. "Quick—while I hold them!"

STEFANO swung the light, slender form over his shoulder, darted to the rail, and let himself down to his waiting skiff. Then, as he held her, he saw her face for an instant in the moonlight.

She was very young—very beautiful. And he was not astonished: men did not freely spill one another's blood for the possession of ugly crones. But the face in its deathly pallor was that of an angel, he told himself; like one of Luini's madonnas.

The battle grew fiercer; the ruffians were driving Paolo to the rail as they saw their prize escaping. Stefano placed the girl in the *felse*.

"Go! Take her away," he commanded. "Take her to the Officers of Police."

"Yes—to Venice!" moaned the girl, opening her eyes at last. "To the Palazzo Eccelini. I implore—"

"But signore!" protested the gondolier, "thy noble father—"

"Be off! I shall take care of myself. I go to help my friend."

"My servant!" cried the girl distractedly. "Poor Nella—she is on the ship."

"Go!" ordered Stefano sharply. "Unless you would be recaptured. I'll look to your servant."

He gave the gondola a vigorous push with his foot and swung himself to the ship's deck and plunged into

the turmoil, once more fighting to reach Paolo's side.

BUT out of the night came a dull boom, ominous and arresting.

A strapping bravo with bristling mustaches and a wisp of beard sprang to the gunwale, fending off an enemy with a sweep of his long sword.

"Hold!" he cried. "Look there!—the barge! Signori of the Night! They are firing a carronade. We're lost!"

The fighting ceased as if a commander had ordered a recall.

"Ho, Jacopo!" yelled another, hailing the boat's captain. "Get wind in your sails. Get out the sweeps! You're in it, Jacopo. Come, we're brothers now. All together, comrades, for a run or a fight—or we'll hang together in a row like butcher's meat."

"Here's a pretty job!" growled the bravo of the mustaches, as he bustled about the deck to put the late battle ground in a semblance of order. "It is one to make the Council hold special sessions."

He turned one of the bodies on the deck till the dead face was touched by moonlight.

KNOW you this gentleman?" he challenged. "You'd better 'a' known him before you let his blood out. Signor Alfredo Ponzone—none other! Son of the Inquisitor of State. Nobler than the Doge himself—and rich! Bad enough, that he's noble—but *rich!* Somebody will hang for it."

"I never touched him!" vowed a red-faced bravo. "What was he doing here?"

"He came with two others, in the gondola with the gold fringes on the *felse.* But for them, and these two wild asses that came last, there'd 'a' been no trouble. The little Eccelino had half the gallants of Venice after her this night. As for us, we have to account to Messer Carlo for not getting her—if we live."

The carronade of the police barge boomed again, louder and nearer.

"These pale-faced strangers here did the killing!" declared the big fellow. "If we're seized we'll hand them over to the Council and charge them with the crime."

"Ha! you're a brave dog!" sneered Paolo boldly. "No man cut and carved more than you. You'd 'a' sliced me in cutlets if you'd been a swordsman. No man can say who killed this one or that one: it was too dark, and we fought like demons. My friend and I fought for the honor of the lady. My faith! 'twas a good fight!"

PEACE!" roared a tall, hatchet-faced ruffian. "Is it a court of law, then, with all of you judges? We're all birds of a color. We came to trap the little pigeon, who took flight. Now, who talks of handing someone over? The informer gets the thanks of the Council—and then he's hung up to ornament the same gibbet that's built for the accused."

"Take your choice now!" he added with an ominous scowl. "Help the sailors of Signori of the Night with the sweeps—get away from that barge, or hang all together—every man, dog, and pig aboard the boat. Throw the carrion overboard, and have done with it. Then pull for your lives!"

A solid shot splashed in the water close astern, and the sailors bent to the long oars and strove to aid the wind in bearing them out of danger.

Paolo and Stefano were at an oar with one of the sailors, pulling stoutly, while Jacopo, the captain, marked the stroke with singsong cries. A shot from the barge sheared off the

blade of the oar, and flung the three men sprawling on the deck.

"We're done for," Paolo whispered to Stefano. "There's no chance. When you're seized you must give a false name; say that you come from Genoa."

"But my father's of the Council!" protested Stefano, with a vague sort of assurance. "Surely we were gentlemen in aiding the lady."

"You deceive yourself, Stefano. Alfredo Ponzone is dead, and his death will be no secret. The Council shows no mercy. Half the senators and ministers have relatives in exile, or toiling in the galleys. Believe me, the son of Messer Zaccaria Lanza is likely to be chosen for the hardest punishment. The father of Alfredo Ponzone has power and influence."

"But Alfredo was here in defiance of the law."

"Alfredo's dead! Only the living are arraigned at the bar. Alfredo, a criminal an hour ago, is a martyr now."

Suddenly, to a swelling chorus of protests and curses, Jacopo hove to.

The police barge was upon them, firing grape shot from her bows, threatening to sweep the deck. In a moment the sides of the vessels scraped, and as the policemen caught the gunwale with grappling hooks, soldiers with matchlocks and halberds swarmed aboard, driving their prisoners forward.

An officer advanced.

"YOUR name, villain!" he cried, as Jacopo cowered before him.

"Jacopo the fisherman, noble signore. I am a poor man. These signori, they hire my boat. I do not know them. I am innocent, signore!"

"Hold your tongue! You're known for a wicked fellow," said the officer, and wrote upon a tablet.

"And now, my high-born signori!" he exclaimed, grinning with keen relish at the group before him. "Come now, are you all princes, dukes, counts, eh? Noble blood, you'll declare to me, but you all have the look of low-born curs! Your eyes shift, your knees knock together, your faces have the color of stale cheese. I will take your illustrious names, one by one, to add luster to my report."

EXCLUDING the sailors, there were seven men gathered before him, survivors of the three parties that met so disastrously. The first to speak was Fra Paolo, and he said in a clear and steady voice:

"My name is Paolo Albamonte. I come from Verona."

"The saints smile upon Verona—sometimes," remarked the officer. "Who is the next nobleman?"

The burly fellow with the huge mustaches spoke up pompously.

"Ottavio Vigano, from Lombardy."

"Next!"

"Zini Gardoni," responded a slight fellow with a boyish face. "My home is in Florence, most valiant captain."

"I, too, hail from Florence," said the fourth, with a saucy grin. "Iachimo Fabroni is the name. Put me down as heir apparent to the throne of Sicily."

"And first cousin to his Majesty, the Devil!" snarled the officer. "What royal family is made proud by the next prince?"

And now he was looking at Stefano Lanza, and the young Venetian was considering gravely what name he should offer in place of his own, to safeguard the honor of his family.

It came to him on a vagrant impulse: he thrilled at the thought; he would give the vainglorious officer a name to make him stare and wonder.

"I am Marco Monti," he said simply.

"Ha! What? Monti? Marco Monti—who rides the Paduan hills?"

"Marco Monti—of the world!" said Stefano, with a proudly defiant toss of his head. "My name is whispered with respect from Africa's sands to the chalk cliffs of Britain."

"Ah, but the blessed saints are good and gracious!" gurgled the officer, quivering with emotion. "Fortune has smiled on me! The noble lords of the Council will inscribe my poor name upon the records."

A FLUTTER of excitement stirred the group of captives. The tall fellow with the heron's feather in his cap pushed forward impulsively.

"Is it possible, then!" he exclaimed. "Do I behold at last the gallant Marco Monti? My eyes have burned for the sight of so much valor wrapped up in a single parcel of human flesh. I shall die happier for this boon."

"Silence!" thundered the officer. "Speak to me only. Give me your name, rascal!"

The man of the heron feather turned his deeply lined face slowly toward the inquisitor.

"Decorate your tablet with the name, Framo Ramorino. I'm a Dalmatian, and I walk lightly in this land, for my feet spurn the soil that grows pigs and dogs, and nothing else."

The officer gasped, and wrote furiously.

"You speak as to the Council themselves!" he spluttered. "They shall read what you say. 'Pigs and dogs', eh? His serene Excellency, the Doge, is a pig or a dog, by your declaration, miscreant!"

"The Doge is a hound," replied Framo Ramorino recklessly; "a hound running with his snout in the dust, tracking gold ducats to their lairs in citizens' pockets."

"Bear witness, all!" roared the officer. "This viper shall have his eyes burned out, his nose and ears cut off. He shall be dismembered, slowly, by surgeons with small, sharp knives. His tortures shall last a month—and I'll witness every moment of his agony. The Doge is a hound, he says! By the saints, I'll—"

"You'll give yourself an apoplexy, my little fat friend!" said big Framo calmly. "Go on with your business: there's another man unnamed."

"I'm Pietro Tamponi," said the seventh man, "and a subject of the Duke of Milan."

"He's happier for one knave less in his domain," growled the officer. "You are all prisoners of the Republic. Make well of every moment left to you, to prepare yourselves for the flames of Purgatory. Try to escape, and you shall be put to torture."

Paolo leaned close to Stefano, a worried scowl knitting his brows.

"God help you, my friend!" he whispered. "You've bitten off a mouthful to chew upon! Oh! the rashness of youth! *Marco Monti*, wherever he may be, is the veritable king of the bravi."

Stefano tossed his head and gave a reckless shrug.

"Who knows, Paolo?" he whispered back. "Give me just cause, and a fair field, and I may be as great a bravo as the best of them."

CHAPTER III

Wind and Weather

STRIPPED of their weapons and guarded by a dozen soldiers, the captives were left on board the fishing boat when the officers returned to the barge, and presently a great hawser was passed to the smaller boat and made fast to the prow. The galley slaves dipped their oars, the hawser strained and creaked, and the vessels moved off slowly toward Venice. All at once a squall rolled over the lagoon from the southern end of the Lido.

The sails flapped violently and cracked like gunshots, then bellied out and rolled the vessel to port till the gunwale was almost under.

"Deliverance!" yelled Stefano. "Strike, brothers! Strike!"

As he uttered the rallying call he threw himself headlong at the nearest soldier, grappled him about the knees, and hurled him to the deck. Then he was up, with a foot on the soldier's neck and the soldier's halberd in his hands.

The other guards charged to the rescue, but Stefano leaped to meet them, swinging the long-shafted weapon.

The other captives, dumb and motionless with amazement for an instant, came to life and rallied to their self-appointed leader.

THE burly Framo Ramorino plunged forward and caught the barrel of a musket to which a soldier was frantically trying to apply the match. Wrenching the weapon from the man, he reversed it, as the match sputtered, and sent a charge of slugs into the faces of the guards.

Pandemonium reigned once more on the placid surface of the lagoon. On the barge the police swarmed on the bulwarks, shrieking in rage at the futility of their position. On the *bragozzo* halberds, muskets, and swords changed hands like pieces in a game, and the guards were demoralized in a moment.

The puissant Stefano tore himself loose from the scrimmage and bounded to the bows of the vessel. In his hand was a short battle-axe, and in a flash he was hacking at the strands of the hawser that held the ship captive.

Muskets blazed from the stern of the barge, and slugs rained about the cavalier, thudding into the oaken rail.

The commander of the barge perched on the taffrail and yelled commands that were not heard in the mounting din. Big Framo poked a matchlock over the rail and fired, and the officer sank from view like a figure in a puppet show.

The sharp pop of bursting hempen strands was heard, then the hawser parted, and the rocking, pitching ship, battling the squall and her captor, rolled again with the shock of the release. But Jacopo, free and jubilant, was at the helm.

Under her master's hand the vessel righted herself and leaped like a greyhound, spurning the foaming waters of the lately placid lagoon. Jacopo bawled his orders in a voice trained by wind and storms, and shaped a course into the north-east, aiming at the dimly glimmering, distant lights of Mazorbo.

Prisoners of state, cutthroats and petty thieves, labored at the sweeps of the lumbering barge. Some of them ended their ill-starred courses that night, falling dead on their oars as the lead-tipped thongs of the knout slashed through their backs and cut to the very marrow of their bones.

But the playful squall, sweeping up the Adriatic, was mightier than double banks of oars. The sailing vessel bore away from her pursuer as the fleet hare eludes the clumsy bear.

THE soldiers who survived the short, sharp battle on the deck stood cowering in the midst of their conquerors. Ottavio Vigano, the pompous Lombard, proposed to cut their throats and heave them overboard.

"A thanks offering to the saints for our lives and freedom?" challenged Stefano. "Nay, comrade, let us leave the principle of wholesale annihilation of enemies to the noble governors of Venice. We have a gondola astern. When we reach smooth water, put these fellows into it and set them adrift. By such a token, Signor

Vigano, we may plead more earnestly for succor when again we see death hovering near us."

"Marco is right!" declared Framo. "These puppets are but slaves of the Signori of the Night. They march and fight because their ears would be cropped if they refused. Let 'em go."

Presently the vessel changed her course, the heavy booms swung to starboard, and the waters grew calm and smooth.

"What's amiss?" cried the skittish Ottavio, still unsettled in his mind.

"All's well, master," answered the mariner. "We're in the lee of Venice herself. There astern are the lights of San Pietro's Isle, and if I keep inside the Lido we'll make Burano before dawn. And now it's time to set those soldiers on their way."

"We're too many for the gondola, signore," objected a sergeant. "We might be swamped. What do we know of currents and shoals?"

"If you're Venetian born," said Stefano, "there's a gondolier among you."

The sergeant shrugged.

"Ye'll make better jests when the Inquisitor's red-hot pincers are on your tongues, signore."

"Keep your tongue civil, and learn to know your betters when you see them!" Stefano cried fiercely. "Into the boat, you and your crew—or into the water, if you want to make a feast for the eels and crabs."

THE sailors pulled up the gondola at the stern and hustled the soldiers into it, and its freeboard was scarcely a hand's breadth when all were aboard; but one of the men threw the oar across the forcola in the manner of an expert.

The sky was gray when the fishing boat came to the shallow waters at the entrance to the canal of Burano. Jacopo got a line ashore, and warped his vessel into the broad channel which formed the main thoroughfare of the little island.

"Where's the young servant maid of the signorina?" asked Stefano. "I pledged my word no harm should come to her."

JACOPO opened the hatch and went below, and returned with a comely, bright-eyed peasant lass. She went white with fear, but Stefano spoke to her gently.

"Your fortunes are cast with ours for a time," he said, "but you are safe. These gentlemen smile at you in pure kindliness, and you must know that they're all high-born noblemen, banded together for the pursuit of wisdom and the practice of all the noble virtues."

"Pah!" snorted Ottavio, resenting the elaborate sarcasm. "Don't trace your ancestry too far back! As for virtue, you're no shin bone of a saint yourself, Marco Monti!"

"Marco Monti!" cried the girl, in panic. "The terrible Marco Monti who rides the Paduan hills?"

There was a burst of ribald laughter.

"Thy fame, friend Marco, reaches to the servants' halls and kitchens of Venice," chuckled Framo Ramorino. "Naughty babes are hushed by your name. Young damsels pray for protection from the Devil and Marco Monti!"

The side of the vessel creaked against the spiles of the quay, and suddenly the young maid fluttered like a bird to perch on the rail, then leaped to the stringpiece of the wharf.

"Help! Help!" she shrieked. "The bravi! The pirates! They come! Help! Murder!"

Fishermen and housewives ran out of doors and alleys.

"We must stop that chicken's cackle!" growled Framo, and leaped

after the fugitive, with Zini Gardoni at his heels.

Jacopo and his men slipped the line and scrambled to pole the *bragozzo* out into the channel.

THEN, by a twist of luck, a squad of archers—police of the island governor—charged out of a narrow lane, armed and equipped.

But big Framo, with giant strides, overtook the squalling maid, boxed her ears, and tucked her under his arm like a bundle, starting back for the quay.

The archers came after him, bristling with pikes and swords, and backed by the swiftly gathering populace.

"Stay aboard, masters," counseled Jacopo. "These folk would 'a' been friendly if they hadn't been stirred up. Now they're a swarm o' bees."

Deaf to his warning, Stefano and Paolo leaped ashore and charged to the relief of Framo and Zini, who had dropped the girl and turned to face the attack.

Four swords flashed like lightning, and there were no idle thrusts, but the armored guards pressed steadily forward and the battleground grew narrower toward the water.

Framo, with his bulk and mighty arm, forced himself into the enemy's front like a wedge, wreaking havoc for a moment, but a pike caught him in the side and he went down, while his three comrades fought madly to extricate him.

Stefano scattered the nearest foes with the fury of his defense, then lifted Framo, heaved him to his back, and leaped into the canal.

Paolo and Zini were left alone, fighting for their lives, and the sight was too much for their comrades on the ship. Jacopo swung the stern back to the quay, and Fabroni and Tamponi jumped and rushed into the conflict.

Meanwhile the sailors rushed to the other rail, looking for the men in the water. Stefano was swimming slowly, supporting the burden of the disabled Framo. A sailor went over the side with a rope, and in a moment the three were hauled to the deck.

PAOLO and Fabroni were beating the enemy back from the prostrate Tamponi, but victory or escape were forlorn hopes with them when the sailors dashed to their aid.

The fishermen were little giants, iron-muscled, fierce in action. They swung their bludgeons to break heads, and guards and islanders fell back from the onslaught.

"Away now!" yelled Jacopo. "Away, before the bees swarm again!" And he and his men gathered all on board, and pushed off in hot haste.

Stefano and Framo lay by the mast, and the handy Jacopo now hurried to examine their wounds. Framo had suffered loss of blood and taken in more water than one man needed, but he revived under the rough ministrations. When Stefano's doublet was torn away, a ragged wound was discovered in his breast.

"And here!" cried Jacopo, "another hole! Here in the thigh, spouting blood like a spigot. Sure, Messer Marco Monti saved a man less hurt than himself."

The announcement was a restorative to Framo Ramorino, stout veteran of innumerable campaigns. Brushing the others aside, he took charge of his rescuer, and dressed his wounds like a surgeon.

"We never tarried to know if you lived or died, Framo," apologized Tamponi, whose own wounds had been bound up. "But we had work that stood for no delay."

"While a man breathes and blinks his eyes, pay no heed to him," said Framo, waving away the apology. "A

wound's of no moment till it reaches heart, liver, or belly, and e'en then the trouble's brief and trifling: death ends it all!"

The *bragozzo* cleared the canal and the sails were spread to the morning breeze.

"Addio, Burano!" said Framo, with a grimace at the receding island. "We left 'em a buxom wench, and they're welcome to her. Where away now?"

"I would I were in the hills again!" declared Fabroni. "It's time we scattered, with room to wander and seek each man his favorite lair."

"I'd choose the city to the hills," said Paolo. "No forests offer such seclusion. Tomorrow is carnival and masks are permitted, with dominoes and fancy dress. Set me where I can slip away to the Rialto at my will, and I've no fear of spies or constables while carnival lasts."

"Then I'll make Chioggia my port, by your leave," proposed Jacopo. "I've friends there who will put their gondolas at your service, and you'll travel as gentlemen should."

"Chioggia, then," agreed Framo, "and we'll rest and mend ourselves till night comes again."

CHAPTER IV

Masquerade

CHIOGGIA was in a furious bustle of preparation for two weeks of carnival when the anxious argonauts arrived.

Neither challenges nor suspicious glances for them there, and Jacopo quietly smuggled them to the house of his friend Gaspare, a venerable patriarch among fishermen who gave medicine and treatment to the wounded, and sage counsel to all; then fetched a friendly merchant to the house with an assortment of masks, dominoes, and fancy costumes for the carnival.

Stefano was wan and white, and had to prop himself on an elbow where he lay on a cot, but he pointed out the russet cap, doublet, and hose of a shepherd.

"THE Sbirri will never look for Marco Monti in the gentle shepherd of Arcadian meadows," he said, "and I can play the pipes like Pan himself."

"A gay crew of bravi signori!" chuckled old Gaspare, "but there's three that should tarry here till healed with herbs and elixirs."

"Nay, my good Gaspare," said Framo, "if I'd 'a' tarried for wounds and fevers all my life, I'd 'a' lost many a good day from the few allotted me in this world. I go to Venice tonight."

"The same for me!" Stefano declared. "Breezes from the lagoon will cool a fever. I must see the Doge wedded to the sea again, before I die."

The aged host took his zither and sang an old song—a song much favored by the gondoliers of the Grand Canal.

"O swallow, O traitor swallow!
Couldst thou not leave me an hour's delight?
Rouse thee, my love, for the day must follow
As soon as the swallow takes her flight."

"Rondinela—swift adventurer of the air!" mused Paolo Albamonte. "Though we scatter through the city, likely we'll meet again. The struggle for life has linked us together in a fashion. Let the swallow be our emblem, and our password 'Rondinela'. Cried aloud in the street, it shall summon all to the aid of one in distress; whispered in secret, it shall announce the presence of one to another. And if I hear the tune played

on strings or pipes, I'll hasten to see if a comrade needs me."

IF I hear it," agreed Framo heartily, "though I be dying I'll rally to the call.

"And I pray that you, Marco, may be the one to sound it," he added, turning to Stefano. "We're but lately met, yet something better than blood brothers. I'll never forget how you aided me, when you had wounds enough to finish a common fellow."

The others pledged themselves to loyalty.

After nightfall they took leave of Jacopo and three gondolas crossed the broad lagoon, bearing them to Venice.

At dawn of the next day the city was in a turmoil. Processions of the faithful passed over the decorated pontoon bridge to the Temple of the Redeemer for solemn rites, while rascally mountebanks and acrobats set up an ungodly din on the bridges, streets, and by-ways.

For the five hundredth time the illustrious Doge of Venice went forth in the gilded and tapestried *Bucentaur,* with its banks of shining oars and was duly wedded to the Adriatic Sea—the Republic's greatest asset in her matchless commerce, and her greatest bulwark in time of war.

At night the lights flared out in a burst of glory to shame the sun and moon, and the city hummed and roared with music, song, and shrill laughter.

Gentlemen and ladies promenaded the terraces and cruised the canals, gambled at gaming booths along with peasants and tradesmen, and flirted with strangers under the protection of their masks.

But only the married women were permitted by custom to join in the carnival, and these more often celebrated in company with gallants and adventurers than with their husbands —for the latter were off on affairs of their choosing.

A dainty lady in a soft silk domino of black, with a little black mask tucked under the shadow of her Spanish mantilla, left a gondola near the Rialto Bridge. She was accompanied by a servant, and they braved the turmoil about the merchants' stands and struggled past a pavilion where a show of mummers was in progress.

Maskers of both sexes paused to stare at the dainty creature, from the tips of her tiny slippers to the red lips and dimpled chin that showed beneath the mask.

Three men emerged from a dark portico and blocked the progress of the two women.

LET us pass!" said the lady coldly, with an imperious gesture. "I go to my home. Stand aside, or I'll call the watch."

"Nay, enchanting signora, the watchmen also are engaged in carnival," said one of the men. "We offer you protection in time of danger. We'll take you home."

The three men wanted no interference, and two of them jostled the servant aside, caught the lady by the arms, and hurried her into a narrow street that led to the church of San Silvestro.

She screamed in terror, but her voice was scarcely heard in the steady roar of the shouting, singing populace and the blare of music.

Her cry had been heard, however: a man came running from the direction of the church.

"Be off, fool, or 'twill be the worse for you!" roared one of the abductors.

The lone man was light and slender, but had no lack of courage.

"Let her go!" he cried.

One of the three men flung back his domino and whipped out his

sword, but the rescuer struck the blade from his hand. Then, like lightning, he caught up the weapon and wounded the man with a straight thrust, and whirled to meet the others.

One of them struck with a dirk, and he cried out in pain, but he never wavered till the fellow lay at his feet; and even then he started after the third villain, who was running off.

"No, no! You're wounded yourself!" protested the lady. "The danger's over. Come with us. We'll find a gondola."

HE tucked a kerchief under his doublet where blood was staining the cloth, then took the lady's arm and led her to the narrow canal beyond the church. The servant clattered after them.

Presently a gondola was hailed and brought to the bank, and they entered it.

They were caught in the jam of gondolas and pleasure craft at the Rialto bridge, and it took near an hour to come near the turn of the Canareggio; but just before they reached it the lady motioned the gondolier to the north bank and the marble terrace in front of a palace of rich beauty and grandeur.

"The Palazzo Eccelini!" exclaimed the rescuer, astonished.

"Yes," she said simply. "I trust you, signore: you are gallant and honest. I am Felice Eccelino."

"Signorina! You had no right to venture into the city!"

"I deserve the rebuke," she admitted, but tossed her head a bit defiantly. "I—I wanted to see the carnival, the masque at the Rialto—everything. Whom may I address in offering my thanks?"

"Why, I—I'm a mere shepherd, you perceive," he answered, a note of humor in his voice. "Shepherds have simple names: you may call me—well, 'Marco', if that pleases you, signorina."

"In carnival every one tells lies," she said softly. "But I know you're a noble shepherd, Signor Marco, and a brave one."

"For the high privilege of serving you, I offer humble thanks," said the shepherd, bowing over her hand.

"But you can't leave me, Signor Marco! Your mask does not hide the pallor of your cheeks. You are ill. I'll give you wine and cakes before you go."

She fluttered away like a sprightly bird, but was back in an instant, trembling with fright.

"My father comes. He'll kill you if he finds you here. He must not see me in domino and mask—and he must not find *you*."

"Where shall I go, signorina?"

"Come," she whispered, then took his hand and led him through a long passage and up a stair. They came at last to a dimly-lighted chamber with a large window opening to a balcony.

MY apartments," she said breathlessly. "I shall get a strong cord and let you down from the balcony. The garden's below, and you can scale the wall."

"I can jump; I'll go at once," he said, and stepped upon the balcony.

But there he paused, listening and peering into the gloom of the garden.

"Hush!" he whispered softly. "There are men in the garden—a number of men."

She stifled a cry.

A sound in the inner passage startled them, and she almost swooned.

"My father! This is the end, Marco! He'll kill you—and me, too!"

The shepherd darted to the door and shot the bolts of heavy wrought iron.

"Now!" he whispered, "mind that you do what I tell you."

"YOU must save yourself," he went on. "When I give the word, cry out for your father. Shout that men are all about the palace. Then pretend to swoon. Your father will have the doors burst open, and—he'll find you alone."

She stared at him in terror and bewilderment.

"Felice! Where are you?" came in deep tones from the passage. "Open the doors, Felice. There's no light here."

There came a furious pounding at the door.

"Felice! Answer me!" thundered the startled father. "Are you within there, child? What's amiss—what devil's work's afoot?"

The shepherd sprang to the balcony and was poised for an instant, silhouetted against the glowing sky. He leaped, and she shrieked—a cry unfeigned—a cry to strike terror to the ears of those who waited in the passage.

"Father! Save me!" she cried then. "Assassins! Murderers!"

An axe shivered the upper panel of a door; the servants attacked the thick frames with sledges and hatchets, and the doors broke down and were forced.

"Felice! The blessed saints be praised!" boomed Senator Alvise Eccelino. The venerable councillor rushed to the balcony, thrust a blunderbuss through the balustrade, and fired into the garden.

Yells answered the shot.

"They fly! They scale the wall!" bellowed the senator.

"Twice in three days!" he muttered, returning to the room. "And we have police and magistrates in Venice! Come, child, you must compose yourself and rest. A sentinel shall be set at every door."

"But I am not hurt. It was fright—the sudden attack. I'm better now. Pray send my woman to me. If Bettina had been here, it would not have happened. Good old Bettina is watchful, brave, and strong."

The senator called for a torch and went again to the balcony.

"The garden's clear," he declared. "I see nothing but crushed shrubbery and trampled turf.

"But your courage and good sense fill me with pride, child. A wife for a noble gentleman you'll be—and soon enough, at that. Daniele Nicotera is himself a pearl among the gentlemen of these unsettled times. I am fortunate in your good fortune."

"I do not know the gentleman—having seen him but twice. He had a mincing gait, I noticed; there's something very like a lisp in his talk."

"The self-consciousness, the becoming diffidence of a young nobleman," explained the senator, a trifle nettled.

CHAPTER V

Jacob's Ladder

"BETTINA, my father does not know," said Felice, when the ungainly serving woman appeared and saluted her mistress affectionately. "He doesn't dream we stole forth and went to the Rialto."

The practical Bettina lighted a taper in the brazier of smoldering charcoal.

"Psst! I hear moaning," she whispered, crossing herself. "Man or goblin, who shall say?"

Felice flew to her side.

"You slay me with fear, old gossip! You're always hearing and seeing things. Let me listen. O Bettina, yes—I hear! Oh, it's Marco!"

"I never loved any human man enough to know his moan," grumbled

the woman. "When my man moaned, he was tipsy, an' I took the broom to 'im. Though he did moan something fearful when he was dying o' the plague! God rest his soul, poor wretch!"

"Oh, will you be quiet!" cried the mistress. "He's down there, and he's dying. We have to get him, Bettina!"

Felice shook the woman till her teeth chattered.

"Do something! Do it quick! Or I'll hire a hag to put the evil eye on you."

The woman begged for mercy, and bestirred herself. She clumped down the passage in quest of the porter, but when she brought him back the room was vacant.

A stout silk cord knotted to the balcony rail furnished the explanation. The young mistress had stripped the cord from the brocaded arras and let herself down—an achievement for a sailor or any able-bodied man.

The porter, faithful and efficient in emergencies, went down by the same route, and Bettina stood on the balcony and exercised the demons of the black night with mystic words and signs.

Felice, her delicate hands torn by the stone and iron, was on her knees in the dewy grass, holding her shepherd lad, beseeching him to open his eyes and speak.

"He breathes, Pasquale," she said. "We have to get him to my chamber—in secret. It must never be known, Pasquale."

"You'll have to let me do it my own way, then, signorina. As it's the only way, it's the best way."

HE crossed the garden and ducked into a dark passage to the store rooms of the palace. Returning in a moment with a huge gunnysack, he proceeded directly to stuff the unconscious man within it.

WITHOUT more ado he disappeared in the dark passage with his burden, and made his way through tortuous galleries to the upper halls. He met the senator on the broad stair, coming down to the main floor.

"Rascal! is your work never done at the proper time of day?"

"It's a damp, chilly night, illustrissimo!" mumbled Pasquale, never halting. "Charcoal for the braziers in the chambers. Will your serenity have a fresh fire in your bed chamber, then?"

"It may be well, old dog! There's a dank mist coming in from the sea. But you've fuel enough there to heat the palace on a winter's night. Charcoal's not to be wasted, at the present prices."

When Pasquale reached Felice's rooms the girl was already there with Bettina, who had drawn her up by sheer brute strength.

The three bore the sack through the boudoir and into the bed chamber at the rear. The carved rosewood bed was built into a recess in the wall, with heavy draperies of tapestry to shut it off from the room, and there the sack was opened and the young man lifted to soft cushions and stretched out in normal fashion.

He was sorely wounded. Three knife gashes had let blood from his body, his head was battered, and slugs from the senator's blunderbuss had lodged in his right leg.

"He's less than half a man, now, poor thing!" said Bettina, "and I never saw a whole man that was worth much bother."

The girl boxed her ears.

"If he dies," she said, "there'll be no masses for your soul when *you* die, old witch! You were fetched here when I was an infant because you were a famous nurse—bet-

ter than half the physicians, 'twas said. Now send Pasquale for elixirs and ointments, cordials and surgeon's things."

"Ah, this man!" groaned Bettina, half resigned to her task. "Who is he, then?"

"I don't know who he is!" snapped Felice, "but he's to be made well and sound, mark you! I intend to have him for a husband."

CHAPTER VI

News on the Rialto

ON the second day of carnival a tall and massive man in purple domino and mask, with bushy mustaches and beard of black framing thick and sensuous lips overtook another conspicuously tall figure, habited in red, and swaggering in evident intention of aping the look and manner of the Prince of Darkness.

"Have no fear," said the purple one softly. "All's well. You make a brave archfiend, but I'd know this shambling rack o' bones in any throng, in Venice or far Cathay."

Framo Ramorino chuckled deeply.

"And no more can a mask hide you, Signor Carlo, while that midnight whisker floats before you like a pennant on a galley."

The purple domino led him into the little striped pavilion of a wine shop, and they ordered a flagon of golden Shiraz from the vineyards of Persia.

"I've had no message," mumbled the domino, "though I've visited the house of the Signora Lucrezia daily. My patience is strained."

"Patience is not patience that endures but half a week," the red devil remarked. "For silence there's always a reason, and mine has not been indifference. There was—a lack of success in the enterprise."

I LACK the smaller details, but not the general story. It was bungled, I say, after preparations that might 'a' won a naval victory. But if 'twill cheer you, why, I'll tell you there's been another defeat in the short time since your own."

"Whose?"

"I'll name no names. But I took the liberty of employing certain other gentlemen of fortune. There were five, and I'll whisper that they wore the green feather. You know that badge."

"And you expected success!" muttered the red devil witheringly.

"One hopes, but never too seriously expects. The citadel itself was the object of attack. The bird was in the cage. The old ogre was away, but he returned untimely. The five Green Feathers gained access to the garden; success seemed certain; but there was a gallant—A pox on 'im!

"He was in the bird cage, and he over-reached himself in gallantry: he jumped into the garden from the balcony, and I'm assured he paid the price of such folly."

"Know you who he was?"

"No one knows. A masker, they told me, dressed as a shepherd lad."

A goblet of Shiraz crashed on the pavement.

"You know, then who the shepherd was?"

"My cup was wet; my fingers slipped upon it. You think the shepherd was slain?" muttered Framo petulantly.

"All fighting men are liars. I fancy my five champions left the scene in haste. Three have holes to be mended in their hides. I acted too hastily in picking those louts for the work."

AND you're too hasty, signore, in cherishing an infatuation for every beauty you set eyes upon. A Turkish sultan would scarcely dare

to covet the whole virgin population of Venice. It was Giulia Ponzone, then Rosalina Lanza; and before you were done raving of their beauty, it was the little Eccelino."

"Ah, but the Eccelino is matchless, amico," chuckled the purple domino harshly. "A little white pigeon! I sha'n't give her up! You shall try again, old falcon. I haven't lost confidence in you yet. The price will be high, I promise you."

"The hazard balances the price, whatever the figure. And you, signore: have you thought of the ultimate price you might pay? The abduction of a tradesman's daughter, a contadina, a fisher girl; that's nothing to think of twice, when the police have so many private, personal interests. But to venture into the high nobility—That takes bravery, signore —or stupidity."

"I'm going on a journey," the purple domino confided. "When I return, if my plans mature, I may be a man worth knowing. Serve me well, now and all the time, and you may be able to call yourself a count, and live like one the rest of your life."

"Again, many thanks, signore."

"Go to my castle in the hills. It's yours! A stronghold to resist an army. The servants will be instructed to obey your orders. From there you can reach out and strike as the eagle strikes, and take your prey to your aerie. Wait till I come. I shall bear surprises in my train."

HE got up and gathered the folds of the purple cloak about him, then raised his goblet.

"To the glory of our next meeting!"

"I broke my cup," said Framo.

Meanwhile, in the Palazzo Eccelini, the earnest ministrations of the two women had done little for the shepherd lad. He lay like one in catalepsy. There was always the perceptible heartbeat, and a film gathered on the glass that Bettina held before his lips from time to time, but there was scarcely the flutter of an eyelid, and he ceased to moan.

SUDDEN alarm greeted the arrival of an unexpected visitor. It was Vincenzo Saffi, the celebrated physician, and he entered Felice's boudoir with the freedom of a family counselor.

"Your good father sends me to prescribe a tonic, child," he said. "You've been badly frightened, and such a shock to the tender sensibilities of a young maid may send her into a decline."

He was a stately, handsome man of fifty, with flowing brown locks and a luxuriant beard of the Florentine fashion, and he genially assumed avuncular privileges and held Felice's butterfly hand, and pressed his lips to her brow.

Her pallor was unnatural; a bright, feverish luster glazed her eyeballs; her features were peculiarly drawn, as from strain and sleepless nights.

"You are ill, dear child!" he declared, and let go her hand to stroke her forehead with his long, sensitive fingers.

"It's very soothing," she murmured gratefully, and rewarded him with a glance from eyes that were devastating to the souls of susceptible gentlemen.

"Adorable! Enchantress!" cried the physician, and his arms flew out, to clasp her to his breast.

She screamed, and the scream was duly echoed by the faithful Bettina who appeared in the doorway on the instant.

He was baffled, angry, but fear came quickly.

"Forgive! Oh, forgive me, gracious lady! I was mad."

She assumed a primly virginal air.

"Such behavior is strange, *dottore*.

I scarcely know what to say. I must call my father."

His face blanched and he became abject.

"I implore you, be merciful, signorina! Have regard for my situation. Your noble father might denounce me to the Council, and—prison! exile! or worse."

He cast himself on his knees and raised the hem of her skirt to his lips.

"I pray you don't, Signor dottore! You make yourself ridiculous. I might forgive you, and in your turn you might show kindness to another sufferer. I'll explain it all to you, in confidence which you must never betray.

"A poor young man was badly wounded in our garden. I fetched him in, for he'd have died if I had not."

"This," said the physician, getting up—"this is very strange, signorina."

"Perhaps all good acts are strange in Venice," she returned. "But the poor young man will surely die unless he has the most skillful treatment. You will save him, Signor Vincenzo?"

"I think we understand each other, signorina," said Vincenzo Saffi, and inclined his head with the deference due to one's equal in strategy. "I pray you let me see the poor young man," he added. "I assure you that I shall do my best."

CHAPTER VII

Half-Way House

ON the Rio della Sensa was a small palace of quiet elegance, once occupied by an exiled Frankish queen, and it seemed fated to be the abode of exiles, for its latest tenant rarely emerged from its portals, and was never named or recognized by other ladies who dwelt in palaces.

She was, nevertheless, a person of intelligence and culture, and she maintained a salon for the pleasant exchange of ideas, witty repartee, and the discussion of current events among gentlemen whose ladies never halted their gondolas near the little palace.

To that intellectual oasis on the Rio della Sensa came a handsome, dashing young cavalier. He was expensively dressed in the prevailing mode, his only concession to carnival being a small black mask, and when he tapped on the bronze door at the top of the marble steps it was opened to him quickly.

A BLACKAMOOR, richly liveried as majordomo, announced him.

"His excellency, the Signor Daniele Nicotera!"

The lady of the palace, Lucrezia Betto, hastened to meet him, and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I have news very nearly concerning thee, Daniele," she said to the young nobleman. "I obtained it from my devoted physician—Messer Vincenzo, who trusts me as he never trusts his wife."

"The old busybody—!" sniffed Daniele. "That's why he's never bidden to my father's house. But if it nearly concerns me, why—you stir my curiosity."

"You may think me a meddler, Danielino—jealous and mischievous, perhaps. However, you mustn't breathe a word of what I tell you. He gave it to me in strictest confidence. He said, poor fellow, he might be forced to kill himself if the matter was noised abroad in Venice."

"Go on, Lucrezia! The man's a garrulous booby!"

"Well, then, that immaculate virgin—and paragon of virtue, thy affianced wife, Daniele—she finds the world not so dull and circumscribed

as one might think. She has a lover!"

"Hah! Bah! Impossible!" snorted the young Nicotera. "The Signorina Eccelino knows naught of the world outside her chamber; she lives like a young nun."

"But she's brought the world into her chamber, beloved. Messer Vincenzo has seen the lover in her apartments where he lies wounded. Messer Vincenzo has treated him with surgery and medicine."

"If I could believe your meddlesome barber, I'd go straight to Senator Alvise Eccelino and denounce his daughter as a jade. But I cannot go to the Palazzo Eccelini," he added thoughtfully, "and demand to know if it's true, can I? It appears that to ferret out the treachery, I must resort to measures of like color. I should have spies, secret agents. Zounds! I wish I knew some of these scurvy knaves who cut and slash and poison for a living. I'd pay such a scamp very well. If my betrothed harbors a lover in her apartments, I'd have him dragged out and spread in little pieces on the pavement."

"It costs—oh, m u c h m o n e y, Daniele. I have good friends who know the bravi, and I'll sound them. They demand large sums, I've heard, for desperate, wicked tasks."

"I wouldn't stop at five thousand," he said a little grudgingly. "It's too much—but something must be done, at once, and I'll never soil my hands with such dirty work, Lucrezia."

THE young Nicotera called at another palace after leaving the Signora Betto, and was closeted for a time with a middle-aged gentleman of his own class and rank: Lodovico Lanza, suave and diplomatic nephew of Senator Zaccaria Lanza, and cousin to young Stefano Lanza.

"At last!" Daniele exclaimed, with youthful importance, "I've put myself in the way of establishing personal contact with the rascally bravi —and you've agreed with me, signore, on their positive value to our cause.

"I'm assured they'll stick like leeches to any cause they solemnly espouse, and I've found a way to get in touch with them, through discreet and influential friends."

"Before you make any contracts, Daniele, I'll contrive to see these fellows you speak of, and judge of them for myself," said Lodovico shrewdly. "In an enterprise such as ours, there's always peril in the employment of mercenaries."

I SHALL proceed with caution, signore. Indeed I've contrived a sort of test of the reliability of those fellows. I have certain personal matters which give me great anxiety —small enough, to be sure, when compared with the future of a state and the success of our cause—but closely affecting my own domestic life.

"I shall employ the bravi on my personal business, and we shall judge of their fidelity."

"Say no more, Daniele," murmured the older man solemnly. "I've no personal knowledge of what you refer to, but I can make conjectures. You yourself, my young friend, are very dear to me. Had I a son, your sister Beatrice's hand would be the blessing I should seek for him."

"And you have a daughter, Messer Lodovico, the fair Rosalina. Changes may come, devastating to pride and honor, yet leading mysteriously to a greater good and an abiding felicity."

"Daniele!" cried Lodovico Lanza with strong emotion, "the few significant words you have spoken have given me new hope for—for *the cause!* They've given me also new fancies to beguile my darker hours."

That same day a pied and chequered harlequin visited the palace on the Rio della Sensa.

"What news, Lucrezia?" he asked gaily, seizing her hands and trying to kiss her, and receiving a slap on the cheek for his pains. "How's old Carlo Cocoto?"

"I've not seen him for ages—that is, for hours; so it's likely he's found another divinity to worship since breakfast time. But Iachimo, I've turned a piece of business for you. A palace to be cracked, a scandal in high society to be laid bare."

"How much?"

"The gentleman's purse strings are tied in double knots, but my little fingers are very deft with knots, you know. I bargained with him like a Greek. There'll be two thousand ducats for the job. And how he squirmed!"

"Three thousand should be the lowest figure," said Iachimo Fabroni. "And you'd put two thousand more in your own purse, adored enchantress."

"You lie, little scorpion! Am I a Greek, a Jew, an Armenian? What goes into my purse comes out of yours—you'll subtract my commission from those ducats."

"My fee is three thousand gold ducats, Lucrezia. You must squeeze the golden goose a little harder."

CHAPTER VIII

Trial by Combat

THE Senator Nicotera and I are agreed that the wedding should be celebrated as soon as carnival is ended," Alvise Eccelino informed his daughter, standing in a senatorial attitude in the middle of her boudoir.

"Would I not be a fairer bride to gaze upon, dear father, if we waited yet a few months? The physician still prescribes tonics to restore my color and natural spirit, but he says it will take time, after two adventures so terrible."

"There might be a third if we delay too long. You must have a husband to protect you."

"How fiercely jealous will those poor ladies be, who have enjoyed his tender care heretofore, my father!"

The senator stamped his foot.

"Again?" he growled. "What if Daniele were to learn that he stands the risk of having a shrew for a wife?

"What is that?" he gasped, starting like a man with overwrought nerves.

A sound like a muffled sneeze had come from the inner room.

"Who's in there?" he challenged, starting toward the heavy arras that covered the chamber door, and the girl's face went white; but the ugly visage of old Bettina was thrust through the draperies, looking like a carnival mask, and the senator cursed her for a hag.

"Save your noble curses for a better use, illustrissimo!" shrilled the woman. "Who's here, indeed! If there'd been more here another day, the rascals might not 'a' come so near carrying off your child."

"Old jackdaw!" snarled the master. "Faith! a woman under twenty should have her tongue well trained and disciplined—and after twenty it should be drawn with pincers and clipped off, to save men torture and earache."

AND at five-and-twenty," countered the daring Bettina, "when a lad's beard grows stiffer and his temper worse, every human man should be plumped into the lagoon with a great rock tied to his feet. We'd have a sweet world then, with the devils all in Acheron together, where they belong."

"Gag that old cow, or I'll have her

whipped!" he roared, and left the apartment.

Felice went, half-staggering, to the inner room.

"Marco, I thought we were undone!" she said reproachfully. "You must not cough, or groan, or breathe, when anyone is near."

"The danger grows," sighed the sick man. "I must be leaving, before I bring greater trouble and disaster on this house."

"But you'll never leave me, Marco! When you go, I go, too."

"You make me a man again!" he vowed. "If the test came now I'd rise and fight for you, and win."

Presently he called for the little shepherd's pipe that he brought with him.

"And have you practiced the little tune I hummed to you?" he asked. "'O Rondinela'?"

She took the pipe and blew gently, bringing forth soft elfin music.

"Now, stand on your balcony and pipe the air. There's reason in my madness. It may bring us friends to help me."

SHE obeyed. The canal lay beyond the trees and the wall, and the notes were like faint, sweet bird song, yet they were capable of traveling on the breeze to distant ears.

That evening her father came to the outer door.

"Come, Felice, the zither's a more ladylike accomplishment than the whining flute. And one wearies of the sweetest melodies when they're repeated a thousand times."

Next day he went in his gondola to the Piazza, and Felice took her station and piped the air again, and in the twilight, while Bettina watched for the senator's return, a song was heard from beyond the wall.

"It's the answer!" cried Marco, starting up in excitement. "Tell the man I'm here."

Felice flung a cloak over her shoulders, and ran swiftly through the palace to the terrace.

A tall man stood on the quay, loitering by the landing stage, and he wore the fancy costume of a Roman gladiator. As she paused and stared at him curiously, he softly hummed the gondolier's song to the swallow.

"Come, then," she called to him confidently; "your friend is here, and he needs you."

He followed her, past the trusted porter and through the halls. When he came to the chamber and saw the sick man, he cried out in consternation.

"You're very ill, my friend," sighed Paolo Albamonte.

"I'm mending fast. I must get away. And Felice goes with me."

The former Fra Paolo wagged his head, and scarcely looked at the wistful, starry-eyed maiden beside him.

"If you're determined, you two, I shall help you to the end. But you must have counted the cost of failure, and the likelihood of it. I'll go out to see what may be done. I shall not fail you."

Meanwhile a gondola landed the senator at his terrace; and the great man was about to enter the palace when he was accosted by a police spy.

"Excellency, I have to report that a stranger has entered the palace," said the man. "Your daughter spoke with a tall man, garbed as a gladiator of Rome. She took him into the palace."

"Cease your chattering!" yelled Alvise Eccelino, in transports of fury. "Go and call the watch. Fetch men—an army of them!"

THE gladiator, furtively making his way through the lower halls, was met by the wild-eyed porter.

"Signore! you are cut off. The master's here. The police are coming to seize you."

The gladiator did not falter. The first flight of steps was taken at a bound.

"The armory!" wheezed the porter behind him. "Arm yourself, while there's time."

Paolo darted into a dimly-lighted hall decorated with banners, shields, and weapons, and suits of armor worn by the Eccelini in the wars. He tore off his tinsel trappings, and donned a steel cuirass and heavy helmet.

NO longer a carnival gladiator, but an armored warrior, he chose a strong, sharp rapier from a stand of arms, and snatched two arquebuses with flasks of powder and bullets.

Into Felice's boudoir he burst.

"So soon!" gasped the shepherd, and struggled to rise.

He told quickly what had happened, and while he spoke they heard shouting in the lower halls.

"One more good fight, then, Paolo!" said the shepherd, and got up from the couch. "Come, arm me. They'll find no sick man here. Let's barricade the doors, and give them work to do."

"Ho! there they are!" bellowed the senator from the stairhead. "In my daughter's chamber! At them! Carve 'em in bits!"

Paolo feinted a lunge over his breastwork, as the senator rushed at him, then stepped back to one side and allowed his portly opponent to lunge into vacant space, lose his balance, and plunged headlong over the chest.

He caught the old man by the back of his collar and rushed him through the room to the balcony.

"Fire!" he yelled at the shepherd. "Give 'em the lead. Hold them till I come."

The captive shrieked and struggled to free himself.

"Over you go, old game cock!" muttered Paolo, and tumbled him over the balustrade, held him for an instant by the folds of his ample coat, then let him drop to the soft turf.

For a moment there was no sound to follow the heavy thud; then out of the shadows came a torrent of soul-chilling oaths.

"He lives!" sobbed Felice thankfully, and turned to the scene of violence behind her.

The roar of an explosion shook the palace, and the air was charged with smoke and stifling fumes. Two halberdiers crashed to the floor of the gallery, and others were flung back upon the stair, while the eager shepherd frantically reloaded the arquebus.

Paolo pressed the advantage with a counter charge. He dashed to the stairhead and attacked the struggling men with his sword. But the officers of the watch had drawn on the armory, and a hail of arquebus slugs flew over the heads of the men.

Gladiator and shepherd flung themselves back to escape the blast, then prudently retreated to their breastwork to wait for the next assault.

Felice screamed and ran to them.

"We're lost! There's no escape. The garden's full of men with swords. They're putting up ladders —they're coming in!"

CHAPTER IX

Merry-Go-Round

INTO the bed chamber!" ordered the gladiator. "We'll barricade the door and keep them out a while at any rate. Fight to the last breath, my children! Never lose hope. There may be an earthquake—a meteor might fall. The ways of Fate are strange."

They went through the door, and piled tables and chairs against it. There was a moment's respite, then a wild struggle began in the other room, a battle raging on the other side of the door. The men from the garden had scaled the balcony and were attacking the halberdiers.

A human avalanche fell upon the door. Timbers and panels strained and cracked, then broke down.

Paolo was flung back by a rush of men, and fell, desperately resisting, into the shattered barricade.

The shepherd, feverishly bewildered, deliriously wondering if he were Marco Monti or Stefano Lanza, got a sword and staggered into the welter of wild men, cutting and thrusting, but a powerful fellow leaped forward and struck the blade from his hand, then caught him by the shoulders in a giant's grip.

The assailant was in black, with a black mask, and there was a heron's feather stuck in his Florentine cap.

Holding the helpless sick man, he peered earnestly into the dull, tired eyes. Then, with a shout that might have meant either rage or triumph, he tossed his captive over his shoulder, flashed a long dirk from his girdle, and plunged again into the melée of the other room.

Paolo struggled to his feet and stared in stupefaction after the departing conqueror, then he caught up the swooning Felice and clambered over the wreckage.

They were caught and drawn into the seething combat, but Paolo's steel breastplate turned pike thrusts, and with his sword he fended off blundering attacks of staggering foemen.

THE giant with the heron's feather was at the balcony, still bearing his burden.

"It's a rescue!" yelled the captain of the halberdiers. "Seize the villian with the feather!"

But the man in black threw a leg over the balustrade, balanced the shepherd on his shoulder, and dropped into the darkness.

Paolo, shielding Felice, fought his way to the balcony. A sweep of his blade cleared it of pursuers for a moment, and he lowered the girl by her arms over the railing and dropped her, then leaped after her.

There were low voices and moving shadows in the garden, but no fighting.

"Are we all together, swallows?" demanded the tallest shadow. "Let's have no light, but answer me if you have tongues still wagging.

"Marco Monti!" he called like a drill sergeant.

"Here—by the saints' indulgence, Framo," answered a quavering voice.

"And here," the others answered.

"Now, let the sound men lend a hand to others," chuckled Framo. "Over the wall, and into the boat hard by!"

Beyond the wall a gondola in festal array rode idly. Two men and two women reclined on the cushions of the *felse:* Lodovico Lanza and his young daughter, Rosalina, and Daniele Nicotera with his sister Beatrice.

A tattered and disheveled halberdier ran howling from the palace, and the young women screamed.

ALVISE ECCELINO, his white ruff hanging in shreds about his neck, staggered after the soldier. He had made his way painfully from the garden where he was thrown, through the dark passages, and at last to open air again, and he called for help and vengeance.

The prow of the gondola touched the landing stage, and Daniele leaped to the steps.

"Hah! Signor Daniele!" cried the senator, blundering toward him. "Your coming is timely, my son. Oh,

we're undone! My home's in ruins. Help me, Daniele; we must get aid."

"Come first with me, old man!" said the youth peremptorily, catching his arm and drawing him toward the garden wall. "You shall see a sight to make you chant a different litany."

Framo came over the wall just then, dropping to the terrace; and he held up his arms and received the drooping figure of Felice.

"Hail, friend!" Daniele called, waving a salute to Framo. "Your fee's well earned, good fellow. I'll add a dozen gold pieces to the purse.

"Give me the wench—the shameless vixen! I'll exhibit her in the Piazza, for people to mock and jeer at. Give me her gallant, too, and I'll turn him into crow's meat.

"Now look, old man," he said to the senator. "You'd palm off a jade on me, prating of her excellent virtues. Did you think to mock the house of Nicotera? I'll tell the story in the public places, and show you to the city as a doddering old fool."

"Be silent, puppy!" thundered Eccelino. "Cease prating of family and honor, or I'll mount the rostrum and read the ill-favored history of the Nicotera clan. I did you honor when I let you set foot in my house. My daughter—she answers to me, booby! I'm old enough, in all conscience, but I'll cut your lying tongue for you, and clip your long ears like a spaniel's."

HO, there! You'd best be gone!" Daniele called to Framo. "Let the wench go. And the gallant, too; I'll find a way to dispose of him anon. Come to my house tomorrow, good fellow, and get your reward."

"Why, little master," said Framo, striding forward, "you talk like a noble prince. Where did you get such grace, such manners? I'm a rough and uncouth fellow, but I know a great gentleman when I see one.

"But come!" he added, raising his voice, "you're all fevered with this excitement, little man. Go cool yourself!"

HIS big hand shot out, flat against Daniele's breast, and the youth went backward, uttered a shriek, and plumped into the dark waters of the canal with a great splash.

"Give me my daughter!" demanded Eccelino. "I'm ruined and undone, but for this night's devilment you'll hang between the columns of San Marco, all of you!"

"Faith, you need cooling off, too!" cried Framo.

The flower-decked gondola was maneuvering toward the spot where Daniele's dark head bobbed above the water, and a long barge rowed by two men, showing no lights, was athwart the current, bearing in to the quay.

Framo whistled and made a sign, and the boatmen changed their course.

The gondola moved across the bows of the heavier craft, and the latter's prow caught the rail at the back of the *felse*, spun the skiff about, and turned it over.

"Into the barge!" yelled Framo, carrying Felice down the steps. "Some of you get those women from the water, before they drink too much. The men will hold more, so we'll leave them."

Presently Beatrice Nicotera cowered in the bottom of the barge, silent with terror. Rosalina Lanza was no less wretched, but she resisted the rescue.

"I dare not let you go ladies," said Framo. "Consider yourselves hostages, and have no fear. You've heard too much of our business here, and I'd be far from Venice before you start telling the story. The gentlemen will haul themselves from the mud presently, and wade ashore."

At his order the boatmen pushed off and turned northward toward the Canareggio.

A gondola slipped from the shadows, and a tall, black-bearded man stood up in it and hailed the barge.

"The hawks take flight to the high crags, eh?" he called out, cryptically enough.

"It's Messer Carlo himself!" muttered Framo, after answering the call.

"Good work, brave lads!" chuckled the tall man as his boat passed within oar's length of the barge. "I saw it, and I know. One sweet-singing bird in the cage was enough, but you've netted me three little nightingales, and I'll be blithe to pay the price.

"I start for Paris and the north before dawn," he added in a low tone, as the boats drew apart. "Do as I told you, and rest easy. I'll return to choose my bride."

"So much for him!" grumbled Framo. "But all's well. Who was the worthy that sent the swarm of knaves into the palace to spoil a good fight and hinder us? Well, Messer Carlo has been a fool from birth!"

CHAPTER X

The Soothsayer

CARLO COCOTO'S castle was the result of his eccentric ambition for a villa in the hills which would be a fortified refuge in time of trouble. It was a Tuscan villa, with spacious halls and galleries, a loggia with fountains and beds of flowers, and gardens and vineyards extending over a considerable estate to the forest where the master hunted the boar and stag.

Little by little the lord of the manor had reared walls of stone about the villa, as he became involved in broils with his neighbors. A moat was dug outside the walls, and flooded by tapping a mountain stream, and a drawbridge gave access to the fortress through a principal gate with enfilading towers and a strong fortcullis.

The six cavaliers and three girls traveled to the villa on muleback from Mestre, and Framo hastened ahead at the last mile to take possession of the estate with the owner's credentials.

When the cavalcade crossed the drawbridge and rode into the spacious loggia, the staff of household servants was lined up to greet the guests. The welcome, however, was not a warm one, and the sight was far from reassuring to the timid girls.

Carlo Cocoto's servitors looked as villainous a crew as one might pick up in a year's quest of such specimens. They bobbed their heads and pulled at their forelocks in a sort of reluctant deference, but all the while they glared suspiciously at the strangers and muttered sullenly to one another.

All at once a bulky brute of a fellow named Beppe, an ugly mountain peasant who was somehow recognized as a rough-and-ready overseer of the estate, lurched forward almost belligerently and fastened his beady black eyes on the shepherd lad who was dismounting from a mule.

"Sancta Maria!" he mumbled thickly, and gave every indication of making ready to spring upon the slim youth who was so lately wounded and near to death.

Felice shuddered and turned pale, clasping her trembling hands convulsively. Then—

"Marco!" wheezed the ape-like Beppe, breathing hard in tense excitement. "It is—No? Yes? Ahhh! It *is* my friend!—the young illustrissimo! Marco! Marco Monti!"

THE pale shepherd, grown rather thin, flushed and smiled with obvious pleasure, and allowed the savagely emotional Beppe to seize his

hand and mumble over it like a devoted dog.

At the same time the other servants pressed forward, positively menacing in appearance, but uttering harsh, guttural cheers and flinging their worsted caps in the air.

"Marco—amico mio!" Beppe mumbled on, "you do not ride any more in our hills! The big mountains, they are desolate without you! You come again, yes? The eagles, they cry from the crags that you are not here. The wolves howl, *'Where is Marco?'* You come back to us, Marco? Ah, we weep and sigh, because our friend rides no more!"

Pietro Tamponi strode forward and swept off his plumed hat.

"Forgive me, Marco!" he said with deep feeling. "Let me confess it. Till this moment I doubted you were Marco Monti. Not because you were not brave enough—never that! But—so young!

"Not one of us had ever seen Marco Monti, and we were—doubtful. Our mountains were farther south, but we had pictured you as rough and rugged as your own hills. Now I know what honor I have had in being for a time your comrade."

Marco Monti was profoundly moved by the speech. He knew how sorely ill he had been, and almost he wondered if it were possible that he had dreamed of being named Stefano Lanza.

THERE followed some idle days at the villa, and the fugitives from Venetian justice rested and waxed luxurious in the keen, crystal air of the hills.

Even the two kidnaped girls found themselves comforted against their will, and almost cheerfully accepted Felice's assurances that they would be held as hostages only till the fugitives were safe from pursuit, and free from private persecution by the powerful Nicotera clan.

PRESENTLY the pretty, wistful Beatrice, bearing no manner of resemblance to her brother Daniele, accepted the escort of the awkward giant, Framo, to walk in the gardens; and the grave austere swordsman and ex-monk, Paolo Albamonte, paced gravely and austerely by the side of winsome Rosalina Lanza.

Pietro Tamponi, reconnoitering the hills one day, rode back in haste with disturbing information.

"Friend Carlo comes!" he announced abruptly, striking terror to the hearts of the girls. "From a crag I saw him riding through the Black Rock pass. He would be here now, but he has marching men—a regiment of scum that he's scraped from the northern provinces. They might reach us in an hour."

"We shall not be here!" declared Framo. "Carlo alone is no match for wit or wisdom, but with an army at his back he's an arrogant tyrant. We've accepted his hospitality here, but give yourselves no concern on that account.

"All that Carlo Cocoto has, he has taken from others by force; and he wanted us here for two reasons: the women, and the aid that we might give him in some devilish new enterprise. If we were to treat Carlo according to his own code, we'd burn down the villa and carry off everything worth the taking."

"There's no refuge for us in the hills," said Paolo. "Surely we must go, but where?"

"Back to the sea," answered Framo readily. "We'll cross the lagoon tonight, and Gaspare will take us in. If we need protection there, we'll have Jacopo, with all the good and worthy pirates of the Lido at his call."

THAT night they rested at Gaspare's, but morning found Framo restless.

"I must go to Venice," he told Marco Monti, "and learn why Carlo comes from the north with men at arms."

"You'll meet him there?"

"I'll meet Lucrezia Betto, and she'll know everything. Lucrezia is a soothsayer and sorceress—in the belief of Carlo. He consults the oracle through her."

"I shall go with you," said Marco resolutely. "We're wanted in Venice by many gentlemen of quality, and two swords are better than one."

Carnival was over, as far as feasting and pageantry were concerned but the fair continued through eight weeks, and masks and costumes were permitted for those who fancied them; so the two friends entered the city in black dominoes like peasants, and Framo went alone to the Rio della Censa.

"You've stayed long at Carlo's, with your wenches from the Grand Canal, old hawk," said the well-informed Lucrezia. "What of Carlo?"

"I come to you from Carlo," said Framo shrewdly, watching the woman's face and eyes intently. "Carlo would have you read the stars for him, and say what's written in the book of destiny.

"Listen, Lucrezia, we have an army at our castle, but keep your tongue between your teeth or I'll wring that swanlike neck with these two hands. Old Carlo marched in last night, with two hundred seasoned men at arms behind him."

She clapped her hands with joy that was almost naïve.

"He did not fail!" she cried. "The day is near when I shall not hide my face from the sun in Venice. Heads will fall, and others will wear crowns. A vulture sat on the cornice of the Doge's palace this morning! The signs are in the sky!"

"But there's danger, Lucrezia," said Framo gravely. "There are spies abroad, as always. The blow must fall at once, or we shall fail."

"Carlo has kept his bargain to the letter. Tell him the plans are unchanged," she whispered tensely. "Three days hence, at dawn. In the Piazza, at the first ray of the sun's light."

An hour later Framo sat again with Marco in the gondola from Chioggia.

"Revolt!" he breathed in his comrade's ear. "Three days, Marco! Lodovico Lanza is the head, and Carlo is marshal of the troops. The Nicotera gold is in it, too.

"Remember the ill-starred venture of the wild man, Falieri: he had the money and the men, but Venice was saved by the trade guilds and the peasants. Come! We must find Jacopo, and learn how many fishermen will defend the Lion of St. Mark."

CHAPTER XI

The Mended Coat

GRAY blankets of fog had smothered the lagoons all night. An hour before dawn Jacopo cast anchor off the Piazza, and proceeded to land his passengers and crew in three small boats.

As the curtain of vapor over the city grew lighter, Messer Ubertino Orsini, the Red Inquisitor, was disturbed in his slumber by the fluttering of draperies between the posts of his massive bed.

He was a nervous man and a light sleeper, and it needed nothing more to set him in a fever of apprehension. Parting the curtains, he felt a chill, salty breeze in the room, and it meant beyond doubt that a window toward the sea was open.

It was always his care to close his room tightly against the malarial vapors of the night, and the evidence that a window had been raised brought him to his feet, wide awake.

He stood on bare feet in the drafty room, his night robe fanning his lean ankles, and the tassel of his nightcap bobbed into his eyes as he sneezed.

His first impulse was to seize the brass hammer on the table by the bed, and strike a stunning blow on the alarm gong, but as his hand was extended his roving eyes fell on a shadowy figure in black, like a visitant from the other world, moving toward him from the foot of the bed.

He parted his dry lips to shout, but the man in black darted forward and presented the needle point of a gleaming dirk at his breast.

"This, then, is the end of a career of faithful service to the State and the people," said the Inquisitor, turning nobly calm in an instant.

"Be quiet, and you are safe," whispered the man. "You posted a reward of two thousand ducats for the capture of Marco Monti, and five hundred each for one or more of his band. You—"

"Do you come in this preposterous fashion, in by my window, to claim the reward—to tell me that you know where Marco Monti may be found?"

"I claim no reward. I bring Marco Monti to you. I am Marco Monti."

I KNOW you for a desperate fellow, Signor Marco. You have me at the moment in your power. What would you do? Is it—my life? Or do you exact blackmail?"

"Your life is yours," said Marco, "and I believe it's valuable to Venice. I do not come to bring new evils on the tortured city, but to save it."

"To save—to save the city?" muttered the Inquisitor in amazement.

"Listen, and mark my every word, Excellency! Revolt is marching on the city. At this moment rebels are gathering in the Piazza. At break of day they'll cry out together, 'Down with the Doge! Death to tyrants! Liberty for all!' Lodovico Lanza, your councillor, will take command.

"Daniele Nicotera is one of the lieutenants, and they have companies of bravi from Lombardy and the farther provinces, in command of the hill men's hero, Carlo Cocoto. They have plotted to seize the palace, kill the Doge, and fly the flag of revolution."

The Inquisitor was shaking with excitement.

"The dawn is near! What can be done in so short a time?"

"Give the alarm," said Marco. "That is what I can't do—in a city that puts a price on my head. Call on the guilds of artisans, as it was done in Falieri's time. Turn out the watch, then rouse and arm the populace. Venetians are loyal, in spite of oppression."

"How shall I know that this is true?"

"Why, wait for proof, if you choose. You'll hear the clash of arms, and the tramp of men."

MONTI was already at the open window, and he passed like a ghost into the gray mist, as Messer Ubertino sprang across the room and smote the brass gong with all his might.

It was much lighter as Marco Monti hurried to the Piazza, and through the clearing air he caught sight of armed parties moving to their positions.

He avoided contact with them and made for the Ponte del Malpasso, and he was there in time to see Carlo Cocoto in his plumed hat, towering above his men as he led them across

the bridge into the great square. In the mist the force seemed magnified, and the mercenaries and hill men, advancing in detachments under their leaders, appeared like a regiment.

From across the Piazza, toward the Merceria, came a trumpet blast, then shouts and cheers. Lodovico and young Daniele were leading their men to the rendezvous.

Carlo leaped on the parapet of the bridge and swung his hat in the air.

"Liberty! Freedom!" he yelled. "Venice and the people! Death to the Doge!"

A body of men moved swiftly toward the bridge, and Marco Monti recognized them and ran to take a place in their ranks.

"St. Mark for Venice!" roared Framo Ramorino, flourishing his sword. "Death to traitors! Forward, brothers, to the charge!"

Carlo's force was halted in confusion at the bridge by the sudden attack, and in an instant the battle was joined, hand to hand; a street fight instead of the impressive charge the conspirators had planned.

Lodovico's phalanx, charging to Carlo's relief, was taken on the flank by the halberdiers from the Ducal palace, while from the east came running, in good order, a regiment of the artisans and sailors of the Arsenal, true to the Republic and their traditions of the sea.

Carlo's mercenaries were the first to break and run; then his hill men lost heart and fell back across the bridge, but the Lido fishermen were all about them, and they were beaten and struck down with staves and knives.

IN a moment Carlo found his army melted away, and himself battling alone against fearful odds.

"Yield, Carlo!" cried the grinning Framo Ramorino. "The game's played out. We're all of us rascals, but only mongrel dogs are traitors."

The hill baron turned fiercely and slashed at his would-be captor, but a thrust of Framo's rapier caught him, and he fell on the ground where his revolution started.

Marco and Framo assembled the eager fishermen and dashed across the square to the support of the loyal troops, but they found the venerable Doge himself in command, and Lodovico and Daniele in chains, prisoners and condemned traitors to the State.

AS in all matters directly affecting the State, the machinery of justice was quickly set in motion. Before noon the Doge sat in the Hall of Justice with the three Inquisitors of State, and after brief formalities the sentence of death was pronounced upon the traitors, to be executed at once between the pillars on the Piazza.

The Red Inquisitor begged leave to speak, and the Doge assented.

"May it please your Serenity," he said, "there are brave men here to whom Venice is much in debt; yet they are men proscribed by the Council, with prices set upon their heads.

"The notorious Marco Monti, the despair of our shrewdest agents, came to my couch today before the dawn, after eluding my sleeping guards, and warned me of the danger to the city. Your Serenity knows the rest. It might be said that he's the savior of Venice. What, then, shall be done with such a criminal."

"Let the man come forward."

Marco made an obeisance and advanced to the bar.

"I pray you be frank and open, Signor Marco," said the Inquisitor. "Tell us who you are, whence you came, and something of your history."

"Excellency, my history is brief. I

come, not from a distant province, but only from the palace of my father on the Grand Canal. I'm a Venetian, and my name is Stefano Lanza."

A hoarse cry came from the seats reserved for the Council, and the noble Zaccaria Lanza collapsed in the arms of his friends.

"You astound me!" exclaimed the Inquisitor, while his colleagues leaned forward to stare at the young man.

"Tell us, what strange masquerade was this of yours? 'Twas but a little while ago you disappeared from Venice, to the great sorrow of your noble father, but the name of Marco Monti has been spoken with dread on hill and plain for a decade. Can you read us the riddle?"

"There may be—there may have been—a man named Marco Monti," said Stefano slowly, "but from all the peasants' tales I heard, I suspected him of being another myth of the mysterious, romantic hills. On a journey toward Padua, I aided in the rescue of Signorina Felice Eccelino from abductors. I was forced by circumstances to flee with the survivors of the battle with the police, and in idle vanity I adopted the name of Marco Monti."

"This Marco Monti legend is tantalizing," observed the official. "Who can tell us if a real Marco Monti ever lived, in very truth."

Framo Ramorino rose and paid homage to the throne.

"If it please your worships," he said awkwardly, fingering the heron feather in his cap, "I am the original Marco Monti, born to the latter name and baptized with the first."

"*You*, Framo!" cried Stefano, aghast, "but you—"

"THE name was worn to tatters like an old coat," Framo explained, "and I'd little enough cause to cherish it for honor's sake. When this young gentleman took it for himself, I bade it goodbye and good riddance. Carlo Cocoto knew, but had no chance to tell. Iachimo Fabroni knew, but I swore him to silence. The others knew nothing of me, for Venice was seldom my hunting ground."

"BUT Framo, what of the servants at the castle?" demanded Stefano earnestly, forgetting for the moment the august personages about him. "They hailed me as Marco Monti, and an old friend. Almost they made me believe I was Marco Monti."

Framo grinned sheepishly.

"The hill men love a jest," he said. "I pledged them all to call you by that name, and do you honor as their hero. They're good actors, eh? It was a merry jest.

"And now, Excellency," he went on, bowing to the Inquisitor, "you see the old coat is brushed and mended; it comes back bright and new; and if Messer Stefano Lanza has cast it off for good, I'll be blithe to put it on again."

"These other men, entitled to pardon and rehabilitation under the law: who are they?" asked the Inquisitor.

"Ottavio Vigano is my true name, Excellency," spoke up a portly cavalier. "In the battle this day I delivered the first sword thrust for the Lion of St. Mark. I'm naught but a poor knight of Fortune, but my plume is unstained. I crave liberty to return to my ancestral estates in Lombardy."

"I shall thank his august Serenity for leave to return to Milan," said another. "Pietro Tamponi is my true name."

"Paolo Albamonte is my name," said the next one. "For a time I was in holy orders, as Fra Paolo."

"The missing tutor, eh?" remarked the magistrate. "But you distin-

guished yourself in arms today, signore. Strange business for a cleric!"

"I was a soldier before I was a priest; and now it seems that I'm more acceptable to the blessed saints in the former shape, so by your leave I'll offer my life and sword to Venice."

"The others?" murmured the official.

"Iachimo Fabroni, of Florence; no more, no less, your Excellency."

"The same for Zini Gardoni, of Florence, too," said the last one.

THERE are other matters to be laid before this tribunal," announced the Inquisitor. "Unhappily, in the law of Heaven and earth, the children must suffer for the fathers.

"The long missing ladies, Rosalina Lanza and Beatrice Nicotera, have returned to Venice, I am told; but under the blight that has fallen on their houses through treason to the State, they are proscribed. The most merciful fate we can offer them is exile for life."

"May it please his Serenity," spoke up the real Marco Monti, shuffling his feet in embarrassment, "I hear it's the law that a lady so condemned may seek pardon, through marriage to a freeman. I'm a rough fellow, but Signorina Beatrice has graciously smiled on me, and I've reason enough to think she'd be my wife."

"That is acceptable to the State, Signor Marco," declared the Doge himself. "You led a gallant charge this morning, and Venice may be proud to show her gratitude. The estate of the traitor Carlo Cocoto is confiscate, under the law, and it will please the Council to grant you those lands as the price of your service."

I CRAVE no reward, my lords," said Paolo Albamonte, "but if I'm to remain a soldier it's my right to take a wife, and I'm honored by the favor of Signorina Lanza. Her family is of higher rank than mine, but if I'm acceptable to the senior line, still honored by the State, I'd petition for her freedom under the law."

"If I may say it, you're welcome to our house as friend and cousin, Paolo," said Stefano, "and the gentle Rosalina deserves a better fate than exile for her father's folly."

"And you, Signor Stefano," murmured the Inquisitor. "Is there any lady you would redeem and set free by this most excellent process?"

"The honor of the lady of my heart," Stefano answered solemnly, "is high above all courts and legal codes. I'm the unworthy one, yet love prompts me to hope for blessings richer than I deserve. I seek the hand of Signorina Felice Eccelino from her illustrious father."

"Thy prayer is granted, Signor Stefano!" boomed Alvise Eccelino, rising from his seat in the Council. "In pride and folly I pledged my poor child to a simpering villain of great wealth and circumstance. Now I'm humbled and brought low by that same villain's ignoble end. My ancient house is honored by your noble favor, and if your august father gives approval, my happiness will be complete, and I may die in peace."

"Nay! Live in happiness, noble colleague!" shouted Zaccaria Lanza. "My own gall and wormwood have turned to milk and honey, and I, too, am rebuked for vanity and folly. My lost son returns, to be honored by the Republic, and the union of our families makes the winter of my life like mellow autumn."

The Stump *of* Mahakam

A Slip of Paper Hidden in a Wooden Leg is the Harbinger of Hideous Death in Penihing

By ACE WILLIAMS

Author of "Fly to the Hills," "Gone—But Not Forgotten," etc.

STRANGE that four such men should have come together with such different motives, so far from the last outpost of vicious civilization. And one of them handicapped with a stick of lifeless hickory which served as a mockery of human leg.

"Rough country up here," McHenry said, spitting indifferently into the fire. "Last time I was up this way, old Cready the mission chap went goofey with sun-stroke. We never found him. He got into the jungle."

Jose Jalapa chewed his match. It was hard to know what Jose was thinking, and uncomfortable to look squarely into his face. His eyes were always slightly closed, sometimes blinking foolishly. He was small, stunted, sullen. He sat close to the red rim of the fire, with his wooden peg stuck straight out in front of him. The glow touched the tip of the match in his mouth, green and white, and made a protruding wolf-tooth of it.

"It's a wonder," young Andrews said with an attempted smirk, "they didn't take the chap's head."

"Who?"

"You said he got into the jungle. This is Penihing territory, isn't it?"

"One never knows, my friend,"

Rogan shrugged. Rogan was lean, sensitive, suave. He took great delight in studying his companions' faces, as he might have examined interesting and amusing animals behind cage bars. "He says, does he not, that the man was never found?"

"CAN you not think of something more pleasant to talk?" Jose Jalapa grunted. "Me, I see enough of this jungle without we must discuss it each night."

McHenry glanced at him sidewise. The heat and the continual drip of the jungle were getting into Jalapa's nerves? Perhaps that. Perhaps it was the hollow drubbing of the tok-tok bird in the lantana bushes beyond the fire. You could never fathom Jalapa's mind anyhow.

The others, they were unmasked. Andrews, he was an American fool from some university, here in Borneo with the sick psychology that a man must see all of the world, especially the danger climes, before settling down to humdrum home life. Rogan, he was a nobody, a drifter; the boy had hired him in Bandjermasin because an outlander did not go into the Mahakam jungles without someone who knew. McHenry himself, he was trading. The Long-Glit kampongs at the headwaters would provide cheap rattan, bamboo, perhaps poor diamonds. But Jalapa?

They had met in Long Iram, all of them. Jalapa had been sitting on the garrison veranda, drinking iced-tea with the controleur. All going upriver? To be sure, eventually. But it is less lonely, less perilous, to travel together, no? A white man alone, set upon by some wandering band of Ibans from the Sarawak border, or stumbling into some hostile kampong —poouf! But together? Four are better than the one.

Jalapa, he was looking for a friend of his, so he claimed. Perhaps the friend was in Borneo; perhaps not. If not, there would be just a little time lost, nothing more. And who can tell?

It was queer, McHenry thought, that Jose expected to find his "friend" in the Mahakam jungles. Occasionally one did find stray whites in the Dyak kampongs. Unwanted whites, renegades. But one in particular? It was queer. And Jalapa was not talkative.

"I should have my Josephina here," Rogan grinned. "She would sing for us and it would be less dismal!"

That was peculiar. A woman at home, to men like these, was perhaps nothing. But at night in the inland, with only the river water lapping in sparse lallang grass and occasional tengelings screeching in the outer dark, the name of a woman was sacred. It relieved; it soothed. Coming even from the sallow throat of a man like Rogan, whose lips licked over the word hungrily, it was—perhaps sweet?

"Who's Josephina?" McHenry said.

"Who is Josephina? Ahh! She was, my friend—not who is. A little thing I found in Singapore four—no, five—years past."

"White?" Andrews demanded.

McHenry looked quickly at him. Andrews had not lived in Borneo long enough, yet, to know that white, brown, yellow, they were alike. They were all women.

"SPANISH color," Rogan smiled, kicking the fire petulantly. "And warm? To be sure, my friends! But only a while. You have met them, they have ideas? You should be faithful! Ah! *I* should be faithful!"

"Marry her?" McHenry said.

"Marry? But to be sure! Am I dishonorable, ever?" Rogan could laugh with exceeding dryness, showing the teeth on either side of his sensual mouth. "It is easy to marry,

my friend. And I loved her, perhaps. But they are like whisky, these women. One tires of the straight drink. It is all rye; it is monotonous and leaves a tiresome taste. One wants a tall glass, well mixed. The rye for a base, perhaps. But bacardi and gin and absinthe and scotch and tuak as well."

McHenry shrugged.

"You can leave out the tuak," he threw in, "when you mix mine. Stinking stuff!"

"To be sure, my friend. But I am just making speech figures, no? I am saying that my little Josephina, she was too difficult. I was compel—you know how it is?—to go away."

"You mean you left her flat?" Andrews had not learned either, to control his curiosity. Nor had he discovered that decency and indecency, in Singapore and east of Singapore, are merely the same word with a slightly different inflection.

"But of course!" Rogan shrugged. "What else?"

"But that's rotten! Was she—"

"Should I know?" Rogan lifted the palms of his hands in mock consternation. "Whatever, it does not matter. My name is not now what it was then. One must be careful, no? Then I was Manuel Rigori; now I am Frank Rogan. One day, perhaps, I shall be something else again."

"Her?" McHenry said casually, half interested.

SHE is in no trouble. Singapore—you have been there, my friend?—there are slums and bad drinking water and typhoid. I have learned that she was too frail for such climate."

"Cashed in, eh?" McHenry nodded. "She could sing, you say?"

"Ahh! She was a turtle-dove, a night-jar! I have heard her sing one of her own Spanish—"

"Yeah?"

"Even her name was a song! Josephina Castillo! No?"

Andrews was too young, too idealistic. He stood up and strode away into the shadows beyond the fire, out of range of the thing that was hurting him.

WHAT'S up kid?" McHenry called. It was unsafe to prowl like that. There were kraits, cobras perhaps, ants' nests to stumble into. There were crocodiles, sometimes, on the river bank.

"I—I'll just have a look at the boats."

The young man's tall, too-thin form went into the deep dark toward the river. McHenry grunted and stared into the fire. Rogan, whose other name was Rigori, said with a smirk:

"Women are all alike. Eh, Jalapa?"

Jalapa's eyes were closed. He opened one of them and twisted his wooden leg into a more comfortable position.

"Eh? Sure, sure," he said, and closed his eye again.

They lay long like that—Jalapa, Rogan, McHenry, perhaps four feet apart, close to the fire-glow. McHenry glanced toward the river. The kid was sensitive, eh? Too young, anyhow, that kid; but he was a decent fellow with good blood. He'd lose those crazy ideas if he stayed in the clime long enough. Too bad.

"Like that myself once," McHenry mumbled. "Too late now, though. Lucky devil."

He spoke aloud and Rogan looked up at him.

"What do you say?" Rogan said.

"Nothin'."

Jalapa was sleeping. Rogan edged to McHenry's side and nudged McHenry with one elbow.

"You have remember what I told you yesterday, no?"

"About him?" McHenry frowned. "Why?"

"You have watch him, perhaps? Today he did it again."

"Yeah?" McHenry said. He was slightly interested, but he had never learned to be as curious and suspicious—and hungry—as Rogan.

"LIKE this," Rogan scowled, making a movement with his hands, "he unscrewed his peg and fished something out from it. He does not think I saw him, perhaps. It was when we stopped and made our noon-day chop in the kampong of old Gungla. I am alert, see? I watch. And I see Jalapa go by himself behind one of the native huts."

"What," McHenry shrugged, "did he fish out?"

"It is a paper, my friend. I have my own notion. I think perhaps it is a map of something. His story—he is looking for a 'friend'—it is impossible! Are we fools? He has other motives. You think so?"

"Maybe. What of it? I reckon it's his own business."

"In this Borneo, one man's business is the business of all. If he has learned of something good—if that paper is perhaps a map of diamond country—"

"You'll have a pretty job gettin' hold of it," McHenry finished dryly.

"Ahh! Is that not significant itself? He keeps his map in the hollow of his leg. He guards it!"

"Yeah. Well, count me out, Rogan. I mind my own—"

McHenry lifted his head and hand simultaneously and said in a louder voice. "What's that?" Then he was on his feet all at once, in a single scrambling movement, and standing wide-legged, peering nervously toward the river.

"The kid's in trouble!" he said curtly. "That was him yellin'!"

He was gone then, scraping through the deep grass and pulling the clumsy Luger from the wooden holster at his hip. This was Penihing territory, as Andrews had suggested. It was far inland, close to the headwaters of the Mahakam. Civilization didn't register up here. Even the usual Malay mockery of civilization didn't penetrate this deep. If the kid was in a mess, it meant Penihings or Ibans, or maybe Kayans—but probably Penihings!

McHenry could stalk softly, and did. The path to the river was thin; now lallang grass, now an interlacing of red mangrove roots. Two narrow dugouts, prahus packed with tin chop boxes, lay nose-high in the sparse reeds. Young Andrews was lying half in, half across, the bow of the closer one.

"What's up?" McHenry said sharply. The boy was stretched face up with arms and legs dangling. His eyes were open. McHenry gripped his shoulders and shook—and saw.

"Jes—" McHenry groaned.

A parang stuck out between Andrews' shoulders. McHenry yanked it and looked at it. It was long, ugly, sticky. The nipa hilt bore here significant designs, snakes with dogs' heads snarling — Penihing nagahs! McHenry gasped and let the thing fall. The boy was alive, groaning in whispers, McHenry picked him up heavily and ran with him.

THE others, Rogan and Jalapa, were waiting for him on their feet by the fire. McHenry dropped his load and gasped orders.

"Get away from the light! Spread! You, Rogan, over in the grass. Jalapa, under the big maidenhair there. Me, I'll watch this end. Get anything that moves!"

They crouched and scattered, leaving Andrews at the edge of the fire. McHenry called out, as he doubled in the reeds:

"Keep shifting ground. They'll get you on gun-flash!"

Then it was a waiting game. Sordid business, and nerve-wracking. McHenry lay prone near the edge of the clearing. There was nothing but darkness and greater darkness, where the half-shadows became a wall—of pitch. Peering, McHenry saw one of his companions crawling near the tent on the other side of the fire. Fifty feet farther, another one, half upright, was barely visible; and it was Rogan.

THREE men, McHenry thought, wincing, and there was no telling how many of the raiders. Raiders they were, certainly. There were no hostile kampongs within twenty miles of this rat-trap. It was their infernal native telegraph; that was it. The news of the white men's coming had gone under water. Hellish, too, that Dyak method of communication. A hollow log, sunk in the river, with something solid to beat upon it, would do the trick. And the reverberations would carry under the surface of the river for miles on miles. Listeners, at the other end—they knew the portent of the sabali drums!

McHenry stopped thinking about it. He lifted his gun, fired, rolled over, and lay very still. Something had moved not far from him. He heard it crash and cry out; then a flung parang thudded into the ground close to where he had been stretched. They could throw their butcher-knives with precision, these devils!

An echo came presently from Jalapa's watch-post. And another, smothering that one. McHenry turned to look. Foolish thing to do, lying in the grass like that. His movement rustled the slender tips above him. Something pinged against his out-thrust leg. He jerked over and over, went up on his knees, and fired again.

It was harder, now, to guess the number of the devils. At least a handful, for Jalapa and Rogan were finding things to aim at. And it was tough on the boy, too. Nothing but a stomach full of raw whisky and cauterization of the knife hole would save him. He'd be dead now, without those things. There was a kit in McHenry's pack, in the tent. No way of reaching it though.

Nothing seemed to be moving any more. McHenry got to his knees, alert, watchful. A shadow twitched near the rim of the intense blackness. McHenry heard a sudden *sssppt*. He ducked. A feathered dart whizzed above his head and struck the grass with a scratching sound, like mice, ten feet beyond. One had to be careful. Parangs, flung in the dark, might hit but probably wouldn't strike a vital place. But sumpit darts, like that one, were dipped in ipoh poison. Eight minutes of agony and a sure thing too. Just a scratch, deep enough to draw blood, would do it—vital spot or no!

SOMETHING else was stirring. McHenry twisted over very cautiously this time. Near the tent, upright, Jalapa was standing and staring. Evidently trying to locate something to work on. Another figure was close, almost at Jalapa's back, creeping on all fours. McHenry pulled up his gun, then lowered it. The crawler was not a Dyak. It was Rogan.

McHenry shrugged. So Rogan was yellow? Afraid to lie alone and take what came? Had to have someone beside him. Misery in company—or cowardice double? But not that, because Jose Jalapa was no coward. At least he didn't look it, standing there on one wooden prop, waiting.

McHenry had other things to look for and think about. He turned away, began crawling toward the river. If it came to a crisis, he wanted to be near the prahus. Then a quick rush, a shove, and the river

would afford a means of escape. The others could go to hell if they didn't have sense enough to think of the only way out.

There was a shrill cry, then. McHenry spun about. His eyes widened, and he said, choking:

"My G — — "

THE two men were fighting, thrashing together against the tent wall. Jalapa and Rogan! So Rogan was yellow? Not that, the cunning treacher! This was his way of finding what was hidden in Jalapa's wooden stump.

Clever? Hellishly clever! There would be no come-back. A quick knife in the back; no one to see it; then a moment's silent work over the stiff stick—and no need to share the secret with McHenry. But something had misfired, eh? Served him right! Jalapa's hearing hadn't been so dormant. The scraping of the thick grass behind him—the sudden lunge of Rogan's flung body—had warned him.

The firelight revealed a little of it. Not much—not enough for McHenry to use his gun—but sufficient to throw out two struggling forms, one of them stumping and straining on an unwieldy leg.

Jalapa's hands were locked around the other's neck, pressing, exerting. It was Rogan who did the crying out. But the voice was choking now, like the sound that comes out of the throat of a stuck bush-pig. Or a man who has the willies from too much alcohol.

"Damn fools!" McHenry muttered. "Do they think this is a private scrap? I'll be left here all alone—"

He saw other shapes moving, and he fired at them as quickly as he could swing his gun. Rogan was down. Jalapa was suddenly gone frantic, screaming at the height of his lungs. Insane? Probably. It didn't take much to make a man break, in the jungle here. At night, too, when nobody knew what was going to happen out there in the deep dark.

Rogan was flat, squirming. Jalapa stood over him. McHenry stopped shooting and stared—and shuddered violently.

"Urrggg! God!" he gurgled.

Jalapa was not crazy. He was too methodical for that. He was still shouting, still tossing his arms, but there was something rational about it. Premeditated, was that it? The words spewing from his lips were Spanish, and McHenry didn't know Spanish. Besides, they were quick, furious, gibbering like an old woman. Rogan was pinned to the ground. He was beating the grass with his arms, hammering with his feet in a wild tattoo. Screeching horribly.

The wooden leg was buried in his stomach. Buried through to Jalapa's knee.

McHenry groped foolishly, yelled insanely:

"Stop it! By God, stop it, Jose!"

Jose laughed hideously and then stopped, because something sang out of the dark behind him and twanged into the bulk of his back, pitching him forward. McHenry saw the hilt of the parang and heard the triumphant howl from the jungle.

Then McHenry ran.

He ran foolishly. He forgot about the river. All he could remember was the sight of Rogan, gored, Rogan, flailing the ground, with the wooden stump rammed through him. McHenry had seen plenty of things, but never anything like that.

HE burst into the jungle and kept on madly. At first it was a matter of hacking through low-dragging creepers and sliding, slipping over giant taphang roots. But that came to an end. He hardly knew it when he struck the utan solid. Then he was clawing, scratching, falling,

pitching headlong. His face and arms bled. A great welt rose on his thigh. One trouser leg was flapping grotesquely, clotted red.

He ran until he fell. Then he crawled another ten yards and lay motionless, with his cringing body under a huge pitcher plant. A black and yellow spider, luminous of belly, crawled over him to investigate.

THEY did not discover him. When daylight and the thick mist came, and the jungle threw up its sweat, McHenry crawled out and limped back the way he had come. He found the river. He followed the river to the camp clearing.

The prahus were gone. He stared at himself and wondered if he could make the long trek down-stream to the first kampong. Perhaps; perhaps not. He had no gun. Where was it? Dropped it, most likely, in his stumbling through the dark.

He shuddered heavily when he found young Andrews beside the dead fire. Rogan and Jose Jalapa were lying together near the tent wall, still joined in grisly mockery by the wooden stump. It wasn't pretty—what the Penihings had left behind.

McHenry closed his eyes when he pulled the stump out of Rogan's body. He thought of Rogan's talk about the girl who sang so beautifully. Josephina Castillo, eh? And Rogan's real name was Manuel Rigori. Well, it wouldn't matter now, and Rogan wouldn't change his name again.

The wooden leg unscrewed easily and came free. On his knees, McHenry held up a slip of pink paper.

Dearest Daddy Jose:

Please do not be angry with me when you read this, because I am so very, very happy. Today your little flower girl will be a child no longer. I am to be married, daddy! I am to marry the finest, strongest man in all the world! He is Manuel Rigori, and we love each other so much. He says we will be very happy, and I know it is so, and you will be happy also, my father?

Your loving
Josephina.

Follow This Thrilling Serial Novel of

The Leopard Man

A Three Part Serial

By

PERLEY POORE SHEEHAN

Author of
"Those Who Walk in Darkness,"
"Dead Men Talk," etc.

PART TWO

SYNOPSIS

The old woman Gozeli, said to have "powers," tells Pierre Bayard about the Solomon Bush and the Leopard Men of Africa. He knows that Farouk, the most dangerous white-black man in dark Africa, long ago put a curse on his, Bayard's, mother. Because of his witchery, she lost her mind and died, seeing haunting images. Bayard feels, stronger than anything else, that he must kill Farouk. He must go to Africa, find him, and avenge his mother's death.

Bayard's most intimate friends, Commodore Haven and Dr. Holbein, secure a berth for him at the Natural History Museum in New York, and an opportunity arises to go to Africa in search of scientific information.

His friends give Bayard a farewell party. Lily Estelle Haven, the Commodore's daughter, interests Bayard greatly. He is attracted to her, and also is startled at her wide knowledge of African native terms and superstitions.

Before his departure, Pierre gives Lily one of his most precious private possessions—an old family map of Africa.

A year later in Africa, in the Guineas, Bayard meets Dom Gonzalo Faro, an old exiled Portuguese, who gives him the first information he gets of Farouk.

Dom Gonzalo and his grandfather were both at one time Leopard Men.

Dom Gonzalo tells Bayard of the story of the Smollets, how the father left his young wife and baby daughter all alone, and returned to find the mother clawed to death, the Leopard Sign, and the daughter carried off.

Farouk did this when he was white; but he got himself and the little girl turned black.

How strange, Bayard thinks, as he hears these tales of horror, magic and mystery that Faro tells him; and how like, the names of Senhor Faro and that other, dreaded one. . . .

Old Faro calls to someone in the darkness.

Now go on with the story.

CHAPTER VIII

The Black-White Girl

THOSE who answered Dom Gonzalo's call were an odd pair—so odd that they helped Bayard to forget himself. Both black, but so wholly unlike.

First, Eboreh, that witch-doctor, to whom Dom Gonzalo had referred a while back; a tall man, and dignified, dressed in a cotton undershirt and

rolled-up overalls, with only a fair weight of beads and charms about his neck and arms; carrying his medicine-bag of gazelle-hide under his arm much as any physician would have carried his kit.

Then, back of Eboreh, a little black minstrel-man, a *griot,* so small and bent and lively that Bayard took him at first for a chimp or a young gorilla —an impression that kept coming back; and his name was Gundey.

"Gundey!"—the name struck meaning in Bayard's brain. It meant "tobacco" in the old Yaga speech, which was the language that Gozeli had taught him; and he didn't quite know how it started, but in a moment they were speaking to each other.

Gundey told Bayard he was Akka —one of a primitive dwarf people who live on the edge of the Yaga country—and that he had lived among the Yagas as an entertainer.

Eboreh, the witch-doctor, listened, motionless, looking at Bayard. Presently he also spoke in that language Bayard knew so well.

"Prince," he said, "your mouth is sweet." He explained to Senhor Faro in broken trade-English and Portuguese. "Him all same for one Yaga *banh* (prince). *E mui bom!* (It is well!)"

Reserved, he squatted on his heels and covered his eyes against the moonlight with a slender hand.

THE minstrel-man had also squatted, black and small, looking more like a chimpanzee than ever—or a buzzard, he wore so many feathers, rags and trinkets. But he put out his slim black arms and plucked his harp with that same melancholy sound Bayard had heard before and which now seemed more expressive than ever.

The harp was a home-made box,

about the size of a cigar-box, into which were set four crooked sticks to support the orchid-root strings, But what fascinated Bayard was the song-net that the minstrel had spread on the flooring in front of him.

All these *griots* carried song-nets. They were like bits of fish-net, and into this would be tangled various objects to represent their songs—a rag of snakeskin, a bunch of feathers, perhaps a small black lump that had been a human heart.

Bayard had seen many such, but never one that held him as Gundey's song-net was holding him now.

You could have read fine print in the moonlight. Every minutest detail of Gundey's net and the three objects in it were clear. First, a leopard's paw, cut off and smoked, with the digits apart and the claws extended, making it look like a hairy and terrible hand.

Then, in contrast to this, pink and prettily modeled, the hand and forearm of what had been a fairly large doll.

Old Dom Gonzalo, who had been watching Bayard, now broke in.

"I gave Mary Smollet that doll. She had her doll when Farouk grabbed her."

So were the two black men watching Bayard—Eboreh, the witch-doctor from under his hand, Gundey with the veiled but alert watchfulness of a monkey.

BAYARD considered the third article in the net—a small dried twig. It might have been a sprig of holly.

"What for good him ting?" he asked, using the trade English of the coast with which all of them were familiar.

"Him ting," the little minstrel answered, while he held Bayard with his monkey-bright eyes, "him ting Solomon Bush."

There was a long silence. It was Senhor Faro who broke it.

"These men," he said, "have just come from where the Solomon Bush grows."

"Gumbah?"

"Right. It was on that old family map of yours. You asked me where Farouk is. He's there."

THE purpose of a song-net is to give the theme of the song—that is, the story—that the minstrel has to tell. It may have been mere accident, but now as Gundey began to strike his harp he was keeping time to the sound of the cannibal drums that came down the smoking river.

Gundey's performance wasn't all straight singing. He was acting as well—crouching like a leopard, coiling like a snake, mimicking the terror of a white child carried off by a Leopard Man.

For a while Bayard had been sitting in a sort of waking dream—a nightmare seen with his eyes open. Gundey was a changing figure in this nightmare—now the terrified little white girl, Mary Smollet; again, Farouk, with a leopard skin over his head and leopard-paws serving him for hands; then other actors in the old drama.

All this time the explanation came clear as Gundey chanted in the language that old Gozeli had taught Bayard when he was a child.

There was a *kahina*—she was a witch of the Fullah tribe on a trail running toward Lake Chad from Calibar—who'd turned both Farouk and the little white girl into black Africans.

"The Fullah woman told us that herself," Dom Gonzalo broke in. "Farouk, he got her to turn the trick while Captain da Silva and I were getting too hot for him—got himself and the child turned into black

Fullahs. With blippo, wasn't it Eboreh?

"That's what the Batura-Dudus used in the old days. Gozeli could have told you that, Dom Pierre. Blippo, wasn't it, Eboreh?"

"Blippo," Eboreh answered softly, as Gundey sank down back of him.

FROM his medicine bag the witch-doctor brought out what looked like a handful of currants. He savored these under his nose before passing them over for Bayard's examination. They had a mild sweet fragrance.

"The dried fruit of the Yaga gardenia," Dom Gonzalo explained.

"I remember," said Bayard. "Gozeli did tell me, Senhor Faro."

"If rightly used, will turn anybody black—will make a Hottentot of a Swede—"

Bayard shuddered. "What became of the little girl?" he asked.

"Farouk, he finally had to sell her," said Dom Gonzalo. "You see, the Fullah *kahina* fixed him right. She made him black and he stayed that way. His own black blood may have helped.

"But the *kahina* must have had pity for the girl because, after three or four years, she was getting white again and Farouk had to sell her—sold her to a slatee, one of those black slave dealers up in the Soudan.

"The slatee, he sold her to a rich Englishman and his wife who'd traveled up the Nile. Then Farouk, it seemed, followed them all down to Cairo and tried to blackmail the couple. But all he got for that was the cut of a dogwhip across his black face, for the English couple had adopted the girl."

"So she was saved!"

"She might have been," said Dom Gonzalo, "but Farouk had put the old Leopard sign on her. It meant that she'd come back to him. Some day, she'd have to come back."

Dom Gonzalo began what sounded like the beginning of a chant or an incantation. He'd lifted his seamed and bearded old face so that the moon shone on it clearly. He was like an old hound baying the moon as he began:

"Oh, those Leopards—"

As he did so, then for seconds afterward, Bayard could have believed that he had become the victim of illusion or that he was witnessing the magic of an evocation.

If this were so he wasn't the only victim. The little *griot*, Gundey, had let out a squeak of dread. Eboreh, the witch-doctor, with a single impulse had flung himself far to one side and lifted his two hands in a sign that Bayard recognized as one meant to warn off devils.

Bayard saw all this in a mere atom of time. Then he was staring at the moonlit mask of a leopard.

CHAPTER IX

Leopards and Men

IT may have begun as illusion but it became reality with all the swiftness of a mental flash. So far as Bayard was concerned, his whole lifetime came into that flash—especially the years he'd spent at Lac Perdu; all that he'd ever learned from Gozeli, his grandfather, memories of his mother and how she had died.

This was no leopard in front of him. This was a Leopard Man. Nor was the Leopard Man alone. There were other leopard masks in the background. Like real leopards, these enemies had come over the stockade from the jungle.

Out of this swirl of perception and memory there sounded in Bayard's brain but a single word: "Kill!"

He'd snatched instinctively at the

pistol he carried in a holster under his left arm. It was the fraction of a second lost. He'd remembered an oiled cloth he'd padded about the weapon just before washing up for Senhor Faro's dinner.

His hand dropped to where he carried his long-bladed knife in a sheath at his hip.

IT seemed as if he'd begun to fight —and had already been fighting for a long time—before he could have had time even to draw his knife.

Things were happening in a jumble. There was no sequence. Each second was pounced upon by a dozen events. Yet through this jumble of heat and blood there ran other flashes of clear perception.

That original leopard he had seen —too big for a leopard and suddenly reared to the height of a man—had swung a barbed club at Dom Gonzalo. The blow caught the old trader in a ripping chop from temple to chin.

"Farouk!" the old man gasped.

So it was Farouk that Bayard caught on the point of his knife. The knowledge submerged Bayard like a bath of fire. But Farouk—if this was Farouk—had a chain shirt under his leopard coat.

It was an ancient device of the cult—one that had been handed down through the centuries. Like that the legend had grown that Leopards have charmed lives.

Bayard grappled. As he did so, he felt a thud across his back, then a flame of paralyzing agony. He knew then that he was not fighting alone. He was beset by Leopards. They were clawing him. Why couldn't they leave him alone!—alone with Farouk!

"Stab high or low!"

He wasn't sure, but the shout seemed to come in the old Yaga tongue. It might have been from Gundey, the little *griot*. It might have been a mental cry from old Gozeli.

He swung his knife down and back and, in the midst of the din, he heard a shriek. For a moment he was free.

Once more, for what seemed like seconds on end, he was beset by illusion. This couldn't be. This was sheer nightmare.

While still fighting himself from detaining claws and in a babble of grunts, thuds, whines, curses, the spectacle of old Dom Gonzalo and the cry Dom Gonzalo let out both reached him clear.

BOTH were fearful. The old man's head had become a smear of blood. But his cry was a strangled curse for that son of his.

The two had gripped each other. They swayed against the frail railing that guarded the gallery overhanging the river.

Again Bayard was striking backward—raking blows left and right, at enemies he couldn't see, but who, he could now tell, were trying to drag him down rather than kill him outright.

In the thick of this business, while all his effort was to free himself and get at Farouk again—it was with the double motive of killing Farouk and saving Farouk's unhappy father—he heard other scraps of speech—he heard other scraps of sound.

He blended the two. That was the thud of the cannibal drums from up the river that reached him.

The words were set to this like the words of a barbaric hymn—"white man—white man's heart—white man's heart makes medicine—" There were blasts of shriller music as someone screamed.

Was that himself who screamed?

He'd torn himself from what was back of him—he was like a fish tearing itself free from not one but a dozen hooks. He'd aimed a stab at

the leopard mask of the shape—it was still more leopard than anything human; but as he did so he found himself caught in a fresh vortex of violence.

THE whole gallery seemed to be sinking beneath his feet. Suddenly the river had seemed to slant and lift—the moon had swung round like a trainman's lantern.

He was falling. He and Dom Gonzalo and the big human cat were falling together.

Bayard—falling and knowing that he fell—caught a last glance of the gallery and those he were leaving there. He saw them against a red light, a curtain of fire.

Even in that swift moment he knew that the place had been set afire. He even knew that this was the work of Gundey—the little minstrel's contribution to the battle.

Not even Leopards would remain to fight in a house afire. Against this red curtain—through a red veil that might have been dyed with blood—he saw Gundey run past like an excited gorilla, he saw Eboreh, the medicine man, still empty-handed but throwing a scare into a mass of spotted hides.

There came an eclipse—swift, like the blowing out of a light; and as brutal as a hanging. The three of them—Faro and Farouk, the father and the son, and then Pierre Bayard, as bound to the two of them by the chains of fate as they were bound to each other—went down together, fighting, choking.

There were crocodiles in all these rivers—unlovely beasts; no unlovelier could be imagined; ruthless as sharks, quick to get the slightest vibration of promised food. For the crocodiles the whole river was one gigantic telephone.

Bayard thought of that. He was still desperately bent on murder when the fall began. In the water it was all salvation—not only of himself but of old Faro.

The blood of Faro and possibly also of Faro's son would lure other killers even if there was a chance to escape the big crocodiles—odd eels and watersnakes, fish with teeth that were razor-sharp, other fish whose bite was poison.

Bayard's first movement was to make sure of a hold on old Faro—there must be no mistake as to whom he was trying to save; and then a stab and a kick for Farouk.

FAROUK himself must have been hampered by his leopard skin and the chain shirt and by the Lord only knows what else he might have been wearing. The Leopard regalia called for a magic rock, those leopard pads on both hands and feet, and these would sometimes be weighted with iron to put more power behind a mauling with the spread claws.

The water was like a flow of blood. It was warm and thick. Bayard had gone down with his eyes open, hoping to see. It was as if a hangman's hood had been pulled over his head.

He could see nothing. It was as if a rope were tightening about his throat.

Yet he knew that he had got his left arm about old Dom Gonzalo's shoulders. In his right hand he still held his knife. That he would keep in case the crocodiles came.

But pretty soon—pretty soon—it wouldn't make any difference whether they came or not.

Bayard thought of his *safee*—that portrait of Lily da Silva; he thought of that other Lily.

He made a terrific effort to kick himself free from something that seemed to be trying to tug him toward midstream. That couldn't be a crocodile. His good sense told him

that. Not yet. That would be some waterlogged snag.

But Dom Gonzalo dragged on his strength like one bent on suicide. They'd touched the mud of the river bottom. There was a current scouring here out toward midstream. But Bayard wallowed over with his burden and got his free arm about a stake.

He'd reached the surface under the floor of the factory—it was already dripping sparks from a far corner—when something seemed to spring toward him with a gliding rush.

It came along the surface of the water. He struck. He fought. But he himself had been struck. He knew that he was losing consciousness. Against this also he fought, clinging to Dom Gonzalo whom he now knew to be helpless, clinging to the thought of his *safee*. . . .

CHAPTER X

White or Black

IT was the little minstrel, Gundey, who had set fire to an oil cask in the rear of Dom Gonzalo's factory. It was a bit of ancient wisdom brought over from his jungle ancestors, no doubt.

Since time out of mind, fire had been their only defense from all the terrors that walk, by night, from leopards to ghosts.

Gundey had done his part. But he had come back into the fight ready to do more. He had a wooden skewer in his hand not much bigger than a good-sized toothpick, but tipped with poison—a scratch from it would have been like a scratch from the tooth of a cobra.

Whether he caught a victim or two he could never be sure, although he tried.

For neither had Eboreh, the master of medicine and magic, been idle. He'd flung at the leopard masks a curse invented especially for leopards —one that had been tried and refined and improved on since the first great drift of black people down to the West Coast jungles from the African Holy Land, in the dim northeast.

Four, five, six—the fight was over so swiftly that there was no telling how many Leopards there had been in Farouk's marauding band. They'd been taken by surprise.

It wasn't their style to fight a crowd. They must have been expecting to find old Senhor Faro either alone or with no one else than Pierre Bayard.

Such black servants and hangers-on as they might have found about the place, of course, didn't count. At the first snarl of a leopard, two-legged or four-legged, these would have run.

BUT to have found Gundey and Eboreh there—that was different. It was different to have found Pierre Bayard as if protected—as if in possession of some magic more powerful even than that with which they themselves had come prepared.

It was strike and run.

Perhaps not two minutes had elapsed since the Leopards first appeared before they'd gone again.

"By the river," squeaked Gundey, his voice pitched small and high. "They've gone by the river!"

It was hard to tell whether he referred to the Leopards or to the trio that had crashed the rail. Gundey had flung himself to hands and knees and was staring down at the river.

He spat and shrilled a jibe as a heavy canoe shot from under the platform, but a moment later a flung spear had snatched away a bit of his head-dress and pinned it against a post just beyond him.

He flattened like an adder but he saw the canoemen—Leopards among them—dragging the Leopard chief

from the water. At the same instant his agile eyes, all-seeing as those of a bird, saw something else. It was a swift-moving eddy across the current of the river—then another—then another.

He piped his alarm.

THE medicine man, Eboreh, standing over him, had also seen those converging ripples and was as quick to know the meaning of them. The crocodiles were coming. Eboreh, muttering, seized the spear that was still quivering in the post and flung it with another sort of cry.

He'd scarcely done so when a shot barked out, then another and another. The shots came from almost beneath him. Again he shouted, this time with a note of triumph.

What he'd heard he'd understood as readily as spoken words. These shots came from a white man's weapon, one that he'd never heard before. They told Eboreh that Bayard at least was still alive. Still that danger of the crocodiles remained. They were converging on the little factory building—doubly attracted not only by the lure of food but by the rising flame.

Eboreh caught up the body of a fallen Leopard Man and flung it into the shining river.

Senhor Faro was dead. The mauling he'd received from the spotted brute he'd called his son would have been sufficient to have killed him without the fall into the river.

It was a dead man that Bayard had dragged to the muddy shore. He himself was exhausted when Eboreh and Gundey found him there.

At first they thought that he was dead also—he lay there so still with the hand of that other dead man still held in his own. For the bank of the river was treacherous and steep.

Bayard had dragged himself and that other from the muddy water in the nick of time.

The burning factory that had been Senhor Faro's home for so many years was in the nature of a watch-light. It kept—so Eboreh said—not only beasts and ghosts away but also Fans.

As the fire went down the sun came up with the suddenness of the tropics. By that time, the three friends—Bayard, Eboreh, Gundey—had dug the grave.

They buried him with the rites that Dom Gonzalo himself would have preferred. And then, when all that part of it was over, Gundey plucked his orchid-root harp and crooned a wailing song.

MOSTLY the song was a straight address to the soul of Senhor Faro. And in it—while his skin crawled now and then—Bayard heard the little minstrel telling Senhor Faro's soul to rest in peace, for everything would be carried out exactly in accordance with Senhor Faro's wishes.

That was all right, so far as Bayard was concerned. But what made his skin crawl was something Gundey said about the magic-working "blippo"—poisonous fruit that could turn a white man black.

Bayard looked at Eboreh, who was also listening, crouched on the other side of Senhor Faro's grave. Eboreh made a sign with a finger and spoke a word.

Gundey, Eboreh indicated, was *ebumtup*—the power was on the little minstrel man and he was divining what had been in Senhor Faro's mind. And this, it seemed, had been the old man's plan:

To turn Bayard black!

That—Gundey, or the ghost of Dom Gonzalo, made it clear—was the only way in which Pierre Bayard—"Daddy Baya'" in the song—could

ever come to Gumbah and accomplish there what he had to do.

"What if I stay black?" Bayard asked, trying to still the tremor in his heart.

Eboreh said: "Banh (prince), if you were to stay black you would come to rule a hundred tribes—you would come to be the king of kings—the Pharaoh of Africa—"

For the moment Bayard was too overcome to speak.

EBOREH, as if setting his words to the tingling of Gundey's harp, continued: "I've been told that far to the north, in the Africa holy land, there is a mighty Sphinx.

"The Sphinx is a Woman. And all these ages she has been awaiting the coming of her Lord—"

Now, Bayard was able to break in. He said: "But there's a lady of my own kind that I love!"

And this statement of his brought the sweat to his forehead as much as anything that Eboreh or Gundey had said. For he was thinking of Lily Haven, and not even to himself had he admitted that he actually loved Lily Haven or, for that matter, ever expected to see her again.

He hastened to add: "In any case, Eboreh, although you and Gundey are my sons and brothers, I'm white!"

Eboreh wasn't excited. He made a gesture with his slender hand to indicate that they could let that part of the discussion wait.

"Banh," he said, "the missionary's child was white."

Bayard felt reproved. He'd let Senhor Faro's interrupted story slip his mind.

Eboreh continued: "The honored friend we've just buried told you that Farouk had put the Leopard sign on the girl and that the sign would bring her back."

"It couldn't bring her back," said Bayard.

"But it has."

"After all these years."

"Yea, they have her now at Gumbah. They but await the Inlaga festival to — paint — themselves — white."

He spaced his final words so that there should be no doubt about his meaning. As if to make this meaning doubly clear Gundey began tapping his harp to the cannibal rhythm they'd been hearing the night before.

Bayard didn't have to ask for an explanation. All his accumulated knowledge of Africa was flooding back over him like the Mississippi through a broken levee.

"White" was fetish; a white woman, when eaten, powerful medicine; and there was that hint that Dom Gonzalo had let fall about the religion mixed up with cannibalism—especially when the victim was not only white but young, unmarried. . . . Inlaga, the Spirit that came from Afar. . . .

He needed no hint.

And to save her—he saw that clearly enough—he'd have to go "black." No white man, especially during a great religious season, could get within miles of Gumbah.

It was more inaccessible, a thousand times, than Mecca.

He tried to think. But he couldn't think. There was a cannibal rhythm in his brain that went—black! black! black! And suppose he should, like Farouk, stay black!

CHAPTER XI

White Man's Magic

MANY a black man looking up from some jungle clearing where he'd planted his yams and bananas—from river swamp where he hunted or fished—must

have dreamed of the Inlaga as he saw that speck in the sky.

This was an airplane flying high. Seen from the ground it was no bigger than a hawk. It came from the mysterious north, where, long ago, gods took the forms of hawks.

It traveled faster than a hawk—traveled faster than a spear. White man fash—white man magic! You could never tell.

Maybe this was the Inlaga bound for Gumbah! Inlaga, the Spirit that came from Afar!

Quite a good many people come down to Africa from England and elsewhere nowadays by airplane. The trip by sea might take eighteen days from Marseilles to Mombasa. The time can be halved by air.

And ever since Commodore Haven and that daughter of his, Lilian Estelle, had started on their long delayed trip to Kenya, East Africa, Lilian Estelle—Lily, for short—had been showing an increased impatience.

THE impatience, even she herself couldn't explain. But it was growing intolerable.

Dr. Holbein was with them. He'd long been wanting to make a botanical survey of Kenya. This was his chance. Commodore Haven himself was interested in the expedition from a scientific standpoint.

He hadn't visited that part of Africa for years. He wanted to see what changes had come about.

But if the expedition was going to amount to anything there was a lot of equipment that would have to be collected in England.

"I'll go on ahead," said Lily, "and meet you folks when you get there. After all, Kenya is civilized."

It was, in spots.

There were beauty parlors and hotels with private baths in Mombasa. At Nairobi, the capital, they were dancing to the same jazz then current in New York and Palm Beach.

The dresses and perfumes came from Paris. Bond Street and Fifth Avenue set the fashion for men.

But in no direction did you have to travel very far to find grass huts and fetish. Practically everywhere there were still zebras, lions—and leopards.

Lily Haven had been feeling the spell of Africa upon her ever since she'd left New York. Day after day the spell had been growing stronger.

In London, where she'd half decided to remain with her father and Dr. Holbein while they completed their outfits, she'd found the spell irresistible. It had been making her miserable. She couldn't wait.

All the time she was flying South, with a purple sky overhead and Africa a green and tawny blur beneath, the spell was growing stronger still. She tried again and again to fight against the spell.

But she did this only half-heartedly. It was as if she were surrendering her will to some higher power—the great mysterious spirit of Africa itself.

SHE wondered at times if this was love. More than once she had admitted to herself that she loved Pierre Bayard. But if it was love that was calling her now, why had she chosen to come to the East Coast of Africa instead of the West Coast.

The last time they'd received word from Pierre he'd been down on Lobito Bay, that old haunt of the slavers, over there on the Guinea side of Africa.

So far as she knew, when she left the plane at Nairobi, she and Pierre Bayard had the whole black continent between them.

Was it this thought—or was it something else—that made her feel

that even now she hadn't reached her destination.

That very first night of hers in Nairobi, after the maid had unpacked her things in the perfectly up-to-date hotel, Lily Haven became aware that not yet had she reached her destination. The spell that had brought her thus far was stronger than ever.

It had become a voice in her heart and brain. It was almost audible. It was telling her that her destination—and her destiny—still lay ahead.

She got out that old map that Pierre had given her—the one they'd looked at together down there in the old house on Lac Perdu. As she did so she felt the swift excitement of a premonition.

She'd flattened the map under a reading lamp on her bed.

"Gumbah!" she spoke aloud.

THERE was the sacred mountain—"the mountain that shone in the night." On the map it looked like a spider in the center of its web. It was there that the Solomon Bush grew. The Solomon Bush could make women beautiful. . . .

It was nothing exceptional in Nairobi to see some strong-willed girl start out on an expedition of her own—especially if she was rich, like this daughter of Commodore Haven; especially, moreover, if she came from such authentic Africander stock as she did.

She wanted, she explained, to go up and look at some of the wildest and least explored part of the country—she was sick of hotels. She pointed out the district on the latest Government map, and the Commissioner himself was there to abet her and give advice.

The district she chose was sketchily known as the Zandey Hills—Massif de Zandé, on the old French maps. Instructions were wired at once to the last frontier post to organize her safari—it was going to be transport by native bearers from there on.

She reached the frontier post in a chartered plane.

She herself was feeling like "a spirit come from afar" as she started on that obscure trek back in the direction of the Zandey Hills.

This was Africa. Africa was no longer a map. It was a Thing. It was a Presence. The Presence was not quite human, nor yet a brute. It was—the thought kept returning to her—a Something like one of the old Egyptian gods, both brute and human and yet a god.

Was this—she wondered—the beginning of insanity, the "bamboo touch," as the natives call it, that affect some white people in Africa?

Or wasn't it, rather, something deeper—something in her blood? She felt at times as if she were African herself?

She was seated in her tent, one night, unable to sleep, when both these questions struck her with the force of blows. They were blows of terror—each of them a jolt of African nightmare.

THERE'D been no preliminary warning, but suddenly she saw that a leopard had entered her tent. The leopard seemed to have slit the canvas wall.

So far—her quick mind was telling her—the thing was both logical and possible. Such things happened.

No year went by but that someone was mauled—mauled in the midst of a well organized safari even as hers. She caught up the heavy automatic at her side in readiness to defend herself.

But even as she was doing this her racing thought was miles ahead of her actions, and her thought was telling her that none of this was logical but wholly unreal.

In the first place, the leopard was larger than any leopard she had ever heard of. In the next place, although the leopard had given her one long look from its green and yellow eyes, it seemed to be preoccupied not with her but with something that it had brought into her tent through the slit in the wall.

To her horror she saw that this was what was left of a previous victim—a body unmistakably human but flayed, stripped of most of its flesh.

She wanted to scream and fire. This wish wasn't just panic. It was her best—perhaps her only—chance for safety, to frighten the beast, rouse the camp.

All this, of course, must have been transpiring with the speed of thought itself. There'd been no pause. So far, it had all been like a single snapshot or something seen in a flash of lightning.

BUT as she raised her pistol, caught her breath, a hairy paw was pressed against her mouth and chin. Her staring eyes could even see the hooked black claws that made the paw still more terrible.

Yet she was certain that so far the claws hadn't touched her.

Swiftly another furred and armored paw had struck the weapon from her hand, then slid across her throat—taking away her breath—taking away her senses.

What Happens to Lily Haven in the Clutches of the Leopard? Does Bayard Succeed in His Quest For Vengeance? These and Other Questions Are Answered in the Last Thrilling Installment of "The Leopard Man." Order Your June Issue at Your Newsstand Today!

See "The Globe Trotter" (page 122), and read how you can win a cash prize by sending in this coupon!

Yellow Treasure

A Plot to Mulct a Chinaman Bound For Hongkong of His Precious Savings Leads to an Unexpected Conclusion For Payne

By WAYNE ROGERS

Author of "The Face That Came Back," "Too Much Gold," etc.

SAMUEL EBENEZER PAYNE stepped aboard the steel barque *San Diego* just below Meigg's Wharf, San Francisco. He halted by the fiddly, and, lifting his face in the air, sniffed inquisitively as an old, familiar aroma smote strongly upon his nostrils.

Payne was large and well nourished, barely thirty in years, with enormous shoulders, and a sleepy, amiable face, from which peered two thoughtful and wondering blue eyes. As he stood sniffing at the baked air, up came the third mate, Mr. Thomas Walker, who preferred the title of "third officer."

"Hallo! Are you the new supercargo? Where's your dunnage? D'you know we sail on the ebb?"

"Yes," said the newcomer, blinking at him sleepily.

"They've exchanged me from the *Los Angeles,* that left last night. Payne's my name, and I'm an easy-going sort. I think I left my sea-chest aboard her. But I can fill up from the slop-chest, and what

else I need I can borrow from you fellows."

The third officer stared.

"Can you, by gad! You seem a fairly cool hand for your size."

"So they say," replied Payne thoughtfully. "But how's it this ship smells like the Coolie-Town back of Canton? You don't carry a Chink crew, do you?"

"Ah, you've sailed with 'em, I see! No, we've no Chink crew, thank the Lord; but we've a saffron-colored freight this trip. Come an' see."

He led the way forward. The forehatches were off, and the two men looked down upon a living mass of yellow humanity. A hundred and fifty Canton coolies, laundrymen, cardsharpers, laborers and stevedores were camping as they chose on the floor of the hold. The Chinaman is not unclean personally, but when a mass of him is lumped together his odor is startling.

"Phew!" said Payne. "What a tea-party! Where are they bound for?"

"Hongkong. They've worked out their time abroad, and most of 'em have scraped together enough to get back to China an' live the life of the landed gentry. It can be done on a penny a day. A few may have got enough to buy up the freight of this ship, too. And then others are likely going back dead broke; they're the real thing when it comes to gambling. See 'em dealin' those greasy cards?"

PAYNE turned, and glanced at a tall, leather-faced Mongolian as lean as a greyhound, who walked by hugging a small store tea-chest, and climbed painfully down the hold ladder with it.

"That's a Kai-Gingh," murmured Payne thoughtfully.

"A which?"

"Two-Knife Kai-Gingh. Knew some of the tribe in Amoy, where I was clerk—confidential clerk and examiner—to See Yen's firm. They're useful, by Chinese standards, for getting rid of anybody the mandarins want removed. And they're experts at their trade. Use two knives, you know—cross them behind your man, bring them together like scissors. Leaves him pretty near in two pieces.

"Oh, you mustn't be prejudiced! Some of 'em are very good men. This one's been at work in the States a few years, evidently, and laid by a little wad. I don't know these parts very well, but I do know the Treaty Ports. How on earth comes it they let you ship 'em like this?"

"You may know China, but you're very innocent as regards God's country," chuckled Walker. "Palm oil will do many things here, and the Californians are glad enough to see the backs of the coolies at any price. By the way, the supercargo's bunk is next the forehold. Hope you'll enjoy it."

"I don't mind. Used to Chinks. Payne's my name and I'm an easy-going sort."

"Are you?" said a voice behind him.

PAYNE turned slowly, and saw a long, powerfully built person with a fighting chin, and arms nearly as lengthy as a gorilla's. He had great breadth of chest, good features, and a manner that would have gained him entry into any collection of seafarers as the typical New England bucko mate. He was the *San Diego's* second officer.

"Guess you're the new supercargo. My name's Grady, and I'm chief guy of this show, includin' supercargoes an' all other flunkeys. Got anything to say about it?"

"No," said Payne, blinking at him sleepily. "You can go on as chief guy, as far as I'm concerned. I'm an easy-going—"

"Ferget it! You've said that already. You've got to weigh out three dollars as footing to the mates."

"Who to?"

"To me. I'm treasurer."

"Yes; I'll bet you treasure anything you get your hooks on to."

"Look here, I want no back guff from you!" growled the second mate, threateningly. "Are you going to come across?"

"No," said Payne, drowsily.

"Then try that for a start-off."

He swung forward with a ferocious hook at Payne, who guarded the blow with remarkable agility for such a sleepy person. The next moment Grady was sprawling under the foremast, as the result of a terrific uppercut on the chin.

He was on his feet again with the resiliency of a rubber ball, and, grabbing an iron belaying-pin from the rack, dashed at Payne.

The spectators were connoisseurs of "all-in" fighting, but they had never seen anything brisker than the way in which the belaying-pin changed hands. Then the supercargo drove Grady relentlessly along the deck till he fell heavily at the foot of the fo'c's'le door and announced with emotion that he had had enough.

I'M glad that's settled," said Payne, replacing the pin in the rack with care. "I've no use for scrapping, myself. But that's the drawback of being an easy-going sort—fellows try to put it over on you."

"I don't think anybody else on this tank will try it," said Walker, much impressed, "an' there's some tough nuts among us, too. But I reckon you'll get tired when we make Hongkong. How did you get the berth?"

"Through the Boston agent of the Line, who's a friend of mine."

"Ah! Owner's man, are you? But Grady is more of an owner's man than you—he's ninth cousin, or something, to one of the partners. He'll get you ousted from the Line. I warn you—he's not a forgivin' creature. The skipper will do it for him.

"You know, the old man can't fire any of the staff without wiring to headquarters—it's a rule that he's up against; that's what keeps him in such a bad temper. You know what the Line is. I don't say that any of us pity the skipper; he's pretty hard-boiled himself, and so are most of us. I never sailed with a tougher bunch."

PAYNE soon found that the third mate was right. Before the *San Diego* had cleared the Golden Gate he had satisfied himself that the after-guard was a "hard crowd" indeed. Grady and a red-headed friend of his named Collins, who was the senior apprentice, and qualified for his ticket, proved particularly unpleasant. However, they left Payne alone, which was all he cared about.

When the *San Diego* was four days out she encountered a brisk breeze from the southward, which knocked up a heavy head sea, and sent such showers of spray into the forecastle, with occasional green water, that the unfortunate Chinamen found their quarters very wet.

The hatches were kept open, nobody caring about the comfort of such passengers. The old man strongly objected to being troubled by Chinamen, and said so with brief pungency.

A few of the inhabitants of the forehold elected to come up on deck at night and sleep under the lee of the hatchways or ventilators—anywhere that might give them shelter from the hissing spray. They brought their belongings with them, and one especially attracted the notice of Payne. It was the Kai-Gingh.

He had with him his wooden chest, bound round with rope, and this,

which appeared to be all his personal baggage, never left him night or day. In the dark hours he slept with his head on it, at the foot of the foremast.

Payne was leaning against a hatch and taking it easy, as was his wont, toward the end of the first watch, and not fifty feet from the sleeping Chinaman. Payne wondered idly how the man had spent his life in the West, and what he thought of his white brothers, when he heard on the other side of the ventilator a voice he knew well.

"There must be somethin' in it worth swiping, Hank. Else the guy wouldn't cuddle it like that."

It was Grady who spoke. The husky tones of Hank Collins replied:

"Five years' savin's, as like as not. Greenbacks an' gold. But the yellow ape never lets it out of sight. How are we to get a look-in?"

"Dead cinch. Hain't you never sailed this route before? Ship'll be clear about two bells in the middle watch tomorrow night. I'll reeve a long line with a clip-hook on one end, running over the foreyard. The hook'll come down just over the Chink. When the guy's asleep, I'll sneak up an' pull the hook down, an' clip it on to the rope of his box. See?"

"Sure! Go on."

THE free end o' the line'll be made fast to the forecastle-head. I'll nip up there and haul on it. Away goes the chest up to the foreyard, where you'll be waitin' to grab it. You'll slip along the yard with it, an' pouch whatever's inside, an' we'll cut up the stuff afterwards. Got that?"

"Sounds like a cinch!" said Collins eagerly. "Gee! I'd like to see the Chink's face when he finds it gone. Mike, I can see us havin' the time of our life at Hongkong. An' it's no slouch of a place for that."

Payne moved gently away from the lee of the hatch.

"That's a pair of real beauties," he said to himself. "Well, I'm an easy-going sort, but I think I'll take a hand in this. As the Kai-Gingh's given up the hired bravo business, and gone to work, there's just a chance he came by that money honestly, an' I don't see why he shouldn't keep it."

IT was characteristic of Sam Payne that he said nothing to anybody about the affair, not even to Tom Walker, who was now his friend. The Chinaman always chose the same sleeping-place and there was little doubt that the scheme would work smoothly.

It happened that Walker was confined to his berth with a dose of island fever, and Payne, though supercargo, held a mate's "ticket," and was required to take the third mate's place. He was on duty in the middle watch—from midnight to four a. m.—and the two schemers were not, so they, being free, had the advantage of him.

But Payne managed to slip away below just before two bells, and waited in the darkened lamp-room that opened upon the starboard alleyway.

A few seconds after two bells had struck, the bulky form of Grady came along the alley, and passed within two feet of Payne. The conspirators naturally preferred not to be seen together, and Payne had counted on it. Collins appeared a little later, making for the companionway.

Suddenly a pair of most capable hands shot out from the darkness and grabbed him. In a couple of moments, Collins was slung into the lamp-room, and the key turned on him. Then, turning up his coat collar, and pulling his cap over his

eyes, Payne pocketed the key and went on deck.

"Sh—sh!" murmured a voice.

Payne saw Grady's figure crouching up against the break of the forecastle. Raising his hand as a reply, the supercargo stole to the foreshrouds, ran nimbly up the ratlines till he reached the topsail, and crouched close against the cross-trees.

He looked down, and could just make out the Kai-Gingh's form, sleeping peacefully, his head upon the roped chest. A shadow came tiptoeing along the deck from behind. It was Grady, who reached up for the line that hung down, and without a sound passed the hook under the rope of the chest. Then he crept back to the forecastle-head.

The line ran swiftly through the block, the chest was jerked away into space, and the Chinaman woke with a cry as his head fell back upon the deck. The chest had melted into the darkness—where he knew not, and there was no sound to guide him.

He scrambled to his feet, uttering strange sounds, and stared dazedly about him. He had scarcely realized his loss.

Already the chest was in Payne's hands at the cross-trees, and, edging swiftly along the yard with it, he cut the rope, pried the chest open with a chisel he had taken up with him, and thrust his hands inside.

TWO heavy jute-bags—evidently packed with coin—met his touch, and he crammed them into his loose shirt with some difficulty. A roll of notes, done up in oiled silk, followed next, and these Payne also pouched. Then, climbing down the yard-arm, he quietly let the chest fall into the sea.

A shrill clamor grew louder and louder below. The unfortunate Chinaman, crazed at his loss, and unable to make any guess how it had occurred, ran round and round the well-deck, uttering wild cries of rage and despair. Finally he rushed aft in search of the captain.

PAYNE slid down to the deck at once, and hurried to his quarters, where he hastily stowed the money and notes in his mattress. A rapid inspection of the loot showed him that there was something over eight hundred dollars.

"I reckon the chest's best out of the way," he said, "but I'm not going to carry all that cash about with me."

He slipped up on deck again, and found the look-out man grinning broadly, for he had heard the joke—not an uncommon one in the Eastern trade.

The cries of the Chinaman, though unintelligible, told everybody what had happened. The captain, who was in his charthouse, was suddenly annoyed by the invasion of a frantic and weeping steerage Chinaman.

"What in three hyphens d'you want here, you yellow mongrel?" roared the captain, starting up. "Git!"

"Me losee all my piecee money!" raved the Mongolian, clawing at his knees. "Wicked men stealee him! You find, chop-chop! Five year—five year money!"

"Do you suppose I know anything about your money? It's no business of mine! Out of this, you son of sin; you're defiling my charthouse! What, you won't?"

There was a bump and a crash. The Chinaman emerged from the charthouse in disorder, and was kicked accurately down the after-ladder, landing in a heap at the bottom. The charthouse door slammed again.

The Chinaman picked himself up, and looked at it for a moment. Then he turned and fled like a streak toward the forehold. As he went he

passed close to Payne, who caught a momentary glimpse of the Mongolians face.

"Christmas," said Payne, under his breath, "the laundryman-coolie's dead! It's cold, raw Kai-Gingh now, and he's wound up to clean out the ship. I wonder if he has his tools with him? I'll have to take a hand in this, or we'll have somebody cut in halves."

He went back to the mainmast more quickly than he usually moved. It was not twenty seconds before the Chinaman came streaking back through the darkness with remarkable speed and silence, his hands stretched out at an angle behind him, and a broad steel blade in each.

Payne sprang out from behind the mainmast like a flash, and the Chinaman was seized in a grip that nearly jerked the breath out of his tough body, two prehensile arms round him, and his elbows jammed tight to his sides. The prisoner twisted himself round with the strength of a trapped leopard.

There were not many men on the North Pacific who could have disarmed the Kai-Gingh. But Payne managed it. First one and then the other knife went skimming out over the rail like a pale blue streak, and splashed into the swells.

The captive wrenched himself half round, his yellow teeth clashing like a dog's. Then a brief whisper in his ear suddenly stiffened him into inertia.

"Quietly, fool, quietly!" breathed Payne, in the Fo-Kien dialect. "Give up, and you ll get your money back."

THE Kai-Gingh gave a gasp, and clutched Payne by the front of his shirt.

"Don't paw me like that, blockhead. Listen! You know the starboard bunk next the forehold? Go there and look in the mattress, and let no one see you. Whatever you find there conceal in your clothes and be sure nobody knows you've got it, or they'll take it from you again. Keep dark till you get ashore."

The Kai-Gingh remained rooted to the spot for a moment. Then he turned Payne's head to the dim light that came from the lantern on the mainmast, and peered into his face.

"I do this much for you; you do one thing for me, Kai-Gingh excellency," said Payne ironically. "You'll forget I spoke to you in the vernacular; let no one be aware I know it—keep out of my way altogether. I prefer to keep out of this affair." He dropped into pidgin English. "You savvy?"

"Savvy plenty!" gasped the Chinaman; and, loosing his hold of Payne, he fled forward and vanished into the darkness like a ghost.

The supercargo, true to his habit of taking things easily, paid no further attention to him, but strolled to the galley to see if there was any cold coffee.

IT was less than a minute later that Collins, having been released by a shipmate who had heard his kicks and cries, hurried upon deck, only to be pounced on by Grady.

"Have you stowed it all right?" whispered the second mate.

"Stowed what?"

Grady growled dangerously.

"The money, you crook! Say, don't try the cross on me, or you'll get—"

"Why, that cub Payne grabbed me an' slung me in the lamp-room!" spluttered Collins. "I know it was him, though it was near pitch dark. I've only just been let out. What do you mean, money? Have you—"

"I see what it is!" cried Grady with an oath. "I thought at the time there was something wrong. Payne went up the mast in your

place, an' he's got the chest! He must have got on to the game!"

Collins relieved himself of a long string of deep-sea adjectives.

"The hog! He's grabbed the money for himself! Where could he have put it?"

"In his berth—the only place. Come on quick—let's see if we can find it."

They dived down to Payne's quarters, not noticing the shadowy figure of the Kai-Gingh that flitted away from the hatch as they went below.

"It's gone!" said Grady savagely, turning the mattress up. "But it's been here; the covering's slit up."

"He's thought better of it, an' hidden it somewhere else," said Collins bitterly, in the tones of one heartlessly defrauded.

"Gee! We're not goin' to stand this! How can we get even? He knows we did it."

"I'll see he don't get away with the stuff," swore the second mate, "and we'd best be first with the old man. I'm solid enough here to get that swab fired, anyhow. Let's tell the skipper he swiped it from the Chink. What I say you swear to."

They made all haste to the charthouse, and there, with much virtuous indignation, informed the skipper that they had seen the supercargo hook a line to the box of a poor Chinese steerage passenger, hoist it aloft, and then go up and ransack it.

THE old man, already in the worst of tempers at having been pestered by so trivial a matter as a Chink passenger's losses, sent for Payne and asked him, luridly, what he meant by it.

"I took the chest, sir, to keep it out of the claws of your two mates," said Payne, rather more sleepily than usual. "It seems to me that even a Chink passenger—"

"I don't want a sermon about it!" raged the skipper, cutting him short. "Did you take that chest and ransack it, or didn't you?"

"I did, sir, to keep the money from—"

"What did you do with the stuff?"

"Stowed it in my bunk, sir, and told the Chink—"

THE captain strode out without listening to another word, and made for Payne's berth, where he examined the slit mattress. His jaw set hard, and he returned to the charthouse, where he turned an entirely deaf ear to Payne's explanations and would hear nothing.

"Do you think I'm here to be plagued by this sort of thing? D'you think I police my ship for sneak-thieves? You're articled as supercargo to this vessel. I'll wire the head agent when we reach Hongkong to fire you, and I'll dirty your ticket for every line and tramp in the East! The devil take you and the Chink and the chest and all the brass-bound flunkeys on this ship! Get out of my charthouse, the lot of you!"

Payne knew his man, and the folly of trying to clear himself was plain. He went forward in an extremely despondent frame of mind, and wondering why he had made such a fool of himself. His first anxiety was to find the Kai-Gingh, but by noon next day he had given up this task as equally hopeless. The man had disappeared as thoroughly as if he had never existed.

"Sure thing the swab doesn't care whether I'm fired for it or not—why should he?" mused Payne. "I ought to know the breed by this time. In any case, he's sticking to my advice to keep himself dark and leave me alone. Those two thieves, Grady and Collins, are crowing over it, and I'll get fired at Hongkong. Not many worse places to be beached." He gave

a little shiver. "Well, I deserve it for being the biggest fool in the two Pacifics."

IN due course the *San Diego* arrived in Hongkong, hauled into dock, and the Chinamen were landed at the Custom House.

The skippers of the Red Funnel Line, though otherwise more powerful than most, were under the disadvantage of being forbidden to discharge their officers at any of the Treaty Ports without first reporting the reason to headquarters, and receiving confirmation of the order.

There was not enough evidence to have Payne legally charged with the theft, nor did the captain in the least wish for trouble. He was only anxious to rid the ship of a junior employee who had proved himself an undesirable, and, worse, had plagued his skipper with unprofitable trivialities.

Had he been able to discharge Collins and Grady as well, his cup of content would have been full. The skipper of the *San Diego* liked complete despotism.

He wired to headquarters at Shanghai, and Payne spent a miserable three days in port, living on the ship and waiting for the return message that would enable the captain to place him "on the beach."

On the morning of the third day, he was sitting disconsolately on the well-deck rail, wondering what was the cause of the delay, when he saw a most striking cavalcade coming down to the quay.

Eight richly clad native coolies were bearing a gorgeous Sedan-chair, attended by a dozen followers, and the procession came straight down toward the *San Diego*.

"That's some big mandarin swell," said Payne thoughtfully. "Eight chair-bearers and twelve ting-chais—must be something out of the ordinary. What on earth does he want down here?"

The procession halted opposite him, and out of the Sedan-chair stepped a magnificently attired Chinese magnate, shining in silks and satins. To the supercargo's utter amazement, this superior person bowed before him.

"Muchee glad to see you again," said the mandarin. "This plenty dam lotten ship; you only honest man aboard him."

"Thanks, old chap!" murmured the astonished Payne, blinking at him slowly. "Same to you, and many of 'em. But who may you be?"

"Three days ago me was poor China boy coming home with few piecee dollas, which bad men stealee. Come ashore, find me come in for plenty big plopelty, an' now velly lich man—mandalin fourth class."

Payne leaned forward with an exclamation and peered under the tasseled cap.

"Great guns!" he said, under his breath. "The Kai-Gingh!"

HE stammered out two words in the Fo-Kien dialect, but a swift flicker of the mandarin's eyelids stopped him.

"Allee lightee!" said the mandarin with a singularly charming smile. He turned to a well-dressed Englishman who had hurried down after the procession. "Mister Agent, you tellee captain come here, chop-chop."

The Englishman stepped aboard, and spoke hurriedly to Payne.

"I've heard your story from the mandarin here, Ah Chen," he said in a low voice. "I'll set matters right for you. I'm sure you don't want to make a fuss."

"No, I don't," said Payne. "You seem to be wise to the game, and if you can set me right that's all I want. But how under the sun—"

(*Concluded on page* 128)

WELL, here we are back in our office again. What a trip, eh?

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On page 113 there's a coupon. Fill it out—send it in—and we'll know what to do.

Okay—fellow adventurers!

* * *

As to that coupon on page 113:

You can win a cash prize by submitting your opinion of the stories in this issue. The awards are as follows:

First Prize $15
Second Prize 10
Third Prize 5
Next Five Prizes....$1 each

(Continued on page 124)

UDGA, INC., 1320 Dakota Bldg.,
St. PAUL MINNESOTA

Gentlemen: I want to try the Ugda Treatment 30 days entirely at your risk. Also to secure free copy of booklet on stomach trouble, testimonials, sworn affidavit of genuineness and your $1,000.00 Reward offer to back it up. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Street or R. F. D. No. .....

City .....*State*.....

If You Have Trouble With Your STOMACH -Mail Coupon Today Sure

CAN YOU BELIEVE what your own stomach tells you—do you agree that freedom from pain and distress is the surest proof of merit? Then let me show you what the UGDA Treatment can do for your sick stomach, entirely at my own risk. If you suffer from stomach pains, gas, bloating, pains after eating, constipation, acidosis (excess acidity), sour stomach, poor digestion, dyspepsia, gastritis, stomach ulcers and associated conditions, caused by hyperacidity or faulty diet, decide right now to try this splendid treatment.

Full 30-DAY TREATMENT Sent At My Risk

Send Coupon at once for full 30-day trial offer. I will include free interesting book on cause and treatment of stomach disorders, testimonials, sworn affidavit of genuineness, and my $1,000.00 Reward Offer to back it up. Mail today—SURE.

UDGA, INC., 1320 Dakota Bldg., St. Paul, Minn.

Men! No Need to Lose *Natural Powers* After 35!

Regain Lost Vitality This Easy Way!

For Pep Vitality Natural Powers

WHY suffer from premature loss of Pep, Vigor and Youthful Energy any longer? Why be depressed by this annoying problem when you can so easily regain lost Natural Powers? Thousands of men have found the answer in DORAL VIGOR TABS! You, too, can help yourself to healthful vigor with this amazing scientific Glandular aid. DORAL VIGOR TABS are recommended by physicians as safe, positive and beneficial, with long lasting results. This is your opportunity to regain the vigor of real young manhood!

Send for DORAL VIGOR TABS today. Regular Large size box (50 time treatment) only $1.95. THREE BOXES $5.00. SUPER-STRENGTH only $2.95. TWO BOXES $5.00. Send Cash or Money Order. C. O. D. 15c extra. ORDER NOW!

DORAL LABORATORIES, Dept. E-14, 303 West 42nd St., New York City

WANT A STEADY JOB?

$1260 TO $3400 YEAR

Gov't Jobs. Men, Women 18 to 50. Mail Coupon Today Sure!

COUPON

- Franklin Institute, Dept. R-329, Rochester, N. Y.
- Sirs: Rush to me without charge. (1) 32-page book with list of Government Jobs. (2) Tell me how to get one of these jobs.
- Name.....
- Address .....

BIG PAY EVERY DAY

SELL AMERICA'S Greatest Values SHIRTS-TIES-HOSIERY

GUARANTEED ONE YEAR

CASH BONUSES

Men and women wanted to represent manufacturer locally. Earn Big Money. Pleasant work. One Year Guarantee. Amazingly Low Prices. Sensational Merchandising Ideas get orders—5 Pair Hose $1.80, 3 Underwear $1.00, 3 Ties $1.00. Other great bargains. No experience needed. Free Sales Outfit. Dept. TH-2.

QUAKER, Broadway and 31st Street, New York

(Continued from page 122)

Mail the coupon before May 15, 1932.

A careful concensus of all the lists submitted will be made, and prizes awarded to those whose selections most closely approximate the average taste of the readers.

This is called the "Reader's Choice Contest" because the selections you make will win in exact ratio to the average expressed opinion. In other words, it isn't what we think of your selections, but what other readers think of them, that will determine your success or failure.

No letters—only bona fide coupons—will be considered.

Everyone is eligible except employees of THRILLING ADVENTURES and their families.

If two or more contestants tie, the full amount of the prize competed for will be paid to each.

* * *

There are thrills galore in the lives of THRILLING ADVENTURES readers.

This was proven by the response to the "Most Thrilling Adventure of My Life" letter contest, recently concluded.

The prize-winning letters speak for themselves, and we'll pass them on to you. First money went to H. E. Knauss, care of X. L. Garage, 456 Fifth Street, Portland, Ore., who recounted the following:

My father left, at his death, a mining claim, 300 miles inland from the South American Chilean coast. Leaving the little coast town on one September morn in the year 1888, a trusted friend and myself started for the little town of Mench, near which the mine was located. We made good

time the first day and made camp late that night about half way to our destination.

Having cooked our supper, we at once spread our blankets and went to sleep. When I awoke, it was to be jerked from my blankets by several very rough looking swamp Indians. They were somewhat similar to the North American Gypsy. To my horror my pardner put up a fight, and one of the devils immediately drew out a big knife, and drew it across my pardner's throat, and left him on the spot dead, first stripping him of all his clothes and belongings.

There seemed to be about ten men, and about two females in the bunch. The women were the leaders and gave the men their instructions.

They took me and our outfit along with them, and after going through dense jungle for about ten miles we came to a sort of village made of sod huts. There seemed to be about fifty people who seemed to consist mostly of women. They robbed me of most of my clothing and locked me up in one of the sod huts. I was afraid I'd end up with the same fate as my pardner.

I was faced with a pretty tough problem, hardly any clothes, no gun, or arms of any kind. If I could escape I feared to be lost in the jungle, without food, or any protection from the wild animals. However, I soon got over my great fright and started to make a hole beneath the sod wall, in the back side of the hut.

By the time I had a hole dug large enough for my body to go through, it was getting dusk. As soon as it was dark enough, I crawled through the hole, and slipping between the camp fires I managed to reach the woods unnoticed.

Going in one general direction I thought the road to be, I went with all possible speed. Going through the jungle for about an hour, my body was bruised and bleeding from over-hanging limbs and brambles, and all at once I was suddenly leaped upon from behind, by what I thought to be afterwards a South American black Panther.

My screams must have frightened him away. But not until he had torn my left arm so badly that it was amputated later. Two days later I was found almost dead, by the roadside, by a mining party who took me to the coast to a hospital where I lay for four months from shock and exposure.

* * *

The second prize winner was Frederick H. Magill, Jr., a Sourdough, Box 247, Petersburg, Alaska. This seventeen-year-old adventurer reports the following as his most thrilling experience:

Three summers ago I was knocking about the Glazier Bay country of Alaska. This country is dreaded by some Indians as an abode of devils and huge animals. I had a

Swede friend along, and he did not like the country; he thought there were too many funny noises going on around us. (By the way, the peculiar groans and squeaks are caused by the glaciers and the wind.)

When I said "knocking about," I meant it. We knocked every good looking piece of quartz for a hundred miles around. We were on our summer vacation, so we wasted away the days by prospecting in the creeks, and by climbing mountains.

One day my friend, John, got some darn good-sized flakes of gold in his pan, and I decided that we would follow up the creek and find out where the ledge was that the gold came from. We followed the creek up to the face of a dead glacier. We saw that the water came out from in under the ice with a heck of a roar, and we sort of missed panning now and then to take a look at the glacier.

We tried a pan right near the glacier and couldn't raise a color. I decided we must have skipped a spot. So back down the creek we went searching for the ledge. We'd only gone about sixty feet, when John let out a whoop like a wild Indian. (On coming up the creek we came to a place so narrow we had to climb around it, and so we missed something.) Finally John subsided and told me what was the matter.

"Hurry up, Fred, I have found the ledge."

I naturally accelerated myself to see what he found. And boy, was that sight good to a tired prospector's eyes? A four foot ledge of white quartz with a little iron stain to it and flecked all through with yellow gold. Oh, boy! We'd be rich now.

We staked the claim and headed for town. We did not want anyone following us, so we soon headed back to the claim, after securing grub, tools, and plenty of ammunition and powder.

We arrived in Windy Cove eighteen hours after we left Juneau and immediately anchored and went ashore. John said the scenery had changed some, but I didn't notice it, anyway. When we got up the creek, we could see the glacier had moved ahead since we had left. I began to wonder how we could stop the glacier, but that was impossible. The darn glacier kept moving, and in four days our claim was covered up.

We are still prospecting, but not in the glacier country. We might have become millionaires if we could only have stopped the glacier.

If anyone has an idea for melting glaciers, we'll give him our claims. They're only worth about five hundred thousand apiece, but what does that matter if a glacier comes to life and begins to travel?

* * *

The third prize is awarded to Alfred Pike, Jr., 201 W. 3rd Street, Chester, Pa., whose adventure took place a little nearer home. Anyway, let him tell about it:

"Stranded on a desert island." A thrilling enough sounding sentence, but when one is stranded only two miles from home, ridiculous!

Nevertheless, it's true.

Rowing is my chief pastime, and also the reason for my unusual adventure. Unfortunately I cannot swim or it might never have happened.

One day I decided to row to Chester Island, which is located in the middle of the Delaware River off Chester City and passed daily by hundreds of vessels. With not a little difficulty I managed to reach my destination.

Tying my boat to some small reeds, I waded ashore, intent upon exploring the jungle-like interior of the isle.

I tramped its entire length, about a mile. About half an hour later I discovered that my boat was missing.

The strong tide must have carried it away. I was the sole occupant of the island, with no means of returning to the mainland, and no food except wild roots and stagnant water. Fear swept through me, but I was comforted by the thought of the numerous vessels which passed the island.

Before long a yacht came steaming past. I waved and shouted, but to no avail. They doubtless thought I was clowning and waved back at me, continuing on their way.

Night fell, and the mosquitoes came out looking for victims. I slept very little that night, due to my insect friends. It was a welcome sight to see the sun come up over the river the next morning.

I spent four days on that island, and Robinson Crusoe has my sympathy. With nothing but weeds and stale water on the menu, life had a dismal outlook. On the fourth day I hailed a fishing schooner.

They noted my ragged appearance and came ashore. I was saved! The fishermen were astounded by my story. My family was pleased to see me. I had been given up as drowned.

The following adventurers, whose letters we cannot print due to lack of space, merit honorable mention:

Andrew W. Nolan, Rochester, N. Y.; Grover C. Willis, Woodland, Cal.; L. L. Cowell, Memphis, Mo.; William Hart, Hillburn, N. Y.; A. L. Hodges, Denver, Col.; Theodore Lutwiniak, Jersey City, N. J.; J. J. Moon, Van Nuys, Cal., and W. L. Frazier, Madison, Wis.

Now watch for results of the "Reader's Choice Contest," for April, which will be announced soon!

THE EDITOR.

YELLOW TREASURE

(*Concluded from page* 121)

"It's quite right what Ah Chen says. He landed here broke, and found himself heir to one of the biggest merchant houses in the place—his people were well off. Influential folk, too, and by chance the business hasn't had time to be eaten up by 'squeeze.' He looked me up and made me promise to set you right."

Payne stared at him dumbly for a moment, and from him to the mandarin and back.

"Well, it's no use," he said. "The old man will only raise Cain. He'll not listen—"

"Yes, he will. I'm agent here for the Red Funnel Line, and we can't afford to offend Ah Chen. We ship all the stuff from the firm he's now master of. Fetch up the captain, and those two mates, Grady and Collins."

There was a short, very strained interview, which ended in Payne's character being completely cleared.

The old man apologized to him with much length and ornateness; there was no mistaking the agent's attitude. Grady and Collins were given to understand that a wire from headquarters would very shortly relieve the *San Diego* of their presence.

"Plenty good liddance to bad lubbish," said the mandarin with a bland smile, as he saw them go to their quarters. "And now, Miste' Payne, me much obligee if you accept little plesent from Ah Chen."

And at a wave of his hand, one of the silk-clad ting-chais presented to Payne a lacquered case, in which lay American notes and gold to the value of eight hundred dollars—the five years' savings of Ah Chen, sometime Two-Knife Kai-Gingh of the Fo-Kien Province; later, laundryman under the restaurant of the Seven Moons, San Francisco; and now one of the richest men in Hongkong.

They Dared Me TO PUBLISH THIS BOLD BOOK ON EUGENICS, SEX, BIRTH CONTROL!

544 PAGES BOLDLY TELL THE TRUTH! Startling illustrations - 39 chapters really a 39 volume encyclopedia into 1 BIG VOLUME of 544 PAGES

Everything A Married Woman Should Know

- How to hold a husband
- How to have perfect children
- Warding off other women
- Keeping yourself attractive
- Why husbands tire of wives
- Dreadful disease due to ignorance
- Babies and birth control
- Twilight sleep — easy childbirth
- Family health guide
- Change of life—hygiene
- Inherited traits and diseases
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- Hundreds of valuable remedies

Secrets for Men

- Mistakes of early marriages
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- How to make women love you
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- Limitation of offspring
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- Hygienic precaution
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- What every woman wants
- Sex health and prevention

What to tell a growing child!

Guide them safely through aid of this book.

Must every woman pay the price of a moment's happiness in bitter tears and years of regret? Must millions of homes be ruined—lovers and sweethearts driven apart—marriages totter to brink of divorce—the sacred love of sex relations be dashed? YES—as long as men and women remain ignorant of simple facts of life.

Away with False Modesty!

Let us tear veil of shame and mystery from sex and build future of the race on a new knowledge of facts of sex as they are told here and pictured in this huge new library of Sex Knowledge.

RUSH COUPON

Sign name and address to coupon. SEND NOW—FREE booklets entitled "The Question of Birth Control" and "Facts About Birth Control." Pay postman $2.98 plus postage.

Girls! Don't Marry Before You Know All This

- The dangers of petting
- How to be a vamp
- How to attract desirable men
- How to know if he loves you
- How to acquire bodily grace and beauty
- How to acquire charm
- Intimate personal hygiene
- How to pick a husband

LIMITED CUT PRICE OFFER - 2 BIRTH CONTROL BOOKLETS FREE!

350,000 Sold

This huge sale enabled us to cut cost so you may secure copy of Modern Eugenics at $2.98 instead of $5.00.

IMPORTANT

Not sold to minors. When ordering state age.

Joan Adams, Preferred Publications, 8905,
56 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y.

Send me Modern Eugenics sealed in plain wrapper. Also enclose two free booklets entitled "The Question of Birth Control" and "Facts About Birth Control." I will pay $2.98, plus postage, to postman.

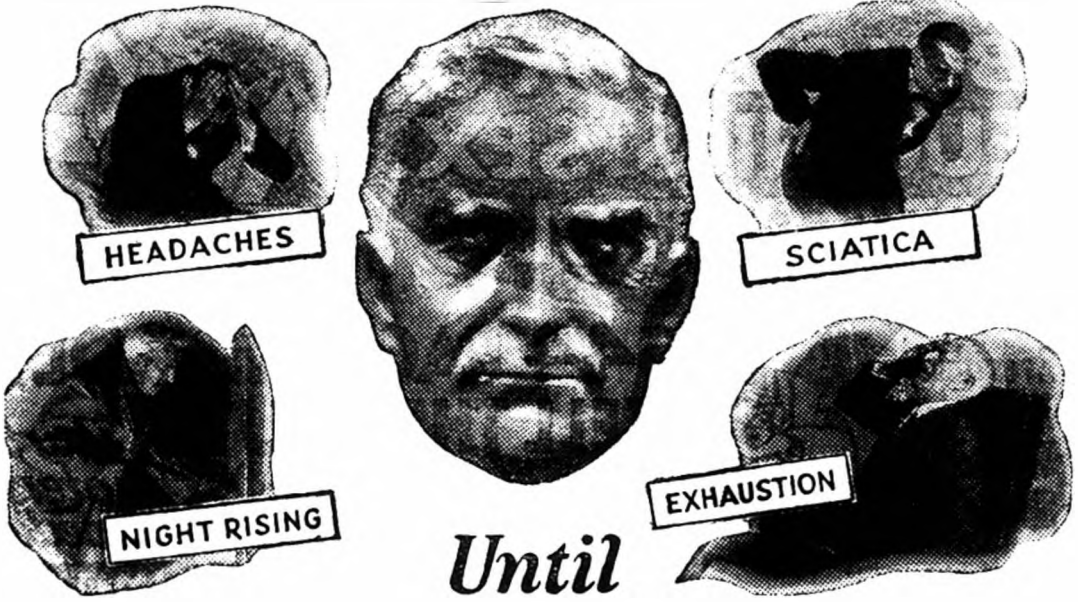
Name.....Age.....

Address.....

.....

Orders from Foreign Countries must be accompanied by express or money order of $3.45.

This Little Gland Robbed Me of Sleep and Health



Until I Discovered a New Hygiene for Men Past 40

IT HAD been coming on for years—this devilish thing called "Prostate Trouble!" I gave it little thought at first, because I figured that all men experience a certain change about my time in life. That was my big mistake. I thought it was *just* the breakdown of oncoming age and that I would have to put up with it. I did for a while, but a year later, my condition went from bad to worse at an alarming rate.

These Common Symptoms

My sleep was broken a dozen times every night. In fact, one hour's fitful sleep was a luxury. Pains had developed in my back and legs, and I was chronically constipated. I was run down in body and almost broken in mind—practically an invalid at 58. I talked to scores of men. In fact, I talked to practically every man I met or could get to listen. As I look back now I think I was practically insane on the subject.

Faces Surgery

It has been my experience that a majority of men past 60—and a surprising number even at 40—had one of these distressing symptoms, but few men had it as bad as I did. I had seen my doctor, of course. But he could offer me but little relief. I spent hundreds of dollars in an effort to avoid an operation, for I had learned that gland surgery was usually dangerous. This insidious little gland that robbed me of sleep and health now threatened my very life.

The Turning Point

Then I read one of your advertisements. I admit I mailed the coupon without the slightest hope. There probably never was a more skeptical mind than mine. But this simple little act turned out to be the biggest thing in my life.

I can never thank you enough. I am now sixty. I can go to bed at ten o'clock and sleep straight through. My doctor has pronounced me in normal health. My entire body is toned up, and I feel almost like a youngster. I have had no return of the trouble, and now use your pleasant treatment just fifteen minutes a day, over one or two months, just to make sure that I keep my perfect health.

Millions Make This Mistake

When I was at my lowest ebb, I encountered so many prostate sufferers that I knew there must be millions of men doctoring for sciatica, pains in the back and legs, bladder and kidney weakness, chronic constipation, loss of physical and mental capacity and a host of supposed old age symptoms, *who should probably be treating the prostate gland!* In fact, I learned not long ago that certain medical authorities claim that 65% of men at or past middle age suffer from disorders of this vital gland.

My advice to these men is not to make the mistake that I made. Send the coupon for that little book, "The Destroyer of Male Health." Find out the facts about this little gland, which the book contains. It explains a prominent scientist's discovery of a new home hygiene—explains how, without drugs or surgery, without massage, diet, or exercise, this method acts to reduce the congestion and combat the dangerous symptoms.

Scientist's Book Sent Free

See if these facts apply to you. Learn the true meaning of these common complaints and see why these ailments in men past 40 are so often directly traceable to a swollen prostate. The book, "The Destroyer of Male Health" is sent without cost and without obligation.

Simply mail the coupon to W. J. Kirk, President, 4253, Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 303 Van Nuys Building, Dept. 42-G, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada, address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 42-G, 53 Yonge Street, Toronto, Can.

W. J. Kirk, President
4253 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio

Please mail me at once your Free booklet, "The Destroyer of Male Health," and full details about the new home treatment. I am not obligated in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

This offer may never be repeated

10 Exquisite Toiletries

that would cost you at least $8.50 if sold separately

Here is one of the most amazing offers ever made to American women. An offer so remarkable that no retail merchant, large or small, could hope to duplicate it. Just think! These are not sample packages. They are all full size packages exactly the same size and exactly the same quality as our regular store packages. But instead of costing you $8.50, as they would if sold thru stores, the Coupon brings them to you for only 99 cents and a few cents postage.

We are making a tremendous sacrifice in selling these Milaire Treatment and Make-up Packages to you for 99 cents, as you can easily see from the suggested retail prices for these identical Milaire Beauty Preparations. We are doing this only because we know that once you try them once you see for yourself what marvelous values they are you will come back to us again and again for Milaire Toiletries.

Coupon brings these 10 Preparations for 99c and postage

$1.00 Box Milaire Complexion Powder—Evening Shade. An exquisite powder, delightfully perfumed and exceedingly adhesive.

$1.00 Box Milaire Complexion Powder—Special Blend Daylight Shade. This Special Blend has been prepared especially for daytime use. It is delicately perfumed and exceedingly adhesive

$1.00 Jar Milaire Cleansing Cream—a beautiful, snowy white cream which literally melts into the skin, cleansing every pore of dirt and foreign matter, keeping the skin soft, firm and youthful. Daintily perfumed with Jasmine odor.

$1.00 Jar Milaire Waterproof Creme Rouge—a special blending of colors that harmonizes with any complexion. It is very adhesive, is not affected by moisture and is very economical. Comes in an attractive package convenient for your purse.

$1.00 Milaire Skin Tonic and Freshener—In addition to its tonic effect, this splendid preparation is a mild astringent, which reduces the size of enlarged pores, refines, refreshes the skin. Essential when cleansing face and neck with cleansing cream.

75c Milaire Frost Balm—Lavender. This Milaire Preparation will soften, bleach and beautify your hands as nothing else can. It is splendid for rough or chapped hands or face. You will be particularly impressed by its heavy, creamy consistency. Note great improvement after second application.

75c Bottle Milaire Brilliantine—In reality this is more than a Brilliantine. It is actually a permanent wave oil. You can use it freely after getting your permanent wave. It will help to keep your wave in longer and add lovelinness to your hair. You should always use a little after shampooing the hair, as it imparts a beautiful lustre to the hair, gives it life and elasticity and prevents it from becoming brittle. Perfumed with Jasmine odor.

75c Milaire Cocoanut Oil Shampoo—a great cleanser which leaves the hair and scalp free from excess oil and dandruff. Free from any superfluous alkalies neutral and harmless to the hair.

75c Bottle Milaire Bath Crystals—make your bath a real delight because they stimulate the skin and impart a delightful odor to the body and room. You will be charmed by the beauty of this package and the refreshing Geranium leaf odor.

50c Bottle Milaire Liquid Nail Enamel—Imparts a beautiful, transparent, waterproof finish to the nails. Contains just enough rose coloring to give the nails that beautiful blush tint they should have. One application lasts a week or 10 days. Will not crack nor peel.

All 10 in the Treatment and Make-up Package for a limited time only for the Coupon and

99¢

plus postage

Send No Money Merely Mail Coupon

Coupon

For One Milaire Make-up Set

MILAIRE COMPANY,
1044 Irma Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

Send me one Milaire Treatment and Make-up Package, containing the 10 regular store-size Milaire Beauty Preparations, as described in this advertisement. I will pay the postman only 99 cents plus postage upon delivery.

Name .....

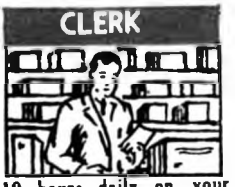
Street .....

City ..... State .....

REPRESENT PUBLIC SERVICE MILLS

$18 to $25 weekly—long weary hours—small chance for advancement.

$2 to $7 daily — never steady — wage cuts — lay offs—gloomy future.



10 hours daily on your feet—small pay—little advancement—in a rut.

WHICH IS THE JOB FOR YOU?

If you are ambitious—wide awake—ready to accept a man sized job—eager to break into the big money class—this is your golden opportunity. If you are unemployed, you can start earning daily cash profits immediately. If you are working, you can easily double your earnings with a little pleasant effort in your spare hours.

This opportunity is offered to you by Public Service Mills—one of the largest manufacturers of men's wear selling direct to customers through authorized representatives. The enormous growth of our business requires that we employ additional representatives throughout the United States. If you think you are the man for your territory, just mail the coupon below. Experience or money is unnecessary. We pay all expenses to start you on the road to big money. Like hundreds of other Public Service representatives, you will soon laugh at the day that you worried about getting or holding a small pay job.

A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO EARN $100 WEEKLY

AS YOUR OWN BOSS—SET YOUR OWN HOURS—BUILD YOUR OWN BUSINESS

As a Public Service Representative, you actually own your own business. You are your own boss. You set your own hours—work when you please and lay off when you want to.

As the personal representative of our nationally famous mill, you offer to the men in your city a huge array of First Quality, Fifth Avenue Styled Men's Wear. Every garment is backed by a bonafide Money Back Guarantee. Amazingly low factory prices win customers quickly and easily. Just show the line and your profits roll up automatically.

You are paid extra liberal cash commissions—in advance! Write your order and pocket your profit. No waiting—no delays. One hour after you start you've got cash earnings in your pocket. In addition, you are paid a fat cash bonus. And you are always well dressed, because our Bonus Plan also supplies Public Service representatives with their own Shirts and Ties. ABSOLUTELY FREE

As a Public Service Representative you are building your own business—you are assuring yourself of a comfortable future. You quickly build up a big list of satisfied customers who will buy from you again and again. You soon establish yourself as the leading merchant of men's wear in your city. You work with the knowledge that you are making money for yourself not for someone else.

The complete Public Service selling outfit is scientifically created—it is your automatic business winner. The Public Service Line is valuable, yet it is sent to you ABSOLUTELY FREE! If you are sincere and mean business. If you've got the "stuff" all you need is an opportunity like this. Here it is. Take it—take it this minute. Use the coupon below.

PUBLIC SERVICE MILLS, Inc. Dept. 365 West New York, N. J.

Scientific Selling Outfit FREE

PUBLIC SERVICE MILLS, Inc.
Dept. 365, West New York, N. J.

I am anxious to operate my own big paying Shirt, Tie, Underwear and Hosiery Business by acting as a Public Service Representative. Please rush complete Selling Outfit FREE.

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In Canada write 110 Dundas Street, London, Ontario.