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Top-Notch

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THE DIAMOND SPEARHEAD
By **BEN CONLON**

JUNE
1933



*The blow
landed flush
on Kersey's jaw*

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The Diamond

By Ben Conlon **Spearhead**

Author of "Rubies Of Wreckers' Reef," etc.

Bruce Harley discovered that this strange South American Indian token was a draft on the bank of fortune and adventure

CHAPTER I.

FIGHTING FURY.

BRUCE HARLEY snapped his office door shut and walked with a brisk step down the corridor and out into the booming New York crowds. But somehow he felt as if he had left part of himself in that little office. Certainly many

of his hopes and ambitions were in there, and would be moved out with the meager furniture in the morning.

He had equipped the place early in the new year. Fortunately, he had not taken out any lease; he had merely rented it from month to month. And he was glad of it now. For he would have to give it up.

Bruce Harley was just twenty-four.

Money had never been very plentiful in his family, but he had managed two years of college by stoking furnaces during cold weather, mowing lawns through the spring term and working at anything during summer vacations.

Later had come reporting along the water front for a New York newspaper; then a chance to work on a prominent murder case.

Some jealous rivals hinted that his sensational success in that case had been a matter of beginner's luck. Even Bruce—and whatever his little human faults, boastfulness was not one of them—never denied this. But, anyhow, with the substantial reward money he had done what he had always wanted to do—set up a small private detective agency. He would have adventure of his own, instead of merely writing up the experiences of others.

But all that was over now. Things just hadn't clicked. Maybe it was because Bruce Harley was too "choosey"—wouldn't take divorce shadowing or do any snooping in labor troubles. Maybe it was because he looked more like a pugilist or a football player than like a sleuth. As a matter of fact, he had taken part in both sports since high-school days.

To keep up an office, one has to have the rent. To have the rent, one has to make money. To make money, one has to find work. That was the trouble. Bruce Harley couldn't find any—at least of the kind he had wanted to do.

All right, then! Try something else. He'd ramble down to South Street tonight and see Carter. Carter was in charge of the city desk on his old newspaper. He'd brace Carter, try to get the water-front beat back; failing that, he might fill in at a desk or do leg work for the paper. Or, if that didn't pan out, he'd try *any* kind of a job—working in a store, or even driving a truck; anything that was honest.

For Bruce Harley had carrotty-red

hair, a chin that looked like something hacked out of rock, jaws just a little too square, and deep-set eyes of battling blue.

More times than not, that kind of a man isn't licked by the first knockdown.

A PHONE call to the downtown newspaper office brought the information that Carter had been shifted to the late trick and wouldn't get on the job till close to eleven that night.

Accordingly, Bruce had his dinner in a Times Square cafeteria and then took in a movie. Still finding time to spare, he returned to his room in the West Forties, had a shower, shaved, and put on a newly pressed blue-serge suit. He topped this with his newer, Oxford-gray overcoat and chose a light, soft hat that had been reblocked only the day before. Newspapermen are not, as a class, given to dandyism, but Bruce Harley had learned that, other things being equal, the man with the pleasing "front" got the breaks over his shabbier rivals.

He took a downtown subway express filled with after-theater crowds and got off at Whitehall Street. From there he strolled leisurely over to South Street.

A biting, salt-tinged wind was blowing. A tide of curious sailormen ebbed and flowed through the street—one of the main water-front thoroughfares of New York.

Bruce Harley liked the district—liked its color, its suggestion of adventure. He found himself studying some of the types he met—officers with badge caps and braid on their sleeves; neatly dressed stewards, most of them lean and with a certain seagoing trimness about them; once in a while a sailor of the old school of the sea—the kind who had worked up from sailing vessels, now rapidly passing.

It was interesting to think that in a week or ten days, perhaps, some of

these same men would be in Liverpool or London or Marseilles; in a few more weeks others of them would be in China or Australia or some other part of the opposite side of the globe.

Yet these fellows were just men like himself. An idea exploded in Bruce's brain. If his old newspaper job was gone, why couldn't *he* take a job on a ship? There must be ways to get one. It should be easy for one willing to start at the bottom.

Why not? The idea persisted. He was strong—stood five feet ten and weighed a hundred and seventy, stripped. Most of that was bone and muscle. He had done hard, laborious work at one time in his life, and he could do it again. He was young—had a little time before settling down.

The spirit of adventure that was never still in his veins started to glow. At times he had curbed it; a wave of sentiment swept over him as he thought back to the time his parents were alive. Now they were gone. He was alone in the world; no one would miss him. He had attached himself to no particular girl.

He had been walking along, dreaming, hardly noticing the sights about him. Now he was conscious that in a slip opposite him was a rusty-looking tramp steamer. Had *Destiny* berthed this old hull there, just as he happened to be passing by? Could the skipper of a tramp vessel give a man a job? Why not walk over and see? He might be laughed at. But what real harm could that do?

He crossed the street and walked in the direction of the slip. Suppose he got a break! He'd be living—seeing some of the places he'd always wanted to see—the *Canabière* in Marseilles, the *Embarcadero* in San Francisco, *Jinkee Road* in Shanghai; maybe *Rio de Janeiro*, and *Port Said*, and *Pagopago*, and the *China coast*, and—

"*Help!*"

One word; sharp, almost hysterical.

One syllable. But it brought Bruce Harley back from imaginary voyages to far ports; made him recall that he was on *South Street* in *New York*, and that some one needed assistance.

The tick of a second had hardly elapsed before he was running toward the wharf from which the cry had come.

Over there was danger—excitement—adventure. Bruce's eyes were shining. Yes, adventure was where you found it. It might be in *Pagopago* or it might be in *New York!*

And Bruce Harley ran toward the sounds of scuffle; ran like a fleet half back with a clear field before him.

THE wharf was dark; but not so dark that Bruce could not see that one man was being attacked by two. The assailants, obviously thugs, were without overcoats. Their victim, overcoated and elderly, was being choked into submission by one of the thugs, while the other, a little, wiry fellow, had a club or "billy" of some kind and was maneuvering around to bring it down on the victim's head without striking his assailant.

He whirled as he heard the stamp of Bruce's feet on the wharf planks. And in that instant, Bruce Harley hit him like an *All-American tackle*.

The impact brought both of them down. But Bruce was on top. He heard the crack of the smaller man's skull against the floor of the wharf and knew that this opening struggle was over almost as soon as it had commenced. With that little fellow unconscious, he'd have a fair chance subduing the other man, who was now making for him.

Bruce bounced to his feet like a rubber ball. The fall had shaken him up, but he had experienced jolts harder than that on the football field and had taken no time out. He waited until

the second thug was almost upon him; then lashed out hard and fast.

His right fist seemed to explode against the bony face of the thug. A sharp pain shot through Bruce's hand; he feared he had broken it. He hit a little too hard for bare-fisted slugging.

The thug staggered, floundered about for a second. Why he hadn't dropped was a surprise to Bruce. He couldn't figure it out. But this was no time for figuring; it was a time for action.

Bruce decided not to risk throwing his injured hand. Instead, he tried his left. It was as accurate as his right, but did not have the same dynamite in it. The thug bored in, tried to bull Bruce toward the edge of the wharf; almost succeeded, too. He was no taller than Bruce, and no wider through the shoulders. But his body was thicker; he was heavier.

Bruce risked throwing his injured right again. He had to—he was being shoved right up against the stringpiece; another second and he'd be over into the dock.

Whish! A miss by the thug. The big arm curled around Bruce's neck like a python. *Spat!* A hit by Harley. A softer, less bony target this time—the thug's splayed, bulbous nose. Fifty per cent of the fight gushed out of the thug. He sniffed, gasped, cursed. It was Bruce Harley's chance; he took it.

Left—right! Left—right! Cruel, hard blows to midriff and jaw. The remaining fifty per cent of fight went out of the bigger man, who fell like a bird shot through the heart. He went down, face forward. His chin hit the string-piece. He was out!

BRUCE HARLEY'S battling blood was up. His fist went back as he felt a hand on his shoulder. For the instant he believed that still a third thug was attacking him. But he lowered his hand and grinned

when he saw in the uncertain light that it was the elderly man patting him on the shoulder.

"My word!" The elderly man was puffing a little, but he was also smiling. "I fancy I was lucky that *you* heard my cry for help. What a fighting fury! I think you could have licked ten such chaps as those."

The man spoke with a trace of English accent. He motioned down to the pair of unconscious thugs.

Bruce's grin widened. "That second guy was no bargain! I thought he had me there for a second. I think I'll frisk both of 'em—they might have gats on 'em and take a shot at us——"

"My good fellow," the older man interrupted, "I shall be most obliged to you if you don't even wait to do that. I have a particular reason for wanting to get away from out of here right away. I'll explain later. We can pick up a cab."

"You ought to have these birds arrested," Bruce said. "They have no right to be at large."

"I know. But I do hope you'll do as I wish. Come along with me, won't you?" The elderly man had taken hold of Bruce's arm and was urging him along. Bruce finally decided to go.

"I have reasons for not wanting any publicity at this time," the older man said, as they walked gingerly along the wharf toward the street. "If I preferred charges against those chaps—what! A bit of luck! Hey, taxi!"

An empty nighthawk taxicab was spinning by. It stopped abruptly as its driver put on the brakes. The elderly man opened the door and motioned to Bruce to get inside.

"Straight uptown," he told the driver. "I'll tell you just where, later."

"O. K., boss."

The driver waited till his passengers got in, slammed the door, and started uptown. The elderly man extended his hand to Bruce.

"Quayle is my name," he said, "and I want to thank you very heartily, young man, for what you did."

"Oh, that's all right. What else could I do? Almost any guy'd have done the same. My name is Harley. I just happened to be near that wharf. I was going to try to get aboard of that tramp vessel there and ask for a job."

Quayle looked at Bruce sharply. "Seafaring man?"

Bruce grinned. "No, but I thought I'd like to be."

"You *can* be—if you want to," Quayle told him. "Skipper of that vessel is a close friend of mine. In fact, I dined aboard the ship with him this evening."

The taxi was passing through a better-lighted district now. Bruce could see that Quayle was a man of fifty-odd or possibly sixty—a big, florid-faced man with hair and small mustache spiked with gray. His clothes were dark, and in good taste. Bruce, accustomed to sizing up things quickly, noticed that they were expensive. Quayle was probably a wealthy man, he thought.

Accordingly, he was not surprised when, a moment later, Quayle took a wallet from his pocket, opened it, and removed a fifty-dollar bill. "I'd consider it a favor if you'd take this. Also, if you're serious about wanting a job on a ship, I'll use all the influence I have to get you one."

"The job part's O. K.," Bruce told him. "But I can't take the money, just for helping out a man against unfair odds."

"But your clothes," Quayle insisted. "They've been ruffled up a bit. Your overcoat is torn in the back. That fall must have done it. I fancy fifty dollars would hardly be more than enough to repair them properly."

Bruce stood up in the cab, twisted around to examine the tear in his coat. "Oh, I guess a couple o' bucks could get that fixed," he said. "The coat only

cost me thirty dollars, and I've worn it most of the season."

He drew off the garment to examine the damage more closely. His automatic dropped out of one of the pockets.

Quayle seemed startled. "Then one of those chaps *did* have a gun," he said. "I didn't see you take it from him when we——"

"No," Bruce cut in. "It's my own gun. I'm glad I didn't have to use it. As a matter of fact, it's a necessary tool of my trade."

Quayle's eyes widened in surprise.

"I'm a private detective," Bruce explained. "Or, rather," he added, grinning ruefully, "I have been one. I was on the way to look for another job when I heard your cry. I think I'll postpone the call until to-morrow night, though. I guess I don't look very presentable."

"A private detective!" Quayle exclaimed. "Very interesting! Very—just at this time."

"Yeah," Bruce said dryly. "Interesting enough—but not very profitable right now."

HE had always been one to laugh at his own little bad breaks. Now he found himself being drawn out by the older man; found himself telling of big ambitions and thwarted hopes. The taxi had turned out of South Street into Corlear, then over Tompkins and through East Third Street. It was now turning into First Avenue—a through thoroughfare to uptown.

Quayle was listening carefully. He was silent, except to interrupt to ask where he could drop Bruce.

As the car finally turned west on the way to Bruce's address, Quayle took out his wallet again. This time it was a hundred-dollar bill that he proffered.

"But I told you——" Bruce began.

"Yes, I know. But it's business this time. It's on account. I need the services of a private detective right now.

I've delayed about hiring one. For the job I have is big stuff. I must have the right man. I'm sure you're the one."

"Thanks," Bruce acknowledged. He took the bill. "You're sure you're not just doing this to be kind?"

"Quite sure," Quayle said tersely. "A man who knows the world has only to look at you to tell that you're honest. You're also courageous and a fighter—you've proved that."

He passed a card to Bruce. "I expect to be busy all day to-morrow; so if convenient, call at my house about ten o'clock to-morrow night. I'll be home from a dinner engagement by then. You may even get your sea trip out of this job—but not as a sailor."

The taxi had drawn up before the old brownstone house where Bruce had a modest room. "And now good night," Quayle said, extending his hand. "Don't fail to show up to-morrow night."

"I won't," Bruce said with enthusiasm. He chuckled. "If I'm not there, you'll know I'm dead, or drunk—and I don't drink a drop."

He had to climb three flights of stairs to his room. But to-night he felt that he could easily have skipped up all the stairways of the lofty Empire State Building.

Now he wouldn't have to give up his office, after all. He had a job. And adventure was calling.

CHAPTER II.

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT.

THE card which Bruce's new employer had given him in the taxicab, read: "A. Preston Quayle," and the address was in the lower East Seventies near fashionable Park Avenue.

Bruce had taken the Times Square-Grand Central shuttle train and then had changed to an East Side uptown

local which brought him within a few blocks of his destination.

Promptness was almost a religion with him, and it still lacked a few minutes of ten when he reached the block in which the Quayle residence was located.

It was obviously a section of rich home owners; quiet, ultraexclusive; a region almost entirely new to Bruce Harley. His prowlings about the city had been limited mainly to the water fronts—South Street and West Street.

Down there one could almost smell adventure in the tang of fish and fruit and coffee and baled hides and sweating dray horses and rotting wood and salt water. Down there, men were going somewhere or coming in from the sea, sharp set for the meats of life.

Quayle must have found the water front interesting, too, Bruce decided; otherwise he would not have been down there dining with the master of a rusty old tramp vessel. There was something that suggested the sea, too, in the manner of Quayle, despite his expensive clothes and white hands and generally cultured ways. Could Quayle be a shipping magnate or a retired officer? Well, here he was at the address given him. No use of any more guessing. He'd find out soon enough.

THE Quayle residence proved to be a three-story, brownstone mansion, and from the outside it looked completely dark. But Quayle had said ten o'clock, and surely he had looked like a man who would keep his appointments. Bruce ascended the steps and rang the bell.

There was a delay of perhaps two or three minutes, during which Bruce had the feeling that some one was watching him from a darkened window of the house. Then there was the sound of footsteps inside, the thump of a bolt being unshot and the grating of a key in a lock. In a few seconds more the

outside door was opened cautiously, and a man of about fifty-five stood before Bruce.

He had furtive eyes of an uncertain color, a wrinkled skin and an unusually long nose, down which he looked as if sighting along the barrel of a gun. "Well, sir?"

"I'm here to keep an appointment with Mr. Quayle at ten o'clock."

"The nyme, sir?" asked the servant, for he was obviously that.

"Bruce Harley."

"Ah! Mr. Harley. Step right in, sir. Mr. Quayle 'as been wyting for you on the upper floor, sir. Just 'arf a moment, sir, an' I'll tyke you up, sir."

Bruce stepped inside. A dim light was burning in the main hallway. It was bright enough for Bruce to see that the servant had a peculiar roll to his walk. And there was something greasy, almost slimy, about the big, long-nosed man, although he was clean enough, and neatly dressed in black.

Bruce waited while the servant locked and bolted the outside door and then came through the vestibule and shut and bolted the inside door, also locking it with a large house key.

Certainly, Bruce observed, this mysterious mansion was protected very carefully.

"Right this w'y, sir," the servant said. "Just two flights up, sir. If you don't mind my preceding you, sir."

"O. K. It's all right with me." Bruce was smiling. He had never been "sirred" quite so much in his life.

He followed the servant along a deep-piled rug from the main hallway, scantily furnished with a console table with a large vase on it; started up a stairway, went through a second hallway and finally up another stairway. The servant led the way to the rear of the house and rapped on a door.

The door was opened by Quayle, who smiled as he recognized Bruce. "Come

in, Harley. Glad to see you." And to the servant: "You'd better get over to my nephew's right away now, Thomas."

"Very good, sir." Thomas bowed and departed, and Quayle ushered his visitor toward the inner room of a comfortably furnished suite.

IT was a mellow retreat, a sort of den, decorated with models of sailing ships, strange-looking idols and etchings of foreign scenes. Surely, Bruce thought, he hadn't been wrong when he guessed that Quayle must have some connection with the shipping business. This was the hide-out of a man who felt the lure of the sea.

He followed Quayle as the latter nudged his big form between tables piled high with books and trophies and miniature ships. Without his overcoat, Quayle looked very fat, but not as a pig is fat. With his oblong face and the swelling sides of his great body, he brought to mind an old, hay-bellied Percheron horse.

They reached the inner room, and Quayle motioned his guest toward an overstuffed leather chair. It was close to a fireplace where cannel coals blazed brightly and washed the walls of the room in cheerful tones of red. Over the fireplace a big Sedgely rifle was racked on a pair of buck's horns. To the right of the fireplace a scrambled heap of books was concealed by a large screen of carved tropical wood.

An unusual suite of rooms, Bruce decided, unusually furnished. And yet the object that took his eyes the most was an ordinary silver frame set on a desk. Or maybe it was what was inside the frame—the photograph of the prettiest girl Bruce Harley had ever seen.

"Just make yourself comfortable," Quayle invited. "I'm expecting my nephew over later, but we'll be alone for a while. It was my nephew who gave the dinner that I had to attend to-

night. He has a bachelor apartment in the Eighties. Thomas is going over there to clean up the remains and make things shipshape again. You won't have a drink?"

"Thanks just the same, Mr. Quayle. Don't let me stop you, sir. I just have no taste for the stuff."

"All the better for you, I'd say. And as for stopping me, you'd be about forty years too late, my boy." Quayle sat down in a red-leather easy-chair, mixed himself a drink from a bottle of Scotch and a siphon of soda on a taboret at his side. He sipped it; looked at Bruce keenly.

"Well, here we are—all set," he said pleasantly. He smiled. "I may as well admit that I had you looked up to-day; investigated your past record, found it as clean as a whistle."

Bruce smiled back at the older man. "And I may as well admit that I knew you did," he replied. "I gathered that you were back of the mysterious phone calls received by my office landlord and my landlady."

"Proves you're onto your job," Quayle said genially. "Well, Harley, we've cleared port, so to speak."

He took another sip of his drink. "You've noticed, I fancy, that I live rather oddly here. Thomas, the man who let you in, is my only servant. Didn't seem like the average flunky, did he?"

"I had the impression, somehow," Bruce answered, "that he might be a retired seafaring man."

"Exactly. A London cockney; sailed before the mast and knows how to follow orders without hemming and hawing; was a steward for a few cruises, so he can make beds, serve food and drinks, keep things shipshape. Been a stoker, too, and tends the furnace—something the average butler-and-valet would balk on. Just the man for me, since I don't want a houseful of servants."

More mystery, Bruce thought to himself. Why did a man like Quayle, apparently rich and liking comfort and luxury, want only one servant in such a large house?

"I used to follow the sea myself," Quayle continued. "Went straight from St. Jude's Hospital, in my home city of London, to a berth as ship's doctor; roamed all over the world. Not a bad life."

"I'll say not!" Bruce agreed with enthusiasm. "During college vacations I often wanted to get a job on a ship. I've worked on farms, was a laborer in a glass factory, and drove a truck. But I was hot for the ship job that I could never get. I've never been out of my own country."

"This job you're going on may take you out of it," Quayle promised. "The time has come when I have to make another voyage. And it is of such a nature that a young man of your type could be useful. You may come along, on it, if you like."

"If I like!" Bruce exclaimed. The idea of an ocean voyage—touched with adventure, too, as all this mystery promised—left him almost breathless.

Quayle smiled at his youthful enthusiasm. "You feel much the same as I did at your age," he told Bruce. "I had no idea of the hardships involved, and——"

The telephone bell rang, and Quayle answered it. "Surely, come up! Come up, Nigel," he said cordially into the mouthpiece. "I'm up in the den with Mr. Harley, whom I mentioned to you to-day. Join us and have a drink. I'd like you to meet Harley, anyhow. Cheerio!"

He hung up. "That was my nephew—the one I mentioned to you before; in fact, my only one," he explained. "Fine young chap. You'll like him. He lives with me here part of the time. Good company for a lonely old bachelor. He's all I have in the world, except a

niece on my dead brother's side. Alicia's in finishing school."

He mixed himself another drink. While he was busy with siphon and bottle, Bruce wondered if the gorgeous girl in the silver frame was Alicia.

QUAYLE passed cigarettes in a teakwood humidor and threw his big body back into the easy-chair. His face, strong-featured, though a little puffy from high living, tightened. "Harley," he said, "I got word last night of the whereabouts of a man that—well, I'm not ashamed to say he's a man that I'm actually afraid of; a murderous customer. That's where you come into the picture, Harley. You can be of real service to me. You'll be in danger, but you'll be well paid for it."

He puffed at his cigarette. "You see, several years ago, I headed an expedition to—well, we'll leave that part a secret for the present. It was a treasure expedition, and I was in one of the outposts of the world when I got wind of something that made me want to act quickly. Accordingly, I couldn't be too particular about the men I took with me."

Quayle paused, smiled wryly. "I thought I could judge men. But I fancy I wasn't so hot, as you young Americans say. One of those men was Captain Chester, skipper of the tramp vessel where I dined to-night. Chester is no end of a good chap. But the three others—"

The nostrils of Quayle's strong nose dilated in anger. He got hold of himself in a moment, though, and continued: "They were rotters, right to the core. One of them was a remittance man, a countryman of mine. Another was a highly educated German—the kind of part salesman, part adventurer, part spy type that one used to meet so frequently in tropical countries before the War. The third was

the hardest, toughest customer I've ever met in my life in all the ports of the world. A good seaman, but an absolutely murderous beast. His name was Red Kersey."

Quayle got up, rummaged in the drawer of an elaborately carved table, brought out an old, rather faded photograph. It showed four white men sitting on camp chairs in front of a tropical-outfitting store, and several natives, scantily dressed, standing in a row behind them.

"This," Quayle explained, pointing to one of the figures in white drill and a pith helmet, "was myself. Not so fat and puffy in those days—what? And this fellow on the end is Red Kersey. Lusty-looking brute, eh? Well, the first job you'll have is to run down this Red Kersey. I have a feeling my life isn't safe for a second if that bully has the slightest trace of me."

"But——" Bruce began.

Quayle held up his hand. "Oh, naturally, I don't mean to have you traipsing all over the world after Kersey. Captain Chester has kept a line on him. Kersey's mate of a schooner that docked at New York this week. I want you to trail him, get acquainted with him, find out what he knows. He's a two-handed drinker, and you say you're acquainted with the water-front dives, and——"

There was a knock at the door. "That will be Nigel," Quayle said, his heavy face lighting up. He passed to the outer room and opened the door. "Come in, Nigel, my boy," he invited. "Come in and have a drink."

HE led in the newcomer. "Mr. Bruce Harley—my nephew, Mr. Nigel Bentley. Sit down, Nigel. A bit of Scotch in Harley, I dare say, judging from that 'Bruce' in his name. So we'll have to put a bit of Scotch in us, to make him feel at home." He set out another glass.

As he shook hands with Bentley, Bruce decided that the newcomer was rather handsome, though not at all like his uncle. Bentley was of medium height, slender, fashionably dressed. A fragile bridge just saved his short nose from being snub, and the lines of his jaws were not well defined. But he showed good teeth when he smiled, and he had his uncle's geniality.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harley," he said to Bruce, as he sat down and accepted a Scotch and soda from Quayle. "I want to thank you for your aid to my uncle last night. And—— But say—you're sure I'm not interrupting any private conference between you?"

"Of course not!" Quayle spoke up. "I was just telling Harley a few things that you already know. You'll have to hear a few of your old uncle's reminiscences that you must have learned by heart. But if you can stand it, I fancy *we* can!"

"You didn't get any further line on Kersey, did you?" Bentley asked.

"No; haven't had time. But Harley here covered the water front as a newspaperman. Even though he doesn't drink, he knows all the speakeasies, and can trail——"

There was a crash—a terrific crash as of broken glass—somewhere in the region belowstairs.

Quayle had taken out a patent lighter to get another cigarette going. He started as if a bee had stung him. His patent lighter dropped from his hand. He looked meaningly at his nephew.

BENTLEY, too, seemed badly shocked. His face had gone the color of fishbelly. "Don't go down!" Bentley quavered. "Don't go downstairs, uncle! You can't tell. It *might* be Kersey or one of those rats who——"

He leaped in front of his uncle who was starting for the door. "Don't!

Better play safe! I'll phone the police!"

For just a second, Bruce Harley sat there. Here was mystery—plenty of it. If some one had made forcible entry downstairs—some one who had no business in this house—who meant harm——

He leaped from his chair, picked his way between the tables piled high with model ships and trophies, and made for the outer room of the suite toward the stairway.

Quayle and Bentley were urging him to take no chances. But, after all, taking chances was Bruce Harley's profession.

He took the top stairway three and four steps at a time, raced along the second-floor hallway, made the ground floor in another second or so. Some one was already battering at the outside front door—probably the cop on the beat or some private Holmes patrolman attracted by the noise that had sent Quayle and Bentley into fits of terror.

Bruce ran to the door, drew the bolt. Better get the help of that cop outside. Certainly some one was *inside* who had no business here. There might even be more than one. Bruce Harley—fearless, but seldom foolhardy—always tried to do things the right way instead of the harebrained way.

But the door would not budge after the bolt was withdrawn; and Bruce recalled that the servant had also locked the door with a house key. As his face contorted in irritation, a gun roared back of him. A bullet whished past his ear and ripped a splinter out of the heavy door.

Bruce whirled and dived for the push button set in the wall of the hallway; pressed it, snapped the hallway into darkness—just as another loud *bang* exploded close to him. A crash almost as loud indicated that the bullet shot into the dark had smashed the big vase on the console table.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH STRIKES—ONCE.

BRUCE HARLEY had seen the flash of that second shot—right inside the door of the darkened room off the hallway. Now, almost in one single, follow-through movement, he had circled warily away from the push button, hurled himself through the doorway of the darkened room and was at grips with the gunman.

It was dark, but it was not pitch dark. A diffused glow from a mid-block street light was shed through the window of the room—which was lined with books and was evidently a library.

Bruce could not distinguish the features of the man he was tussling with, but he could just make out the man's smudgy, poorly defined form. And the man was big—and strong.

He could have told that, anyhow, for the arms that gripped him were almost like a gorilla's. The big hands were grappling for Bruce's throat.

Bruce had often had reason to believe himself strong and muscular. Now he was realizing that everything was comparative. He couldn't afford to wrestle with this fellow; but he might possibly get the better of him if it came to fists alone.

One encouraging thing—the fellow had evidently dropped his automatic when Bruce had hit him like a tornado there in the darkness, for as Bruce struggled to get the burglar's grip away from his throat he could feel that the fellow's hands held no gun.

Bruce had always believed that a gun was a good thing when you had to use it, but a poor thing to draw too readily. He might hold this fellow—delay matters until the cop broke in or until Quayle or Bentley got downstairs with weapons, snapped the lights on and got the drop on the man who had no right here. He wondered what was delaying them; probably phoning the police.

The banging at the front door now was terrific; there was a strident squeak of splitting wood, and Bruce could tell that the outside door had been crashed.

He brought up a smashing uppercut; thought he felt the burglar's knees buckle. At almost the same time he stopped a terrific clout between the eyes and his senses went reeling.

NOW he could tell that there was another cop outside there, trying to get in, for he could hear voices yelling excitedly and some one had directed a snapped-on flashlight through the library window. It made a slender spray of light, and Bruce shook the cobwebs from his brain and shoved the heavier man within the circle of it where an accurate puncher wouldn't have to depend so much on luck.

He could see his opponent now—a big fellow with no cap; probably had lost it in the struggle—and wearing some sort of short topcoat. It might be a seaman's reefer, but Bruce couldn't see it plainly. And he wasn't watching it too carefully. He was watching those big arms swinging out at him like flails.

Bruce backed up to avoid a whizzing swing, then stepped in and put all he had into a terrific right cross.

The fellow stood up under it! But it had jolted him badly. His arms were down. The right one had gone into the pocket of that short coat. His jaw was unprotected, and once more Bruce fired that right. But the right had been injured the night before; the dynamite must be out of it.

The burglar staggered, though, then his right hand came out of his pocket. They were again in the spray of light from the window, and Bruce caught the flash of metal. He realized that if the fellow had dropped his gun when first tackled, he had come prepared with a second weapon.

Bruce's arm shot out to grab the hand holding that gun, but the next second he saw it arcing through the air and coming down on his skull. He ducked; the barrel of it struck him only glancingly on the temple. The strength was seeping out of him, but as he crumpled to the rug, he knew he was still conscious, for he could hear the inside front door gradually giving, and now he could also hear some one running down the stairway.

The burglar flashed a glance scarily in the direction of the stairway; then, without stopping to shoot at his fallen opponent or slug him again with the automatic, ran through the library toward the rear of the house. Bruce could hear him knocking over chairs and bric-a-brac stands.

In another second, Quayle ran into the library. *Snap!* He had pressed a wall button and bright light flooded the room. His right hand clutched a blunt-nosed automatic. He took two shots at the big form fading into the gloom of the rear of the house. There was a flash back there and a subdued *bang*.

Bruce Harley managed to raise himself from the rug. "Open the front door!" he yelled weakly at Quayle. "Cops outside!"

But Quayle was standing there with a contorted face. His left hand was clutching his right arm. His automatic was on the floor. He had been struck by a bullet and was evidently in great pain.

Bruce picked up the automatic. He felt woozy, but he heard a crash of glass in the rear. "He's escaping through the garden!" Quayle yelled.

HARLEY took the short cut to the rear of the house—ran out into the lighted hallway and straight back into a small room at the end of it. He snapped on the electric light there, noticed the broken window

through which the burglar, in desperation, had leaped.

It was a basement house, and from that first-floor window it was a drop of eight or nine feet to the back yard, or garden. Bruce raised the window next to it, climbed out on the sill, and dropped. It was bright moonlight. He could see that the burglar had picked himself up from the ground and was racing across the yard to the back fence.

"Stop!" Bruce yelled. "You're covered!"

The fugitive whirled. A brace of shots belched from his gun, and Bruce heard one of them snarl by his right ear. He hadn't wanted to kill the fellow. But now at least he'd try to bring him down with a bullet through the leg.

The burglar had leaped for the top of the high-board fence now; had gripped it and was pulling himself up. "Stop!" Harley yelled. "One more move and I'll let you have it——"

Boom! Boo-oom!

Out of the side of his eye Bruce could catch the flash of gunfire from the window of Quayle's lounging suite on the third floor rear of the house. He saw the burglar drop from the fence like a fly swatted from a wall. His body landed on a slender trellis near the fence, broke through the spindly laths and rolled over into a mass of vines withered by the fall frost. It lay there, crumpled and silent. No twitching; not even a groan.

LIGHTS were springing into the rooms of the houses on the next street that backed on the Quayle garden. Windows were being thrown open; heads being poked out. A woman screamed shrilly. Other folks were shouting and talking excitedly, yelling questions, trying to find out just what all the noise was about.

A second later, two uniformed men ran out through the back door of the

Quayle house and into the garden. They were the men who had finally smashed in the front door. One of them wore the blue of a city police officer and the other the gray livery of a private Holmes patrolman. Behind them staggered Quayle, his left hand still clutching his wounded arm.

The city cop ran over to the body in the patch of withered vines and snapped on his flash. "Ooh!" he said, as if the sight might not be pleasant. "One through the neck and one through the head."

He turned to Bruce, who, with the Holmes policeman had joined him. "Was it you got him? What the hell kind o' bullets do *you* use? Baby! Them things look like dumdums. This guy is dead, what I mean!"

Bruce remembered that big-game rifle racked on the buck's horns up in Quayle's lounging room. "Some one shot him from the upstairs window," he told the cop. "Probably Mr. Quayle's nephew. Think he must have used a Sedgely. Soft-nosed bullets—220-grain, I guess."

The cop looked over to where the folks at the opened window were shouting questions. "We'd better get inside," he suggested. "Too much hullabaloo back here. This guy better not he moved till the medical examiner comes. Say, you need a doctor, too," he said, looking at Quayle's stained sleeve. "Yuh'd oughta get yuhself fixed up."

The Holmes patrolman volunteered to guard the body while the city policeman put through a telephone call. Bruce and Quayle followed the young cop back into the house.

Quayle stepped close to Bruce. "Oh, but I say!" he whispered. In his excitement, his British accent was stronger than usual. "Why! I never saw that dead beggar before in my life!"

Bruce said nothing, merely nodded. The remark made it clear to him that

Quayle must have *expected* to recognize the corpse; must have thought at first that the dead man was one of the vicious enemies he had explained about a few minutes before. Or was Quayle telling the truth? Had he recognized the dead man? Well, time might bring all this out.

"This sure is Mystery House, all right!" Bruce remarked to himself.

NIGEL BENTLEY had come downstairs, and his slight body showed his tension as he talked with the young cop in the hallway. "Yes, I shot that burglar," he said in answer to the young cop's question. "He'd fired at this man"—motioning to Harley—"a couple of times. I was afraid he'd get him or my uncle. I'm—I'm a little rattled, I guess, not used to this sort of thing."

The young cop slapped him on the shoulder. "Yuh're O. K., buddy!" he said. "If there was more guys with your guts, that'd be a break for the cops."

Quayle also commended his nephew for his ready action, as did Bruce and the precinct men who arrived at the Quayle home almost before the young cop finished telephoning. Bentley had put through a previous call from the telephone extension upstairs.

There were three policemen and a plain-clothes man. Still another policeman was at the foot of the brownstone steps, trying to disperse a curious crowd that the noise had attracted.

The merest examination seemed to prove just what had happened—that the burglar had been ingenious as well as lucky in getting into a home so well guarded, even if he had not been so lucky later.

The double doors, locked and barred, made entrance at this point almost impossible. The basement windows were barred, top and bottom. The first-floor windows were also grilled, but only in

the bottom division, since the top panes were so far above the areaway. But somehow the burglar—a good climber, like most seafaring men, it was decided—had made his way up to the window sill and used a glass cutter on the upper pane. Then somehow he had got through the opening, taking the pane of glass in with him.

Once he had entered through the awkward opening, however, he must have stumbled and dropped the pane of glass. It was this crash which had alarmed Bruce, Bentley and Quayle, and also brought the cop on the beat and the Holmes patrolman from their rounds almost a block away.

Quayle had chosen not to mention to the police anything of the matter he had told Bruce Harley about, and that, Bruce decided, was Quayle's own business. Later, when Quayle completed his story of why he wanted to engage a private detective, would be time enough to come back to that matter again.

But one thought persisted in Bruce Harley's mind: Why had that burglar been dressed in seaman's clothes?

CHAPTER IV.

QUAYLE'S SECRET.

BRUCE HARLEY, born in a small town, never failed to wonder at the matter-of-fact way in which New Yorkers looked upon events after they had happened. In his home village, the excitement at the Quayle mansion would have been a nine-day wonder. But the newspapers of the largest American city gave the happening only a scant few lines.

After all, it was only something that happened frequently in the metropolis—a burglar breaking into a man's home. Perhaps the papers would not have found space for it at all, except that the home had been in an exclusive section and because the burglar had been

foiled by the presence of mind of the householder's nephew.

And Bruce, despite his youth, was too experienced in the ways of life to be mystified as to why Quayle's name had not appeared in the newspaper at all. Quayle was "hiding out" from unprincipled enemies. Bruce decided that he had sprinkled a little money around judiciously to keep his name and address out of the papers. Nigel Bentley was named as the occupant of the house. Bruce Harley, too, came in for brief mention. But that was all.

The next day, after the routine police investigation, both Quayle and his nephew readily admitted that they had been back of the withholding of Quayle's name. The three of them were up in the den.

"I thought it was the wisest thing to do," Quayle said. "After all, the police look upon the whole business as a small matter—just another criminal put out of the way. They're always glad when one of their traditional enemies is exterminated without expense to the city or State."

"What I can't understand," Bruce said, "is whether that fellow was just a plain burglar—a cracksman who just happened to take a chance on this house because it was in a wealthy district—or whether he might have been sent by the enemies you mentioned to me."

"The latter—for every last dollar I have," was Nigel Bentley's opinion. "Ordinary burglars don't wear seaman's clothes. Kersey and those other fellows of the expedition are after my uncle—and something he has in his possession," he added mysteriously. "There's not the slightest doubt in my mind about that."

"Quite possible," Bruce agreed. "But the man himself was a professional cracksman. Kelly, over at the precinct station, said they had his finger prints down at headquarters. He'd done two stretches in Sing Sing and one in San

Quentin." He turned to Quayle. "I hope you still want me to work on the case, sir?"

Quayle smiled. "I do—now more than ever. In fact, when I talked with you originally, I intended to hold out certain bits of information. But my nephew and I like the courage that you showed; we believe it would be well to have you in this thing with us up to the hilt."

Quayle got up, rummaged in the drawer of the carved table, unearthed some sort of a mounted map, then returned to his easy-chair.

"All this business goes back to here," he said. He turned the chart face up. Bruce saw that it was a map of a section of South America. "This was where I went on the expedition I mentioned—the wilds of the Upper Amazon country. Quite a river, the old Amazon. Quite a river! Its total length is almost four thousand miles."

He pointed to a spot on the map marked with a little blue cross. "Of course, up to this point—about three thousand miles from the mouth—there is practically no obstruction. But up here"—putting his finger above the blue cross—"navigation is interrupted by rapids, and when you get off into some of these tributaries, many of which are over two thousand miles in length—well, I'm telling you, young fellow, you're in savage country! No one knows *how* savage and strange, except ones who have been through it. And they're not many of those—white men, at least—in the world."

He set down the map. "Nigel has heard all this before. But I'm going to tell you the whole story, Harley, so that you'll know how important your new job is. Like to hear it?"

Bruce smiled. Would he like to hear it? His head seemed in the clouds. He was getting in on matters of romance and adventure beyond all his boyish dreams.

BETWEEN sips of a Scotch and soda, to which he seemed addicted but which never affected his smooth speech, Quayle spun a yarn which, though it took the better part of an hour, was all too brief for Bruce Harley.

Quayle had been at Para when a dying Baralhao Indian, a faithful servant who worshiped him, breathed the secret that caused him to throw an upriver party together hastily and risk a trip which might easily have meant death.

The small backward tribe of Baralhao Indians in that almost inaccessible part of the South American jungle had never traded with white men. There had been vague tales, though, of a Baralhao chief coming once in a blue moon down to the trading centers with diamonds. The mythlike story had been to the effect that this had been done only in famine years. The chief had gone back with supplies of dried *pira* fish and jerked beef and *farinha*, and white men's fever medicine. And the jungle had closed on him like a curtain.

The Baralhaos were sparing talkers. Few persons could speak more than a few words of their peculiar dialect. And if the Baralhaos could understand Portuguese, they kept the fact to themselves.

As he told of the hardships and deprivations of the long trip upriver, Quayle's eyes glowed like a youth's. But they gleamed with hate when he mentioned three of the men who had accompanied him. These were Schlie-mann, the German; Foxleigh, the English remittance man, and "Red" Kersey.

They had proved more of a hindrance than a help; had kept drunk on almost limitless supplies of *aguardiente*; had kidnaped a San Blas Indian woman, and had brawled among themselves.

Later, up in the almost impenetrable Baralhao country, they had stolen a little sackful of diamonds from a Baral-

hao subchief—and it was Quayle's opinion that they had committed murder to get them. The subchief had disappeared without a trace. Only the superstition of the backward natives and their belief that prowling spirits might have removed the subchief so close to *Ouriquhao*—or the Feast Day of Pure Sacrifice—had saved the white men's party from ferocious *Indio* vengeance.

The treachery of Schliemann, Foxleigh, and Kersey had finally come to a head when an epidemic broke out in the tribal village. The three ruthless adventurers—brave enough in the face of death from battle with man or jungle beast—had fled downriver. They had stolen the *batelao*—the dugout-bottomed, thirty-foot craft containing all the stores from the outside world. They were willing to leave Quayle and Captain Chester, his friend, to death from disease or from torture by the aroused Baralhaos.

"We won out, though," Quayle continued, with pardonable pride in his voice. "I have always got along well with primitive peoples. One thing we can still learn from them. The quality of gratitude has become old-fashioned with us white men. Many modern psychologists claim it is a selfish emotion. But primitive tribesmen are still grateful for favors; which fact saved the lives of Chester and myself."

HE went on to tell of how, with his medical knowledge, he had practically stamped out an epidemic of amebic dysentery, caused by almost unbelievable unsanitary conditions. The grateful chief, or headman of the village, had rewarded him with a *legao*—a small native measure fashioned from agouti hide—full of uncut diamonds.

Above the Baralhao village, Quayle explained, was a river deposit, a kind of gravel known to diamond experts as "cascalho." It was known downriver

that "carbonado" diamonds were found there occasionally, but these were not used as gem stones, and fever risks and tribal ferocity had also served to keep out white men. That the Baralhao headmen also had access to the more valuable stones, was proved by their gift to Quayle. For back in civilization, his gift gems had been sold to the London agent of an Amsterdam diamond firm for forty thousand pounds—at that period almost two hundred thousand dollars.

Chester had bought an interest in a tramp vessel with his share. Quayle had returned to New York at the time of a "bull" market in Wall Street, and had soon run his fortune into half a million.

"The only trouble," Quayle said, smiling ruefully, "was that I found Wall Street worked both ways. I didn't leave well enough alone. And in the financial crash of 1929, they nearly cleaned me. I've got to the point where I must make a trip to the Baralhao country again. That was why I was down on South Street the other night, conferring with Captain Chester."

"But would you find the same conditions?" Bruce asked. "The country might since have been opened up."

Quayle looked understandingly at his nephew. "The conditions will be the same—for me," he said confidently. "Harley, I'm going to show you something that only three white men have ever seen—Captain Chester, Nigel, and myself. And one white woman," he added. "My niece, Alicia." He nodded toward the picture of the girl. "Come down to the library."

And as Bruce Harley got up to go, the thought passed through his mind that he and this gorgeous girl would have something in common after he had seen Quayle's mysterious possession. During this startling case that he had fought his way into, would he ever meet Alicia?

IN a dim corner of the Quayle library was set an elaborate cannon-ball safe. Quayle worked at the combination a full three minutes, and finally Bruce heard the tumblers click.

A moment later, Quayle stood before Bruce and Bentley with a spearhead about six inches long. It was of stone, with a selvage of some hard metal ground and stropped to razor edge. Set into the spearhead, some distance from the point, was an uncut and unpolished diamond of three or four carats.

"No one on this side of the ocean but myself has the combination of that safe," Quayle said. "And no white man except myself has ever actually held this token in his hand. If last night's burglar was sent by my old enemies, this is what he was after. News of treasure travels fast."

"Is it worth as much as that?" Bruce asked. The spearhead itself, he believed, could be duplicated for a small amount of money, and the diamond could not be worth much more than a thousand dollars.

"It has little intrinsic value, if that's what you mean," Quayle answered. "But it's a token. It's like a check on a bank; a cheap piece of paper that might stand for a fortune."

He listened at the doorway a moment before bringing the spearhead out into the lighter part of the room. Judging from the clatter in the basement below, Thomas was busy with pots and pans.

"For this token," Quayle said, "any one of my old enemies would commit a dozen murders. I had an attempted burglary here about three months ago. The man got away through the stupidity of Thomas, my manservant. But both Nigel and I feel certain that Kersey had something to do with it. He was in town when the attempted burglary occurred."

He brought the spearhead to the better light near the window.

"The Baralhaos have an annual ceremony, a religious ritual known as the *Ouriquhao*. A free translation of that would mean 'pure sacrifice.' In other words, decency and morality among the Baralhaos hardly pays. For each year the strongest man, the handsomest, the most beautiful in character, is selected by vote. That man, always a man less than twenty-three, is chosen as a voluntary sacrifice."

Quayle ran his finger lovingly along the spearhead. "This probably took a full year to fashion and carve—from one *Ouriquhao*, or Pure Sacrifice Day, to the next. You see cut in here the outlines of a *batelao*. That is the boat in which the body of the sacrifice man is carried to a religious meeting ground across the river from the village."

He pointed to another figure which seemed like an alligator to Bruce. "This is the supposedly Sacred Caiman," he explained. "This"—indicating the carved figure of a fish—"represents the *piracuru*, a food fish of the Amazon. The body of the sacrificed man is quartered. One section of it is buried—to appease the earth gods that fruits and vegetables may grow. Another part is left in the jungle to appease the beasts; a third part placed on the top of a tree for the birds and *piume* flies. Still another is lowered with ceremony into the river for the monsters that abide there, in order that food fish and other river edibles may be spared for the tribe."

Quayle balanced the spearhead almost lovingly in his hands. "To one Baralhao native, that meant death," he said. "He was pierced with it dozens of times. The haft of the spear is of tough *luiri* wood, and is passed from one native to another for a thrust. But to me, this means that I shall never be poor. With this token I could go back—and I suppose any other white man could—and trade again for diamonds."

Quayle returned the token to the safe,

slammed the doors, twirled the combination knob. "And now I think you know why you must run down this Red Kersey," he said to Harley, "and see what Kersey knows—if these strange burglaries have been inspired by him; if he really knows where I am. I want to settle that before I start on this next expedition."

He leveled a finger at Bruce. "There's one thing I want to tell you, though, young man," he said soberly. "I am giving you five hundred dollars to trail Kersey, to find out what you can. But I'm frank enough to say that I personally wouldn't take such a commission for that many thousands. If Kersey knows you're spying for me——"

He smiled a bitter smile. "You say you're twenty-four?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well," Quayle concluded, "that will be the age marked on your tombstone if Kersey finds you out. Still game?"

"The job appeals to me now more than ever," Bruce replied.

CHAPTER V.

SHARK OF THE SEA.

A DANK, heavy mist had settled like a huge blanket of gray over South Street, and piers, warehouses, and the prows of tied-up vessels loomed up like ghosts. Street lights glowed like balls of fire suspended in the air; the poles and posts that sustained them were practically invisible in the fog.

Bruce Harley watched the scene from the porthole of Captain Chester's stateroom cabin on the tramp steamer, *Mary North*. It seemed odd that only two nights before, he had planned to ask for a job on this very vessel. "Think I'll pass muster, captain?" Bruce asked.

Captain Chester, Quayle's friend and skipper of the *Mary North*, smiled. "Oh, I think so," he said, without too much conviction in his voice. "I'm not

saying you look like an old hard-shell sailor. But you ought to get by."

He looked over the clothes that he had let the young private detective take. Bruce wore an old pair of heavy trousers, old shoes, a seaman's jersey and reefer and a shiny-peaked seagoing cap. "You don't seem any too confident yourself," Chester remarked.

Bruce laughed. "Oh, it may be force of habit. The cases I've been on have never called for any disguise. That false-beard-and-wig bunk always gave me a laugh; I'm sure they never fooled anybody but the wearer of them."

"But you look natural enough in that gear," Captain Chester told him. "You have a rugged build and a fairly healthy color. Of course, this Red Kersey isn't any dub; I ought to tell you that."

Eight bells, struck in pairs, sounded from a vessel tied up near by. "Well, it's midnight," Chester said. "Maybe you ought to be shoving off. Just ask any sailor you meet on West Street where Pete's Place is. That's where you ought to find Red Kersey at this hour. If he's already drunk, or partly, so much the better for you. He'll be fooled easier."

"Don't think I'll have any trouble getting in?"

"Oh, I don't think so. They're not very careful down in this section of town, especially with seamen. If there's any question, say you're from the *Tamerlane*. That's a tanker that's tied up in Brooklyn to-night; you wouldn't be apt to run against any of her crew there."

"O. K.," Bruce said. "I'll be getting started."

"Good luck, Harley. Personally, I'm not so sure that you have much to fear. I have an idea that Quayle is too strongly hipped on the subject of Red Kersey. He's seen enough of Kersey to know that Kersey's a vicious shark—a blighter who *would* kill Quayle if he got on his track. But I've never been

convinced that Kersey even knows that Quayle's in New York. Anyhow, you'll know, after to-night, Red is talkative when he gets drunk. Most seamen are. You ought to be able to pump him, all right. Well, cheerio, Harley."

He put out his hand. Bruce Harley took a final look at himself in the cabin mirror, and started out on his adventure of the night.

HE found "Pete's Place," on West Street, easy of access and all that it was reputed to be—the toughest of water-front dives. A cloud of acrid-blue smoke almost veiled the short bar as seen from the doorway. The fumes of strong tobacco and cheap alcohol stung Bruce's nostrils. The filthy floor almost seeped spittle.

In a sitting room to the rear of the bar, a tinny piano was being pounded. An equally tinny cabaret girl was singing "Take Me to My Southern Home" in a strictly Northern voice.

The back room was crowded, and a couple of dozen men—mostly sailors, but a few of the wharf-rat type—were drinking at the bar. Bruce recognized some of the drinks as "smoke"—a cheap, colorless, alcoholic mixture.

A few of the men looked harmless enough. Bruce, no stranger to the water front, realized that they were homeless, lonesome fellows, not knowing what to do with their time and taking advantage of about the only entertainment their small money would buy them at this hour.

Other faces along that bar, though, were ratty, beastlike, hard, cruel. One man, in particular, stood out. Bruce knew him in an instant. Red Kersey!

It was easy to recognize Kersey from the picture Quayle had in his possession; particularly as Captain Chester had given additional information to identify him—that Red now walked with a slight limp, the result of falling

down a hatchway at Shanghai while drunk on *samsu*, the cheapest alcoholic drink in China.

Bruce studied Kersey while he himself ordered a drink at the dim end of the bar. It was a strong body that Kersey had—heavy, bunched shoulders, big arms, a chest like a meat barrel, and legs that were springy and sinewy in spite of the limp in the left one.

He was a couple of notches above average height, slim-waisted and flat-bellied. His features were big, strong. The smooth-shaven skin was tanned to a mahogany hue, although the eyes were the gray of a sea sky just before a threatened blow.

The jaw was big, brutal. The hawkish nose paralleled the curving line of his sea cap's visor, except that the bridge of it had been broken. There was grimness, cruelty in that face.

BRUCE'S first experience in Pete's Place was a lucky one. For he had been studying Kersey and not watching his drink of rye whisky. He had been worrying about the necessity of drinking it. Now, as he turned back to the bar, he saw that there was no such necessity; some hanger-on at the bar had spared him the task of getting rid of the liquor. The hanger-on had got rid of it—down a thirsty throat.

Stealing drinks ordered by other men seemed to be a practice at Pete's Place, for the next instant Bruce heard a harsh yell and saw a wharf rat sink to the dirty floor from a blow of Red Kersey's fist. "Ye'd try to steal my drink, would ye—ye swab!" Red roared. He kicked at the prostrate man, who scrambled out of the way.

No one interfered. If hangers-on at Pete's Place were encouraged to steal drinks from drunken men, it must have been understood that it was done at their own risk.

The incident had a sobering effect on

the thirsty "chisellers" who were broke, and finding that no one relieved him of his second drink, Bruce carried it over to a dirty table at the side of the room. He could escape attention better there, he thought.

Red Kersey was drinking steadily; soon ought to be drunk enough to risk talking to. Red was filling his glass to the rim each time, gulping it neat, not bothering with any chaser of water.

A tough man, this Red Kersey, Bruce decided. A man of the old school of the sea. Bruce had met them during his newspaper days along the water front—"hard shells" who preferred the sailing vessels, now rapidly passing. The work on the windjammers was harder, the food poorer, the pay lower, the voyage longer—tougher. But these hairy-chested old-timers preferred it somehow, just as they would have preferred canned willy and slum and rum and strong ship's tea to a daintier diet.

Most of them were soft underneath, Bruce had reason to know; the kind of fellows who might risk their lives overboard to save the ship's cat. But Red was hardened inside and out, a shark of the sea.

Bruce thought he had been doing rather well; had succeeded in emptying his second drink into a cuspidor beneath the table. Another few minutes, and he'd pick an acquaintance with Kersey.

But just then he saw Kersey down his drink, turn and walk toward the side table. This was odd. Red Kersey was coming to *him!*

KERSEY limped over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. "Well, wot's yer game?" he demanded. "I been watchin' yuh. C'mon! Out with it!" His eyes were tricky, cruel. He seemed like a big cat that had cornered a mouse.

"Wot game is that, mate?" Bruce asked calmly.

"Mate, me eye!" was the retort. "None o' that bilge! You ain't no sailor; them's fake slop-chest gear ye got on. Ye come in here; order two jolts o' liquor. Ye let one get stole, spill the other in the gobboon."

"What's the difference whether I'm a sailor or not?" Bruce parried. "Tell yuh what I'll do—I'll buy a drink."

"Oh, ye will, eh?" Kersey sneered. "Did ol' Doc Presty Quayle tell ye to do that?"

The question had hit Bruce like a shot. But he laughed a little drunk-enly. "Doc *who?*" he asked.

Then Quayle had been right! And Captain Chester had been wrong. Red Kersey must be on the trail of the man who had led the expedition into the Baralhao jungle.

"Listen, kid!" Red Kersey rasped. "I ain't no mug. Nobody ever made a livin' foolin' me yet—except one. An' that one's the scum that sent ye here—to get a line on me."

"Where does this Gale, or Quayle, or whatever his name is, live?" Bruce asked, sparring for time.

"Well, we're *goin'* there, anyhow!" Kersey shot back. "While I've been eatin' pilot bread that weevils has been writhin' in, Quayle's been livin' high. While I've been freezin' on the footropes, he's been bunkin' soft an' warm. I always swore I'd get him if he——"

Bruce Harley had leaped up. But Red's hairy hand had shot out. It was gripping Bruce's arm like a vise. "Not so fast there, me hearty!"

"Can't I stand up?" Bruce asked, like a man willing to be meek because he was harmless. He'd have to get out of this place. Unexpectedly, his brief visit had served its purpose. "Why can't I——"

Then he swung with his disengaged arm—his right. It caught Kersey on the point of the jaw.

Red Kersey stopped in his tracks. His eyes went glassy. A stupid, sur-

prised look came over his face. The blow had everything that Bruce Harley had in his powerful body, and it had landed flush. Yet the red-headed beast was still on his feet; his hairy hand was still clamped on Bruce's left arm.

Kersey shook his head and roared like an angry bull. He jerked Harley across the table. Then he let go his grasp, but only to sling open his reefer and pull a sheath knife from his belt.

Smack!

Bruce had straightened up like a jack-in-the-box, brought his head against the chin of the killer. Before he could recover, he had brought over left and right again—hard. The right was going back on him, though; it was still swollen from that tussle on the water front two nights before.

"Bear a hand here, mates!" he heard Kersey yell.

It was a satisfaction to realize that he had this human bull calling for help. But it would be a temporary triumph, he felt sure. For now bedlam broke loose.

HARLEY rushed for the door. His hand was in his back pocket after his automatic, but before he could get it out, a heavy glass struck him glancingly on the head. It had been thrown from behind the bar. It made him wobble. Before he could get his bearings, some one hit him on the jaw. The dimly lighted room was going dimmer.

"Kill the swab!" he heard Kersey yell. He charged after Bruce. Bruce's foot went out. Kersey, well loaded with liquor, went down heavily.

Bruce whirled. Three men were guarding the exit. One of them, back against the door, had an automatic in his hand. He might not shoot, except as a last resort, but he could use the weapon as a club and no one on the street would be the wiser.

Some one had an arm around his

neck, was trying to wrestle him to the floor. Bruce flung him off. Well to the side of the door was a stained-glass window. If he could get to that—

But men were running out of the rear room now. The bartender had rushed back there; must have quickly spread the word that some sort of a stool pigeon was getting away.

Bruce started to back toward the stained-glass window. It was closed. But he'd have to crash through it if he could. The noise of the crash might bring cops, or attract some passers-by.

Crack! Some one had got him from the rear—but Bruce was moving. The blow struck him on the right shoulder. He whirled again. The doorman was there with the upraised automatic. Bruce lashed out; floored the gunman.

Bruce's automatic was out of his pocket now. It was pointed at the men charging from the back room. Hazily, he could see Red on his feet now. Red was yelling for some one to give him the works—to shoot him down.

Another glass struck Bruce in the temple. His knees buckled, and he felt strangely sick at his stomach. He couldn't fight any more. There was no strength left in his arms. He'd have to make that window quick—take the only chance he had; a long one, at that.

He wheeled, ran for the window. He dropped his automatic, put up his arms to guard his eyes.

Crash! He went through the stained glass. There was a gust of cold air. Then he remembered no more.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH STRIKES TWICE!

BRUCE HARLEY came to with some one tugging at his arm. He tried to open his eyes, but he couldn't. And then he lost consciousness again. He thought he could hear voices, though. Yes, he was sure of it. He could make them out now.

"I never seen a drunk kill himself with a fall yet," some one was saying. "Hey, wake up, buddy!"

Bruce opened his eyes. The first thing they noticed was a brass button that looked as big as an egg. A uniformed cop was bending over him.

Bruce looked around—saw that he was in a small car such as city policemen use. His head ached badly. He put up his hand to his forehead. The cop, bending over him, laughed. "I knew this sailor'd come to; they always do."

"Where are you taking me?" Bruce asked.

The other cop, the one who was driving, answered. "We *was* takin' yuh to a hospital. Now I think we better run yuh in. A guy dragged yuh out of an alley back there on West Street—said yuh must 'a' got drunk an' got thrown out of a speak. Well, they sure beat yuh up, kid. Maybe yuh'll lay off liquor a while after this."

He had a rough voice. But it was plain that he meant to be flippant. "Say—what time is it?" Bruce asked.

"After two o'clock," one of the cops answered. "But what's the diff'rence? You ain't keepin' no appointment, buddy. Yuh must 'a' been out about an hour——"

"Listen!" Harley cut in. "I don't care anything about what's happened." He remembered Kersey's threat to get Quayle. "There's a seaman down this way that may have killed a man by this time. I'm not a sailor. I'm a private detective. I've got my badge. Here!" He dug into his pocket and produced it.

The cops still showed unbelief. But Harley was talking crisply now, despite the ache in his head. "Don't waste a minute. The man you want to pick up is called Red Kersey. You may find him in Pete's Place, the West Street speak, although I'm afraid he may be out o' there by now. He may

be on the street, or he may have gone back to his schooner, the *Thames*, down near Rector Street. But get him and hold him. See?"

A few minutes more were necessary to convince the cops. Afid then Bruce Harley ran out and hailed a passing nighthawk taxicab. It pulled up at the curb.

"Take me to Park Avenue and Seventy-second Street as fast as you can," he told the driver as he got in.

"O. K., sailor," the taximan said. He put his car in gear.

LESS than twenty minutes later, the car was turning west in the Seventies. The driver had speeded up the West Side Express Highway and had given Bruce Harley the fastest taxi ride he had ever experienced.

During that ride, Bruce had made a careful inventory of his physical condition. He found two gashes on his head, from thrown glasses, a painfully injured shoulder and a feeling of soreness all over him. His face, too, had been cut, either from blows or from leaping through the closed window, and his left eye felt almost entirely closed.

As to just what had happened after he had leaped through the window, he could only guess and piece it together from the cops' explanation. Evidently some passer-by had heard the noise, looked into the speakeasy alley, found him unconscious and bleeding, and dragged him out, finally locating the policemen in the small car and turning him over to them.

The proprietor of the speakeasy might have seen through the window what was happening, and let the passer-by drag him away. After all, it would be the best "out" for the owner of the place.

Bruce was trying to figure it out when the taxi drove up in front of the Quayle residence. There were several cars at the curb, and when Bruce

jumped out of the cab, he saw two policemen standing on the brownstone steps. The front room of the house was illuminated.

Policemen at the house! Many things flashed through Bruce's mind. Had Red Kersey—

He was halfway up the brownstone steps. A policeman grabbed him by the arm roughly.

"Goin' somewhere, buddy?" he asked with official sarcasm. "In a hurry, ain't yuh? What's the idea?"

Bruce stopped. He realized how foolish he looked, dressed in sailor's clothes and badly marked up, dashing up the steps of A. Preston Quayle's house.

"It's all right," he explained. "I'm in Mr. Quayle's employ. Just tell him it's Bruce Harley."

"Yeah? Well, we can't very well do that, buddy," the policeman said. "Quayle's been murdered."

"Murdered?" Bruce gasped.

"Yeah. Body's in the lib'ary now. An' you better come with me. The sarge might want to ask a few questions. Say! You're a sailor, ain't yuh, buddy?" The policeman looked meaningly at his colleague.

"Take me in!" Bruce commanded. "Take me into the library. I may be able to give some information that will help in this case."

THE first sight to meet his eyes as he walked into the library, with a uniformed policeman on either side of him, was a form with a sheet flung over it. Then he saw that one of the bay windows was broken—the same window that had been broken on the night of the attempted burglary. But the window had been repaired the day before. Had some member of the same gang after Quayle had the nerve to repeat getting into the house the same way? The door of the big cannon-ball safe was wide open. Bruce

did not have to be told that the token—the Baralhao spearhead—was gone.

Bruce got a blurry look at the crowd of people—several uniformed cops, a few men who could be nothing but plain-clothes men, Nigel Bentley sitting white-faced and red-eyed over on a settee, and Thomas Cheever, the tall, long-nosed manservant, who also seemed to be strangely affected.

He recognized Murphy, a detective-sergeant from the homicide squad. He knew Murphy by sight, but assumed that Murphy didn't know him. He looked sternly at Bruce as the policemen brought him in.

"This bird just got out of a taxi," one of the cops said. "He looks like he's been through a battle. Says he worked here. Yuh might want to ask him a few questions."

"My name is Bruce Harley," Bruce hastened to explain. "I'm a private detective with offices in the Harper Building. I was in the employ of Mr. Quayle and I think I can give some information that will help a great deal in this case. I want to explain."

Murphy was a detective of the old school—hard boiled, and incidentally not too friendly toward private sleuths.

"Oh, yuh do, luh?" he said. "Well, start to broadcast, kid."

BRUCE told briefly of his adventure down on the water front, giving a detailed description of Red Kersey. He said nothing about the Baralhao spearhead; that, he reasoned, was the business of Nigel Bentley to tell about, and not his, as Quayle's story has been told in confidence.

"Well, you learned a lot for the five hundred Quayle gave you," Murphy said when Bruce had finished. "You're in five hundred, anyhow," he added dryly.

Bruce flushed. He felt a little irritated at Murphy's patronizing attitude.

"That's where you're wrong," he countered. "Certain plans that Mr. Quayle made didn't go through. I intend to return the five hundred to his nephew, Mr. Bentley."

He was about to turn and walk away, almost knocked into Bentley, who must have overheard the conversation. "No, you won't, Harley," Bentley said. "You did everything my uncle wanted you to do. The money's yours. You earned it."

A man came into the library from the hallway. He had a stenographer's pad in his hand. Murphy nodded at him. "O. K., Mr. Bentley," he said. "We're ready to take your story now." He grinned at Bruce. "You can listen to this if you want to, Harley," he said. "You're a smart private dick. You might be able to solve the case."

"I might, at that," Bruce agreed.

HE walked over to the window, looked at the piece that had been cut in it, then circled back to where Bentley was repeating his story to the police stenographer. Three men who looked like reporters had joined the group. They were scribbling furiously.

"It's hard to place the exact time of the murder," Bentley was saying. "I suppose the medical examiner will fix that. I called uncle on the phone around midnight and there was no answer. Thomas was having his night out. I live in the Eighties, about even in the block with this house. Strange things have been happening around here; two attempted burglaries within three months. I got a taxi and came right over. I came in with my keys."

His voice broke just a little. "I found uncle lying right there before the open safe. It looked to me as if he had been struck over the head with a club. I don't know. I ran out to phone the police. I couldn't even stay in the house to use the phone."

Murphy held up his hand. "That wasn't a club, by the way. It was a spanner your uncle was hit with—a kind of a wrench used in the engine rooms of ships. Detective Curry picked it up out in the areaway where the killer dropped it."

"Then it must be one of the same gang——" Bentley began.

"Just stick to what you saw, Mr. Bentley," Murphy interrupted. "We'll ask you about that later. Did you notice the pane of glass cut out of the window when you came in?"

"I didn't. It's on the opposite side from the front steps, and after I found uncle lying here, I'm afraid I didn't wait to notice anything else."

Bruce left the group of policemen and the scribbling reporters and cornered Thomas Cheever, the butler and valet, out in the hallway.

"Where were you, Thomas, when all this happened?" he asked.

"It was my night out, sir," Thomas replied. "I met an old shipmate, an' we 'ad a few drinks, sir."

Bruce looked sharply at the butler. He recalled that Thomas had also been out of the house the night the burglar had entered through the window.

"Where did you have the drinks, Thomas?" he cross-examined. "I suppose you can give an account of your time since you left the house."

"I'm—I'm not sure, sir," Thomas replied. "I was taken to the drinkin' plice by my friend. It was on Front Street, downtown, an' I don't know the number. I might be able to locate the plice, though. It was up a stairway, between two other stores."

"It will be better for you if you can," Bruce said grimly.

He took notes on the general description and location of the speakeasy. He'd check up on Thomas's story later.

A detective from the precinct station passed him on the way out of the house. "We got a phone call that Red Kersey

was picked up when he was going aboard his schooner about half an hour ago," he told Bruce. "He's being held at the Old Slip Street station now. I'm hoppin' down there in a cab."

"I'll hop with you," Bruce said.

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH STRIKES AGAIN.

THE trip to the Old Slip police station proved disappointing, but at the same time exciting. One thing was certain—Red Kersey could not have been the man who killed A. Preston Quayle by striking him over the head with a heavy wrench.

The medical examiner had set the approximate time of Quayle's death at ten o'clock. Witnesses proved that Red had been downtown continuously, drinking at various speakeasies from nine at night until shortly before he was picked up by the police.

From nine to almost ten he had been in a resort kept by an ex-seaman who was not too suitably called "Holy Joe" by the water-front crowd. At about ten o'clock he had wandered only half a block to Pete's Place, on West Street, and had remained there until almost two o'clock. His final stop had been at "Portuguese Frank's." Soon after leaving this dive, he had been taken in tow by the police.

Red was sullen, snarly, as tough as ever. His bandaged head, however, indicated that the cops who had taken him in charge had not handled him any too gently.

"Ye've got nothin' on me," Red rasped. "Ye'll let me go, that's wot ye'll do. I know my rights. I ain't sayin' I'm sorry to hear that Presty Quayle was killed. But I had nothin' to do with his death. I never even knowed Quayle was livin' in New York."

"How can you explain, then," Bruce demanded, "your talk about Quayle at Pete's Place, before the fight we had?

You knew then that Mr. Quayle had sent me to get a line on you."

"Huh! Ye think ye got me there, do ye?" Red snarled. "I can explain that away in a jiffy. A note came to me last night, just before I came ashore from the schooner. It was signed by Karl Schliemann, a Dutchman that was on the Amazon expedition with me an' Quayle. Schliemann said he'd located Quayle at last; that Quayle'd send some snoop to spy on me when I went to Pete's Place on West Street. That's why I knowed who ye was—I twigged ye as soon as ye come through the door."

"Do you know where Schliemann lives in New York?"

"I don't. I ain't heard o' Schliemann for years. Last time I had a trace of him, he was in Bremerhaven, Germany. I'm tellin' you swabs that y'ain't got a thing on me."

Bruce was thoughtful for a moment. He admitted to himself that Red was right. Red had an alibi for every minute of his time. His witnesses were not of the highest character, but there were plenty of them.

If he was telling the truth about the Schliemann note—which he claimed he had thrown overboard before coming ashore—then the Quayle case might be pretty badly tangled up. It would be difficult to find Schliemann in the great city of New York, for if Schliemann had something to hide, he wouldn't be living under his own name.

FOR the next three days, Bruce Harley never missed so much sleep in his life; never taxied so much, never walked so much, never had been in so many speakeasies and criminal dives.

He wore rough clothes. He poured enough bad whisky into cuspidors to make a drunkard burst into tears—if any drunkard had seen him get rid of the stuff, which he hadn't. He shaved

only once. That was when he returned to his room to dress suitably for the funeral of A. Preston Quayle, whose murder was still unsolved.

He met Alicia Quayle, niece of the dead man, and thought her even prettier than her picture, although her violet eyes were dim from weeping.

His own eyes were moist as the body of Quayle was carried from his great mansion. Nigel Bentley was pale and hollow-eyed as he supported the slight figure of his cousin, Alicia, out to her motor, and Thomas Cheever wept openly and walked with faltering step.

Five hours later, from a Tenth Avenue speakeasy frequented by cracksmen and other rough characters, Bruce Harley made three calls from a booth.

One was to Detective-sergeant Larry Murphy, one to the apartment of Nigel Bentley, and the third to Thomas Cheever, the Quayle servant who had seemed so affected at his employer's death.

AS Bruce's cab drew up in front of the Quayle mansion, another cab rounded the corner from Park Avenue, and Nigel Bentley got out. "I started just as soon as I could after I received your phone call," Harley, he said. "You've found out something? Haven't picked up Schliemann's trail, have you?"

"No," Bruce replied, "but I think you'll be interested."

He followed Bentley into the still, silent house. Thomas Cheever had been given his notice the day before.

"I think both of us might prefer the den upstairs for our little conference," Bruce suggested. "It might be more cheerful than the room where Mr. Quayle was murdered."

"Decidedly," Bentley agreed.

He closed the outside door and led the way up to the den on the third floor. Bruce sat down in the big red-leather chair in front of the elaborately

carved screen. Bentley mixed himself a drink and threw himself down on the settee. "You won't have a drink, Harley?" he asked affably.

Bruce shook his head. He looked penetratingly at Bentley. "You ought to be more generous in your offer than that, Bentley," he said grimly. "And I think you're going to be."

Bentley started slightly. "Wh-what do you mean?" he demanded.

"I'll explain—exactly," Bruce told him. "Since you stole the token—the diamond spearhead—when you killed your uncle," he said, "I think you'll offer me more than a drink before we get through!"

Bentley bounded up from the settee.

"Are you crazy, Harley?" he asked.

"No. Quite sane, I assure you," Bruce said dryly. "Never mind the acting, Bentley. It won't go. Now, listen carefully. Make your proposition to me as soon as you're convinced that I've got you."

He got up, took a small strip of glass from his pocket. "You're a smooth bird, Bentley. But not smooth enough to get away with murder. Few men are."

BENTLEY had recovered his poise. There was a sneering smile on his face. Bruce's eyes were as cold and hard as agate.

"You have been after that spearhead for a long time, Bentley. You knew the whole story from your uncle. You staged the first burglary when word came from Captain Chester that Red Kersey was in the city. You knew how much afraid your uncle was of Kersey."

Bentley started to say something, but Bruce cut him off.

"Wait, Bentley. You staged the next burglary cleverly. "You arranged to give a dinner at your apartment and also arranged for Thomas to come over to clean up. That got Thomas out of

the house. You were going to make the thing perfect—have the burglary happen while your uncle and you and I were right in this den. You let in that burglar with your own keys when you came over from your apartment. Pug Jones, the burglar, was an expert on safes. You turned him loose in the library to work quietly while you came upstairs and saw to it that your uncle and I remained in the den. Jones was to cut a piece of glass out of the front window before he got to work. It would be assumed, of course, that this was the way he got into the house.”

He looked squarely at Bentley, whose smile had disappeared.

“But poor Jones was awkward, working there in the dark. He dropped the piece of glass he cut out. The crash alarmed us up in the den. No wonder you didn’t want your uncle to come down to the library! And you did your best to keep me up there, too, so that Jones could escape. When you saw Jones on the verge of capture by me, you took the only way out. You shot Jones dead. You reasoned that ‘dead men tell no tales.’ You had an absolute alibi. Any man has a right to shoot at a burglar who breaks into his home.”

“Nice little fairy story,” Bentley sneered. “I’ll let you go ahead—see just how ridiculous you can be.”

Bruce ignored the taunt. “From the very first,” he said, “I could see that the glass of that window had been cut from the *inside*. The precinct cops didn’t notice it. They never worked in a glass factory—as I did during one college vacation!”

He patted the strip of glass in his hand. “I took a piece of that broken window to a glazier, checked up my own opinion, found it correct. I then knew that either you or Thomas was the *inside man* on that attempted burglary. I was inclined to think that *you* were the one—on account of your cold-blooded

shooting of Jones to get him out of the way.”

“Nice theory,” Bentley chuckled. But it was a forced chuckle. His face had gone two shades paler.

“When I found the glass of the window cut the same way the night your uncle was murdered,” Bruce went on, “I knew that the same ‘inside’ man was back of both crimes. When I ran down the whereabouts of Thomas on the night of the murder—found that he was speaking the truth—that left you as the main suspect.”

“You’re talking like an absolute maniac,” Bentley said.

“I don’t think you’ll stick to that opinion after what I’m going to tell you. Any criminal can be traced. Pug Jones was no exception. I visited dozens of speaks on the West Side; found where Jones hung out.” He leveled a finger at Bentley. “Found that *you* were seen talking to him on the afternoon of the burglary.”

Bentley’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah?” he said defiantly. “Well, what if you did? There could be no penalty, even if it was known that I was in with Jones. He was a burglar. There’s no penalty for shooting a burglar in one’s home.”

“Maybe not,” Bruce conceded. “But, listen, Bentley. You’re not only up against the law in this matter. Sometimes the law can be beaten—too often, unfortunately. But Pug Jones’s *pals* can’t be beaten! I’m telling you, Bentley, that if I let this story about your double-crossing of Jones out, you’ll be taken for a ride. Gangland deals harshly with one crook who double-crosses a partner.”

He shook his finger at Bentley. “So that’s the situation, Bentley. I can’t absolutely prove that you killed your uncle—although I know you did. But you’re admitting it to me right now, and offering to split with me on the diamonds you get through the spear-

head token. You'll do that—or the word about your double-cross of Jones gets out. Are you game enough to risk it? If you are, I have nothing more to say."

Bentley wet his lips. "What do you want, Harley? What's your game? You want to cut in on the profits of the expedition to the Amazon country, is that it?"

"Ah! You understand at last, do you?" Harley mocked. "Then you admit you have the token, do you? I thought you would. You were smooth, no doubt about that. The smoothest piece of work you did was to send that note signed 'Schliemann' to Red Kersey. You thought Kersey would do for me down in that tough speak. It would have been good for you. I'd have been out of the way, and unless Kersey could prove an absolute alibi—unlikely—it would be reasonable to assume that a man who'd commit one murder would commit another."

BENTLEY was smiling now. "Yes, you doped that out right enough," he admitted. "And once that fake Schliemann note came to light, I figured there wasn't a chance in the world to pin it on me. That drew a red herring across the trail. Schliemann would be regarded as the murderer; Schliemann, a man who may be on the other side of the world or may even be dead. The cops would have had a hell of a time locating *him*."

"You were clever, too," Bruce complimented, "in planting that spanner with which you slugged your uncle when you induced him to open the safe that night. It gave a sea flavor to the whole business. If you hadn't bungled in having that window glass cut from the inside, you'd have come through O. K. You killed your uncle at ten o'clock, then locked up and went to your apartment. The record shows that you phoned his house when you said

you did. And the record also shows that you got a cab and came to the house, apparently in alarm, when you found your uncle didn't answer the phone. Well, where's the spearhead, Bentley?"

"Well, since you've got me, Harley, it's hidden in an old chest in the attic of this house. But don't think you're going to cut in on half the profits. I'll give you a share——"

"All right, Murphy!" Bruce interrupted "I think you and Thomas can come out now!"

The elaborate carved screen toppled over. Detective-sergeant Murphy and Thomas Cheever, the servant, straightened up from their crouching position. Bentley, his face like a death mask, bounded to his feet.

"Don't bother to run, Bentley. You can't get away," Murphy said grimly. "I thought Harley was crazy when he telephoned me to come to the house to-day. He had also phoned Thomas, who let me in, and——"

He sprang forward as Bentley leaped toward the window. Bruce, too, shot out his arm, but just missed Bentley's coat tails. There was a crash. Bentley had dived through the window. There was a sickening thud in the yard below.

Murphy ran over and looked through the hole in the glass made by Bentley's body. Harley looked over his shoulder. "Not a stir out of him," Murphy said. "Dead as a herring. Back broke, I s'pose. Well, maybe he's better off."

He turned and put out a hanlike hand toward Harley. "Shake, kid," he said. "You're at least one private dick that uses his head for somethin' besides a hat rack."

He looked sharply at Bruce. "And that spearhead that's upstairs in the attic—I suppose you'll get a reward for recovering that, won't you?"

"That's what I'm hoping—in one way or another," Bruce answered.

He wasn't thinking in the same terms

as Murphy. He was looking toward the desk—at the picture of Alicia Quayle in the silver frame.

The diamond spearhead! Worth about a thousand dollars in New York—but worth a king's ransom in the impenetrable jungle country of the Baralhaos!

Can Bruce Harley win out against Red Kersey, the shark of the sea who now knows the location of the Baralhaos token? Can he outwit Schliemann, the

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Will youth and purpose and grim determination win out against trickery and ruthlessness and guile?

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Remember that date!



THE YOUNG MARKSMAN

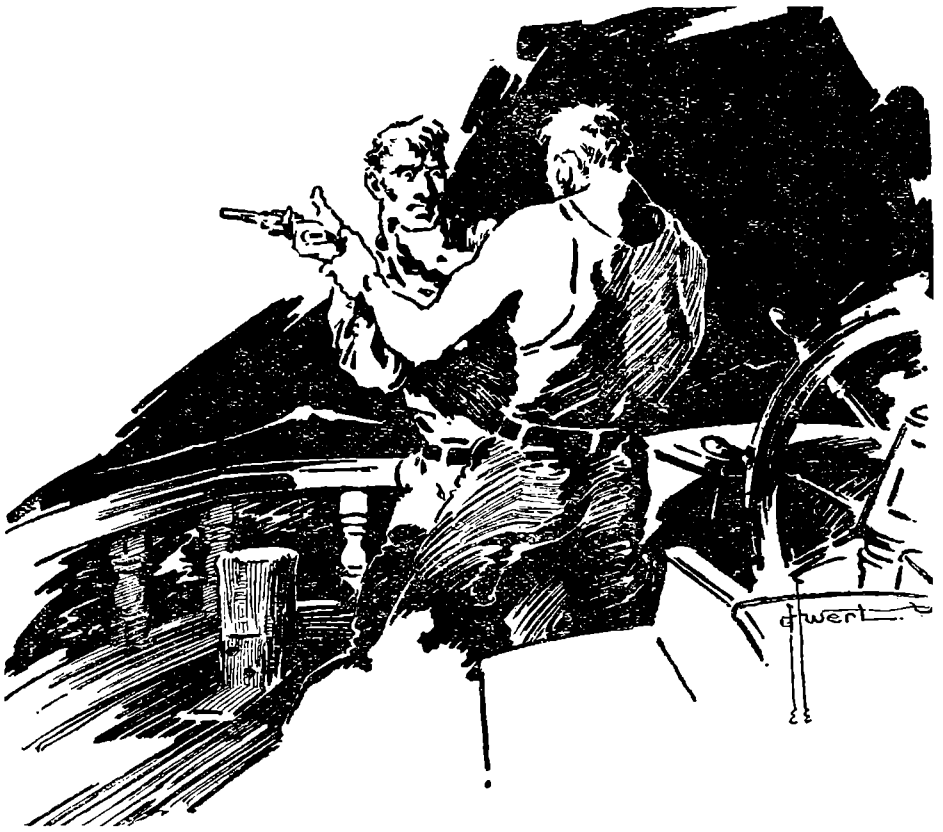
By FLOYD T. WOOD

OUR lady cook at Bar 9 N
 She bought her boy a B. B. gun.
 The kitchen's gettin' full of mice,
 It's time the killin' wuz begun.
 There's gophers in the garden patch,
 An' saucy magpies stealin' chicks.
 They'll get hot lead, an' lots of it,
 From little Willie, risin' six.

First mornin' out he clinks a glass,
 The parlor winder, too, fer luck.
 Our best bull calf he lost an eye;
 Then passed away our only duck.
 He'd shoot at anything that moved,
 Jest like a cowpoke primed on moon;
 It looked, by gosh, as though we'd got
 A sort o' second Daniel Boone.

His mammy tells her darlin' child
 That harmin' farmyard things ain't nice,
 That he must stay inside with her
 An' use his talents wingin' mice.
 The young scamp grinned an' said he would;
 But I've observed that boys is boys;
 It wuzn't long till from the house
 There come the dangdest, loudest noise.

When we dashed in to see what's what
 The marksman's cryin' on the floor;
 The B. B. gun is all in chunks;
 There'll no one use it any more.
 Cook wouldn't tell us where she's shot;
 'Twuz her affair; we didn't press;
 But way she walked, an' stood to eat,
 It wazn't awful hard to guess!



Trail of the Wooden Dolls

By Arthur J. Burks

Author of "The Iron Leatherneck," etc.

Walt King devised a greater punishment for the fugitive than mere capture

JOE CATON, bull-browed, with simian strength and appearance, was a maker of dolls by day—and something else again by night. But when they discovered that he had been something else by night, it was impossible to lay hands on Caton. He had simply vanished.

With him had vanished nobody knew

how many thousands of Curaçao dollars, or pounds, or whatever it was he had stolen. Nor had that been all. A whole Willemstad family was dead—had been murdered, and the only clew to the killer was the silly *muñeco*, the carved wooden doll.

Only Walt King called the simpering things by that name, and he had got the

name in Santo Domingo, where the records showed that Joe Caton had learned to make them.

Walt King, about whom few people knew anything at all, save that he had a penchant for doing things nobody else would do, was an American with a sun-bronzed face, and less than thirty years of age. He was called in by the old mossback of a consul, and instructed to get Joe Caton, no matter where he had to go to get him.

He didn't tell King how to do it, or how to pay his expenses. He left that for King to worry about. The mossback was a wonderful buck-passer, having been in his government's service for some thirty years, all of it spent in Curaçao.

"Get Joe Caton," he said in his high-pitched voice, "and bring him back, dead or alive!"

"Any idea how," drawled Walt King, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "I could go about it, or——"

"Since you're going after Caton," interrupted the old mossback, "it's up to you to drag out the ideas. Want me to go all the way with you and prompt you as you go?"

Walt King, from his advantage of height, six feet as opposed to the five feet four of the consul, smiled a wintry smile down at the little man.

"Guess I'll mosey," he said. "Want to have a look at the Espailatts."

The Espailatts were the family that had been murdered. Walt King went to the house, where matters had been taken in charge by the Willemstad authorities.

There he learned that a knife had accounted for father, mother, and two daughters. But an icy hand seemed to have clasped itself about the heart of Walt King.

He spent the remainder of the day nosing about town, with especial reference to the water front, where he checked up on boats that had sailed since

the wholesale killing. As he made his quiet investigation, his hand stole occasionally inside his light coat, and fondled a wooden article that he had picked up beside the body of the younger Espailatt girl—a doll, made of hardwood.

Joe Caton had a reputation in Willemstad for making that kind of doll. Because he made them for children of every age, color, and description, he had entrée to every home—and that's how it had happened.

When night came, Walt King, who might have been a soldier of fortune just wandering, left Curaçao for La Guayra, calmly certain that he was on the trail of Joe Caton.

The natives who manned the schooner regarded him curiously, but asked him nothing. Walt King had a reputation of sorts, and it was his own reputation that he feared, on this mission, more than he feared coming up with Joe Caton. He might be too well known to get away with it.

He turned in that night with all his clothes on, in one of the little boxlike cubbies on the deck of the schooner, near the starboard rail, and inside his clothing his right hand clasped the butt of his revolver. He needed all the rest he could get, for he had a hunch, based upon knowledge of the past of Joe Caton, that the way before him would be plenteously beset by thorns.

He was awakened around midnight, so suddenly as to distinctly shock him, but so skillfully that he could do nothing about it. He was yanked out of the cubby feet first, out upon the deck, to find himself in conflict with a bulking shadow of a man whose face he could not see, but whose hands felt like steel bands about his throat.

HE tried to bring his revolver into play. Instantly one hand of the attacker shot to the wrist of that hand, and clasped it with a ferocity that almost brought a scream

of pain from Walt's lips. Walt did not scream, however, and for an excellent reason. The other hand of the attacker was around his throat, the fingers biting in like steel claws.

Walt wrapped his lithe, powerful legs about the body of his assailant, and exerted all his strength in a scissors that would have squeezed the heart out of an ox. Yet the sides of the attacker did not even seem to give. The bodies of the fighters rolled with the rocking roll of the schooner. Total blackness, almost, filled the world for Walt King. But through it, hazily, and splotted with red dots that danced crazily in the darkness, he could see the shape of a face—and no more.

He knew that for him the end had come, and he tried to think why, and how. What was the reason for this midnight attack? Could the people on the schooner be in league with Joe Caton, the fugitive?

But his thoughts, naturally, were incoherent. Thoughts are, when one's life is being squeezed out by a viselike hand at one's throat. The darkness was falling deeper. A drumming was in the ears of Walt King, and even the drumming was receding in the distance.

Walt King was diving head foremost into the Valley of the Shadow, and that was all he knew. When he knew that, he knew it all, and for a great length of time he knew nothing else.

KING was first conscious of a burning pain in his right hand. He stirred, and in his semiconsciousness, rubbed that hand across his face. Exquisite agony coursed through his arm as he did so. The awful pain of it snapped him erect, did much to brush the cobwebs from his brain. Dazedly he looked around him. Almost at his feet the opalescent waves from the ocean lapped on the shingle beach. He looked at his clothing. It was wet, but drying in the morning sun.

Back of him, up the shelving beach was a row of nodding palms. But in all directions from him the beach was bare. Not a footprint to give him a clew. But, just the same, there were clews.

Two of them!

The first joint of his right thumb, and the first two joints of his trigger finger, had been neatly amputated! Not too neatly, either. They had just been hacked off. Dumbly, his face white, and sweat-beads of agony on his brow, Walt King stared out to sea. But for the moment it seemed empty of anything that moved.

But no! Away off to his right, making southward, was a vessel with three masts.

"Not my boat, but probably going where I want to go," muttered King. "I'll just mosey down that way and see what's what. So—I've met Joe Caton, eh? They had him in the hold of that sea-buggy! I wonder how much the crew knew about it, and if anybody tried to help me. Maybe they did, or I'd be dead now. Or maybe the redoubtable Joe was satisfied to ruin my trigger finger, and let it go at that. But he doesn't know everything."

King's left hand delved into his clothing. Yes, there was his revolver. He wondered why that had been left him. Also his money. Didn't seem consistent, somehow, with what he knew of Joe Caton, to leave a thousand American dollars in bills on his enemy. But there they were! Or maybe Caton had been surprised, and had merely tossed King overboard.

His head whirling with pain, his throat feeling as though it were afire, ridged with rings the pressing fingers of the attacker, had made, Walt King staggered to his feet and started down the beach, toward the south. His chase of Joe Caton had now become a personal matter.

Skillfully Walt bandaged his right

hand with a dirty handkerchief. The sun beat mercilessly down upon his bare head, while a gentle breeze whipped his yellow hair, but apparently Walt King did not mind. While seeming to travel almost lazily, he still covered the shingle at a fast pace.

His wound disposed of, he put his mutilation out of his mind as much as possible, and cast about for ways and means. It wouldn't be easy, that was plain. The minute he stepped into a village, or accosted a native, the word would be passed, and the word would reach Joe Caton.

King brought forth his revolver in his left hand, and an observer, had there been any such, must have been impressed by the fact that he handled the revolver with his left hand as easily as though it had been his right. That he was ambidextrous was one of King's own personal secrets. He smiled grimly to himself as he returned his weapon to its hiding place.

HE waited until nightfall to go into La Guayra. He kept both his hands in his pockets, and he whistled tonelessly. He kept away from the lights of the town, and found his way to the water front, where he watched the endless passing to and fro of fisherfolk and native sailors.

And here he encountered a man in uniform, a man who was mainly conspicuous because he carried a revolver as big as a young cannon. Boldly King walked up to him.

"Did you at any time," he said softly in the vernacular, "see a big man who looked like an ape get off one of the schooners here, and make for the town? He has no forehead, and his hair reaches down to his eyebrows, and he looks strong enough to kill many men with his bare fists."

"I have seen no such one," replied the policeman, but there was an appreciable pause before he made answer.

"Who are you, and why do you seek this man?"

Ignoring the question, Walt King thrust his hand into his clothing and jerked forth the wooden doll with the simpering, changeless, painted smile. The policeman gasped as King made the swift movement, and clumsily, slowly, went for his cannonlike revolver. But he gasped with relief when King drew forth the doll.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Another gasp, and the policeman, from a capacious pocket, produced another one of the simpering things.

"He carried a basketful of them, this man you are seeking," said the policeman, "and he dropped one of them. I have a little daughter, you know—and just how does it happen that you have one of these things? I think perhaps that it is something for the chief to look——"

The big revolver started to raise again, and Walt King struck. He struck savagely, and he used the wooden doll as a weapon. The simpering, painted face crashed atop the head of the policeman and, despite the thickness of the official cap, crashed the blunderer into unconsciousness.

Then Walt King faded into the darkness.

"That," he mused, "will start the ball a-rolling, if I know my Latin America! Fifteen minutes after that cop comes back to his senses, Joe Caton will know that some one who has one of his *muñecos* is on his trail! Now, how to get this Joe Caton? I have no chance against him in a fight. Let me see!"

He slipped off into the shadows, at the end of the wharf, and waited.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty. Then the policeman came lumbering along, cursing soulfully, rubbing his head, and traveling faster toward the lights of the town than any native policeman is ever expected to travel.

With a wry grin, Walt King followed him. All sorts and conditions of men appeared in La Guayra, and the natives had long since learned the cardinal virtue of minding their own business.

King followed the policeman at about fifty yards, and never once did the fellow look around. Knowing the penchant of the Latin-American cop for graft, King knew that if the fellow knew his whereabouts, he would head straight for Joe Caton to sell his information.

So, when the fellow slipped through the door of a native shack in a malodorous part of the town, King was right behind him, and the door had no sooner closed than his ear was against the panel.

"Well, what do you want?" It was a deep growl from inside the shack, and the quality of the rasping voice caused an involuntary shiver to run quickly along the spine of King.

"A man, a tall man," gasped the policeman, "with one of those wooden dolls like yours, and asking about you. I did not tell him, and he knocked me down with the doll, after a ferocious struggle. I was knocked out because he had half a dozen men with him, who held my arms while he beat me senseless."

"And followed you here, I'll bet!" roared the familiar voice. "Did you look behind to see if you were followed?"

"Of course! But there was no one. It would take a clever spy to follow Miguel Sosa!"

"You blithering ape!" roared the voice. "Get away from me!"

A scream of anguish followed the crashing of fist against flesh. King grinned—then stiffened as he heard footsteps racing toward the door. Whirling, he ran straight away from the door for ten paces or so, then faced about—and the rectangle of light from the open door reached out into the

street, he dragged his maimed hand from his pocket, and strode straight toward Joe Caton.

THAT it was Caton he hadn't the slightest doubt. There was no mistaking the simian build of the slayer-robber—the low forehead, the shock of black hair, the apelike arms. That Joe Caton knew him was instantly apparent. The piggish eyes of the murderer raced to that right hand of King's, and bulged out to their fullest extent at what he saw. When he knew himself recognized, King stood stock-still, moving not so much as a muscle, and let Caton stare his fill.

A long, tense moment, while the light from the shack bathed the figure of the man in the street.

Then Joe Caton whirled and looked back into the shack he had rented as a temporary hide-out. There was only one door. There were no windows. The place was a trap. King had figured his man to a nicety. He could take him now, after a fight. Maybe. But it would be too tame. Death held no terrors for Caton, because he had no imagination—or King thought he hadn't. To the murderer, that shack must have suddenly become a ghastly trap.

He whipped around to look back at King. The bareheaded man hadn't moved a muscle.

With a scream like that of a horse mortally wounded, Joe Caton sprang straight ahead, toward King. Still King did not move. He kept his eyes squarely to the front, did not even allow them to follow the movements of the murderer. Caton stopped within three paces of him, raised his hand and waved it before the eyes of King. King neither blinked or moved. He merely stood there, staring idiotically.

With another scream, which brought a rattling of bolts in the houses all about, Caton turned to the left and ran up the street. Grinning after him, King

waited a full minute and started in pursuit. He did not need to keep Caton in sight. He could tell by the behavior of natives the direction the murderer had taken. King had evolved a neat punishment for Caton, and one that he felt fitted the crime to perfection. He wondered if it would work out as he planned.

Hours later, with La Guayra somewhere behind, invisible, unheard, Walt King was treading tirelessly along through the jungle, following a dim trail that led inland.

"I've got him!" he told himself exultantly. "I've got him! It is better than hanging, electrocution, or life imprisonment! But can I make the grade myself?"

King's torn hand pained him terribly, and he fastened tighter the tourniquet he had fashioned. There were all sorts of possibilities. Blood poison, for example. But King did not think Caton would last that long. Besides, King knew something of herbs. He would chance it. Uppermost in his mind at this time was the picture of the Espail-lats, and the younger daughter for whom Caton had made the wooden doll with the simpering smile.

"Nothing can really pay the brute for that!" said Walt King to himself. "And *nobody*—except me! Back from the dead to avenge the dead! He hasn't much of a mind, but such as he has, I can read it like a book. The pages are smudged and slimy, but readable."

On through the night, Walt King followed the jungle trail of Joe Caton. It was easy to follow, for ever and anon, back down the wind, would come a shouted burst of demoniac laughter. Joe Caton was pleased with himself. He had, apparently, outrun the man who had come back from the sea to get him.

Near morning the fugitive risked making a fire. Somewhere on his race he had managed to knock down a bird for a meal. Joe Caton was an old hand

in the jungles. Frightened he was, but canny. He knew he needed food if he was to live on. So he built the fire, and the bird became deliciously odorous on the spit he made and turned in the flames.

It was done to a turn, and Joe Caton raised the whole bird to his mouth, which gaped cavernously open to receive the first wolfish bite. But, over his breakfast, looking eerie and ghost-like in the pre-dawn darkness, just within the circle of firelight, he saw the man who had come back!

The man did not move. His eyes did not blink, and his mutilated right hand was plainly in evidence. Joe Caton had not heard the specter arrive. One moment the night had been vacant. Then—there was the man he had thrown overboard to the sharks. That he had really lived through was inconceivable. A motionless body—well, the sharks would have done their duty by it.

With a wild scream, which came after a full minute of wild-eyed staring at King, Joe Caton dropped the bird he had cooked, and darted away, into the jungle again. King noticed, in the moment of time vouchsafed him, that the face of the murderer was scratched and bleeding from the bite of many thorns and slapping limbs. His clothes were in rags, and his feet were bare. He had caught Caton in La Guayra in the act of retiring. Only the remnants of socks remained on the ankles of the fugitive.

King listened, motionless, without even turning his head, until the threshing through the bush died away, up the trail. Then he darted forward, caught up the fowl Caton had dropped, and stepped back out of the firelight.

His eyes glued to the darkness ahead, he strode on after Caton, munching the murderer's breakfast with hearty relish.

"I've got him!" he exulted. "I've got him! If only *I* can hold out!"

But, remembering the Espail-lats, he knew he could. Joe Caton, who made

wooden dolls with simpering smiles, and seemed a veritable Santa Claus to children who worshiped dolls. Joe Caton who smiled at children—like a wolf licking his chops before feeding on a rabbit! Any punishment was too light for Caton.

King knew he had to hold out.

SO the night passed, and the day came, with Joe Caton pressing deeper and deeper into the jungle. There was deep ravines to be passed, matted jungle growths, and morasses which stank with pestilence. But Joe Caton feared none of the dangers of the jungle as he feared the man who was relentlessly following him.

Joe Caton was in rags, and bleeding from scores of wounds—wounds made by thorns and barbs, wounds made by the sucking leeches of the swamps, wounds made by savage flies, gnats and mosquitoes. But before the day ended, Joe Caton was singing! A wild, discordant song, a song mingled with much demoniac laughter. He raced through the jungle, which he hoped would hide him, in the end, and always he looked back. He never heard his pursuer, but if he dared paused for so much as half an hour, he would always see the man with the flowing hair and the mutilated right hand, standing motionless in the jungle, staring, waiting—with an expressionless face.

Then Joe Caton would hurry on—hurry on with all his strength, and Joe Caton was a mighty man. Hurry on until his body steamed with sweat, until his throat was dry and parched, and his whole body ached with weariness. Then he would pause for a while, breathing like a spent runner.

Toward the end of the second day, when civilization was miles behind across the trackless jungle, he brought forth his knife on one of his halts. He found a piece of wood that pleased him, and aimlessly began to whittle. Under

his hand, before he looked back suddenly and saw his pursuer standing in plain sight behind him, the piece of wood took on the shape of one of his simpering dolls.

But when he saw Walt King back there, Walt King who had come back from the dead, he dropped the thing he was fashioning, and took up the race once more. On and on, endlessly. He paused at intervals to snap up stagnant, wiggler-filled water in his sweaty palm, and with it to rinse his mouth, allow a few drops to trickle into his throat.

The phantoms of the jungle were after him now, and he saw them gibbering all about him. The faces of the phantoms were familiar, too. Terribly and strangely familiar. They were the faces of men, and of women, he had killed. Then, while he blinked at them, and his heart was icy with fear, and his knife mechanically shaped a fresh piece of wood into the form of a simpering doll, their faces changed—and all resembled the man whom he had tossed overboard from the schooner.

The man whom he had mocked at by cutting off his thumb and his trigger finger! That had been a fine jest—and when he recalled it, Joe Caton laughed loud and long, and behind him Walt King followed by the sound of the laughter.

That laughter would lead the staggering, wearied pursuer, right to the resting place of Joe Caton, where, in view of his quarry, he always found the strength to stand stiffly, motionless, as though he had always been there, until Caton recognized him, cast aside the wooden bit upon which he worked, and rushed on.

Joe Caton would look back, and the trail behind him would be empty. He would look again, and there would be the man who had come back from the depths of the sea.

He formed a habit of taunting his pursuer.

"Yah! Yah! You can't scare me! "I know you can't shoot, because I cut off your trigger finger. Ha! Ha! Haa-a-aa! They told me you were fast with a gun, and I cut off your trigger finger for a laugh! Why do you follow me? You can't shoot!"

More than once, when this happened, Walt King was tempted to jerk his revolver with his left hand, and prove to Joe Caton that he *could* shoot. But he did not. This way was better, and little by little Joe Caton, the killer, was breaking. His journey through the jungle was more aimless, and he often deviated from a straight line, threshing through the underbrush, going waist deep into fetid morasses.

At these times King had but to travel on, wait for Joe Caton to return to the trail. Then Caton would see ahead of him, instead of behind, the man who had come back.

SO into the next night, and Joe Caton was gaunt with hunger. But he did not feel the pangs. For him the way was full of people, of faces which gibbered and grimaced, and most of the faces resembled the face of Walt King. He formed a habit of talking with King, and when King made no answer, Caton would laugh, curse him vilely, and stagger on.

Then, the wilderness, far inland, which is penetrated by few men—the wilderness where stinging things fly, where poisonous reptiles crawl, and the bushmaster rules supreme.

Out of sight of Joe Caton, Walt King staggered often.

His lips were cracked and his voice, when he spoke to himself, was like the cawing of a crow. He was almost done.

"But I will go through! I will! I will! The right is on my side, and this is more just punishment for Caton than swift execution. He has taken many lives. His own shall be taken many times!"

So they passed into the deeper jungle, where the overhanging limbs shut out forever the light of the sun, where the aisles through are wells of gloom, in which one is instantly lost unless one's sense of direction is superhuman.

Walt King was slightly delirious himself, and his right arm was swollen twice its size, and from wrist to shoulder. Sharp stabs of pain ran through the arm, the shoulder, and the right side of the body. King cursed himself for a fool that he did not end it all with a bullet. But then he remembered the *Espailats*, and continued on, though now and again he laughed, and caught himself up sharply, fearfully, when he realized that the laughter he heard was his own.

Over his right elbow, the swollen arm, which had grown stiff while bent at the elbow, he carried many dangling things on a string. Those things were the partially finished dolls which were Joe Caton's mileposts on the dash through the jungle. Walt King scarcely knew why he gathered them up, and kept them. As reminders, perhaps—reminders of the *Espailats*, and especially the younger sister, for whom Joe Caton had made one of these things.

Whatever the reason, he carried them, and there now were a full dozen, dangling in the crook of the monstrous arm, clicking their half-finished faces together, talking among themselves as Walt King followed on after Joe Caton.

Hour after hour. They now were so deeply into the jungle barrier that Joe Caton had to feel his way with his hands, and Walt King had to listen carefully to catch the sound of Joe Caton's endless laughter. Now, perhaps, there were *muñecos* which he missed, and Walt King was compelled to rub his face with phosphorus so that Caton could see him.

Caton would see, scream hoarsely, scarcely above a whisper, and scramble on, threshing through underbrush,

butting into trunks of trees and snaky lianas—like a man without eyes, or like a bluebottle fly against a windowpane.

King was almost on Caton's heels now, and praying all the time—praying that this chase would not last forever, praying that Caton's strength fail him at last. He refused to think of the endless journey back to La Guayra, and across to Willemstad. That could be taken care of when the time came.

Then, suddenly and terribly, there came from dead ahead, a scream of terror that literally rocketed through the gloomy aisles of the jungle. Mumbling drunkenly, Walt King broke into a shambling run. Brighter grew the way ahead. Joe Caton had broken through the jungle, into a grass-choked clearing—grass that reached to his shoulders.

Walt King saw the top of Caton's head, threshing wildly to right and left, as though Caton fought a score of opponents too short for King to see. Caton screamed endlessly. The threshing sound was as of a drove of peccaries on a stampede. Then the head of Joe Caton dropped from view, though the uproar in the clearing, among the grass, increased in ferocity.

A cold chill caressed the spine of Walt King, and he forgot his fatigue. For just before the head of Caton had dropped from view, King had seen another head—the vicious head of a striking bushmaster! The fanged head was slashing down at the face of Joe Caton, and the right hand of Joe Caton had darted up and caught the reptile just below the head.

King knew that the bushmaster, fold on fold, had wrapped itself around Caton, and that Caton was doomed.

SLOWLY, horror possessing him, King moved ahead. There might be another bushmaster. He did not know whether they traveled in pairs, like rattiers. They might—and King was far too nearly done to withstand an

attack. Joe Caton's screams increased in intensity.

Then, at last, King was standing with arm's reach of Caton, and the whole grim drama unfolded before his eyes. Caton was now quite mad. His right hand still grasped the head of the reptile, and the snake's body swelled all out of proportion, below and above the hand—swelled like King's arm. The snake's eyes were like coals of fire, and they seemed to peer right into the eyes of Caton.

Flexing, contracting, writhing, the bushmaster was little by little bringing that gaping mouth closer to the face of Caton. Caton was done. No man, single-handed, can beat a full-grown bushmaster.

Then Caton did a thing that filled King with horror. He looked up and saw King. His left hand was held at the wrist by a twofold coil of the bushmaster's body. But as Caton saw King, and recognized him, the fear in his face was a dreadful thing—a ghastly thing.

Slowly, even against the might of the bushmaster's coils, he brought his left hand up toward the neck of the snake. Closer and closer, while the cords of his neck stood out like ropes, and his arms became Titan's arms. Up and up, until his left hand was fastened to the neck of the snake beside his right hand.

Then, with all his mighty strength, Joe Caton lunged and tore and matched his power against that of the bushmaster. When he loosened his hands at last, the head of the bushmaster dangled. But his coils still were not dead, and the face of Caton became purple as he waited for the death struggles of the bushmaster to spend themselves and free him.

When the bushmaster finally grew weak enough, his coils dropped from Caton, one by one, and as the last one dropped, Caton dropped, too.

King stepped forward, and secured the swollen wrists of Caton. Then he dragged the heavily breathing man back into the jungle. And there they slept, pursuer and pursued, for twenty hours.

When Caton awoke he was babbling, and on the journey back to La Guayra, taken by easy stages, a mere twenty miles a day, Caton amused himself at stopping places, while King prepared meals, by working on his wooden dolls. This, perhaps, was why King had kept the unfinished ones—to provide some amusement for the apelike man whose mind had broken under the strain.

Whittling, whittling, always whittling—and grinning up with childlike faith at King, until both had eaten, when King would prod the killer on again.

Ages later King reported himself and his prisoner to the mossback consul in Willemstad—the little man who had sent Walt out on the hunt.

"It will be a short shrift and a merry one for you, my man!" snapped the terrierlike mossback to Joe Caton. "You'll pay, and pay to the full, for the *Espailrats!*"

"You don't execute demented men," said Walt King wearily. "Joe Caton has paid for everything. Let him go on making his *muñecos* in jail—the *muñecos*, with the silly, changeless smile. And say, Mr. Consul, did you happen to notice how all these dolls resemble me?"

Joe Caton, handcuffed to King, looked up at his captor with a vacuous smile.

LOOT OF THE BUCCANEERS

SCIENCE and the spirit of adventure have been combined recently in an odd way by Lieutenant George Williams, a former British naval officer, who has conducted a series of treasure hunts around the Panama Canal Zone.

Lieutenant Williams uses a scientific instrument known as a "gold-finder," and he is searching mainly for the treasure buried by the famous pirate, Henry Morgan. Williams has a four-year concession from the government of Panama and has had considerable luck so far in locating buried treasure.

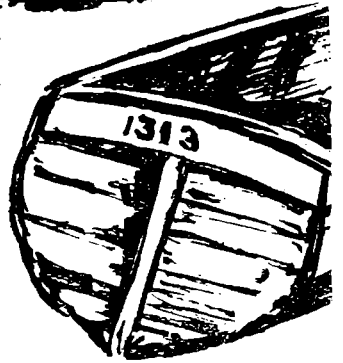
Most of this treasure hunting has been on the Cruces Trail, but more recently he has turned his attention to Porto Bello, a ruined city similar to that of Old Panama.

The treasure that Williams has found thus far does not consist of jewelry and precious stones, but of church plate, all of solid silver—for the "gold-finder" finds silver as well. This church plate was stolen from the Spanish priests by the ruthless buccaneers under Morgan. A church bell of pure silver has been found, together with jugs, vases, trays, and other things used by the Spaniards in the olden days.

But Lieutenant Williams feels sure that this is only the beginning. He is certain that Porto Bello is rich in buried treasure, for often, even without any means of science, treasure has been found there during late years. There must be thousands of dollars worth of gold plate still buried around the ruins of the city. There may be fortunes in jewels waiting for some lucky treasure hunter.

Most valuable of all, however, is the solid gold image of the Virgin Mary once owned by the governor of Porto Bello. And it is this that Lieutenant Williams is particularly anxious to locate. It was hidden somewhere when Morgan sacked the city with his horde of pirates behind him like ravening wolves.

Where the image is, no one knows, but it is believed by the priests of Panama that the golden statue is buried somewhere near by, perhaps close to the bones and skulls of the very pirates who helped to lay waste the ancient city.



***There were millions in gold
in the Klondike diggings—
but outlaws wanted easier
paths to fortune***

The Man From Skagway

By James B. Hendryx

Author of "Justice—and the Law," etc.

CHAPTER I.

GOLD RUSH.

IT was late in May. The wind blew cold on White Pass summit, where Sergeant Kelly of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police collected customs and inspected the outfits of the thousands of stampedees that swarmed over the pass. Two con-

stables moved about among the confused litter of sleds, boxes, and bales. They were answering innumerable questions—maintaining order.

"Here, sarge, let me do the pencil work. We can get along twice as fast."

The sergeant whirled to stare into a pair of gray eyes set in a smooth-shaven face. The owner of the face was young and lean. He had the sinewy

litheness of a panther. His lips parted in a smile to expose white, even teeth. There had been a few smiles and fewer shaven faces among the anxious-eyed stampedeers who, day after day, chafed at the delay of inspection.

"An' who the devil are you?" Sergeant Kelly asked brusquely.

"I'm Joe Northern. Come on—give me the pencil, and we'll get to work. These folks look like they're in a hurry to get somewhere."

The smile that accompanied the words was infectious, and the stern lips of Sergeant Kelly relaxed in a grin. "The devil take 'em—an' you, too, for interferin' with an officer in discharge of his duty. But, here! Take the pencil an' the book, an' get to work, since you're askin' for it."

THREE hours later, when the relief detail took over the work, the sergeant turned to his helper. "You'll be comin' with me for a bite to eat?" he invited. "You've earned it. We moved 'em along in jig time."

"It's a two-man job," agreed the younger man, as he followed the grizzled officer to the police tent.

"A two-man job! Hell! If it ain't a ten-man job, I'll eat it! What with enforcin' the new order about a year's supply of grub, an' collectin' the customs! An' you've got to be a doctor, an' a lawyer, an' an information bureau besides. An' the damn fool questions they ask! 'Twas funny, at first; but it quit bein' funny a long time ago. By the time you listen to 'em from mornin' till night, you get to wonderin' who the hell ever let 'em grow up—an' why?"

"The reason for the confusion is that you ought to have more men on the job," said Northern, grinning.

"We ain't got 'em. There was only a handful of police in the Yukon, an' we was hard enough put before the stam-

pedeers come swarmin' in on us like flies. The super hustled us off to the passes, with orders to rush 'em through an' not jam the summits. This is only one of four routes. Looks busy, don't it? An' yet they tell me the Chilkoot's gettin' more than we are."

The old officer paused and regarded the younger man quizzically. "But how does it come you ain't hell-bent on crowdin' on to Bennett, like the rest of 'em? I'll speak to Corporal Deems an' have your stuff rushed through when you've ett. 'Twill be little enough to do for the help you give."

Young Northern smiled. "If it's just the same to you, sarge, I'd like to hang around and help for a few days longer."

"Lad, you can stay till the flowers bloom—an' welcome! But I don't understand. Yer an American, I take it?"

"From the ground up. And I've got a couple of reasons for wanting to stay. I like to look 'em over. It's my business."

"Policeman?" asked the sergeant quickly.

"No—newspaperman. I got the bright idea that the readers of the Sunday *Star* would like to know what's going on up here—what a big gold rush is really like. I put it up to the old man and he shipped me up here for a dozen feature stories. I got a good story in Seattle, another on the boat, and a couple of more in Skagway, where Soapy Smith, and his gang of outlaws are running the town. What a hell hole! Then, I got another on the trail, and the summit, here, is good for another. They're stories that ought to go big."

"Yeah," said the sergeant. "They'd go big with me, all right—if I could sit down in a warm dinin' room with my feet under the table, an' a good cup of hot coffee in front of me, an' read 'em out of a newspaper. Up here it don't go so big. Stay as long as you

like—an' yer welcome to stop with us, unless you'd rather set up yer own camp. One good turn, as the sayin' goes, deserves another."

Northern laughed. "I'm takin' you up on that. The fact is, I couldn't set up my own camp if I wanted to. And that brings us to the second reason I want to hang around. I've got some curiosity to see what sort of a looking cuss it was that stole my outfit."

"Stole yer outfit?"

"Yeah—yesterday, on the trail. I'd dragged it to the foot of the pass on a sled, and while I was nosing around the big camp to see what I could see, some one lifted everything but the sled and my pack sack. I spent last night in the tent of a couple of fellows who had some spare blankets and the usual Northern hospitality."

The sergeant frowned. "There's a lot of stealin' on the American side. We've had plenty of complaints. The devil of it is to identify the stuff."

"I think I can identify mine," answered Northern. "I checked the pieces with a blue pencil. But, I'm not going to bother you fellows with a complaint. You've got your hands full as it is. I just want to get a good look at the hombre—that's all. I'm going on in, along with the rest of 'em—that is, if you'll let me by without an outfit. I'd like a police card, too."

"A what?"

"A police card—a permit to go where I want to, when I want to, and to horn in on this and that. Something to show policemen that I'm a privileged character."

Reaching into his pocket, he handed the officer his newspaper credentials, and a letter directed to "whom it may concern," which stated that Joe Northern was a newspaper reporter of discretion who never violated police confidence. The letter was signed by a high official of the New York City police force.

SERGEANT KELLY scratched his head thoughtfully. "We ain't got police cards—that I ever heard tell of. An', what with the shortage of grub an' the prices they're gettin' for it along the river, our orders is to let no man into the country without he's got a year's supply of grub. We ain't to make no exceptions."

"I've got plenty of money," ventured Northern. "The old man realized that prices would be high, and he sure went the limit on expense money."

"You can't eat money," the sergeant reminded him.

"That right. And orders are orders. I'll just stick around a few days and make myself useful while I write the Saga of the Summit, and then I'll beat it back to Skagway and get another outfit."

There was a twinkle in the keen eyes of the old officer. "It'll be a cold trip, an' a hungry one, without grub an' blankets. You'll prob'ly starve to death, or freeze."

Northern laughed. "Bet you a week's pay I don't. Hell! If a man's born to die at eighty, he can't starve or freeze to death at twenty-five!"

"There's a grain of truth in the statement," admitted the officer. "But why eighty?"

"It's the age I picked to die. A man don't have much fun after eighty. Got my tombstone bought and inscribed. 'Joe Northern,' it says. 'Born July 4, 1873. Died July 4, 1953, of boredom. No runs. No hits. No errors.'"

"Yer forehanded," said the sergeant. "An', this here tombstone—if you did happen to make an error of forty or fifty years, what would become of it then?"

"There'd be some one to worry about that," grinned Northern. "It isn't paid for."

"'Twould be a shame," said the sergeant, "to keep the likes of you out of the country. I've be'n thinkin'—which

is a process you'd prob'ly not recognize—that what this country needs is newspaper publicity to get folks comin' in here. There may be some one that's stayin' to home for some reason or other. The inspector'll be along in a day or two. I'll speak to him about appointin' you special constable. As a member of the force, you'll be needin' no police card, an' no year's grub, neither. You can come an' go as you please."

"But I'm not a Canadian, nor an Irishman, nor an Englishman——"

"'Tis yer own hard luck. But you could be a special constable if you was even a Hottentot. You'll rate up with guides, dog drivers, an' interpreters—but, you'll get where yer goin', if yer legs holds out."

"Thanks, sarge. You're all right!" said Northern seriously. "And some day I'll get the chance to come back at you."

CHAPTER II.

SPECIAL CONSTABLE.

EARLY in the morning, three days later, Joe Northern took leave of the officers on the summit. The inspector had readily agreed to the sergeant's suggestion and had appointed the young newspaperman a special constable.

"Good luck to you," said the inspector. "Tell Superintendent Steel at Bennett that I expect to visit Chilkoot summit, and go on to Chilkat, and in over the Dalton trail."

"I'll bet you got a good tale for the folks back in New York to be readin' over their Sunday coffee," the sergeant said. "Don't forget to put in about the idiot that fetched in the ice-cream freezer, an' the one that wanted to know how far it was to the nearest drug store."

"I've got 'em in," laughed Northern, "and a lot more with 'em."

"It's too bad you couldn't spot your

man. But there was a lot of goods checked off with blue pencils."

"Oh, I spotted him, all right—day before yesterday. Recognized him as one of the gang that hung around Soapy Smith's. He checked through under the name of R. Brown."

"Why in the devil didn't you point him out?" exclaimed the sergeant. "We'd have picked him up—or at least turned him back."

Young Northern shook his head. "You fellows have your hands full here as it is without handling any prisoners and the stolen goods for evidence. I recognized my check marks and got a good look at the fellow. I couldn't have proved my property, anyhow. He had sense enough to leave the pack that contained my personal belongings with the sled. The stuff he took was the same as every one else packed—bought at the same store in Skagway, and done up the same way. He got a surprise when he found me here helping the police. And he sure looked relieved when he ran my own goods through right under my nose and got away with it. And, as for turning him back—that's the last thing I wanted. I've got a hunch that that jasper and I are going to meet again."

The inspector nodded approval. "You've got a wise head, son. He's probably figuring on pulling off something big in the gold fields—and we've got a guard house in Dawson that'll hold him."

AT Bennett young Northern plunged into that chaos of frenzied activity caused by the desire of several thousand chechahcos to knock together some sort of craft that would carry them and their supplies through the lakes, and downriver to Dawson.

Felling trees, whip-sawing lumber out of the green timber and fashioning it into boats was the occupation of thousands who had never built a boat and

had only the vaguest notions of how to go about it. And, with the break-up almost upon them, men worked feverishly during the hours of daylight, and by the light of bonfires at night.

Boats were built that never would float right side up, and others so clumsy of design that they were mere boxes which, once loaded, could never be handled in the water. A few very creditable craft were turned out.

After a few days in this camp, which would have furnished material for a dozen newspaper stories, young Northern proceeded to Tagish with two constables of the Mounted whom Superintendent Steel was sending to help Inspector Strickland.

"Strickland'll need every man he can get hold of, and wish he had more," opined the gray-haired superintendent, "when boats begin going through. His job is to get the name and address of every man that goes inside besides numbering and registering every boat. A lot of men have passed the summit that'll never see Dawson, and their folks will be wanting to know what became of 'em."

On May 29th came the break-up. And boats—miles of them! Boats of every conceivable shape and design propelled by oars, paddles, sweeps, and sails swarmed down upon Tagish. Tiny rowboats, rigged with a blanket sail forward, their single occupants toiling laboriously at clumsy oars, wallowed along, showing scarcely any freeboard, to be all but run down by faster sailing craft, or by lumbering scows propelled by a dozen sweeps.

"Every man for himself; and the devil take the hindermost!" was the cry of the gold-crazed chechahcos. And "rush 'em through!" was the police slogan.

Joe Northern threw himself into the work with a will, and during the peak of the rush labored side by side with the men of the Mounted.

One day, as he listed the occupants of a heavily-loaded scow, he glanced overside to see a constable releasing a one-man boat. He recognized its single occupant as R. Brown, the man who had relieved him of his outfit at the foot of White Pass, and grinned sardonically as he watched the constable affix the number to the little boat. The number was 1313.

"Thirteen-thirteen!" exclaimed a scowman, pointing to the little boat. "Take a good look at that hombre, boys—with a number like that, the chances is, it'll be the last time you'll ever see him!"

CHAPTER III.

TWO THOUSAND IN CASH.

R. BROWN, late of Skagway, beached his boat among a hundred other boats, a short distance above the head of Box Canyon, and walked forward to join the rabble of anxious-eyed chechahcos clustered near the brink of the perpendicular rock walls that formed the sides of the "Box."

"What's the trouble?" he asked of a man who, with two companions, stood upon the edge of the crowd.

"Ain't you seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"Why, what all of us fellers got to go down through! What the hell do you s'pose?"

"Meanin'," said R. Brown, biting the corner from a plug of tobacco, "that there's a stretch of bad water?"

"Well, it don't cost you nothin' to look," growled the man. "I'll say it's bad water! A man might jest as well stick a gun to his head an' be done with is, as tackle that! If it ain't one thing in this man's country, it's another!"

Elbowing his way to the brink of the rock cliff, R. Brown stared downward upon seething white water that roared thunderously through the narrow chute

in a series of waves that topped a high-flung ridge in the center of the current.

Viewed merely as a spectacle, the sight was impressive. Viewed as a waterway down which a man must navigate a boat, it might well give pause even to the stout-hearted. And, R. Brown was not particularly stout of heart. His eyes shifted speculatively to the steep, rocky foot trail that paralleled the canyon.

No man could drag even a small boat over that trail, to say nothing of back-packing his outfit, piece by piece.

At his side a man spoke to his neighbor. "Four fellows got drowned not over an hour ago. Their boat didn't hold the ridge. It slipped off, hit the rocks, an' in a minute they was gone."

"Yeah," muttered the other. "An' they say there was seven drowned yesterday."

"Yeah—but a lot gets through."

"That's right. Look! There goes a boat now!"

R. Brown's eyes followed the pointing finger, and he stared in fascination at the small boat, far below, that was just entering the head of the canyon.

Voices on the cliff were hushed, as with tense expectancy all eyes were riveted upon the tiny craft with its four occupants that, squarely upon the center of the ridge was plunging and pitching from wave to wave, as it shot past with incredible speed.

Twice in the brief space of its traverse of the canyon it disappeared in a smother of flying spray only to reappear again many waves beyond. Then—the low murmur of voices, and the expelling of pent breath, as far below, the little boat shot into placid water.

"Gee!" muttered one of the men who had spoken before. "I wish that was us!"

"Yeah. Well, let's tackle it. The longer we stay here, the colder our feet gets. Might's well die down there as anywheres. They say drownin's easy."

"It ain't the drownin'. It's gettin' smashed all to hell agin' them rocks."

The other laughed—a short, nervous laugh. "What the hell do you care how you look after you're dead? There won't no one see you, anyway. They don't find the bodies. Come on! We might make it!"

THE two turned away from the edge, and R. Brown saw them both start back for the boats. Again his eyes sought the water, and again he stared in fascination while two more boats ran through, holding to the crest of the ridge.

"There's a chance," he muttered. "Mebbe, it ain't so bad as it looks. Anyways, it's better'n——"

He paused abruptly, and glanced about him, but, apparently no one had heard him.

R. Brown's need of haste was urgent. Somewhere behind him, he knew, certain minions of the notorious "Soapy" Smith would be eagerly seeking him. True, he had assumed the name of R. Brown at White Pass summit, and as R. Brown he had been listed, and his boat numbered at Tagish. He wished, as he fingered the thick roll of greenbacks in his pocket, that he hadn't double-crossed Soapy Smith.

Soapy had steered him against the Jew, and after the robbery, he had handed Soapy fifteen hundred for his share of the loot—and, had kept five thousand for himself. How in hell did Soapy know how much the Jew had on him? But, he *did* know!

R. Brown shuddered at the memory of the white face of the "Frisco Kid," one of Soapy's look-outs, who had tipped him off two days after the robbery.

"Beat it!" the Kid had warned. "Soapy's hep to the five thou you let stick to you. He's passed the word to git you. The boys'll do it to-night. You ain't got a chanct."

And the man who now called himself R. Brown had beat it—had shucked his name, as he had shucked it a dozen times before, and slipped out of Skagway among the White Pass stampeders with only the clothes on his back and the roll of bills in his pocket.

At the foot of White Pass, cold fear gripped his heart, as he learned of the police order to allow no one to pass who couldn't show a year's grub. Money didn't count. To return to Skagway meant a bullet, or the cold steel of a knife blade between his ribs.

HE spotted a young chechahco he had seen around Skagway, and when the chechahco left his outfit and went prowling about the big camp, he loaded that outfit onto a discarded sled, and cached it. The chechahco could go back to Skagway for more. No one was waiting to shove a knife blade between his ribs.

For two days he lay low and then tackled the pass. For several minutes his heart had stood still, as he waited for the sergeant to inspect his year's supply of grub, while the supposed chechahco he had stolen it from stood at the officer's elbow, checked the items, and recorded the name "R. Brown."

"Chechahco—hell!" breathed R. Brown, now, at the remembrance of it. "He's a policeman! I sure was lucky he was so damn busy he never recognized his own stuff. I'm glad I had sense enough to leave his pack sack. But he's liable to come along—an' Soapy's men's more liable yet—"

The muttered words trailed off into silence, and R. Brown turned back from the cliff's edge.

"I've just *got* to go through!" he said determinedly.

"Same here, pardner," said a man at his elbow. "You goin' it alone?"

"Yes—an' it's a two-man job, to hold a boat on that there ridge. If it slips off, he's a goner."

"I'll say! I'm alone, too. An' I can't swim a lick."

"What good would swimmin' do? If you don't get off the ridge, chances is, you'll get through—an' if you do, you'll get smashed flatter'n a pancake agin' them rocks."

"What do you say we tackle it together? Take my boat through an' then come back for yourn?"

"What! Go down through there twict!"

The man grinned. "You got a better way?"

R. Brown spat, and followed the man back toward the boats.

"This is my outfit," said the stranger, kicking the bow of a small craft loaded almost to the gunwales. "Thirteen hundred, the number. Nice number to run them rapids with? You superstitious?"

R. Brown grinned. "What difference does it made if I am, or ain't? Yonder's my outfit—two boats over—thirteen-thirteen, her number is. The name is R. Brown."

"Mine's Kendall—Pete Kendall, from Spirit Lake, Iowa. Some folks claim that thirteen is a lucky number."

"It better be! We're sure goin' to need all the luck that's comin' to us."

"Let's tackle it while our nerve's up," said Kendall, laying hold of the bow.

"Hold on," said R. Brown, his eyes narrowing. "How about runnin' mine through first?"

"I got here first."

"Yeah, but I was jest thinkin'—there ain't no one runnin' them rapids fer fun. Suppose we was to run your outfit through an' you'd figger you'd had enough of rapids? Your stuff would be through—an' mine wouldn't."

"Do I look like a crook?" asked the man hotly.

"Do I?" countered R. Brown.

"No—sure not."

"What I mean," said R. Brown, sagely, "you can't never go on a man's looks."

"Tell you what I'll do," said Kendall, stepping closer and drawing a wallet from his pocket. "Here's two thousand dollars that says I'll come back and help run your boat through if we get through with mine. If we don't make it, it won't make a damn bit of difference who's carrying the money—they'll never find us anyway. Count it, and stick it in your pocket. Then, when we come back after your outfit, you can hand it over."

Deliberately Brown counted the money, and stuffed the wallet into his pocket. "Fair enough," he said, "Let's get agoin'."

"I'll take the bow," suggested Kendall. "I'm lighter than you, an' she'll steer easier. Hold her on that ridge now, or we're goners!"

Gradually they worked the little craft out into the current as a hundred pairs of eyes looked on. As the boat shot faster and faster in the suck of the current, R. Brown cast one look toward the tense crowding faces, and with an air of bravado, he waved his oar. Then, in the first of the tossing waves, the tiny craft leaped and bucked like a broncho, and the whole world seemed blotted out in a smother of flying spray.

Two minutes later, before the two fairly realized what was happening, they were floating on an even keel in quiet water. "How did you like it?" asked Kendal, with a white-faced grin, as they tied up to the bank.

"Gosh!" breathed R. Brown shakily. "I swallowed my cud!"

Drenched to the skin, they walked back over the foot trail to become the center of an eager group of questioners:

"How was it?"

"Was you scairt?"

"Yer boat's so damn little we couldn't see it half the time in them waves."

"We thought you was goners, half a dozen times."

"Is it as bad as it looks?"

"You goin' to run another one through?"

"What'll you take to run ours down?"

"What's it like in there?"

"Listen!" said R. Brown. "When you hit them waves, you won't know nothin' till yer through. If you don't get through, you won't know nothin' neither—so what the hell?"

Kendall grinned as the other returned his wallet. "Looks like thirteen is our lucky number."

"Seems as if," admitted R. Brown. "There's two thirteen's on mine. Accordin' to that, we'd ort to be twict as lucky."

The second trip through the Box was a repetition of the first. "They tell me," said Kendall, as they beached beside his own boat, "that there's another rapids below here that's worse than this one. The White Horse, they call it—and they say she's a hell winder. What do you say we double through again?"

"Suits me," agreed R. Brown. "Wait fer me when you git there. My boat took in more water'n yourn. I've got to do some bailin'."

CHAPTER IV.

BROWN BECOMES KENDALL.

A HALF hour later, floating downstream, R. Brown dawdled at his oars as he speculated aloud to himself: "Two thousan' in cash—an' he can't swim. If a boat was to tip over at the tail end of a rapids like that last one, a feller would get shot out into still water, an' if he could swim good he'd make shore easy. If he couldn't he'd—be out of luck!"

His eyes gleamed as he went on: "Kendall couldn't see nothin' settin' in the front end—an' if there was a thousan' folks lookin' on from the bank, they couldn't none of 'em tell how it happened. That would leave me safe beyond the rapids with his boat—an' his two thousan' in my pocket—an' him

an' my boat gone to hell. There ain't no one knows which is tother of us, nohow, nor which is my boat, an' which is hisn. Them police is so damn busy hustlin' 'em through, that they wouldn't remember no one. An' he's got papers in his wallet with his name on 'em."

He grinned evilly. "I'd jest as soon be Pete Kendall as R. Brown—both of which I ain't neither one, nohow. It looks from here like R. Brown an' boat 1313 is due to turn up missing."

The grin left his face as he figured that if something *should* go wrong with his plans, those miners' meetings were very handy with a rope. For several seconds he sat in silence, watching the shores slip past.

"Aw," he mumbled finally, "Columbus took a chanct—an' two thousan' on top of what I got offn the Jew makes quite a little stake. This here's a good country. A man's a damn fool to break his back diggin' gold."

A few miles downstream, he found Kendall in a crowd even greater than that at the head of Box Canyon. These men had come down through the Box, but the White Horse, with its wildly tossing "Mane," gave them pause.

The Box had at least been approximately straight—but here a rock dyke slanted the whole river to the right bank where it plunged into the narrow throat of the crooked chute through which it rushed in a series of high-flung waves, overcurls, and whirlpools.

"She's got the Box backed off the map," said Kendall, pointing to the chaos of foaming white water. "Look—there goes a boat!"

IN tense silence the crowd riveted its eyes on the craft, a twenty-footer containing four men and their supplies.

Three of the men crouched low, holding to the gunwales, while the fourth stood in the stern, eyes ahead, hands gripping the steering oar.

The boat seemed fairly to leap from wave to wave, and as it hit the Mane it disappeared in a smother of flying spray.

A low, indefinable sound ran through the crowd—a sound that seemed a blending of moans and sighs.

The boat reappeared, seemingly hurled from the depths by a mighty catapult, to show full half its length clear of the water above the crest of a curling wave. Hoarse shouts of relief broke from the throats of the crowd as the craft seemed to hang for a brief instant suspended in the air—then again it disappeared in the trough of the waves.

Once more it appeared, and the man in the stern was seen to throw his whole weight against the steering oar to prevent slipping off the Mane into the dreaded whirlpool. The oar snapped, and the man plunged headlong overboard.

Shrill, hysterical exclamations rang out as men saw the boat yaw sharply and take the next trough on her broadside.

This time she did not reappear. Seconds passed, and toward the lower end of the rapid floating pieces of outfit were spewed into the quiet water. The boat emerged, bottom upward, and eager hands seized and dragged two struggling forms from the water.

"Two more gone," breathed a voice from the crowd. "Gee, I wish I was through!"

"It was No. 1175," imparted another. "I was talkin' to 'em not half an hour ago. They've be'n waitin' three days tryin' to get their nerve up. They finally done it with whisky."

"Whisky ain't no good when a man's got a job like that ahead of him. He needs a clear head," opined another. "There's one of them Mounted Police down below, takin' a list of the casualties. Them two makes forty-seven fer the White Horse, an' twenty-nine fer

the Box, so far. It sure is a hell of a country!"

Kendall's eyes met those of R. Brown. "Shall we tackle it?" he asked.

The other shrugged. "Might's well, I guess, while our nerve holds."

Kendall grinned. "A man can't go to hell but once, anyhow. An' if he's born to be hung, he can't be drowned."

"What d'you mean—born to be hung?" growled R. Brown, slanting the other a look. "Can't you think of nothin' but hell an' hangin' to talk about, when we've got a job like that ahead of us?"

As Kendall walked toward his boat, a man laid a hand on Brown's arm. "You goin' to tackle it, in that little boat?" he asked, wide-eyed.

Brown nodded. "Yeah—sure," he answered, and eyed the man steadily. "You look like a man that would do a thing you promised to do. It won't cost you much. It's like this: Kendall's my name—Pete Kendall, an' that's my boat, No. 1300. The other one there is R. Brown—we come down through the Box together, each helpin' the other run his boat through. We're goin' to run mine through first, an' then come back for hisn. It's No. 1313. What I'm askin'—if anythin' goes wrong—like that other boat just now—you let my wife know—Mrs. Pete Kendall, Spirit Lake, Iowa. Will you do it?"

"Sure, I will! Be glad to—that is, I hope I won't have to. Mrs. Pete Kendall, Spirit Lake, Iowa. I'll write it down. Your partner's calling you. I'm going down to the lower end to see you come through. Good luck!"

"Same to you. So long!" replied R. Brown, and as he moved on to join Kendall, he smiled, grimly.

"All ready?" greeted Kendall, who was evidently impatient to be off.

"Yeah. But, ain't you forgot somethin'?"

"Fergot somethin'! What?"

R. Brown held out his hand. "Why,

them two thousan' bucks that says you'll come back an' help me run my boat through."

The other handed over the wallet. "I thought, by now," he said, "that you'd know I'd come back."

Brown grinned. "It don't hurt to make sure. Come on—let's go!"

THE trip through the White Horse Rapids was a repetition on an exaggerated scale of the trip through the Box. The tiny boat, bobbing like a cork, plunged from wave crest to trough in a series of dizzying lunges, its occupants drenched with flying spray. Then, suddenly, it was floating placidly in the slow-moving eddy at the foot of the rapid, half filled with the water that had curled over the sides from the wave crests.

Tying the boat to the bank, R. Brown removed his water-soaked mackinaw and stowed it in the bow of the boat.

"Come on," he called, heading back up the foot trail, "let's get this job over with before we get cold feet."

As they stepped into Brown's boat, Kendall extended his hand. "I'll take my money now," he said. "I guess you don't think I'm going to run out on you."

"Sure," agreed the other. And then: "Oh, hell!"

"What?"

"Why—I left it in my coat."

"Say, man! That's every cent I've got in the world! Suppose some one should steal it!"

He made as though to step ashore, as Brown shoved out into the current. "Set still!" Brown cried. "You'll get to it quicker this way than walkin'! Chances is, it could lay there a week. There ain't no one goin' to frisk that old coat."

Kendall subsided into his place at the bow as the little craft, already in the suck of the current, plunged madly toward the roaring vortex of the rapids.

Hidden from sight of those on shore, in the trough of the last of the tossing waves of the Mane, R. Brown gripped his oar and with a mighty wrench, swerved the light boat broadside and, as she started upward on the wave, he threw all his weight on the lower gunwale. The next instant she was bottom side up.

Still gripping his oar, Brown disappeared beneath the surface, holding his breath as he whirled over and over while it seemed that thousands and thousands of devils were tugging at his arms and legs.

His lungs were bursting, and writhing green and red shapes gyrated and twisted through an inky blackness. Then he was on the surface, his tortured lungs sucking in great gasps of life-giving air. His ears rang. He released his grip on the oar, and struck out wildly.

Violent nausea assailed him, and the near-by shore appeared a blurred, indefinite mass that revolved giddily in great swinging circles. Then, eager hands were reaching from the bank. A uniformed figure, waist-deep in the water, clutched him by the shoulder, and both were drawn ashore by the eager hands.

Lying prone in the center of a circle of crowding forms, he coughed and retched, as the solid rock upon which he sprawled, seemed to pitch and whirl. As from far away came the sound of voices—"Kendall's his name—Pete Kendall—he's from Spirit Lake, Iowa. His partner's name was Brown. Brown never *did* come up."

Mightily, the half-drowned man fought to retain consciousness. Kendall—Pete Kendall—that was his name—he mustn't forget that—from Spirit Lake, Iowa. R. Brown was dead—drowned in the rapids when the boat tipped over—No. 1313, the boat was—the police could charge off both Brown and his boat as a total loss.

GROGGILY, he struggled to a sitting posture, his hand covered his eyes. If only the world would quit spinning around!

Something smooth and cold touched his hand, and a voice sounded close to his ear: "Take a long pull at that, pardner. You sure need it! It'll do you good."

His fingers closed about a bottle, and the odor of whisky was in his nostrils. An arm was supporting his shoulders, and a hand helped him raise the bottle to his lips and tilt it. He swallowed again, and again, and as the fiery liquor burned his gullet, his head cleared and the world gradually ceased to spin around.

A small boat was drawn up near by. His roving eyes caught the number—1300—Kendall's boat—*his* boat—*he* was Kendall now—he mustn't forget that. Struggling to his feet, he staggered to the boat, and seated himself on the gunwale.

A policeman, notebook and pencil in hand, stood before him. Water drained from the policeman's clothing and trickled across the rock. The man on the boat remembered, dimly, the uniformed figure waist-deep in the water.

"Thanks fer pullin' me out," he said between coughs. "I was damn near all in."

"That's all right. Glad I was able to do it. Afraid the eddy would take you back out before you could make it. Is this your boat? What's your name?"

"Pete Kendall, Spirit Lake, Iowa. Yes, this here's my boat—No. 1300. Where's Brown? Didn't he make it?"

"No, the other fellow never came up. Brown, you say, his name was?"

"Yeah—R. Brown—1313, his boat was. We run mine through, an' went back after hisn. We was near through. What happened?"

The policeman shook his head. "No one knows, if you don't. We saw you one second, and then we didn't see you

—and, the next thing we saw was the boat, bottom side up, and pieces of the outfit floating around. Then your head showed, and you began swimming.”

“Pore Brown,” said the man on the boat. “Pore devil—he was afraid of them rapids. He couldn’t swim a lick.”

“Where was he from?” asked the policeman, his pencil poised.

The man on the boat shook his head: “He never told me. All he said was that his name was R. Brown. His boat was No. 1313. I just met up with him at Box Canyon—we was both goin’ it alone, an’ we throw’d in together, runnin’ the boat through one at a time ‘cause we figgered it would be better than one man tryin’ it alone. We had good luck at the Box, an’ we got my outfit through to here—but we sure had bad luck with hisn.”

The policeman pocketed his notebook and moved on to his tent, the dozen or more witnesses to the tragedy trailed off toward the head of the rapids trying to gather courage from shaken nerves to run their own outfits through, and on the bank the man who now called himself Pete Kendall wrung out his shirt, bailed the boat, and shoved out into the current.

As the boat floated smoothly down the broad river, he transferred the five thousand in bills he had taken off the Jew to Kendall’s wallet, and tossed his own, which contained R. Brown’s customs receipt, into the water.

“This here’s a good country,” he said, smiling grimly. “A man should ort to do well here—if he uses his head.”

CHAPTER V.

BURIED DUST.

IN Dawson, the city of shacks and tents that had sprung up mushroomlike on the flat at the mouth of the Klondike, the man mingled unobtrusively among the chechahcos who crowded the saloons and dance halls.

In Cuter Malone’s Klondike Paiace, one of the lowest dives of the big camp, he forgathered with others of his ilk, and added a few dollars to his roll by robbing drunken chechahcos.

He listened to the stories of new strikes, and watched the chechahcos stampede in droves to new locations. And he heard men talk of the wonderfully rich diggings on Bonanza, and Ophir, and El Dorado, and Hunker; and watched with wolfish, covetous eyes as they weighed in little sacks, bulging with gold, and deposited them in the safes of saloons and gambling houses.

Time and again he plotted the robbery of these safes—one big job, and a man would be fixed for life! But with the places running full blast twenty-four hours a day, with competent looking guns ready to hand, and alert, hard-eyed bartenders working in shifts, he realized the futility of it.

His mind turned to the creeks. Where did these men keep their gold before they brought it in to deposit it in the safes? There could be only one answer—they cached it. Many of them brought in hundreds of ounces at a time. If a man could locate a few of those caches! He’d have to use his head, though—a miners’ meeting meant short shrift for a cache robber.

His determination to hit for the creeks was hastened by sight of one of Soapy Smith’s henchmen mingling with the crowd one night in the Tivoli. Had the man come downriver as a prospector? Or—

He shuddered at the thought of cold steel slipping between his ribs from behind.

Early next morning, he bought a stampeding outfit and hit for Bonanza.

THE broad bottoms were staked from rim to rim, and so was every feeder, every pup, and draw. This was as he had expected, and he went to work for wages while

he spotted the richer claims, studied the habits of their owners, and the lay of the land.

The owner of the adjoining claim, he learned, was an old-timer in the country—one Bettles, who had been among the first to stake on Bonanza.

Bettles was reported to be sluicing out from thirty to forty ounces a day, was drunk nearly every night, and only banked his dust in Dawson about once a month.

Here was a set-up if he could locate the man's cache, which should not be hard to do, as on several occasions he had seen him carry his clean-up for the day into his tent, which was situated only a few yards distant from his own. Somewhere within those four canvas walls was gold—plenty of gold. In a hole in the ground, probably—beneath the man's blankets.

He cut a slit in the wall of his own tent, and for several nights, lay for hours with his eye to the slit, watching the grotesque shadows that danced on the lighted walls of Bettles's tent, hoping that some night those shadows would reveal the location of the valuable cache.

But for the most part, the shadows showed only the tilting of bottles, for Bettles was a convivial soul, and his tent was a favorite rendezvous of the sourdoughs, whose loud talk and louder laughter ran far into the night.

Night after night he watched these men depart, and saw the tent go black as Bettles blew out the candles. And night after night he lay, trying to screw up his courage to the point of slipping over in the darkness and bashing in the old man's head with a rock as he lay in his drunken slumber.

It would be a snap—he would have plenty of time to locate the cache within the small compass of those walls, and besides that he would have plenty of time to recache the gold.

The crime would not be discovered

till morning, and, with the thousands of men on the creek, who would suspect him?

Hadn't he got away with the Kendall job? And nobody even suspected that it wasn't an accident! But this was different. There was no white-water rapid here to destroy the evidence, and by no stretch of the imagination could the finding of a man in his own bed with his head bashed in be ascribed to accident.

Murder and robbery—that's what it would be called. And if there would be some slip—

The man shuddered in his blankets. But there was gold—hundreds of ounces of it, lying within a few yards of him, and only a drunken man and four flimsy walls of canvas guarding it. How could there be a slip—if a man used his head? To-morrow night—or the next—the longer he waited, the more gold would accumulate. It would be a week or ten days before old Bettles would be going to Dawson.

Then, one evening a sourdough paused before the door of the other tent. "Stud game to-night over to my place, Bettles," he announced. "An' bring plenty o' dust. We ain't fergot what you done to us last time. The boys'll be there in an hour."

A chuckle sounded from the interior of the tent. "I'll be there! Takin' dust offn you boys sure is a damn sight easier'n gougin' it out of the gravel."

The other passed on, and the man who posed as Kendall, recognized him as the owner of a claim a quarter of mile up the creek.

Shortly thereafter, the shadow on the canvas wall showed that old Bettles had dropped to his knees in a corner of the tent—evidently heeling himself with dust from his cache. Then the tent went dark, and the watching man saw the old sourdough emerge from it, and make his way up the creek.

HERE was his chance! The chance of a lifetime—little sacks, bulging with gold lying there within a few yards of him! But, there was no hurry. The stud game would last far into the night.

An hour passed—two hours, while the man lay, watching the tents about him go dark as the miners sought their sleep.

Removing his boots, he stole out. Here and there, dull patches of light proclaimed the tents of the night revelers; but for the most part, the creek was dark.

Stealthily, he covered the few yards that separated him from Bettles's tent, and for a full minute, paused listening before its door. Loud laughter floated from a tent whose walls showed a dull blur of light in the distance, and a fragment of an obscene song from another.

Stooping swiftly, the man jerked at a tie string and slipped within the tent. Moving cautiously, he crept to the corner, and rolled back the blankets from a thick mattress of spruce boughs. Lying flat on his belly in the darkness, he ran his arm beneath the boughs, feeling with his fingers for recently disturbed earth.

He found it, near the head of the bed, and pushing away the boughs, began to throw out the loose earth with his hands.

A few inches down, his gouging fingers encountered buckskin—smooth, cylindrical little sacks, stuffed like sausages. Eagerly they fastened upon a sack and drew it forth. It seemed unbelievably heavy. Another was dragged forth—and another. Then, suddenly the man paused, and crouched, tense and rigid. Somewhere outside was the sound of footsteps. Doubtless, one of the tipsy revelers returning to his own tent.

The footsteps sounded nearer. And nearer. They were only a few feet away now!

Could it be that old Bettles was returning for more dust? Or liquor?

The footsteps paused at the door of the tent. There was a fumbling at the tie strings, a match flared as the old man stooped to examine the string that he found untied. In another instant, his eyes would sweep the interior! "The noose for cache robbers" was the law of the camps!

Like a tiger, R. Brown, alias Kendall, sprang. Intense blackness succeeded the flare of light, as he caught the older man with the full weight of his body and sent him rolling heels over head, to bring up against the sluice box. The next instant he had vanished in the darkness, his stocking feet making no sound. Loud cries sounded from the darkness behind him: "Robber! Robber! Robber! Help! Help!"

CIRCLING swiftly, Brown dived into his own tent and pulled the blankets over him. Feverishly, he reached beneath them and drew off his socks and trousers. Then, he struck a match, and with fingers not quite steady, held it to the wick of a guttered candle thrust into the mouth of a bottle. Sweat stood in little beads on his forehead, and he wiped it away on his sleeve.

"What the hell's the racket?" he roared, and candle in hand, stumbled groggily from the door of his tent, rubbing at his eyes with a fist. Lights were showing in other tents, as Bettles continued to yell.

"What's ailin' you?" he shouted, advancing toward the old man, his shirt tail flapping about his bare thighs.

"Fetch yer light!" cried Bettles. "There was a man in my tent, and he knocked me hell-west-an'-crooked when I come in the door!"

"He either seen me, or he didn't," muttered Brown, as he advanced, light in hand to where Bettles stood at the door of his tent. "What d'you mean—

a man in yer tent?" he growled. "Who was it?"

"How the hell do I know who it was? I come back fer a bottle of licker, an' I seen the flap was ontied, an' I hadn't no more'n struck a match till the next think I knows I was fetchin' up agin' the sluice box yender. Come on in with the light, an' we'll see if he bothered my cache. The way he got to hell out of here, he wasn't packin' off no great heft of dust."

"Didn't you get a look at him?" asked the other, as he followed Bettles into the tent.

"Jest a flash. Heard a kind of a noise behind me an' turned to look—then the light went out, an' I was on my way. He wore a beard, like you an' half the other hombres on the crick."

Other men arrived, and other candles were lighted, as Bettles, talking volubly, checked up his dust.

"She's all here, boys," he announced. "The damn skunk never got nothin'! But it's a good thing I come along when I did."

"Why didn't you hang onto him?" grinned Camillo Bill, one of the sourdoughs.

"Hang onto him! I did—you damn fool! Jest like you hung onto that moose that butted you halfway down a mountain a couple o' years back!"

"Which way did he go?" asked another.

"How'n hell do I know? I struck a match here in the door—an' next thing I knowd I was ontanglin' myself from the sluice box, an' hollerin'. Then Kendall come with a light, growlin' about me makin' a racket."

"Who's Kendall?" asked a smooth voice from the little knot of men.

The man who had adopted the name, glanced at the speaker, and for an instant his heart seemed to stand still as he recognized the smooth-shaven young man whose outfit he had stolen at the foot of White Pass, and who, two days

later, had stood on the summit, helping the police sergeant check in the supplies.

Then Bettles was answering the question, pointing him out with a gnarled forefinger. "Him, there, without no pants on. He's got the next tent, an' when he heard me yell, he come pronto."

"Oh," said the smooth-shaven one, and relapsed into silence.

THE candle burned short, and the man who posed as Kendall, blew it out lest its wavering flame should betray the sudden tremor of his hand. Was it imagination, or had there been something eloquently expressive in that single syllable, "Oh"? And, hadn't there been a meaning look in the blue eyes which regarded him? And why the peculiar smile that had accompanied the look?

"Moosehide Charlie," another of the old-timers, was profanely addressing the smooth-shaven one. "Say, young feller, this here'll make a good piece to put in yer noospaper! In this case, the robber didn't git nothin'. But you put it to 'em strong that if he had, we'd sure tore up hell till we caught him! An' when we did, we'd hung him so high the buzzards couldn't find him! That had ort to make good readin' fer them damn chechahcos that's figgerin' on comin' up here with idees in their head fer gittin' rich quick."

The excitement over, men drifted away, and the fake Kendall slipped back through the darkness to his own tent and crawled between his blankets. So the smooth-shaven one was a newspaperman, and not a policeman, after all. There was, somehow, vast comfort in the discovery.

"He was prob'ly askin' about names, an' such, jist to put it in his paper," he muttered. "An' the reason he kind of grinned, that a way—it looked kind of funny to see a man standin' around without no pants. If he'd knowd I was

me, he'd had me pinched fer liftin' his outfit when I showed up on the summit! An' what with all the folks crowdin' through, how could he remember that I checked through under the name of R. Brown? Them noospaper guys is jest nach'ly snooty. But, by golly, now an' then back in the States, one of 'em picks up a bet that the bulls an' the dicks overlooks! That old fool comin' back when he done, sure knocked me out of the chance to pull anything on this crick. Guess I'll quit an' hunt me another."

Next morning, when he glanced up from his work at a sluice, to see the newspaperman contemplating the slit he had cut in the side wall of his tent, sudden panic again seized him.

When the man strolled on, he hunted up the boss and drew his time, and an hour later, with his stampeding pack on his back, he was picking them up and laying them down with commendable diligence.

Reaching the Klondike, he headed upstream, and a short distance above the mouth of Bonanza, crept behind a big rock to rest.

CHAPTER VI.

OWL CREEK.

HOURS later he was awakened by the sound of voices. Had the newspaperman voiced a suspicion? And were the men of Bonanza tearing up hell to catch him, as Moosehide Charlie had threatened they would? Flat on the ground, close against the base of the rock, he listened.

"We'll have to get powder or dynamite to blow that ledge out so we can work. And then—boy, we're rich! Think of it, Dick—there was better than two ounces in that last pan we washed! And the Lord knows how far to bed rock!"

"I hope it's a mile!" laughed the

other. "What do you know about that—two tenderfeet like us locating a real strike! And no one else on the creek! We're allowed two discovery claims. That's equal to five regular ones——"

"Yes," interrupted the other, "and, in sixty days we can each file another, providing there's any place left to stake on the creek."

"If we work it right, I don't think we'll start a stampede."

"Don't you believe it! There's a bunch hanging around the recorder's office like buzzards, watching for new locations."

"Sure—but, we won't appear enthusiastic. We'll let on we're taking out less than an ounce a day between us—and that it's hard work. And if we don't flash any dust, I don't believe they'll pay much attention to a couple of tenderfeet. We aren't supposed to know anything, anyhow——"

The other interrupted with a chuckle: "Sure—and we know just about what we're supposed to at that. It was pure blind luck that we made a strike."

"Yeah, but, we don't want to let any one know it's a strike. We'll pay for what we get in bills, and growl and grumble about what a tough country it is. No one will bother to trail us back, if they think we're taking out less than an ounce. They can get an ounce a day working for wages."

"What'll we name our creek? It's got to have a name."

"Let's call it Owl Creek. Remember that big white owl that flapped down the creek and sat on the stub while we panned out our first gold?"

"Owl Creek it is! Come on, throw the rest of that grub into you, and let's hit for Dawson. We want to record our locations and get an early start back in the morning."

"Not on your life, we don't! I tell you, Bob, we don't want to appear anxious to get back to the claims. That's a sure way to start a stampede. We'll

loaf around town for a few days as if we didn't care whether we got back or not. I wonder if they've got any good beer in Dawson yet? I don't care for whisky in the summer."

"Guess you're right. But, anyway, let's clean up these dishes and get going."

FURTHER conversation was broken and blended with the clatter of tinware. Very cautiously, Brown inched himself into position to peer through the tangle of weeds to the river bank a few feet distant, where two bearded young men were returning their dishes to a duffel bag. The bag was swung into a canoe, and the two took their places and shoved off.

A few minutes later, Brown rose to his feet, swung his pack to his back, and struck off downriver.

"Two ounces to a pan!" he muttered to himself. "It's like them sourdoughs tells about some of them first claims on Bonanza! Guess I'll jest pass up them other cricks! I hope they don't start no stampede!"

In Dawson, he visited the recorder's to find that discovery claims had been filed on Owl Creek by Richard Kent and Robert Winslow. Leaving his pack at the Klondike Palace, he began a round of the saloons and dance halls.

In the Tivoli, he spotted the two drinking beer at the bar—spotted, also, several of his erstwhile cronies of the Klondike Palace casually loafing about the place, their eyes on Kent and Winslow. He noted with relief that the minion of Soapy Smith, from Skagway, was nowhere in evidence.

A pair of the Klondike Palace vultures motioned him to join them at a table. "Hello, Kendall," greeted one of them. "Fetch up a chair. I'm buyin'."

With a round of drinks before them, the other asked: "Wher'n hell you be'n?"

"Up on Bonanza workin' fer wages."

The two grinned, knowingly. "How is wages on Bonanza?" snickered one.

"Ounce a day. That's straight goods. I've be'n sluicin' fer Jimmie the Rough."

"How's the scenery up there?"

"Well," replied the man known as Kendall, with a grin, "there's some pretty good scenery, all right—but, she's well spiked down."

"Nothin' doin', eh?"

"Nothin' whatever. I figger it too resky to try to pull nothin'."

One of the men laughed: "I'll tell you a good un—but, the drinks'll be on you."

"What's that?"

"Nothin' much—only you overlooked five thousan' bucks in cold cash—let it git way right in under yer nose."

"How come?"

"You come downriver with a bird named R. Brown, didn't you? An' you run your boat through the White Horse, an' when you was runnin' hisn through, you got wrecked, an' he got drowned, didn't he?"

"Yeah—but, what's that got to do with five thousan' smackers?"

"Nothin'—except he had that much in his pants when he went under."

"The hell!" exclaimed the man, eyeing the other sharply. "An' how come you know how much he had on him?"

"It's like this. This here bozo was workin' with Soapy Smith's outfit in Skagway. Soapy tips him off to a Jew with a roll on him. He cops the roll all right an' turns in fifteen hundred to Soapy, who was supposed to git half. But Soapy's hep to how much the Jew had, an' he passed the word to the boys to git the double-crosser, which his name was Jones, in Skagway. But somehow Jones got the office an' beat it. Soapy, he puts a man on his trail, an' he finds that Jones hit fer the White Pass, lifted an outfit, an' crossed the line under the name of R. Brown. He comes on down here, an' finds out from the police rec-

ords that this here Brown's boat was wrecked, an' he was drowned comin' down through the White Horse with you."

"Well, I'll be damned!" growled Brown. "So Brown had five thousan' on him, did he? There wouldn't no one have thought it to look at him. Where's this other guy at—this Soapy Smith guy?"

"He went back upriver. Says the pickin's around Skagway's got this beat plenty—an' it's my guess that he's right at that."

"Hm-m-m," sighed Brown, alias Kendall. "To think that Brown had five thousan' on him! Five thousan' good smackers soakin' in the river on a dead man! The drinks on me, all right. But what's doin' around here?"

"Nothin', you might say. We're thinkin' of stampedin'."

"Stampedin'? Lookin' fer a chanct to break yer back shovelin' gravel?"

"Well, if a man was to git in on a rich strike, he wouldn't have to shovel a lot of gravel to git him a pile. There was better'n five hundred dollars to the pan washed out of some of them first claims on Bonanza."

"Yeah—but, there ain't no more Bonanzas."

"Who says so? Any new crick's liable to be jest as good. See them two chechahcos soppin' up suds. Well, they jest filed discovery claims, an' it might be they struck somethin' big."

Brown let his eyes rest for a moment on the two at the bar. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "Who—them?" he asked.

"Yeah—them. What's so funny about it?"

"Oh, nothin'. Trail 'em back in the hills, if you want to. I'll be waitin' here when you come back."

"What do you know about 'em? You claimed you'd be'n workin' fer wages on Bonanza."

"Yeah, I was. But, not all the time

I've be'n gone. You'd ort to know me better'n that. If you don't believe I know what I'm talkin' about, I'll tell you their names, an' the name of the crick they've filed on—their names is Bob Winslow, an' Dick Kent, an' they located on Owl Crick, way up the Klondike. Well, wha' d' ye say? Am I right or wrong?"

"Right. But how'd you know?"

"It don't make no difference how I know. But I know their claims ain't worth the powder to blow 'em to hell, an' I'm givin' it to you straight. I'll bet they ain't takin' out better'n half an ounce a day. An' to prove it, I'll bet they'll pay fer their supplies with the bills they fetched into the country. If they don't, they won't take out many supplies. You boys is friends of mine—an' I'm givin' you a tip that'll save you a long drag through a rough country. Take it or leave it. It ain't no skin offn my nose if you want to go kihoot-in' off after 'em. Them two fools is so green that they think half an ounce a day is a strike."

THE two men looked at each other. One of them nodded.

"That's jest what they claimed they was takin' out. I edged over an' listened to 'em talkin' together, an' one of 'em says how he didn't hardly believe they could make a livin' at half an ounce. An' the other one says how they wasn't only about fifteen foot down yet—wait till they hit bed rock. Any one knows that if you've got down fifteen foot an' ain't got no better'n half an ounce, the location ain't worth monkeyin' with. But we figgered that they suspicioned I was listenin' an' was jest handin' out a line of guff to give us a wrong steer."

Brown shrugged. "Foller 'em out an' see fer yerself, if you don't believe it. File in alongside 'em, or lay on yer belly like I done an' watch 'em dig an' crank, an' pan. But you wouldn't get

me back among them hills ag'in—not if they was takin' out five ounces!"

One of the two rose to his feet. "Le's go down to Cuter Malone's an' tell the boys. About a dozen of us figgered on follerin' 'em back to their claims—but if you know they ain't no good, there ain't no use in keepin' an eye on 'em. Come on along an' tell 'em."

The three sauntered to the Klondike Palace, where the man known to them as Kendall convinced the others that to follow the two chechahcos back to their location would be a waste of time and effort.

The proprietor of the dive, Cuter Malone, who was, in a measure, the director of the efforts of the thugs, rolled a fat cigar to the corner of his mouth.

"You boys might keep an eye on 'em till they pull out, an' if, like Kendall says, they pay fer their stuff with bills, it wouldn't be no use botherin' with 'em. Take a chechahco an' if he's got any dust, he spends dust—no matter if he's got a pocketful of bills. It makes him feel like a sourdough—an' he wants folks to think he is.

"What you goin' to do now, Kendall?"

"Oh, I'll be pullin' out in a day or so fer one of the other cricks to kind of look around. I've be'n up on Bonanza—but there wasn't nothin' much doin' there."

Malone shook his head. "A man's got to be pretty slick if he kin pull off anything on them cricks. An' if he ain't slick—they're mighty handy with a rope. Take it in here now—with so many folks millin' around all the time, a man's got a chanet."

"Yeah—but if a man could spot one of them bozos comin' in to bank his dust in some safe, he could make him quite a haul."

"Mostly, they come in bunches," said Malone. "Still, if a man watched his chance, he might git one of 'em alone."

CHAPTER VII.

A FOOL FOR LUCK.

FOUR days later, Brown once more lay in the shelter of the big rock on the Klondike where he had overheard the two chechahcos at their evening meal. It was the second day of his vigil, and he was growing impatient.

"They'd ort to be showin' up," he muttered. "An' when they do, they'll be alone—unless they got to shootin' off their mouth, er spreadin' dust around where them hyenas could see 'em. Them chechahcos an' I wants this here Owl Crick all to ourself fer a while."

He chuckled softly. "So I overlooked a bet when I let R. Brown git drowned with five thousan' smackers on him! That's a good one! It sure pays a man fer to use his head. But I'm glad Soapy Smith thinks I'm a goner. There's one bird that don't never let up. If it wasn't fer that noospaperman—but what could *he* know? The police kin prove that R. Brown's dead."

Well along toward the middle of the afternoon, a canoe rounded the bend, and the waiting man recognized its occupants as the two chechahcos, Kent and Winslow.

A half hour after the heavily loaded craft disappeared around the upriver bend, Brown grinned. "No one follerin'," he muttered, and slipping a light canoe from the bushes, swung his pack into it, and headed upriver.

Holding close to the bank, he forged steadily upstream, and when, well toward dark, he caught the flicker of a little fire ahead, he dropped back around the bend and camped.

For three days he followed the canoe, holding close as the numerous bends would permit. When it headed up a tributary that flowed in from the north, he was a quarter of a mile behind. Progress on the smaller river was slow. The current was swift, and numerous

shallows necessitated much lining and portaging for the two partners.

ON the fourth day after leaving the Klondike, the two beached their canoe at the mouth of a small feeder, and putting their straps to all they could carry, headed up the creek on foot.

Concealing his canoe in the brush, Brown followed, traveling light. Resting frequently with their heavy packs, the two made slow progress, arriving at last at a little pole-and-mud shack, dog tired.

It was a narrow creek, meandering through a bottom not more than two hundred yards between the rims. The tiny cabin nestled close against a perpendicular rim wall, and worming into a position directly above it, Brown surveyed the little valley. Small gravel heaps showed beside shallow prospect holes, and a larger heap had been thrown from a shaft located midway between creek and rim rocks. The mouth of the shaft was bridged by a rude windlass.

The two emerged from the shack and stood, pack straps in hand, scarcely thirty feet beneath the silent watcher whose face was screened by a bush that overlapped the rim.

"I'm willing to call it a day, Dick," said Winslow, with a tired grin. "We can pack the rest of the stuff up to-morrow."

The other frowned. "We ought to go back and cache the stuff, and the canoe. If any one is following us, there's no use piloting them straight to our door."

"There's no one following us, or they'd have been right on our heels. They wouldn't have taken the chance of our giving 'em the slip. We were foxy in throwing 'em off with our talk of half an ounce a day—and, when we paid for our supplies in bills, they lost all interest in us. Just a couple of fool

chechahcos, they thought, and let it go at that."

"Guess you're right. But I believe in playing safe. Besides, that stuff in the canoe ought to be covered. Let's go back and cache it, and pack a light load back. That'll leave about two good loads apiece for to-morrow, and two for next day."

"Wish this damn creek was deep enough to float the canoe," grumbled the other. "Gosh! If we could line the canoe up to the falls, we'd only have to carry the stuff about a quarter of a mile. But come on."

Carrying their straps, the two disappeared down the creek, and a few minutes later a lone figure clambered down into the valley and making his way swiftly to the mouth of the shaft, peered downward.

About fifteen feet down a ledge of rock a foot and a half in thickness jutted into the shaft obstructing half its area. On the unobstructed side, the shaft extended some three or four feet deeper. A rude pole ladder led downward to the ledge.

"'A fool fer luck,' the sayin' is," muttered Brown. "They've got a dry hole right in a crick bed, owin' to them falls suckin' the water out of the gravel. Well, no man's luck only goes jest so fer. Theirn's due to change. Mine's raisin'. They think they're foxy as hell, throwin' off them Dawson hyenas; but if it hadn't be'n fer me, they'd be fifty men sinkin' their stakes in this valley right now. She's a great country, if a man uses his head."

Regaining the rim, Brown made his way back to his canoe by a circuitous route.

FOR two days he camped in a parallel valley, a mile to the westward, cooking his frugal meals over tiny, smokeless fires. "I could file in above or below," he mused. "But them two discovery claims is five times

as big as a common one. Guess I'll make a play fer discovery. With so many folks in the country, the recorder can't remember faces, no more'n the police kin."

On the third day, figuring that the two had finished with their packing, he made his way to the vantage point above the cabin.

From the shaft came the sound of a hammer falling rhythmically upon a steel drill. On the gravel dump was a case of dynamite from which the cover had been pried, a coil of yellow fuse, and a small tin box which undoubtedly held caps.

For several minutes Brown lay there, his eyes taking in every detail of the scene. They fixed with a steely glitter upon the two poles of the rude ladder that protruded a foot or two from the mouth of the shaft.

The hammer sounds continued. Slipping noiselessly into the valley, Brown paused for a moment in the shelter of the tiny cabin, then silently and swiftly he glided to the mouth of the shaft.

His two strong hands fastened upon the upright poles of the ladder, and with a mighty heave, he jerked half its length clear of the hole.

A second later, he tossed the ladder onto the ground. The hammering ceased abruptly. From the shaft, exclamations of intense surprise were followed by cries of anger:

"Hey—what the hell!"

"Put the ladder back!"

"Hey, what's goin' on? Who are you, anyhow?"

Ignoring the cries, and avoiding the mouth of the shaft, Brown passed around to the gravel dump and, removing a dozen half-pound sticks of dynamite from the case, bound them into a tight bundle with a thong that he took from his pocket.

The clamor from the shaft redoubled as he seated himself on the dump and

whittled a skewer which he thrust deeply into the center stick of the bundle.

Cutting a short length of fuse, he crimped on a cap with his teeth, and forced it to the bottom of the hole he had skewed into the dynamite. He split the end of the fuse that protruded scarce an inch from the end of the stick, then applied a match, and, when the fuse sputtered, he held the bundle for a matter of ten seconds, then tossed it into the mouth of the shaft and ran for the shack.

Hardly had he gained the doorway when, with a dull roar, the dynamite let go and a volcano of smoke, loose stones, and human fragments belched from the mouth of the shaft.

FOR several moments the man stood staring out through the doorway, as the loose stones and the fragments returned to the ground with a patter. Wildly, his glance sought the valley and the rim.

Suppose some one had heard the explosion! The country was alive with prospectors. And even back here, one man, or a dozen might have heard.

Suppose they had? There was nothing on him. The two chechacos were in the shaft and the giant let go—that's all. He had just happened along. That would be his story.

Swiftly the man reclimbed the rock ledge and gained the rim. Again his eyes swept the terrain, but no living, moving thing greeted them.

Shaking with nervous reaction, Brown sank to the ground and for two hours lay scanning the little valley while powder smoke drifted lazily from the mouth of the shaft in this wisps.

"If any one comes, I'll let 'em get there first an' tell 'em I come across from my camp to see what the racket was."

But no one appeared, and descending into the valley, Brown set to work feverishly collecting the human fragments

that sparsely strewed the ground within fifty yards of the shaft.

One hand he found on the opposite side of the creek. Placing the ladder, he descended into the acrid-smelling shaft and emerged in half an hour with a blanketful of bloody fragments. These, together with those he had collected from the ground, he cached in a thicket, and, picking up a spade, he proceeded to dig a grave close against the rock ledge near the head of the falls below the cabin.

Entering the thicket, he hurriedly set about the gruesome job of sorting the fragments. Hastily thrusting two hands, two feet, the head, and a mass of unidentifiable fragments into the blankets, he carried it to the grave and threw it in.

Then he shoveled back the gravel, mounding it carefully, and patting it into place with the spade. Placing the fragments that remained in another blanket, he carried them for up the creek and buried them in the brush, being careful to replace the top soil, and leave the place exactly as he had found it.

Entering the cabin, he proceeded to get dinner, and while the meal was cooking, he shaved for the first time since leaving Seattle, nearly a year before.

"There!" he muttered, as he surveyed himself approvingly in the small mirror. "Jones was a bearded man, an' so was R. Brown, an' Kendall, too. Both Kent an' Winslow had beards when they filed these claims—an' the recorder nor no one else can't say I ain't one of 'em. Guess I'll be Winslow. Them clothes of hisn'll fit me better'n Kent's."

His best bet, he decided, would be to hit back to Dawson and report to the police that his partner, Dick Kent, had blown himself to pieces while working in the shaft.

"If they come up here to investigate," he mumbled, "I kin show 'em his grave

where he's buried all nice an' reg'lar. I always claimed she was a good country, if a man uses his head. I guess I must 'a' been right."

After dinner, he slipped into Winslow's clothing and burned his own, piece by piece, in the smudge fire outside the cabin door.

In Winslow's duffel bag he found a diary, dating from their departure from Skagway. He spent hour in familiarizing himself with its contents, and other hours, with paper and pencil, imitating his handwriting.

"If they try to check up my writin' agin' my name in the recorder's office, they'll find out I'm Winslow, all right—I can make every damn letter jest like him. Kent, he come from Minneapolis, an' I come from St. Louis. An' we come downriver in boat No. 1244. An' I can tell 'em everything that happened on the way."

CHAPTER VIII.

KENDALL BECOMES WINSLOW.

TOWARD evening of a day nearly a week later, a smooth-shaven man stepped boldly through the door of the office of the Mounted Police detachment in Dawson and crossed to the desk, behind which sat a grizzled sergeant.

"Hello!" he greeted. "Ain't you the police that was on White Pass when I—when we come through?"

Sergeant Kelly looked up from a paper. "I was on White Pass summit for a month or more this spring," he answered. "Is that when you come through?"

"Yup—me an' my pardner, Dick Kent. We come down on the break-up."

"Somethin' I can do for you?"

The man shifted from one foot to the other. "N-o-o, that is—I guess there ain't nothin' you can do. It's about my pardner. Pore Dick, he blow'd hisself

all to hell with giant down in the shaft. I figured I'd ort to report it."

"Where was this?"

"On Owl Crick, we named it. It's where our claims is—we staked two discovery claims."

"Quartz claims, or placer?"

"Placer claims——"

"What was you doin' with giant on a placer claim?"

"We run onto a ledge of rock about fifteen foot down that stuck out an' plugged up half our shaft, so we fetches out a case of giant to blow her out with. Dick, he claimed he know'd about giant, so he went down with a dozen sticks all tied up in a bundle. I was afraid of the stuff, so I didn't go down. He'd rigged some kind of a cat'ridge, or cap, he called it, to a piece of fuse."

Brown tried to look doleful as he continued: "He hadn't be'n down more'n a couple of minutes or so, when I heard a hell of a roar, an' I run out of the shack an' there was rocks an' pieces of Dick hittin' the ground all over the valley. It was awful! I got his pieces together—what of 'em I could find, an' buried him decent. An' then I come down here to report."

"Where's this Owl Crick?"

"It's three days up the Klondike, an' four days up a smaller river, an' the claims is about five mile up a little feeder which we named Owl Crick."

"When did this happen?"

"I made it here in five days. It was the day before that."

The sergeant made a note. "When did you file the claims?"

"Couple of weeks ago."

"You bought the giant then?"

"Sure."

"Where?"

"Here in Dawson—A. C. Company."

"What day did you cross the line?"

"In May—before the break-up. I couldn't say jest the day."

"What was your boat number?"

"Our boat was 1244."

THE officer ran through a record, and after some minutes, he paused, his finger on an entry. "Here it is—Richard Kent, Robert Winslow—boat 1244. Where are you from, Winslow?"

"St. Louis."

"And Kent?"

"He claimed he come from Minneapolis. I met up with him in Seattle."

The sergeant slipped a pencil and a pad of paper across the desk. "Just sign your name there, Winslow."

When the man complied, the sergeant turned to a constable.

"Here, Brooks, go to the recorder's and compare this signature with Robert Winslow's on the books—claim filed a couple of weeks ago—and stop in and see if the A. C. has got any record of the sale of a case of giant to Kent and Winslow."

He paused and turned to the other. "When did you get the giant—the same time you filed the claim?"

"Yup. It would be a day or two later. We hung around Dawson fer two-three days."

"All right. Take a chair till the constable gets back."

A half hour later the constable reported that the signature checked with that of Winslow on the recorder's book; also, that the A. C. had sold a case of giant to Winslow and Kent.

The sergeant turned to the waiting man. "All right, Winslow. Too bad your partner had bad luck. A man wants to know what he's doing when he handles giant. You did right in reporting the accident. I'll notify the public administrator. You can go ahead and work the claims, but you'll have to keep an accurate record of what you take out. You'll hear from the administrator when he gets around to settling up Kent's estate."

"Hell! Don't a man get the claims if his pardner gits killed?"

The grizzled sergeant eyed Brown

sharply. "Only his share of 'em," he answered. "Kent's share goes to his heirs, when the administrator digs them up."

"Well, that's fair enough, at that," admitted the man. "Is that all?"

The sergeant nodded, and turned to his papers. When the door had closed behind the man, Constable Brooks grinned. "I'm wondering if that was so much of an accident, after all."

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that he seemed mighty disappointed when he found out that he didn't get both claims—as if a plan had gone wrong."

"I thought of the same thing," admitted the older man. "But assumin' it was an accident, if he thought he was entitled to the whole works after his partner was killed, he'd naturally be disappointed."

"Yeah—I suppose he would," admitted the constable. "If it wasn't an accident, he's hard-boiled, all right. He sure got holt of himself, an' admitted right away that it was fair enough that Kent's half should go to his heirs."

"A man would have to be damned hard-boiled to blow up his partner with giant. I wish we had somewhere near enough men to run this outfit like it ought to be run. With the chechahcos pilin' in on us every day, an' them that's here wranglin' over claims, an' the camps to police, an' a thousan' an' one things to 'tend to, I'd have to have a lot more to base a suspicion on than what we've got, to warrant me sendin' a man into the back country for ten days or two weeks to investigate."

"Yes, I reckon that's true enough."

"If it was a murder instead of an accident, he's had plenty of chance up there alone to destroy all the evidence. An' usin' giant like that, it would be a mighty hard case to prove. He evidently don't fear an investigation, or he wouldn't have reported it to us. Of course, no matter how careful they are,

they're always liable to make a mistake, an' if I could possibly spare a man, I'd send one up there. But I just can't do it—I haven't got any man to send."

The door opened, abruptly, and a young man stepped into the room: "Hello, sarge," he greeted, "how goes it?"

"Hello, Northern! Where you be'n for the last two, three weeks—huntin' up news for yer paper?"

THE younger man nodded. "Not news, exactly. If I do say it myself, I've turned in some mighty good feature stuff. But I'm all washed up with the *Star*. Sent in my resignation with my last story. I'm going to try my hand at prospecting."

"Got bit by the gold bug, eh? Well—go to it! There must be a lot of gold that ain't be'n dug out yet. If I wasn't so busy policin', I'd try my hand at it myself. Couple of million or so would always come in handy."

"Who was that hombre that came out of here a few minutes ago? I met him down the street."

"Winslow's his name. His partner got blow'd up in a shaft with giant, an' he come in to report it. Too bad you quit the writin' business. There'd be a piece to put in yer paper."

"Winslow, eh?" drawled Northern. "Where was this shaft? And how long ago did the accident happen? He called it an accident, I suppose."

"Sure, he did. It happened five-six days ago. Here's what he told us about it."

The sergeant tossed a memorandum pad to the younger man, who perused it intently.

"Guess I'll forget that resignation," Northern said, returning the pad to the desk, "and write one more story for the *Star*. It ought to be good. This Owl Creek oughtn't to be hard to find. Guess I'll mosey up there and have a look-see. That is, if you can manage to ar-

rest this Winslow party and hold him till I get back. I'd rather not have him butting in on me."

"Arrest him! What for! Gosh, I ain't got nothin' to hold him on! He told a pretty straight story. I checked it, far as I could, with the records."

Northern grinned. "I noticed that he's recently shaved. The lower part of his face was a good deal whiter than the upper part."

"Well, it ain't no crime to shave! You mean you suspect he blow'd up his partner?"

Young Northern shook his head. "No, I don't suspect he blew up his partner, because I don't believe he had a partner."

"Sure, he did! I checked up on that. They come downriver in boat No. 1244."

"Who did?"

"Why, this here Winslow an' his partner, Kent."

"Not 'this here' Winslow, sarge," Northern corrected. "Another Winslow. This bird came downriver to White Horse in boat 1313, and from there on in 1300."

SERGEANT KELLY reached for the boat record and thumbed it for several minutes.

"Thirteen-thirteen!" he exclaimed, at length. "Here it is—feller name of R. Brown come down in that boat alone. At White Horse, him an' a man named Kendall doubled through. They run Kendall's boat, No. 1300, through, an' when they run Brown's through, they wrecked her, an' Brown was drowned. It was Kendall come on down in No. 1300—his own boat. It's all here in the record."

Young Northern's grin widened. "That record's a great thing, isn't it, sarge? It tells a man just what's what."

"What'n hell made you think Winslow come down in them boats?" asked the sergeant, frowning.

"I don't think Winslow came down in 'em," said Northern. "Jones did."

"Did what?" scowled the sergeant.

"Come down in those boats."

"Who in hell is Jones?" cried the exasperated sergeant. "An' what's he got to do with it?"

"That," said Northern, "we may never know. I've got a hunch, though, after glancing over what he told you, that a real smart young man might find out that he murdered Winslow and Kent."

The sergeant's jaw dropped. "You b'en drinkin'?" he shouted.

"Nope. And if you'll promise to lock up Mr. Jones-Brown-Kendall-Winslow—the lad with the fresh shave, who was just in here—I'll mosey out to Owl Creek, wherever that is, and try to find out something. It doesn't seem possible that a man could pull off a double murder without leaving some evidence."

The old officer made a gesture of a resignation. "Seein' you've already stretched a single accident into a double murder," he said with elaborate sarcasm, "mebbe you'd be so good as to suggest what sort of a charge I could hold this man on. A real smart young man ort to be able to think up a charge."

"Oh, I could think of a lot of 'em that would do," smiled Northern. "You might charge him with the robbery and murder of a Jew in Skagway. The theft of my outfit at White Pass. The drowning of Kendall at White Horse. Or the attempted robbery of old Bettles's gold cache on Bonanza."

"To be sure," assented the sergeant. "Any one of 'em's valid charges, except that Skagway ain't in Canadian territory, an' by now you couldn't never identify yer outfit, an' the record shows that Kendall come on downriver to Dawson, an' old Bettles ain't reported no attempted robbery. How come you didn't mention bigamy?"

"I forgot it," admitted Northern, "and, besides, we couldn't prove it."

"Ye can prove all these other charges, I s'pose."

"Not a single one of 'em. But, take it from me, he's guilty of 'em all. The fact is, sarge, that bird is a bad actor—and I'm going to get him! You've got to lock him up for a couple of weeks on some charge or other. I'm giving it to you straight."

Despite the younger man's seemingly preposterous statements, the old officer was impressed. After a few moment's scowling silence, he agreed.

"All right, I'll hold him. You're a special constable, you know, an' I'll detail you to investigate. But you'd better show up with evidence enough fer a conviction. The inspector'll raise hell with me, if you don't. It ain't the habit of the Mounted to go lockin' a man up, jist because he's got him a fresh shave. An' if you don't deliver the goods, I'll lock you up an' deport you back where you come from, fer *non compos mentis!*"

"*Pax vobiscum*, seeing we're reviewin' our Latin," said Northern, grinning. "I'm on my way!"

CHAPTER IX.

JOE NORTHERN—SLEUTH.

TWO weeks later, young Northern walked into detachment office where Sergeant Kelly sat chatting with the public administrator. "Hello, sarge," he greeted. "How's everything?"

The grizzled officer favored him with a wry grin. "Everything's all fine an' dandy—providin' you've dug up some evidence that'll justify holdin' a man for a couple of weeks on vague charges. The inspector was through here a few days ago, an' he growled an' raised hell about it. I had a hard time persuadin' him to leave me hold him till you got back. What's in that big can-

vas package you set down outside the door?"

"That," explained Northern, "is all that's left of Dick Kent. I disinterred the remains and brought them down. And it wasn't a pleasant job."

"What did you dig him up fer?"

"Several reasons. I thought the public administrator would appreciate an identification. And then, if a stampede should hit Owl Creek, his bones would be scattered all over the gravel dumps, while here they can lie in a cemetery. Can we have the prisoner in here?"

"Have you got the goods on him?"

"Sure—but, there are some things I'd like to check up."

The sergeant turned to Constable Brooks. "Go fetch Winslow in here, an' then set by to take down the questions an' answers."

THE constable soon disappeared through a doorway, and presently footsteps sounded in the short hallway that led to the cell room, and a man, his face covered with a two weeks' growth of beard, stepped into the office, closely followed by the constable.

Midway of the room, the man hesitated for a moment, his eyes fixed in startled surprise upon the face of the young man who stood beside the sergeant's desk. Recovering himself instantly, he proceeded to the chair indicated by the sergeant.

Northern was smiling into the bearded face. "Must feel kind of natural again to grow whiskers, doesn't it, Jones?" he asked.

The man's eyes flashed angrily. "What d'you mean—Jones?" he rasped. "My name's Winslow!"

"Sure. So the sergeant told me. I'd forgot. I was thinking of a chap that's wanted over in Skagway for murdering a Jew, and robbing him of five thousand. But—you doubtless heard all about that case in Skagway."

"I don't know nothin' about Skagway," growled the man. "I come straight through there."

"It doesn't matter," said Northern. "Let's get on. The sergeant, here, sent me up to Owl Creek to investigate the murder of Kent and——"

"Murder!" cried the man, his eyes flickering. "What the hell d'you mean—always talkin' about murder? Dick Kent blow'd hisself up tryin' to shoot down a ledge in the shaft with giant!"

"So, that was the way of it? Well, just so we can get it straight, there are a few questions I'd like to ask you about it, Brown."

"Brown!" cried the man, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. "You crazy, er what? One time it's Jones—an' then Brown! My name's Winslow, I tell you—Bob Winslow!"

"No matter," said Northern evenly. "I recollect now that R. Brown was the fellow who swiped my outfit at White Pass—same chap who called himself Jones in Skagway. Coincidence, isn't it—my thinking of him?"

Northern paused, and the sergeant and public administrator noted that little beads of sweat stood thickly upon the prisoner's brow.

"To get back to Owl Creek," purred Northern, "and what happened there in the shaft. I wish you'd tell us, Kendall, just——"

"Damn it!" shrieked the man, leaping from his chair, with blazing eyes. "That's the third time you've called me out of my name!"

"Set down!" roared the sergeant, his hand on the service revolver lying on his desk, while Constable Brooks grasped the prisoner by the shoulders and forced him back into his chair.

"My name ain't Kendall!" vociferated the man, beside himself with rage.

"No?" drawled Northern. "Well, we won't argue the point. Kendall, I remember, was the chap that this fellow Jones, or Brown, murdered by drown-

ing in White Horse Rapids. He assumed Kendall's name and came down and hung around the Klondike Palace for a while before he hit out to Bonanza and tried to rob old Bettles's cache. If you're not Kendall, you won't have any trouble in proving it. The officer who reported the drowning at White Horse will remember Kendall well. So will a lot of the hangers-on at the Klondike Palace—and lots of the boys up on Bonanza. Somehow you never forget a man you see running around in his shirt tail. The picture sticks. Lots of folks will remember Kendall."

AS Northern talked, the man sat, gripping the chair arms, the sweat glistening on his brow that had gone chalk-white. Suddenly, he rasped out: "Who the hell are you, to be askin' me questions?"

The sergeant thumped on his desk. "He's a special constable of the Mounted Police that I sent up to investigate your story of your partner blowin' himself up. You don't need to answer if you don't want to. If you don't, you'll be booked fer the murder of Richard Kent. We was only givin' you the chance to clear yerself of suspicion. If you've got nothin' to hide, you'll answer."

"I'll answer! You ain't got nothin' on me! Dick Kent blow'd hisself up—an' all the police in the world can't prove he didn't!"

Northern smiled reassuringly.

"I'll admit that pretty much everything I found up there checked with what you told the sergeant when you reported the case. But there are one or two things I'd like to get straight. When was it you recorded the discovery claims?"

"About a month ago. August 29th."

"And when did you actually discover them?"

The man hesitated. "Well, I guess we worked on the shaft about a month.

We wanted to see if we really had somethin' before we filed."

"Very well," young Northern said mildly. "Now about that ladder. You say Kent was down in the shaft with the dynamite, and you were in the shack when the explosion occurred. But I found a ladder lying on the ground near the mouth of the shaft, with no sign of having been in any explosion. Can you explain that?"

"Sure, I kin," answered the man glibly. "I let Dick an' the giant down in the bucket. He didn't want the ladder down there. It would be in the way. He claimed he needed all the room there was. Then I pulled up the bucket, an' he was to holler when he got ready, an' I was to lower the bucket, an' stand by to haul him up when he lit the fuse. But—pore devil, he never got the chanct to holler. First thing I heard was the giant lettin' go."

"What did you do then?"

"Why, I come out of the shack on the run—an' then I run back fer a minute, 'cause gravel, an' chunks of rocks, an' pieces of Dick was comin' down, an' I didn't want to git hit."

"What then?"

"Well, then I went back out, an' I seen Dick's head, an' one of his legs that was blow'd off at the hip, layin' there on the dump. I says to myself—jest like that, I says, 'Somethin' must 've happened to Dick!' And then I run an' looked down the shaft, but I couldn't see nothin' on account of the smoke from the giant. So, then I gets a blanket, an' begun gatherin' Dick an' puttin' him on it. By the time I'd got all I could find of him on the blanket, the smoke had cleared off, an' I went down the shaft an' fetched up an arm an' his other leg. An' then I carried him over by the rim rocks an' buried him, blanket an' all. After which I hits out fer here to report to the police."

"Did you find all of Kent's body?"

"No—that is, Dick he'd weigh'd around a hundred an' sixty-seventy pound, I guess. But, what of him I buried didn't weigh over fifty-sixty. He must 've be'n right over the giant when she let go, 'cause it blow'd him to pieces somethin' fierce."

"But, you got his head, and legs, and arms, and——"

"Yeah," interrupted the other, "his head was blow'd off at the neck, an' was whole, except where one cheek was tore half off. One leg was tore off at the hip, an' laid near the head on the dump, an' the other leg was down in the shaft. It was off at the knee, an' the boot tore plumb off of it. One hand was blow'd off at the wrist, an' down in the shaft, an' tother, I found clear across the crick. It had the arm on plumb to the shoulder."

He went on to describe the details.

"You could identify these pieces if you saw them?"

"Why—sure I could."

NORTHERN stepped to the door and returned bearing a heavy, canvas-wrapped package which he deposited on the floor beyond the sergeant's desk. He undid its rope binding, and threw back the canvas, disclosing a red-stained blanket.

"Whew! Take that thing out of here!" cried the sergeant. "What the devil——"

Young Northern slanted him a meaning glance.

"I dug up the body," he interrupted. "I wanted to be sure that everything was just as this man reported it. I want him, now, to identify it so there can be no mistake." He reached into the blanket. "You say the head was intact, except for a torn cheek?"

"Yes," answered the man.

"This it?" Northern held up the head, grasping it by the hair.

"Yes, yes! Put it down! I can't bear to look."

"And you say one hand was off at the wrist?"

"Sure. Jist at the wrist—it had pieces of tendon stickin' out of it like strings where the flesh was off."

"Do you recognize this?" He held up the hand. "Don't make any mistake. These are the parts you buried?"

"Sure—that's the hand, all right. See them tendons—jist like I told you."

"And this is the leg that was off at the knee?"

"Yup. That's it. It was down in the shaft."

"And this is the other leg?"

"Yeah. That's the one that laid on the dump by the head."

"And, this is the other hand, with the whole arm attached?"

"Sure! That's the one that got blow'd acrost the crick."

Northern covered the gruesome fragments with the blanket.

"That's all," he said, and turned to the grizzled officer. "I guess, sarge, you can book him for the murder of Kent and Winslow."

Constable Brooks and the public administrator looked surprised, and Sergeant Kelly stared at him, wide-eyed. "What the hell do you mean?" he roared. "Book him fer murder! You ain't found out a thing that he didn't tell me! Everything has fitted right in with what he reported to me two weeks ago! An' as fer yer fool talk about murderin' a Jew, an' wreckin' a boat in a rapids, an' changin' his name—you admitted you couldn't prove none of it! An' if he did change his name, it ain't no cause fer chargin' him with murder, even if you could prove it! An', here I thought you was smart! You've made a fool of the Mounted! Git to hell out o' here!"

"Hold on, sarge," Northern said. "The prisoner identified each piece of this body as being the identical piece that he buried, didn't he? There can't be any mistake——"

"'Course there ain't no mistake!" interrupted the prisoner, with a sneering grin. "Not none whatever! Them's the exact pieces I buried—an' I described 'em before you showed 'em! An' that proves that I told the sergeant the truth, when I reported the case!"

"Sure it does!" seconded the exasperated sergeant. "Northern, you're just simply crazy!"

"Maybe," Northern smilingly admitted. "But the murder charge stands."

He pointed at the prisoner.

"That man, whatever his name is, slipped up and jerked the ladder out of the shaft where the two partners, Kent and Winslow, were working. Then he tossed in the dynamite, with a short fuse lighted. He was evidently excited and in a big hurry when he collected the fragments of bodies. A man naturally would be."

Northern's face became more stern. "I couldn't find where he buried Winslow," he said. "But when he buried Kent, he made one fatal mistake—a mistake that you fellows here overlooked with the evidence right before your eyes. I've got other evidence, too. I know he got his facts—the number of the boat, and all, from Winslow's diary. I've got several sheets of paper on which he practiced Winslow's handwriting, and especially his signature. And I found where he burned his own clothing after changing to Winslow's."

Pausing, he allowed his glance to rest for a moment upon the face of the prisoner—a face from which the sneering grin of a few moments before had vanished—a dead-white face that was staring wide-eyed into his own.

Then, stooping swiftly, Northern picked up two fragments and extended them toward the sergeant.

"*These are both left hands!*" he said.

And Jones, alias Brown, alias Kendall, alias Winslow, had the expression of a man who sees the noose dangling over his head.



Fogarty and Hoyle were only buck privates, but they decided to appoint themselves

Admirals Of Egypt

By A. de Herries Smith

THE members of the Third Australian Infantry were going to fight at last. Seven hundred helmeted figures were clustered at the rail of the *Dilwarra*, the troopship that had brought them to this part of the War. They were cheering and yelling, for they had wanted action, and now it was announced that they were going to get it.

But "Flapper" Fogarty and "Possum" Hoyle were not doing any cheer-

ing. They were in the "brig"—sentenced to three months' imprisonment because Sergeant Scurr had accused them of hijacking the rum issue belonging to the sergeants' mess.

Private Fogarty heard the cheering out on the decks. "When I get that weasel-faced Scurr in the 'tween decks, I'm sure goin' to plug him!" he boasted.

"Aw, you couldn't plug a hole in a beer barrel with your fat tongue!" Hoyle flung back. "Shut up!"

Flapper mumbled disgustedly, and then glanced overside to the glaringly yellow sands of the Suez Canal. There, with red fez bobbing and their black faces split by wide grins, a company of the Soudanese Camel Corps was swaying along toward the battle front. The camelmen waved their Lee-Enfields in salute, and the Australians on the deck of the *Dilwarra* howled in reply.

An ambulance train, slowly wheeling through the sand, could not dampen the ardor of the new troops. They greeted the Red Cross trucks with fresh volleys of cheers. The booming of the howitzer batteries and the droning of the battle planes overhead were music in their ears.

Even the gangs of frowzy Arabs, toiling to keep the canal banks in repair, were cheered by the new regiment which was going to fight at last—all except those unhappy warriors, Privates Fogarty and Hoyle.

At the height of the cheering, these dismal soldiers were marched by Sergeant Scurr down two long flights of iron stairs until they reached the steaming interior of the *Dilwarra*. The sergeant pointed grimly to a steel-walled inclosure housing a pile of old boxes and two carpenter's axes thrown on the steel floor.

"You're lucky," Scurr announced, when he had filled his mouth with a nourishing chew of tobacco. "The battalion'll be landing in half an hour an' we'll be battlin' with them ruddy Turks. All you blokes got to do is to sit in this cozy corner an' make a million toothpicks. No decorations for youse, but here you'll be—busy, happy an' warm. Heh-heh-heh!"

Private Flapper Fogarty glanced up for a fleeting moment. His eyes took in the sergeant's narrow, grinning face, his bottle shoulders, and the spidery legs which had brought the man the title of "Beetle."

Scurr made an elaborate gesture with an imaginary toothpick, and disappeared.

Bitter thoughts surged through Fogarty's mind. Why the hell had he deserted his own American ship in Melbourne and joined Australian Expeditionary Force? Why didn't he have the sense to go back to San Francisco on the *Sierra* and join up there? Why wasn't the good old United States army the right place for him? Might have known enough to pick a cool place to scrap in, anyhow. And now! The best bayonet fighter in D company—making toothpicks for the officers! Bah!

Again it came to Flapper that there would be no fighting for him, and above all things the big American gloried in trouble. Sentenced to three months! That wasn't justice. No, sir. He joined to kill Turks, not to make toothpicks. By Jupiter, he was going to fight, too!

"Possum Hoyle, I ain't goin' to stay here another minute," Flapper announced suddenly. "Them Turks is advancin' to blow up the Suez Canal, an' you an' me is goin' to stop 'em! Listen. The old tank is in Port Said now; engines stopped. Get this. We'll amble ashore ahead of the troops, pull off some darin' deed an' get loaded with medals. Then the colonel'll forget all about that run. How does that listen to yuh?"

Possum blinked, said "Click! Click!" twice, and motioned as though he were one of a firing party examining the breechblock of his rifle. With a dirty finger he wrote in the air: "Deserting in the face of the enemy. Sentence—death!"

The baby-blue eyes in Fogarty's face were still eager. He was a large man, always untidy, and possessed of the reputation that army jails had been invented for his especial benefit.

His nickname of "Flapper" had not been acquired by reason of girlish man-

nerisms, but rather because his comrades stated that the man's protruding ears flapped as he walked.

P RIVATE POSSUM HOYLE took no notice of the American, but went on splitting box lids with maddening care. As Fogarty was huge, so Hoyle was little. Although thin and wiry, his head scarcely reached to his comrade's shoulder. He possessed an alert mind despite his sleepy appearance, however, and prior to the unfortunate episode of the sergeants' rum, he had been the brains of various flapper adventures.

Both the prisoners well knew that it was a critical period of the World War. Troops, food, and supplies of all kinds were being rushed from India and Australia, through the Suez Canal, to the hard-pressed western front.

The Australians had been given the task of keeping the canal open, and the Turks were advancing to blow it up. If the enemy succeeded in capturing the canal, it might mean that the War was lost.

Flapper wiped the perspiration from his broad face, wrinkled his nostrils disgustedly at the clinging odor of cabbage coming from the near-by kitchen. He surveyed his comrade's back and his clammy hair.

All at once Fogarty bent down, picked Possum up, and, despite the little man's expostulations and kicks, jumped through the doorway and headed off down a long, stifling passage.

Fogarty blundered on, finally halting when a broad beam of light stabbed the lower deck's darkness. He put Possum on his feet, pointed out through the doorway to the scenes ashore and grunted inquiringly.

For a long moment Possum maintained a discreet silence. Then he returned the grunt, and the big man laughed. He understood that Hoyle's imagination had been stirred and that

now the only trouble would be to hold his comrade in check.

Facing them was a narrow blue ribbon of water, with beyond that the flat-roofed houses of Port Said's Arab quarter. Beyond again were the desert's yellow waves. Below the two men, barges were alongside the ship and long lines of Arabs were passing baskets of coal from hand to hand, between the barges and the bunker ports. The natives were all dressed in the usual blue jelabs, long garments of light linen that reached from neck to heels.

"If we had a couple of them night-shirt things those blokes are wearin', it would be all right," the little Australian drawled, turning up lazy eyes to his comrade.

Fogarty made no reply. He copied Hoyle's example, rubbed coal dust into his hair and face, and then crept forward toward the dim figures of the topmost Egyptians.

Flapper had crouched down and was extending one arm when hard fingers on his wrist halted the movement. He came erect to find himself looking into two hard eyes underneath an engineer officer's cap.

"Up on deck, soldier!" the engineer ordered, waving an authoritative hand. "Stuff that animated toy you got with you into your pocket. Let your feet burn or I'll— Ah!"

Whang!

A hard, though small fist connected with the point of the engineer's chin. A split second later, Fogarty was conscious of the fact that the officer had disappeared down the coal chute to the regions far below, traveling at a high rate of speed.

"There! Let him go an' blow his whistle," Possum mumbled, nursing his hand. "Sailors is my meat. I hates 'em."

"*Pow!* Right on the smeller, an' down he goes to the Black Hole of Calcutta!" Flapper breathed in admi-

ration, placing an affectionate arm about Possum's shoulders. "Boy, when you wake up, you sure are a wicked rabbit," he added.

Hoyle thrust the praise aside. He jumped forward and circled the necks of the two topmost Egyptians with his arms, dragging them back from the doorway. Wild howls were choked off. Hectic moments came, following which two startled and naked natives were racing down the troopship's dark passageways, calling upon Allah for aid.

The soldiers took no notice of the receding cries. Clothed in the flowing jelabs, they strode down through the line of toiling Egyptians and reached the coal barge's deck. There good fortune still smiled upon them.

A fruit seller's bumboat was alongside. Fogarty leaped aboard, waving a fist and a wad of French francs before the merchant's astonished eyes. The oars dipped in response to the dual urge.

WHEN they had reached about halfway to the shore, Flapper kicked Possum on the leg. The little man commenced to swear, but all at once his mouth dropped. He saw a commotion of khaki-clad figures at the *Dikwarra's* rails. Shouts came thinly across the water, and a moment later a bugle's notes blared out.

"Scurr!" Fogarty growled from deep down in his great chest. "He goes below an' misses his pets. Then he hears them colored boys jabberin'. He's after us!"

The big man exhibited a No. 10 ammunition boot to the Egyptian at the oars. He added various choice phrases, dating back to his Arizona days. The result was satisfactory. The native drove down with the long blades and the craft fairly leaped through the water.

"This is desertin'," Possum warned

his companion, when they reached the boat wharf and turned to stare back at the troopship's bulk, towering above the crowded native boats. "Anyhow," he added brightly, "what's the diff? An Australian bullet feels the same as a Turk's."

"You said it!" Flapper agreed heartily. "Now we do the cowboy act. Sure great to be ashore after livin' in that tin can for four weeks. We gotta speed it before Scurr gets ashore, though. There's a bunch of burros up there by that café, or whatever it is. Quick march, me little comrade."

They reached the Arab boys and their saddled donkeys, drowsing in the stabling sunshine before a white-walled café. At once the soldiers proceeded to negotiate terms.

For a time the boys took no notice of what they thought were their own kind, who would certainly not indulge in donkey riding after the tourist manner. But one keen-eyed Arab caught sight of the French money in Fogarty's hands and a near riot was staged as the natives fought each other for the privilege of mounting the strangers.

The soldiers waved arms toward the desert, to where planes circled mothlike against the glaring sky, to where cordite puffs hung on the hot air. Much shrugging and hand waving took place, but finally the donkey boys came to understand that the visitors desired to be delivered to the battle front.

"Cavalry, by heck!" Flapper exulted as their groaning steeds got under way. "This is the life. Reminds me of the time when I was prospectin' out on the Mojave——"

"Shut your bleedin' trap an' pull them legs of yours up under that nightshirt," Possum cut in caustically. "Your hoofs is darn near draggin' on the ground. Look what's comin'!"

They were passing down a dusty street, close to a line of shops screened by wide awnings that reached across

the sidewalks. The soldiers were suddenly aware that a crowd of people was pushing along under the awnings, keeping pace with the riders, and staring at them curiously.

ALL too late, Flapper pulled the tell-tale boots and puttees under the hem of his jelab. A tall figure, and crowned by a red fez, had pushed through the crowd and was advancing toward the riders. He held one white-gloved hand aloft in mute command.

"One of them Egyptian cops," Possum wheezed, kicking his donkey viciously. "Lay off him now, Flapper. Get him in an alley! Go on, get that burro movin'."

The Egyptian's handsome, bronzed face was affable. He apparently recognized that the soldiers were masquerading for some good purpose. Since the arrival of the Allies in Egypt, there had been many strange sights in Port Said.

"Right wheel! Right incline, you big boob! Here's an alley," Possum hissed at his comrade, meanwhile tugging at the donkey's reins.

"Jake! Leave him to me," Fogarty replied, measuring the tall policeman, who still waved his white gloves and shouted questions at the donkey boy.

The two soldiers succeeded in turning the stubborn donkeys' heads down the alley, and were immediately conscious of a grateful shade from the balconies which almost met overhead.

Fogarty glanced back and noticed that the crowd was not following. He tensed his muscles, stiffened his legs, and let the donkey walk from under him. Just at that moment a voice at his elbow inquired:

"Name and regimental number? What battalion?"

After what seemed a century of time, Flapper's head came about to find that his ears told no lies. He was looking directly at a figure uniformed in khaki twill, whose arm bore the fatal letters

"M. P." in addition to a sergeant's chevrons.

Behind the sergeant were three other military police, revolver holsters at their hips. Lee-Enfield rifles were slung across their shoulders by the carrying straps. They regarded the two tourists with an offensive curiosity.

Possum had also slid off his mount, and from his movements, Fogarty well knew that the little man was preparing to stage his celebrated pig fight, by darting between his adversary's legs.

Flapper stilled the intention with a sudden glare, gave his regimental number and name; waiting patiently until the sergeant had noted these particulars, as well as Hoyle's.

"Well?" the M. P. queried coldly, as he stowed away his book. "Why the painted maps and the pi-jammers? What's the dirty lie this time?"

"To tell you the honest truth, sarge, we're ashore off the *Dilwarra* without leave," Flapper replied humbly, his broad face wreathed in innocence.

"Yes. Go on." The sergeant nodded to the three other police, who unslung their rifles and closed in.

"No shore leave at all," Fogarty went on, shrugging his great shoulders in frank admittance of the crime. "Fact is, we're orderlies in the sergeants' mess, an' Sergeant Scurr sent us ashore to grab a few bottles of wine. The sergeants of our mob is fine guys. They like their liquor, an' the *Dilwarra's* as dry as that there desert."

The sergeant bent forward to stare fixedly into Flapper's black face, but the big American's features betrayed nothing more than disappointment and a sense of having done the best possible for his superiors.

There was a slight feeling of doubt in the M. P.'s mind, but in a vision he saw himself labeled as a "poor punce" by every sergeants' mess in the A. I. E. F. if these two orderlies were sent back to the ship without the desired

wine. He'd be in wrong with all the other N. C. O.'s. No doubt at all about that!

"Oh, is that the way she lays?" the M. P. queried. "Hell, that's all right. Tell Scurr you met Sergeant Ransome of the Tenth. Ain't seen him since the big night in Melbourne. Best place for wine in Greek Adolph's. I'll fix it with the cop. Keep to the town, though. The Turk patrols are closing in on the canal. Go ahead, boys."

The two deserters muttered their thanks, and while the M. P. sergeant assured the Egyptian policeman that all was well, they once more mounted the donkeys and proceeded.

THEY had gone about fifty yards when a great shout rang down the vaulted alleyway. At it, both twisted about in the ornamented red saddles. What they saw was that the military police had been joined by other figures in khaki uniforms, all of whom were waving their arms and yelling in unison.

"Holy cow!" Possum groaned. "The farther we goes the worse it gets. It's Scurr! He's after us, an' by hokey, he's got the picket with him. We'd best mosey off."

"Mosey is right," the other man growled in agreement, eyes still on the figures running down the alley. "Put the hooks to that canary."

Flapper managed to get his heels high enough to kick the donkey in the ribs. Hoyle pounded his mount. Behind them, the Arab boys turned loose a series of wild cries, flailing the little beasts with their bamboo rods.

"Blazes! We might as well be goin' backward," Fogarty called when another glance convinced him that the pursuers' pace was double that of the donkeys'. He stepped off his animal, grabbed Possum's flowing jelab, and towing the little man, streaked on up the alley in time to redoubled shouts from behind.

Whump! Eee-e-p! Whee-ee-e!

Half a dozen rifle shots suddenly rang out from behind, reverberating back from the cavalike alley. Lee-Enfield bullets kicked up the dust about the flying soldiers and buried themselves in the mud walls.

Flapper had no time to consider the marksmanship. His eyes were on the overhanging balconies as he ran. The men turned a sudden corner, and before Possum could voice a protest, he was flung upward until his hands met an ornamented iron grille. Then Fogarty leaped, caught the railing and hauled himself up.

They flopped down in the shelter of a deeply buttressed window, lying there with stifled breathing until the pickets' boots sounded in the dust beneath.

Scurr's urging voice came distinctly through the medley of noises, then faded away, and the two on the balcony were aware of no sounds but their gasping lungs.

"Through with that cavalry stuff!" Flapper announced firmly. "Look, if you go to sleep, you'll wake up in a hotter place than Egypt. Get up here an' look around."

Following his comrade, Possum presently found himself on a flat roof and gazing out over a sea of similar coverings. The roofs stretched apparently without end to where the square shapes were topped by the ships in the Suez Canal.

"Duck soup!" Flapper exulted, pointing to the canal. "If we ambles back now, they stands us against a stone wall. We starts a private navy, see? We go to the ditch, snitch a boat, an' set sail for the middle of the battle."

"Yus." Hoyle admitted drowsily. "There's Scurr an' the picket down in the damn town. There's patrol boats in the canal, an' camel guards ridin' along the bank. Oh, it's easy. Anyhow, where does we sail to? That's what I wants to know."

"That's you all over," Fogarty rumbled disgustedly. "Always puttin' somethin' by for a rainy day. Well, it don't never rain in this man's country. We'll sashay across these here flat roofs, get a boat in the canal an' hunt Turks on our lonesome."

FORTUNATELY for the two, they had elected to cross the roofs during the blistering mid-day, a time when no self-respecting Egyptian left the shadows. Time and again they came on string roof beds used by Port Said's residents at night; empty now. These. Possum regarded lovingly, but his comrade's insistence was not to be denied.

Finally they left the security of the roofs, and dodging through alleys and cluttered bazaars, reached the canal. Lady Luck once more smiled serenely. A large assortment of boats was moored to the bank while their owners enjoyed the midday siesta.

"Easy, easy! Go easy!" Fogarty appealed to his comrade as the two strode down the bank. "If you was hired by a circus they wouldn't need no steam calliope. Can't you make less racket?"

"My troubles!" Possum said in loud and distinct tones. "Think I'm scared of a bunch of dirty Arabs?" he added, voicing the usual Australian contempt for the native races.

Fogarty sighed, grasped the lightest boat within reach and commenced to slide it down the sand. As he did so an ear-splitting howl reached his ears. Both he and Possum jumped about to see a bearded Arab jerk half upright, mouth wide for another warning call.

It was not needed. The rest of the Arabs were on their feet now and racing down the sand, screaming execrations, the jelabs billowing out behind them, their brown faces writhing in fury.

"Get this battleship afloat an' leave 'em to me," Possum ordered. He took

a pace forward, crouched down, shoulders bent.

There came a flash of khaki when the little man dived through the nearest Arab's legs and brought him down, with three more floundering on top of him. He emerged from the maze of garments, both feet and fists in action.

"*Allah il Allah!* There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet!" a hoary-bearded native shouted from outside the milling mob. "Strike with the knife, O my brethren! Kill these infidels! Kill! Kill!"

Possum emitted a joyful shout and dived once more. But when he came to light again, he was revealed with an Arab's sinewy brown arm about his neck, while the native sought for a knife under his flapping garment.

"Damn fool! I'll knock your map off!" Flapper shouted, stung to agony by his comrade's insanity.

A hard fist crashed into the clawing Arab's face, knocking him backward. Fogarty's hands met in Hoyle's jelab. With a heave of his great shoulders he threw the little man back into the shallow water.

Thereafter, Flapper had no thoughts but the matter in hand. He was dimly aware of the sun glinting on long knives, on those rolling whites of eyes, and the evil faces snarling at him.

Something hot stung his shoulder. A face leaped up into his range of vision, only to disappear again as his fist found the mark. The whole immediate world appeared to be filled with pagan howls, gasping breaths and those darting brown hands.

All at once something white flashed past his hazing eyes and peace spread her wings over the scene. When Fogarty's dazed vision cleared, it was to find Hoyle standing beside him, a splintered oar over his shoulder and three Arabs stretched on the hot sand.

Beyond, the other natives were racing down along the canal in the direc-

tion of Port Said, waving their arms and emitting shrill howls.

"You try throwin' me in the drink again, cow face, an' I'll——"

Flapper brushed the threat aside, his eyes still on the racing Arabs.

"We done it now," he said reflectively. "Them boys'll raise hell in the town. They'll have every kind of policeman in Egypt on our tails. Best thing we can do is go an' sit in front of a howitzer. Come on, worm."

Both the soldiers' faces cleared, however, as they turned away. A tornado of sound was rolling up the canal now. Below the detonations of shells they could hear the rumble of drum fire and the crackle of machine guns. Flapper patted Possum affectionately, and the little man beamed.

With the Arabs' howls still ringing in their ears, they jumped into one of the boats and commenced a furious passage toward the battle.

"Jumpin' Julia! I'm boilin' to death in this here nightshirt," Possum complained after half an hour's feverish rowing. "We're in the navy now. So why we gotta wear these things? Off she——"

Fogarty's heavy hand halted both the words and the movement. He was staring at the bank ahead. Possum's eyes followed and he swore softly under his breath.

Two other figures had suddenly become outlined against the eye-aching blue, where the canal bank and the sky line met. The strangers were digging with feverish haste, but when the boat appeared, they threw down their shovels, and commenced running about in circles. Finally the men brought their legs to a halt, waved to each other and then to the two soldiers.

"Durned queer place to start a garden——" Possum commenced.

"Garden!" Flapper broke in on him, his voice bitter. "Garden, he says," the big man complained to the air. "In the

middle of a war an' all the runt can think about is cauliflowers!"

He emitted a loud snort, backed the boat about, and headed for the bank.

A CHANGE had swept over the two strangers by the time Fogarty reached the sand and plunged upward. Now they appeared to be affability itself. They bowed, pointed to themselves, to the soldiers, to the boat, and to the far side of the canal.

They were swarthy-featured men, black-haired and hook-nosed. They were dressed in the same kind of blue jelabs as the soldiers.

"Here, you ginks, what you think you're pullin' off?" Flapper demanded, shaking one great fist under the brown noses.

That savage gesture, the foreign tongue, and as well the sight of the military puttees under the jelab's hem, wrought another change in the strangers' manners. They suddenly knelt down, clasped their hands and shook them to high heaven.

Then the larger of the two bounded to his feet, threw his arms about Fogarty's neck and kissed him. The American sent the man sprawling in the sand.

"Hey, don't kill the boy!" Possum appealed, clutching his comrade's arm. "We gotta get down to where the scrap is goin' on, ain't we? Well, we'll use these lads, see?"

"Mebbe," Flapper said darkly. "There ain't no guy in this dirty country what is goin' to kiss *me* an' get away with it, though."

He thought it over, letting his eyes run from the two supplicating figures to the boat and back again.

"Jake!" Flapper finally agreed. "We lets 'em join this here private navy for a spell, eh? We hereby elects ourselves admirals, an' these bozos does the rowin'. How does that listen?"

Possum made no reply but to nod sleepily. Flapper Fogarty stirred the natives into motion and herded them down to the boat. After some violent conversation between themselves, the strangers took their places in the craft and settled down to row, heading directly across the canal. Flapper at once protested at the direction, but the natives continued to row.

"What's the bright idea?" the American queried, roaring the words the better to help the strangers understand a foreign tongue. "Quit zigzaggin' across the ditch. 'Straight ahead' is the idea."

A minute later, Fogarty nudged Possum out of his slumbers and arose to his feet. Despite his protestations, the two strangers still continued to head for the opposite bank. With an oath, Flapper reached out, held one of the oars and ordered the other man to pull about.

Instead of obeying the order, the native bounded upright and hit Fogarty on the nose. In that same moment, Possum once more staged his pig fight by diving through the man's legs, and the four were thrashing about in the rocking boat.

A withering crash that shook the boat, the shrilling of a whistle, and a hoarse voice bellowing commands stabbed Flapper's consciousness. He sent in another wicked jab at the wriggling form beneath him—just as a pair of heavy boots landed on his back.

Thereafter the air seemed filled with legs, boots, and fists. Once the American saw Possum's blackened face, streaked with lines of sweat, rear up out of the *mêlée*. Almost at the same moment, he was aware that he himself had been pitched out of the boat and onto a firmer surface.

IT was the forward deck of Patrol Launch No. 6, whose bows had cut down the private navy. With a start, the wheezing Flapper recognized that he was again a prisoner and that

the other three were in the same predicament.

He stilled his gasping lungs as well as he was able and managed to catch Possum's eye. The message that flashed between them read: "Firing squad at sunrise!"

The patrol launch had stopped and was drifting. After the recent riot, the scene was calm and peace laden. Then all at once a bugle blared out from the bank and the two soldiers looked up to see a column of infantry passing.

Only the helmeted heads were visible above the canal's sand banks, but neither man needed to be informed that the Third Australians were marching out to attack the Turks—all the Third Australians, except Privates Fogarty and Hoyle.

They stood dejectedly on the little vessel's hot deck, aware of the sailors mounting guard over them and the unpleasant proximity of bayoneted rifles.

"Ow!"

A sudden kick on the ankle caused Private Fogarty to forget his misery and turn savagely on his attacker. His eyes jumped away from the little man beside him—to where khaki uniforms were thrusting a passage through the sailors.

"Great Scott!" Flapper groaned through his nose. "Sergeant Scurr, the picket—an' Captain Blackjack Buller!"

"What's this? What's this?" "Blackjack" roared, when he finally reached the prisoners. "D company, too! My colonial oath, but I'll send you two down for keeps this trip! What have you got to say for yourselves? What have you got to say?"

Captain Buller was a large man, red of face and short of temper. He was also the prisoners' company commander. Both Flapper and Possum recognized that it was especially unfortunate that he should have been detailed to command the picket.

"Well, come through with it?" Buller

demanded. "Why the jelabs and the tinted mugs? No time to waste on you. Battalion's going into action. Deserters or what? Out with it!"

All at once a stupendous idea flowed across Possum's agile mind. He opened his mouth to give the thought birth, but it died on his lips.

Just at the same moment, he saw Sergeant Scurr's beady eyes fixed upon him in evil satisfaction and noted the grim crinkling up the corners of his mouth.

Possum gulped, licked dry lips, and ran his eyes about the circle of intent faces. Then again that amazingly brilliant idea flamed across his brain. It was a forlorn hope, a desperate chance. They were going to be shot anyhow. Might as well give it a whirl.

"Sir, we got tipped off by some Arab bozos that the Turks is tryin' to pull off somethin' down the ditch," Possum commenced in time to cut off an agonized snort of expostulation from his comrade.

"Well?" Captain Buller queried furiously.

"Well, sir, me an' Fogarty dolls up in these here nightshirts for detectin' an' we's followin' hard on the scent when we comes on these two——"

"Hah-hah-hah!" Sergeant Scurr's harsh laugh broke in on the explanation. "Excuse me, sir. I can inform you. As you know, it was common knowledge that Turkish patrols were advancing with the intention of blowin' up the ditch. Yes, sir. Those other two are Turks, sir! We saw them diggin' an' then leave the bank in that boat with the two deserters. Why should Fogarty an' Hoyle be disguised, sir? I submit, captain, that they was aidin' the enemy in the placin' of high explosives an' time fuses to blow up the canal!"

Fogarty went green under his tan. He opened his mouth to defend himself, but was frozen speechless by Captain Buller's glare.

In a fleeting moment, the officer's mind went back to the two men's crime sheets, and decision came to him. He wheeled about and spoke rapid words to the commander of the patrol launch.

The two natives, emitting shrill cries of protest, were hustled off by the blue-jackets, and the little vessel was headed for the bank.

FIVE minutes later, Fogarty and Hoyle were both struggling up through the sand, carrying shovels. On either side of them an armed soldier kept pace with the prisoners. Captain Buller, Sergeant Scurr, and the remainder of the picket marched behind.

"So long, old-timer," Fogarty said huskily under his breath to his comrade. "We had some good sport together, but in half an hour we'll be toes up."

"So long," Hoyle returned miserably. "We took their run anyhow. Well, we——"

"Halt! Dig!" Captain Buller's harsh voice cut in on Possum's farewell, when the procession reached the disturbed sand.

The two prisoners stripped off their jelabs and commenced to dig while the sweat streamed down over their blackened faces. With Blackjack and Scurr standing over them, they dug as they had never dug before.

The shovels hissed and chugged in the loose sand, but neither of the men heard those sounds. Their ears were still attuned to the howitzers' booming and the crackle of machine-gun fire—closer now.

The hole grew and grew, and gradually the two prisoners went deeper into the sand; caked with sweat, gasping, with the wicked sun, making every lunge with the shovels an agony.

Clunk! One of the shovels struck some object now thinly covered by the sand.

"Be careful there! Be careful!"

Captain Buller roared. "Don't you fools understand anything? Want to blow us all to blazes, eh?"

All at once a well defined suspicion of the prisoners' intent crossed Black-jack's mind. That big man, Fogarty, was plunging around with his shovel as though half demented. Was it the sun or could it be that he actually intended setting off the detonator with a sudden blow?

"Halt!" Buller roared, jerking out his revolver. "Not a move out of you men!"

Before the words had left his lips. Sergeant Scurr slid down the hole in a cascade of loose sand, wrenched Possum's shovel from him, and threw it up. Then with Buller's revolver still covering Fogarty, the sergeant grasped the other shovel, motioned both prisoners back against the side of the hole, and commenced a careful scraping and digging.

Clunk!

A rustle of expectancy came from the circle of men rimming the hole. Heads were craned down. The troops had completely forgotten the *tak-tak-tak* of the machine guns and the *whump-whump* of the air bombs.

Clunk!

"My heavens! What is it?" Captain Buller called irritably. "Can't you speak? Land mine, eh?"

"No, sir," Sergeant Scurr's voice sounded after what seemed an age of time.

"What is it?"

"A camel."

"A camel!" Buller roared, as though in pain.

"Yes, sir, a camel," the sergeant responded miserably. "I think it's dead, sir."

Captain Buller's face changed from red to purple. He swelled visibly. Words foamed to his lips but took no shape. He motioned the three out of the hole, then turned to Sergeant Scurr, his face dangerous.

"So you think it's dead, do you? Clever man for an N. C. O.," Buller rumbled at length, peering down at Scurr's averted features. "Two Arabs burying a stolen transport camel and you knew it was the Turks blowing up the canal. Marvelous! Thanks to you, here we are celebrating a camel's funeral while the battalion is attacking. I'll attend to you later. You're under open arrest.

"Fall in, the picket," the officer ordered. "For-r-m fours. Right. On the double! March!

"Well, what's biting you idiots?" Captain Buller inquired of the two motionless and erect prisoners as the picket swung by. "What did you come to this blasted country for, anyhow, to stick around and paw at dead camels, or fight? Think you'll play safe back in the town guard room, eh? Rolling the bones for drinks, where it's nice and cool, eh? You'll fight or, by the gods of war, I'll shoot you down right where you stand! Can you understand that? There's a spare kit on the transport trucks. What the——"

Private Fogarty and Hoyle shot past the laboring picket like kangaroos. Their faces beamed.

The ex-prisoners' movements lacked grace, but they possessed speed.



Ozar's Crown Of Victory

By

Valentine Wood

Author of
"Ozar and the Jade Altar," etc.

**Ozar the Aztec makes
his final struggle against
the power of the evil Tarx**



CHAPTER I.

THE LAST COMMANDMENT.

SIGHING, Claxitl the Arrow Maker laid down his flint-chipping hammer and the half-finished spearhead, which he was flaking into shape. With a grunt of exertion, the old Aztec got to his feet and hobbled to the mouth of his cave.

Far off down the slope of the Navajada range, the old hermit detected a tiny dot of movement. An ordinary Aztec would not have discerned the approach of a traveler so far away, though the rarified air was crystal clear in the white Mexican sunlight.

But forty long years in this secluded

fastness had given Claxitl the telescopic vision of a *sopilote* hawk. He recognized that movement as a white man, clad only in the fur of an ocelot. And beside the white man trudged a half-naked Indian, burdened with a pack.

"At last—my son Ozar returneth to the humble abode of his father!" murmured the old Indian, cramming a leaf of brown *tabac* into the cylinder of tortoise shell in his fist. "The great sun god Mexlitl has protected my Ozar in

the great city of Karnux. *Huwa!* It is good."

Claxitl's relief was genuine. Of late, he had begun to wonder if his adopted son, Ozar the Aztec, would ever return to the mountain grotto, where he had spent his childhood. For was he not absent on an extremely perilous mission? Was he not pitted against

also accounted for the wavy brown hair which contrasted so strongly with the coarse, straight black locks of the Indians; and for the ice-blue eyes, in place of savage, ebony orbs.

Claxitl hobbled out to the granite rampart overlooking the fertile mountain bench where he grew his maize and yams and *tabac*. Years before, Claxitl

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE IN THE ADVENTURES OF OZAR THE AZTEC

LARRY STARLING was captured as an infant by a lost tribe of Aztecs. The barbarians killed his parents, who had wandered into an inaccessible part of mountainous Mexico with an American scientific expedition. They had been slaughtered to appease the wrath of Yaxob the Rain God, who had withheld his favors until the fertile fields that were once so green and lush were now withered and brown.

Just as the child was placed on the sacrificial block, thunder pealed and lightning flashed. Rain—merciful, life-saving rain—poured from the skies in torrents.

And Montezirka, aged king of the Aztecs, shouted to the high priest in charge of the sacrifice: "Spare him, O Tarx! It is written in the walls of the Golden Temple that a ruler shall come to Karnux—a fair god with skin like furbished silver, named Ozar the Aztec. Who knows but this babe is Ozar?"

As the bloodthirsty Tarx scowled, the monarch continued: "He shall not be killed until twenty summers have passed—for then, if he be indeed Ozar the Aztec, he can prove his divinity by meeting the mightiest warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Duel. If victorious in that, stripping though he be, this ivory-skinned babe is indeed Ozar, sky king of the Aztecs!"

And Ozar, after twenty summers had passed, proved victorious in the fabled Doom Duel. But he had yet to fulfill the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlitl the Sun God and redeem an afflicted people from the sinister influence of Tarx, the pagan high priest who ruled supreme now that the aged monarch was dead.

Ozar was victorious in fulfilling the Sacred Command of the Plumed Serpent and again in recovering the lost knife of the great god Mexlitl from the sunken Temple of the Jade Altar, and still again in the adventures of the Death Drums and of the Black Skull.

This is the final episode of Ozar's struggle against the wiles of Tarx, the vicious pagan high priest.

dangers which an ordinary Aztec could not surmount?

But, then, Ozar the Aztec was not an ordinary Aztec. In fact, he was not an Aztec at all. Had it not been for an incredible chain of events, over twenty years past, Ozar would now have been Larry Starling, son of cultured American parents, about to graduate from college.

His American parentage accounted for the golden ivory tint of his skin, so different from the coppery complexion of the Aztec Indians. His alien blood

had been a mighty warrior in the army of Montezirka, king of the Aztecs. He had received that lame leg in the heat of battle; and ever since, he had been a hermit, living alone in his mountain cavern, choosing to make arrowheads and spear points, rather than be retired off in the city of Karnux, to spend his days receiving the piteous glances of younger and sturdier warriors.

But all of the forty years he had spent in this mountain cavern had not been alone. Even now, as he peered off through a haze of *tabac* smoke to

where Ozar the Aztec and his companion were approaching, Claxitl's eyes grew misty as he recalled the strange events which had led up to his meeting with the white-skinned baby whom he had named Ozar the Aztec.

MORE than twenty years before, a drought had blighted the Valley of the Navajadas—located in the great crater of an extinct volcano, somewhere in northern Mexico's waste lands. For four hundred years, since Cortes had made his conquest of Mexico, and had apparently destroyed the mighty Aztec tribe forever, the crater of the Navajadas had been peopled with a remnant of that mighty Indian civilization, who had wandered there to establish the lost city of Karnux.

But it was those very mountain walls that had kept the existence of a mighty Aztecan civilization from being discovered by a twentieth-century world, which had kept out the rain clouds, on that eventful summer twenty years before.

Montezirka, the aged king, had summoned the high priest of the sun god, one Tarx, the magician. He had commanded Tarx to go outside the towering walls of the crater rim in search of a sacrifice which would appease the rain god, and bring fertility and life once more to the Valley of the Navajadas.

Tarx and his warriors had done so, and they had returned with three persons for sacrifice—a white man with a face covered with a strange, hairy growth; his wife, with eyes like turquoises; and their infant son, a babe with skin like the lily.

Those white people were all that remained of a party of geologists exploring the wilds of Mexico; they were Doctor William Starling and his wife, and their eighteen-month-old son, Larry. The others had been slaughtered by Tarx's attack.

The father and mother had been sacrificed by Tarx, on the altars atop the great Temple of Gold in Karnux; but before Tarx could slice out the heart of the baby boy, the heavens had opened, and warm rain had gushed down upon the starving Indians of the Navajadas.

To the aged King Montezirka, himself dying of old age, the rainstorm was a sign from Yaxob the Rain God to spare the life of the white babe. There was a tale in Karnuxian mythology which said that, some day, a white god named Ozar the Aztec should come to rule over them.

So Montezirka had ordered the babe's life to be spared for twenty summers, much against Tarx's strenuous objections; and thus Montezirka had died, leaving the throne of the Aztecs to his only heir, the infant Queen Esta, his granddaughter.

Tarx, the wicked high priest, had taken over the reins of government until Esta should have reached maturity. And the first official act which the evil priest ordained was to banish the white baby to the mountain hermit, Claxitl the Arrow Maker.

And well might Tarx hope that the white babe Ozar would die; for if the infant were indeed the fabled fair god, then he would replace Tarx as mightiest man in all Karnux.

It was the theory of Tarx that if he banished Ozar to the care of the surly old hermit Claxitl, the babe would perish, leaving Tarx in possession of the throne of Karnux.

But the sturdy little American babe had captured the gruff old arrow maker's fancy. Instead of dashing out the infant's brains in a fit of disgust, Claxitl had turned his attentions to developing the white child into a powerful specimen of young manhood, such as the Aztecs had never before witnessed.

He had taught Ozar all the craft of a warrior: how to shoot a bow, and hurl

a spear, and defend himself with a buckler; how to wield the huge wooden *macquauitl* sword, and how to wrestle, and swim, and hunt.

All these things had Larry Starling mastered in his boyhood; but in addition, he had invented the first sling shot the Aztecs had ever seen, with which he could kill birds on the wing, or stop a mountain lion in mid-leap. It was on his sling shot that Ozar depended; he kept it wrapped like a bandeau about his forehead, so that he might travel swiftly, unburdened by heavy swords or shields.

But, finally, the twenty summers were up, and Claxitl had sent young Ozar to Karnux, to meet his destiny as the savior of his people. And now, Ozar was returning.

"I wonder what brings my son to the mountains?" mused Claxitl, as he hobbled back to his grotto. "I must prepare food."

WITH the aid of a broom made of tough fibers, the lame hermit swept the smooth rock floor of the cave clean. Beside his smoldering fire he placed heaps of food, to nourish Ozar and his friend after their long trek from the city of Karnux.

Balls of maize paste flavored with chili; avocado pears and *nanona* fruit, beans and papaya. A pottery jar filled with sweet brown *chocolatl*, stewed and bubbled on the fire; a stone pot of honey stood between a dish of fresh duck meat and a gourd bottle filled with maguey sap. After the meal, would follow the stimulating *octli* liquor, prepared from the fermented sap of pulque. None could say that Claxitl, the hermit arrow maker, did not serve his guests well!

Ozar the Aztec and his companion were just climbing the rim of the granite shelf jutting from the cave's mouth, when Claxitl emerged from his cavern home.

"A thousand hails, Ozar, my son! Greetings, O stranger!" called the old warrior, lifting a bronzed, battle-scarred arm in greeting. His stern Aztec features did not betray the joy which overflowed his heart at sight of his long-absent Ozar. "Thou and thy comrade are welcome to the poor abode of Claxitl!"

A powerful and well-muscled man was Ozar, the adopted Aztec; Claxitl noticed that his golden-bronzed skin was seamed with half-healed scars in a score of places, and he guessed wisely that each scar told its story of a breathless adventure.

Behind Ozar, panting heavily from the exertion which had merely brought sweat to the white man's pores, was a towering native Indian, carrying an *itsli*-tipped spear and a heavy coil of maguey fiber rope over one shoulder, for mountain climbing.

"'Tis one Larxatun I bring to thine abode, father," said Ozar, as he presented his dusky comrade. "Sharer of my adventures in the city of Karnux is Larxatun. More times than I have fingers has Larxatun saved my life, and I his. Once a slave of Tarx, the high priest, he is now my brother!"

The two Aztecs raised their arms to their hearts, in mute recognition of Ozar's introduction.

"And what brings thee to my abode, Ozar my son?" inquired the old weapon maker, motioning the travelers to a seat on a heap of goat skins on the floor of the grotto. "Doubtless, thou hast endured many adventures since I sent thee away to Karnux, to prove thyself to the Aztecs thy right to the name of Ozar."

"Aye, father." Ozar's ice-blue eyes misted as he glanced out over the great valley, to where the city of Karnux lay like a cluster of ivory shavings, far in the hazy distance. Indeed, his life had not been an easy one within the shadows of those mighty pagan temples and pyra-

mids! "Even now, my sire, Larxatun and I are on our way to the Temple of the Stars, to obtain the Crown of Ozar—my last commandment."

Claxitl's brown face went ashen, as Ozar finished speaking. Despite his lame and withered leg the weapon maker sprang to his feet and hopped to his foster son's side, his Aztec calm broken for the first time in Ozar's recollection.

"But Ozar, my son!" cried the old man, trembling as if from a sudden fit of ague. "Thou—thou canst not go to the *Temple of the Stars!* 'Tis forbidden by the gods! Only death will await thee at that house of horror!"

CHAPTER II.

CLAXITL'S WARNING.

LARRY STARLING smiled, and laid a reassuring hand on the shoulder of his trembling foster father. From across the cavern, Larxatun stirred on his lounge of ocelot skins, and spoke for the first time since arriving at the cave.

"I, too, warned my Lord Ozar of the fearful story of the Temple of the Stars," the ex-slave said. "I have told him many times, O Claxitl, that it is an abode of ghosts, and is guarded jealously by the mighty Mexlitl, god of the sun. Death only can await him who would enter the Temple of the Stars!"

Claxitl's face was troubled, and fear clutched at his heart as he read the determination in the white youth's face. But how was Ozar, who was not of Aztec blood, to know fully of the danger of visiting the forbidden temple of Mexlitl?

Even Claxitl, hermit of the Navajadas, had seen the Temple of the Stars but once. Most Aztecs lived and died in the valley below, without even having seen the abode of the ghosts.

The Temple of the Stars had been built, so it was said, by Mexlitl himself.

It was situated on the brink of a mighty chasm overlooking the outside world, beyond the rim of the Navajada range. Mexlitl had fashioned the bricks out of stars, and his mortar had been prepared from lime from the burned bones of warriors who had died in battle while the Aztecs had vanquished the original inhabitants of the great crater valley. All this was native tradition.

Even Tarx, the high priest of the sun god, feared to make the trek to the Temple of the Stars, if was said. It was located many days' journey from Karnux; it was built on top of the highest pinnacle of the Navajadas, and the few Aztecs who might have chanced to pursue a herd of mountain goats far into the mountain wilderness had returned with wild tales of having seen the Temple of the Stars gleaming like living fire in the dead of night—glowing whitely, though there was no moon!

Only ghosts could scale the cliffs which formed the pedestal for the Temple. Mexlitl had made those masonry walls, fashioned those loophole windows. How could mortal man have transported bricks up those sheer cliff walls?

"But, father, revered companion of my childhood," laughed Ozar, "dost thou not realize that my crown—the Crown of Ozar the Aztec—is kept in the Temple of the Stars? What would the people of Karnux think, if I, Ozar, feared to search for my own Crown of Victory? Is even the fair god of legend and story afraid to go to the Temple of the Stars?"

Claxitl sat down, trembling. True, this white-skinned youth was not an Aztec. He must be a god. But even gods feared to enter the portals of the Temple of the Stars. It was a temple which Mexlitl the Sun God had had built for a banquet hall, to be used by the ghosts of vanished, long-dead warriors. The regiments of a hundred forgotten Indian armies formed a spectral

cordon about the room which contained Ozar's crown!

"Listen well, O father, while I tell thee what has befallen thy son since thou sent him to the lost city of Karnux, nearly two moons hence," spoke up Larxatun. "Perhaps then, thou wilt realize that he is in truth Ozar, fair god of the Aztecs!"

And while Claxitl listened, Larxatun unfolded the wierd, amazing story of his adventures in the lost city of Karnux—how he had first come to the city, and had met the mightiest warrior Tarx could summon, in the fabled Doom Duel.

And then, having won the duel, how his enemy Tarx had conducted him to the idol of Mexlitl, to read the Five Sacred Commands of the sun god. Five commands, to "be fulfilled by him who would call himself Ozar the Aztec"; and that, if he failed to overcome any of those five commandments, how he would be slain by Tarx on the altar block atop the Golden Temple.

WHILE the arrow maker listened breathlessly, Larxatun described in vivid terms how Ozar had won the sanction of the dread Plumed Serpent, in fulfilling the First Command; and how he had saved Larxatun's life, who had been doomed to die with him. From then on, Larxatun became a partner of Ozar in his adventures.

The steaming food went cold on the stones beside them, as the ex-slave told of Ozar's adventures at the bottom of the Crystal Lake, when he had obtained Mexlitl's Sacred Knife from the submerged Jade Altar; and how he had destroyed the war god's Unlucky Calendar Stone, with the aid of the Death Drums.

Many times during his account, Larxatun mentioned the name of Queen Esta; and Claxitl, being old and wise in the ways of men, understood the glow which lighted Ozar's eyes whenever his

companion mentioned the name of the girl he had learned to love with all the fiery passion of a primitive nature.

And then Larxatun described how Ozar, despite the opposition of the evil high priest Tarx, had completed the fourth of the Five Sacred Commands of the sun god, by entering the grim Tower of Death, and wresting from the tomb of Montezirka the secret of the Black Skull.

"Thus he came to the fifth and last commandment of the sun god, O reverend Claxitl," Larxatun concluded. "That command is most dangerous of all, by far—that he journey to the distant Temple of the Stars, and return with the Crown of Victory upon his head."

"Only then, my father," said Ozar, "may I appear before the Aztecs of Karnux as their fair god. Only then am I worthy of the love I hold for Esta, fair Queen of Karnux. Until I obtain the Crown of Victory, I may well be counted only as an impostor, seeking to overthrow the high priest Tarx. I must go on."

Claxitl's head bowed. As well seek to keep the moon from rising as to turn back Ozar from his quest of the Crown of Victory; yet Claxitl feared for his foster son with an awful fear, which sapped the strength from his bones.

"Nevertheless, I implore thee—remain here with thine aged foster father, and thy comrade, Larxatun," begged the old man, as he set his dishes before the travelers. "Thou art a son of the wilderness, not of the temples and palaces of Karnux."

Ozar shook his head, and commenced eating.

"But I have a mission to fulfill, father! To deliver the Aztecs from the cruel bondage of Tarx!" Larry Starling insisted. "Even now, I must resume my journey, O father. Dost thou see? It is now mid-day. All night must we travel, under the light of Arsa, the

moon goddess. For by dawn, we must be at the Temple of the Stars."

Twenty minutes later, Claxitl the Arrow Maker finished packing an abundant supply of food in a wicker sack, which Ozar shouldered. Larxatun picked up the burden of heavy maguey rope, and the travelers were ready to bid adieu to the old hermit of the Navajadas.

"Take heed—the evil Tarx may be following you!" warned Claxitl as he saw his white-skinned adopted son turn at the last curve of the trail to wave a final salute. A flash of white teeth, a lusty cry of farewell—and Ozar was gone to complete his destiny, with his slave Larxatun trudging behind.

Small wonder that Claxitl's coal-black eyes watered as he turned back to his flint-chipping, that afternoon. A half-formed notion to follow Ozar roiled in the old Aztec's mind. If he didn't, he felt confident that he would never lay eyes upon his son Ozar again.

CHAPTER III.

THE HIGH PRIEST'S PLAN.

IN his heart, Ozar the Aztec knew that his foster father's last warning of the danger of being stalked and attacked by his enemy Tarx, was a wise one.

Had he known how close that danger was, however, he would have been surprised and on his guard.

Even while Larxatun and Ozar were making their meal of maize and *chocolate* and fruit and vegetables, in the grotto of the old arrow maker, the high priest Tarx and two of his sinister blue-feathered warriors were scaling the mountain scarps above them, seeking to get ahead of Ozar and his slave.

It meant everything to the wicked high priest of Karnux to overcome the triumphant march of Ozar the Aztec. Tarx had seen Ozar fulfill four of the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlitl, and all this despite the high priest's most

powerful opposition, though the Commands themselves were fraught with seemingly unsurmountable dangers.

But the white man's quest of the Crown of Victory, said by legend to have been fashioned from a sunbeam by Mexlitl, and hidden in the far-distant Temple of the Stars, provided an ideal opportunity for Tarx to accomplish his fiendish plans.

In the first place, the mission would remove Ozar far from the city of Karnux, where he was beloved of the common people, who hailed him as a rescuer from their bondage.

In the desert wilds of the Navajada mountain range, Tarx felt that he could ambush and slay his white-skinned foe, and return to the city without any one suspecting that he or his warriors had done the deed.

Thus it was, that even while Ozar the Aztec was bidding the Queen of Karnux farewell, that morning at dawn, Tarx was hurrying to his secret lairs far below the city, to make preparations to follow the white man and his slave, Larxatun.

From the ranks of his blue-feathered warriors, Tarx chose his mightiest chieftain—one Tuxatl, who held the most coveted military position in all Karnux, that of Captain of the Guards.

Without doubt, Tuxatl was the most brutal Aztec in the ranks of the blue-feathered warriors, all of whom were unexcelled for their cruelty and skill in the use of weapons. But Tarx realized that only the best of the best would be able to aid him in destroying Ozar the Aztec.

And so, while Ozar and Larxatun had made their way across the level maize fields and forests of the great valley, bound for the Temple of the Stars, Tarx and his henchman were following two miles behind, keeping out of sight themselves, but always making sure that the white man and his slave were within view.

Slinking along on their victims' trail, the two Aztecs would have horrified a civilized spectator.

TARX was clad in his holy vestments—a *tilmatli* mantle of humming bird's skins, dyed scarlet; a silver helmet fashioned like the head of a wild animal, with the yawning, fang-studded jaws framing his cruel, hawk-nosed face. Only one eye did Tarx possess; the other lay in its socket like a frosted marble, white and opaque and horrible.

The high priest's teeth were notched like the teeth of a saw, and inlaid with jade plugs. His tongue had been split like an adder's, a symbol of his priestly rank. His scrawny arms and twiglike hands were bejeweled with jade and yellow gold.

Tuxatl wore a similar helmet, from which floated a military plume of blue. He wore a quilted corslet over his armor, and was equipped with a javelin and heavy wooden sword, together with an inlaid shield, circular in shape.

While Ozar and Larxatun stopped at the cave of his foster father Claxitl, the high priest saw his chance to get in front of the travelers. Tarx, skilled at his job, knew it would be safer to pounce down upon their unsuspecting enemies than it would be to stalk them from the rear, and possibly run into an ambush themselves.

It was when they had gained the crest of the Navajadas that the high priest conceived a new notion. Why not let the white man reach the Temple of the Stars, and, if possible, obtain the fabled Crown of Victory?

Then there would be plenty of time to slay the white man from ambush. Tarx knew that if he could return to Karnux with the Crown of Ozar, the rule of the Aztecs would be his.

And then a still more daring plan entered Tarx's fowl brain. Why not make himself the crowned king of Kar-

nux, as well as high priest? He could hurl Queen Esta into the Well of Sacrifice to die. Had not the lovely empress spurned his attentions?

Let Ozar obtain the holy Crown of Victory from the Temple of the Stars! Kill Ozar, and return to the city of Karnux, and overthrow the royal régime! Sacrifice Queen Esta, and set himself up as highest monarch in the Valley of the Navajadas!

NIGHT descended over the mountains, but an early moon soared into the indigo vault of the heavens, looking like disk of mother-of-pearl set among the diamondlike stars. By its light, Tarx and Tuxatl made rapid time.

Save for short rests, the two followed the mountain ridges throughout the entire night. Miles behind them, little dreaming of danger, followed Ozar the Aztec and Larxatun.

Dawn was just breaking over the Mexican horizon when Tarx ordered a halt. The end of their journey had come, but it was worth the hard night's trek.

The Temple of the Stars!

Here it was, before them. They knew, now, why it had been so named. Far above them, two pinnacles of rock towered to meet the heavens. Between them was a deep notch—as if a great finger of stone had been cleft with a mighty ax.

The left-hand pinnacle was bush-covered, and readily accessible to its summit; but the right-hand finger of rock was bare of vegetation, and on its top, like a pile of ivory, was built the pyramidal pile of the Temple of the Stars.

Catching the first rays of the sun, the Temple glowed like white fire against the black sky. Crimson dawn light painted the rims of great terraces, played off sheer granite walls pierced only by tiny loopholes.

"If Ozar can scale those cliffs and enter the Temple, he can likewise obtain his holy Crown of Victory," chuckled Tarx, turning to Tuxatl. "But come—let us hide ourselves at the base of the cliff, for Ozar and his toad of a slave will soon be arriving."

The warrior grinned savagely as he followed the wicked high priest into a dense chaparral, hidden in the blot of shadow cast by the towering spindle of rock on which the Temple of the Stars was perched.

Before that sun had reached the point of midday, they knew that the Temple of the Stars might well be a mammoth tombstone for the white man who was even now drawing near the end of his long journey.

CHAPTER IV.

UP THE CLIFF.

A THRILL coursed through the sturdy body of Ozar as he arrived at the base of the great granite pinnacle which was surmounted by the Temple of the Stars.

"Verily, none but a fly could scale those cliffs!" cried Larxatun, shaking his head in despair as he peered up the frowning heights, blue in the shadows of early morning. "The gods have deserted us at the very eve of triumph, Lord Ozar. Thou canst not climb to the Temple of the Stars."

Ozar smiled. His ice-blue eyes swept over the tumbled, canyon-torn, and ridge-corrugated terrain about him. The very backbone of Mexico was spread out to the cardinal points of the compass; if he had had the stamina and endurance to climb here to the roof of the world, should he let seventy feet of sheer rock defeat him?

"Thy eyes are the eyes of a city dweller, Larxatun," replied Ozar, as he picked up the coil of maguey fiber rope which the slave had dropped at his feet. "Thou dost not recall that I have spent

my whole life in these bad lands. To me, a steep mountain is more easy to climb than the steps of the Temple of Gold. Watch!"

Slinging the heavy coil of rope over one shoulder, Ozar the Aztec adjusted his girdle of ocelot's fur more tightly about his waist, and headed for the base of the cliff, buried in a furry growth of thick underbrush.

He was glad that he had done most of his traveling at night; his muscles were not exhausted by the strength-draining rays of the torrid Mexican sun. True, his body was lashed by whippy undergrowth, and torn by barbed cactus encountered along the way; his skin was plastered with trail dust, and his stout leathern sandals were badly worn.

Crowding through the brush with the slave at his heels, Ozar reached the granite base of the finger of rock on which the Temple of the Stars was built. And immediately above them, a narrow ledge streeaked its way up the cliff, invisible at a distance, but offering a toe hold on the side of a cliff that from afar appeared as smooth as glass.

"Humans do not examine the face of a cliff closely, because they have no cause to do so," Ozar explained, as his gaze swept in a critical survey of the rock wall, plotting out his course in advance. "There are thousands of tiny footholds, long ledges, depressions, and roots, to climb to, that would escape the ordinary observer. Do not fear for me, Larxatun, my brother."

So saying, Ozar set foot on the narrow ledge, obtained hand holds from projecting knobs of rock, and started his ascent. In a couple of minutes, he had mounted to an elevation twelve feet above the slave's head.

"When I reach the top, I shall drop the rope to you, Larxatun," Ozar called down. "If I need thy help, I will call thee. If not, be prepared to receive the Crown of Ozar when I lower it from the rope."

Larxatun's eyes glowed with pride. The end of a long, grueling test was in sight! Soon they would be on their way to Karnux, Ozar's Crown of Victory in their possession—back to Karnux, to overthrow the power of the wicked Tarx!

But had Larxatun known the disasters which were soon to occur, he would not have been so jubilant.

"May the great god Mexlitl bless thee, Lord Ozar!" returned the slave.

Strangely, his superstitious fear at being so close to the dreaded Temple of the Stars had vanished, in his confidence of Ozar's power to succeed. Was not Ozar the fair god of the mighty Aztecs?

HIGHER and higher up the cliff, climbed the white man. How thankful he was, now, that he had learned well the teachings of the great primitive school of the outdoors! Each and every step, every handhold, he tested with infinite care. The slightest slip, and he would plummet to certain destruction in the brush and jagged boulders below.

Above him was victory, symbolized by the Crown of Ozar. With that on his head, he could claim the right to the girl he loved—Esta, Queen of Karnux. Possessed of the crown which the sun god had placed in this temple with his own hands, Ozar the Aztec could hurl the wicked Tarx from his place as mightiest man in the lost city of Karnux!

With that knowledge spurring him on, Ozar climbed, swiftly, but using the caution which a mountain goat shows by instinct. Taking advantage of every tiny niche and pockmark unnoticeable from below, the white man climbed the steeple pinnacle of rock like a monkey scaling a date palm.

At times, he pulled himself from ledge to ledge, and crack to crack, by the sheer strength of his mighty arms; at other times he followed horizontal or slightly

pitched seams in the rock, crawling on his stomach, or on hands and knees. But every passing minute was bringing him higher up the cliff.

How had the ancient artisans of the Navajadas ever built this temple, in the first place? Ozar knew that brick and mortar and stucco could not be brought up this pinnacle by the same method he was using to carry the rope to the summit.

Of course, legend had it that Mexlitl had fashioned the Temple of the Stars of star dust; but Ozar had seen too much of pagan deities since coming to Karnux to accept that explanation with the blind ardor of the primitive Indians.

In his heart, he knew that human hands had put that temple there, brick on brick; he knew it, as well as he knew in his own soul that he was no fair god, but a human being—not an Aztec, but a human being, nevertheless.

A human being who had accomplished what appeared to be supernatural in the eyes of the Aztecs, but which was, in reality, his clever use of his wits and strength, capabilities he had inherited from his American ancestors, coupled with the rigid training he had received from Claxitl, his foster father.

His heart was bursting with exertion, and his skin was bathed with sweat, but finally he inched his way up the last steep pitch of rock, and his fingers closed on the scant shrubbery which grew at the rim of the pinnacle.

A short rest, then a last struggle—and he dragged his panting body to the top of the tower of granite, and lurched forward, to lean against the mossy Temple of the Stars!

FOR many minutes, the white man rested, while his eyes surveyed the beautiful vista about him. Then he shook loose his coil of rope, and made one end fast to a punctured rock near by. In a flash, it came to him—the secret of how the ancient Aztecs had

built this temple. These perforated rocks held rope ladders, up which untold hundreds of slaves had transported mortar and brick for the Temple!

"Here comes the rope, my brother!" called Ozar, dropping the coil over the brink of the cliff. "If I call thee, thou canst climb, or I can pull thee up."

The rope tumbled in a writhing cascade over Larxatun's shoulders. Buried in the underbrush, he could not see Ozar standing at the top of the pinnacle, eighty feet above him.

"Aye, master—I await thy call!" Larxatun shouted back.

Coiling the extra rope, Larxatun tested the strength of the tough fibers with his weight.

But he was destined never to have occasion to climb that primitive rope. There was a slight rustle in the chaparral at his side, and Larxatun felt his veins freeze as he spun about, one hand flying for the javelin which he had leaned against the granite cliff near by.

Crash! A heavy body catapulted from the brush before his very face. Larxatun had a fleeting vision of Tarx's opaque, sightless eye, and a darting forked tongue behind rows of grinning, pointed teeth.

Then choking fingers clamped over the slave's windpipe, and all went black.

CHAPTER V.

THE TEMPLE OF THE STARS.

HAVING received Larxatun's call, signifying that the rope had reached the bottom without lodging on some intervening ledge, Ozar the Aztec turned and began his inspection of the Temple of the Stars.

The walls were of huge blocks of porous volcanic rock, set with mortar. Ozar shuddered as he recalled the legend about that mortar—how Mexliltl had mixed it from lime obtained by burning the skeletons of warriors who had died in his name.

The original structure had been a pyramid with the top lopped off and surmounted by an alabaster room, with perhaps a jasper altar for sacrifices at the top; but the Temple of the Stars had fallen into ruin.

Unvisited by human beings for possibly many centuries, the cracks of the walls were filling with live plants and shrubs which nearly covered the mossy stones. Birds wheeled about the rock, startled from their nests by Ozar's approach. At one place a portion of the cornice had crumbled away, and a *zopilote* hawk had built its nest there.

The Temple occupied nearly all of the crown of the pinnacle, so that Ozar had to move with extreme care, lest he slip over the brink to his death.

Moving around the west wall of the pyramid, Ozar came out on the south side, with the full glare of the morning sun bathing his body in gold. A soft breeze rippled the wavy brown locks, bound by his sling of leather. He inhaled deeply, his whole body thrilling with his adventure.

No doorway revealed itself on the south slope of the pyramid; so the white man determined to make a complete circuit of the temple, before attempting to climb to the sanctuary on top. Such a climb, at an angle of nearly seventy degrees, would be a dangerous one, with the stones made slippery by vines and leaves.

Pacing the distance off, Ozar figured that the pyramid was one hundred feet in extent at the base. The corners of the Temple were set with Plumed Serpents, which undulated their way to the top of the Pyramid.

REACHING the east side of the Temple, a gasp of pleasure escaped the American's lips. In the center of the pyramid was a huge doorway, the walls covered with Aztec picture writings and various symbols representing Mexliltl the Sun God.

"I might have known the entrance would be on the east, to greet Mexliti when he tops the horizon at dawn," mused Ozar, edging his way along the narrow ledge at the base of the Temple.

Inches to his right, the cliff dropped sheer away. Even to Ozar's altitude-trained mind, the blue depths below made him dizzy, and he twined his fingers about the roots growing over the walls of the ruined Temple.

Moving cautiously, Ozar the Aztec reached the great portal. A pavement of marble was at his feet, almost invisible under an accumulation of dirt and débris collected over many ages. Vines had grown over the entrance, stimulated by the sunshine they received, so that the carved figures of the godlings and sacred *quetzal* birds were almost covered.

There was no door; the entrance, hung with stringy vines, led directly into the great Temple, which had not known the tread of human feet for over a thousand vanished years. Something of the age-oldness of the structure, the presence of masons and stone carvers long since dead, oppressed the heart of Larry Starling as he paused a moment on the threshold.

The sun rays gleamed through the vine-hung portal, sending his shadow, like an announcing herald, into the ruins. Sunlight was reflected back into his eyes from the polished surfaces of inner walls, blinding him.

A faint inkling of danger knocked at the inner door of the American's consciousness, but he threw it off, laughing at his own nervousness. All his life, he had heard of the grim Temple of the Stars, which the average Aztec would have been afraid even to look at, if one had ever reached this almost inaccessible section of Mexico's mountain wilderness.

Ozar was not an Aztec, though. He did not know why, but he knew he was different from these Indians, in nature

as well as in the color of his skin. At the same time, he did not feel that he was a god. For did not blood flow from his veins when the spiny barbs of the cat's-claw lacerated his flesh? Was he not, then, the same as Larxatun or any other mortal?

Was he able to fly, as was a god? Did he did not require food, like any other mortal?

Little did Ozar dream, at that thrilling moment when he stood in hushed silence before entering the mighty Temple of the Stars, that the high priest Tarx was even then climbing hand over hand up the fiber rope which he had lowered for Larxatun's benefit. Otherwise, Ozar would never have crossed the threshold of the sun god's sky-piercing temple, that morning.

"Victory is within my grasp! May Mexitl sustain me, until I return to Karnux and my beloved Esta!" breathed Ozar reverently, as he walked through the vines into the Temple.

TIME had laid its heavy hand on the interior of the ruined edifice, but even the ravages of thunderstorms and blasting gales of many untold centuries could not totally destroy the splendor which Mexliti had placed within his temple.

The floor was of solid gold, elaborately carved and riveted down, plate on plate. Walls were inlaid with priceless jade and turquoise, fitted together by skilled artisans.

Bats had made nests in the lichen-gray censors that had once fumed storax incense through the room. A portion of the roof had tumbled in, but Ozar could see that the Temple had been elaborately ceiled with inlays of pyrites and rose quartz.

Vast chests of beaten copper held beads and pendants fashioned from jadeite and translucent stones. Small mirrors made of shiny pyrites nodules hung from the walls. Draperies, fallen

apart with mold and time, still clung to the side walls.

But, suddenly, Ozar's inspection of the glories of the Temple of the Stars was cut short, as his eyes fell upon the central feature of that magnificent room, dazzling in its ruin—a low, squat altar built of jasper, in the center of the floor.

Upon that altar was a rich cushion of scarlet cardinal bird's feathers. But it was not the golden floor or the jasper altar or the gorgeous cushion, which drew Ozar's eyes.

It was the glittering object which shone like molten fire on the center of that cushion. It was a sight which Ozar never expected to see again if he lived through ten thousand reincarnations. A sight to paralyze the strongest imagination known. A sight which erased Larry Starling's doubts in one swift sweep.

Ozar's Crown of Victory!

There it lay, a band of sparkling, burnished gold, powdered with jewels, and surmounted by spreading plumes dyed emerald, the royal color.

A cry of joy sprang to Ozar's lips as he took a step forward, his fingers already tingling from the expectation of lifting that crown, which had lain on the scarlet pillow for ages, awaiting the touch of his hand.

And then Ozar's spine turned to a pole of ice, as a low, guttural chuckle reached his eardrums—a fiendish chuckle, like the throaty rasp of a wild animal as it wolfs down the meat of its freshly slain kill.

Even as he spun about, Ozar knew what he would see. Framed against the blazing sunlight, parting the vines which curtained the threshold of the Temple of the Stars, stood Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs!

With a motion too swift for the eye to follow, Ozar's hand darted for the sling shot wrapped about his brow. He stepped back toward the altar which bore the Crown of Ozar, the while his

other hand thumbed a pebble from the leathern pouch at his ocelot's fur girdle.

Ozar had a glimpse of Tarx leaping forward, a mosaic-handled knife darting from the folds of his scarlet humming-bird's mantle. The knife sped through the air with the speed of a hornet, straight for Ozar's unprotected chest.

But even as he winced back, a fresh terror clutched Ozar's heart. His feet suddenly pitched downward, as a great section of the gold-plated floor dropped away beneath his weight!

As the knife zipped above him to lodge with a quivering *plunk* in the scarlet cushion on the jasper altar, Ozar the Aztec felt himself plummeting downward through dark, sickening space.

CHAPTER VI.

TARX'S THREAT.

TARX stood quivering, unable to believe his eyes, as he saw Ozar the Aztec vanish, with nothing to indicate his presence in the Temple of the Stars save a gaping black square in the golden floor.

A breath of relief whistled over the pagan priest's notched teeth, and he relaxed. He had been cheated of the pleasure of killing Larry Starling, but from what he knew of Aztec building methods, he felt sure that Ozar must have plunged to a fate fifty times more gruesome than the thrust of a knife.

Tarx had had a chance to hurl his knife into Ozar's back. But he did not want to send his white enemy to his doom without first letting him see who had outwitted him—who had lain in wait for him, and then scaled the cliff wall to force a show-down and snatch victory from Ozar's very grasp.

Instead, Tarx had given vent to his soul-curdling chuckle—and then had hurled his knife, before the white man would have had a chance to get his death-dealing sling into action.

But the fates had snatched Ozar from beneath the very whistling point of Tarx's *itzli*-bladed knife—the same blade which had killed Ozar's parents, Doctor William Starling and his wife; the sacrificial knife that had slain hundreds of human beings during the years Tarx had been high priest of Karnux. "*Otske!* The gods reserve for themselves the vengeance of destroying the vile impostor who would pose as Ozar the Aztec!" chuckled Tarx, wetting his thick, cruel lips with one point of his cloven, snakelike tongue. "At the same time, they place the Crown of Victory in my very grasp!"

A muffled groan issued out of the black hole in the floor, and Tarx chuckled. Ozar probably was lying on a cold stone floor of a dungeon, with both legs or his spine broken. Tarx knew of the danger of trapdoors—he had built plenty of them in his own temples in Karnux, to catch the unwary.

Having just seen Ozar's fate, Tarx determined to make no such error himself. Treading carefully, testing each golden floor plate with his sandaled toe before trusting his weight upon it, the high priest of Karnux inched his way to the altar.

The priest's evil heart pounded his ribs as he lifted Ozar's Crown of Victory from the scarlet pillow, leaving an imprinted ring in the feathers. With the other hand, Tarx removed his sacrificial knife from the place where it had embedded in the fluffy down.

Placing both knife and crown inside his scarlet mantle, Tarx backed away, still examining foot by foot of his path across the golden floor. Once a huge plate tilted, and a rush of dank, musty air snote his nostrils from the dungeon beneath the altar-room floor.

However, a moment of examination showed him the proper course, and he steered away from the hidden trap-door.

PAUSING at the edge of the door which had dropped Ozar the Aztec to his fate, Tarx peered into the inky depths. He could hear the white man groaning, far below; and a bevy of squeaking bats brushed under the priest's face, as he bent over.

"Thou shouldst have known that thou couldst not hope to compete with Tarx, thou vile pig of a lily-skinned impostor!" taunted the high priest. A sudden lapse in Ozar's groaning, and he knew that the white man had heard. "Dost thou see now, Lord Ozar? Ha! Whilst thou art starving to death in thy agony, consider *this!*"

So saying, Tarx lifted the Crown of Victory from his robes, and held it in the blazing sunlight. A shaft of yellow light reflected down into the black maw of the dungeon, and the prostrate body of Ozar, lying limp as a dead man, was revealed fifteen feet below, as if under a spotlight.

"*Otske!* And thou canst also think about *this*, Ozar!" Tarx went on, his one good eye gleaming like a serpent's as he bent over the abyss. "I am returning to Karnux at once, bearing with me the Crown of Ozar. Also, I bear with me thy toad of a slave, Larxatun! Fear not—the torture he shall endure will make him curse the day he met Ozar the Aztec!"

Under the light reflected from the glittering crown, Tarx could see the glare in Ozar's blue eyes.

"And Esta! Ah—I see that shaft goes home! *Huva!* Esta likewise shall feel the wrath of Tarx! For she, Ozar"—Tarx paused, reveling in the mental torture he was heaping upon the American's physical pain—"for she, Ozar, shall taste the most awful fate that can befall an Aztec woman—Queen Esta is to be hurled into the Well of Sacrifice!"

Even from his position high above the bed-rock floor on which Ozar lay as if crushed, Tarx could see the shudder which racked the white man's body, at

his words. The Well of Sacrifice! A great hole in the earth, where the bodies of young girls were hurled, to drown in the name of the god they were supposed to have offended! Once thrown into that well, there was no possible escape—for the walls were overhanging, defying even the grip of a lizard. Fifty feet of water below—fifty feet of overhanging wall above!

"And while Queen Esta's body settles to join the rising mound of bones in the bottom of the Well of Sacrifice, Tarx shall ascend to the throne of Karnux!" screeched the high priest, in conclusion. "And now, farewell, Ozar! Ha! And pray that the injuries thou hast sustained from thy fall will bring death to thee soon—in place of starvation! Ya-ah!"

With this parting thrust, the brutal priest got to his feet, and hurried from the Temple. He had no desire to be under those crumbling walls a moment longer than was necessary.

Five minutes later, the high priest had lowered himself by the maguey-fiber rope to the brush where Tuxatl held the bound figure of Larxatun upon the ground.

Stark despair flooded the Indian slave's eyes as he read in Tarx's leering face the story of his complete victory. And the look changed to one of terror as Tarx brought the golden Crown of Victory from his robe, and related to Tuxatl a fanciful tale of how he had overpowered Ozar, and hurled him into the pit.

"And now, we must pull down this rope—thereby cutting off Ozar from any possibility of being rescued by some passing huntsman," finished the pagan high priest. "Then we will return to Karnux."

Swart bathed Larxatun's face as he saw the two Aztecs combine their weight on the rope, until it snapped, far above, to come tumbling down in writhing coils.

"And Larxatun—shall we slay him now?" asked Tuxatl, his murder-thirsty eyes gleaming at the helpless slave.

Tarx leered, and spat into Larxatun's face. "No, Tuxatl, no! I have reserved a fate ten times worse than death for Larxatun! We will hurl him into the Pit of Panthers—and let those hungry beasts pick the flesh from his bones! *Otske!* Larxatun has fainted! Come, Tuxatl—pick him up! We must be gone to Karnux!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE DUNGEON.

OZAR THE AZTEC lay for many minutes on the icy floor of the dungeon, his mind a seething furnace of emotion. Stark despair drained the last drop of his spirits; for he could see that escape was utterly impossible.

He struggled to his feet sometime after, feeling himself for broken bones. His face twisted in a mirthless grin as he realized the irony of finding himself not seriously injured, though his magnificent body was lacerated and severely bruised from his fifteen-foot fall.

His examination of the dungeon into which he had fallen only increased his feeling of despair. This pit had been hewn out of solid rock. Its walls were slippery with moisture, and they, like the walls of the Well of Sacrifice, overhung the floor.

There was a single, narrow window, and Ozar hurried to it, his heart drumming hopefully in his breast. But as he glanced out of the narrow slit in the rock shell which entombed him, he groaned aloud.

That loophole overlooked a sheer drop of hundreds of feet, down between those two fingers of rock, one of which held up the Temple of the Stars! Had the fiendish engineers who had planned this pit of torture, deliberately placed the window there, so that the luckless pris-

oner might see the green grass growing on the crown of the opposite spire of rock—a hundred feet across space? Only a hundred feet! Yet it might have been a hundred yards, for all the good it did him.

Of course, one could leap into the chasm below. There was one chance in a million that a falling body might be held away from the jagged boulders below by the light, scrubby brush which grew about the base of the pinnacles. But in reality, it was a sure bet on suicide. Anything, though, would beat starving to death in this dungeon cell.

The day wore on, and Ozar the Aztec paced the floor of his prison like a caged tiger. Not an inch of his prisons' walls had he left unexamined in his futile search for a method of escape. Yet he knew each passing moment, Tarx was nearing Karnux, to wreak his terrible vengeance upon Queen Esta, his slave Larxatun, and the luckless pagans of Karnux.

Up through the hole in the golden-tiled floor above, he could look through a jagged aperture which time had crumbled through the roof of the Temple, and he could see the blue sky and wispy clouds above. How tantalizing, the breath of freedom they symbolized!

Freedom! The only freedom to await him was the freedom of almost sure death, by a suicide leap through that window.

OZAR slept that night, the sleep of utter exhaustion. But his slumbers were disturbed by vivid nightmares, in which he seemed to see his beloved, Esta of Karnux, being hurled into the Well of Sacrifice by the hands of the leering Tarx, upon whose head was the sacred Crown of Victory.

With the Queen's screams ringing out of the depths of the awful well, Ozar awoke in a cold sweat, to find that it was his own voice that had screamed

out to awaken him, resounding in the confines of his dungeon.

Ozar sprang to his feet, eyes glaring like a maniac's. It was day again—a glow of soft light came through the loophole window beside him, and lanced down like a square pencil from the hole in the temple wall above.

Hunger made a flaming pocket of his stomach. His bruises were throbbing, and the long hours on the cold, moist stones of the dungeon made the very marrow in his bones ache.

Screaming like a madman, Ozar sprang to the sill of the narrow window, and squeezed his body out of the opening, so that he hung over the dizzy depths of the cleft between the two towering pinnacles of rock.

A leap! An almost hopeless chance of not being dashed to pieces on the rocks below! Far better than remaining in here, to go through another night of torture under the foundation of this grim Temple of the Stars, with the knowledge that each passing minute led Tarx nearer and nearer to Karnux!

Far better, for that matter, that his body be dashed to bits on the rocks below, to be picked by the buzzards, than to rot inside this pit of horror!

Even as he strained his broad shoulders through the slit of the window, Ozar thought he heard a voice ring out across space.

The appalling depths seemed to beckon. Trees, so far below that they looked like soft moss, invited his jump. Foul, black vultures wheeled silently by, as if waiting for him to leap.

For a moment he went temporarily delirious, and he seemed to see the face of Queen Esta in the depths of the fatal Well of Sacrifice. That settled it. Another vision like that, and he would go stark mad.

Bracing himself for the leap, Larry Starling gritted his jaws, and tensed his muscles.

"Ozar! Ozar, my son! My son!"

Again that cry—and this time the fresh breeze which whipped along the smooth walls of the cliff revived Ozar's hearing, and he glanced up, scarce believing his ears.

And then he located the owner of that familiar voice. Out there on the brushy crest of the opposite finger of rock, a hundred scant feet across this yawning chasm, stood a man!

There, waving his arms in the hot sunlight, was Claxitl the Arrow Maker.

CHAPTER VIII.

OVER THE CHASM.

A SOB broke from Ozar's throat as he struggled to maintain his balance. For an instant, it seemed to the horrified Claxitl as if the depths were not to be cheated of their victim, and then Ozar was climbing back inside the dungeon of the Temple.

A second later Ozar's sweat-stained face appeared in the narrow opening once more, and he waved a brown arm toward the old Aztec across the abyss.

"My father! My father! Didst thou come to bid me farewell ere I journey for the Sun Temple of the Aztecs?"

Tears glistened in the morning sunlight as Claxitl hobbled as near as he dared to the edge of the cliff. He realized how close he had come to seeing his foster son plunge into eternity, and even now it seemed that his doom was sealed. Yet he was thankful that he had followed Ozar to the Temple of the Stars, if for nothing else than to bid him farewell!

"But—canst thou not be saved, even from the Temple of the Stars, my son?" pleaded the old Aztec piteously.

A bitter grin creased Ozar's face. He shook his head.

"If thou couldst climb the rope I left for Larxatun, mayhap thou couldst release me from this dungeon," he called back across the intervening abyss. "But thou art old, my father——"

"The villainous Tarx pulled the rope down, and broke it, midway to the top," Claxitl called back, in despair. "I followed thee yesterday, and from a great distance, I saw Tarx returning to Karnux with the crown thou sought. I hastened, but my lame leg prevented me from slaying the evil priest."

Ozar's eyes were pools of bitterness. "And now thou hast found thy son worse than dead," he choked. "There is no escape, then, if the rope is broken—— But, Father Claxitl. Wait!"

Ozar bit his lip, and his brow knitted in thought. A sudden idea had leaped into his head—and when men are on the threshold of eternity, they leap at the slightest hope.

"Listen closely, my father!" he cried.

CLAXITL thrilled as he heard the undertone of hope which coursed through his foster son's voice. Briefly, shouting his words above the soft whistle of the mountain wind through the cleft between the cliffs, Ozar outlined his daring plan of escape. But as Claxitl listened, his heart grew heavy, for he knew the chance of success was small.

"I will go down for the rope at once!" Claxitl shouted back, when Ozar had finished outlining his scheme. "I shall do thy bidding, my son—and may the gods sustain thee!"

Minutes passed like hours for Ozar. He watched his foster father disappear in the brush, and from time to time he glimpsed the old man, hobbling down the steep slope of the opposite rock. Then the angle of his window cut off all view, and he could do nothing but wait.

Nearly an hour elapsed. Then Ozar the Aztec once more caught sight of the old Indian weapon maker, hobbling his way up the brush-grown crest of the opposite pinnacle. The white man's heart leaped as he saw that Claxitl bore, in a heavy coil over one shoulder, the remains of the fiber rope which Tarx

and Tuxatl had pulled down by sheer force from its anchor rock near the Temple of the Stars.

Claxitl also held in one bronzed hand a coil of heavy twine—but the *tilmatli*, or traveling cloak, which he had worn, was missing. Obeying Ozar's instructions, the old man had unraveled his coarsely woven mantle!

"Hasten! Thou must hasten, if I am to get to Karnux in time to save Queen Esta from the Well of Sacrifice!" screamed Larry Starling, his face dewy with sweat as he saw old Claxitl once more gain the top of the pinnacle opposite his prison. "I travel faster than Tarx, but he has a day's start!"

Working rapidly, the old arrow maker tied one end of the twine to an arrow from his quiver. Then, picking up his sturdy yewwood bow where he had dropped it, Claxitl nocked the arrow to the bowstring, and braced himself for the shot.

"Out of the way, my son!" called the old Aztecan, tensing the bowstring. "Let us pray to the great war god Huitzil' that age has not laid its icy fingers upon my arm!"

Obediently, Ozar the Aztec stepped back. As he did so, Claxitl loosed the bow—and across the intervening chasm there streaked, with the speed of light, the *itzli*-tipped arrow.

Whiz! Straight as a bullet, the arrow vanished into the tiny loophole of Ozar's prison, trailing a banner of twine in its path. Not for naught had Claxitl once been the best archer in Montezirka's army, before his leg wound had made him a hermit flint-chipper! Not for naught had Claxitl practiced his arrow target work daily, during the forty years that had passed!

A CRY of joy burst through Ozar's lips as he saw the arrow fly through the narrow opening, to splinter its tough reed shaft on the opposite wall of the prison. But it was

not a cry of admiration for Claxitl's marksmanship, for the white youth knew that his foster father would not miss.

But clinging to that arrow was the wisp of yarnlike twine—and that twine bridged the yawning abyss, to connect with a tough knot around Claxitl's waist! On that tiny strand depended Ozar's life!

"*Huwa!* Thy aim is as perfect as of old!" called Larry Starling, reappearing at the window. "And now—tie the twine tightly to the fiber rope! We must work quickly!"

With the precision of well-oiled machinery, the two men got Ozar's ingenious plan under way. The threadlike wisp was made of maguey fiber, and tough as wire; so that Ozar had little fear of its breaking under the strain of pulling the heavier rope across the chasm.

Foot by foot, Ozar pulled the rope while Claxitl fed the heavy strands from his coil. What if it would be too short?

But it reached, with many feet to spare. A few moments later, Ozar was making his end of the rope fast around a jagged knob of rock inside his prison, the while Claxitl anchored the other end about a wiry-rooted bush.

His bridge completed, Ozar wasted no time in wriggling through the loop-hole. Then, gripping the rope with both hands, he swung out over the chasm.

His flesh crawled as he looked down into the blue depths below, but he had no time for fear. Hand over hand, he made his way out through space, while the rope sagged like a letter V, and Ozar fought to keep out of his mind thoughts of the rope breaking, or the anchored ends slipping.

Finally, as he neared the opposite side, and began the ascent of the quivering V of rope, old Claxitl bent his powerful muscles to the task of pulling the white man up.

Long minutes later, and Ozar the Az-

tec released the rope bridge to cling to the brush roots at Claxitl's feet. Strong hands seized his armpits, and Ozar fell panting to safety!

"Food!" gasped Larry Starling. "I must be on my way, dear father. I must overtake the fiendish Tarx!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PIT OF PANTHERS.

A STRANGE foreboding gnawed at the heart of Queen Esta, as she minced half-heartedly at her breakfast of *atolli* gruel and honey, in her royal apartments of the palace.

Ozar the Aztec was long overdue. Was it possible that even Ozar could not surmount the perils of the grim Temple of the Stars? Could the fates have been so cruel as to defeat her lover on the very eve of success?

Esta pondered these thoughts as her Aztec maids assisted her with her toilet and dressing. To double her anxiety was the rumor that Tarx the High Priest had been seen leaving the city shortly after Ozar and Larxatun had departed. With Tarx, so the report went, had gone Tuxatl, the vicious captain of the guards. Knowing Tarx's hatred of Larry Starling, Esta knew the priest's departure from the city must carry some dire portent.

The Queen of Karnux made a dazzling figure as she left her royal apartments, and walked along the red-tiled portico for her daily walk in the Montezirkkan flower gardens.

Her well-shaped face was framed in clustering raven hair, gleaming like lacquer under the yellow gold crown which was powdered with gems and surmounted by a royal crest of green plumage from the rare *quetzal* bird.

Without doubt, Esta was the flower of her generation. Her royal ancestry showed in the finely molded brow, delicate curving lips, and firm chin. Esta's teeth were even and white, in sharp contrast to the filed teeth of the average

Indian woman. Her eyes were the rich brown of the Montezirkkas, the heritage of an untainted blood strain for twenty generations.

The queen was dressed in a glittering bodice of finely beaten gold scales, which clung to the beautiful contours of her body like the scales on the sides of a goldfish. A skirt of green *quetzal* feathers, and a pair of golden-soled sandals completed her gorgeous costume, with embellishments in the form of turquoise and jade anklets, bracelets, beads, and rings.

The queen was seated on the edge of her royal fountain, idly watching goldfish playing in the crystal depths of the pool, when she felt the light touch of a slave awakening her from her brooding reverie.

"My queen—I have dire news!" panted the Indian girl, as Esta spun about and stood up, suddenly trembling. "O gracious Esta—one Larxatun, the slave of Lord Ozar—he——"

"Yes—yes! *Huwa!* What has happened, Lorlatl? Tell me——"

The slave girl's eyes were dark pools of terror as she pointed out over the walls of unburned brick which inclosed the royal garden and aviaries.

"Tarx has hurled Larxatun into the Pit of Panthers!" choked the girl. "Even now, they are baiting the hungry beasts——"

Esta waited to hear no more. If Tarx had returned to the city with Larxatun, then it meant that Ozar, also, was in peril, if not already slain.

A STARTLED guard was hurled aside in the middle of a low bow as the queen fled like a panicked deer outside the palace gates. The green plumage of her royal crown bannered over one shoulder as she ran down the red-paved street which led to the Pit of Panthers.

In all Karnux, there were two supreme punishments which Tarx held

over his subjects; for the women, the Well of Sacrifice, from which there was no escape save drowning; and for the men, the Pit of Panthers, which offered a quicker but more ghastly death.

Even as she drew near the place, Esta knew that the slave girl had spoken the truth. Hundreds of Aztecs of all walks of life were running, even as she, to get a glimpse of the Pit of Panthers, which was about to claim a fresh victim.

Merchants had left their *toldo* stands in the market square. Copal and amber sellers had deserted their jars, to witness the death of a fresh victim of Tarx's wrath. Women and children from the nobility and richer classes mixed with the *nequen*-clad slaves from the dingy mud-and-straw quarters of town.

Blue-feathered warriors, pick of Karnuxian soldiery, were everywhere in evidence, policing the situation. Whips were biting great welts in the backs of naked, squalling children. Wooden swords severed hands and ears from overanxious underlings. War clubs cracked pates and crushed bodies, as the warriors fought back the lesser castes to make sure that the nobility would get ringside seats for the gruesome spectacle.

At sight of Queen Esta, an aisle cleared automatically in the throng of Indians gathered about the lip of the great, circular pit. And as Esta flung herself to the very edge of the great cup in the earth, her heart seemed to cease beating, from sheer panic.

It was true. There on one side of the great, sand-floored pit, lay the body of Larxatun, bound like a mummy!

The air was a bedlam of screams from the caged-up panthers behind the heavily barred doors which rimmed one section of the pit. Warriors were hurling loads of freshly slaughtered meat just outside the cage doors, to whet the appetites of the panthers within, who reared

against the wooden bars, stabbing out clawed paws whenever a warrior came close. Slaver dripped from the fangs of a score of the animals, as the beasts went crazy at the proximity of fresh meat.

But that meat was not for the panthers. It would be taken away, just before the doors were opened; it was merely bait. And when those doors were opened, the panthers would find but one victim awaiting their fangs and claws—Larxatun, the slave who had incurred Tarx's undying hatred because he had allied himself with Ozar the Aztec.

Screaming with terror, but her cries drowned by the snarls of the caged-up panthers below, Queen Esta sped frantically along the stone edge of the pit, until she came near the spot where Larxatun lay, his chest rising and falling.

Tears glistened in Larxatun's eyes as he caught sight of the Queen of Karnux, there in the forefront of that raging mass of Aztecs.

"Larxatun! Where is my Lord Ozar, Larxatun?" screamed Esta, her voice breaking hysterically. "Speak to me, Larxatun! Where is Ozar? Is he dead?"

LARXATUN nodded his head in mute despair. In a few moments, he would be torn apart limb for limb by those raging beats. But his own fate did not worry Larxatun. It was for Queen Esta that his face went ashen, and his heart heavy.

A sudden bating of sound among the yelling Aztecs behind her caused Esta to turn about. One jeweled arm flew to her lips as she stifled a scream of horror. Emerging from the crowd at her very elbow came the red-robed form of Tarx, the high priest.

And in place of his usual animal-head helmet, the wicked magician wore over his coarse black hair, a ring of beaten

gold. It was Ozar's Crown of Victory!

The despair in Esta's soul seemed to choke her, as she realized the meaning of that crown. It meant that Ozar was dead, and that Tarx possessed the crown which gave him, in the eyes of the Aztecs, the power of the throne!

"Tarx! Release Larxatun at once!" screamed the queen, beating her tiny fists frantically upon the high priest's jade-incrusted chest ornaments. "I, the Queen of Karnux, command thee to stop this carnage! Release him, Tarx!"

The priest's single eye gleamed like a snake's. His lips peeled back over jade-inlaid teeth, and she caught a glimpse of his hideous forked tongue.

"Dost thou see the Crown of Ozar upon my brow?" leered the holy man, fingering the hilt of his sword with long, bony fingers. "*Otske!* It is not for *you*, Esta of Karnux, to give the mighty Tarx commands! Tarx is ruler over all!"

Esta fell back as she read the threat in Tarx's eyes.

"Seize her, warriors! Even as Larxatun is to be devoured by the wild beasts, so shall the granddaughter of Montezirka be hurled into the Well of Sacrifice! *Otske!* She has saved us the task of breaking down the gates of the palace to find her!"

The girl's scream of terror was lost in the savage yells which sprang from the lips of the blue-feathered warriors, as they leaped forward, to seize the Queen of Karnux as a pack of wolves might seize a crippled pigeon.

CHAPTER X.

OZAR'S RETURN.

PUKSTATL, keeper of the gates of Karnux, blinked in amazement as he saw the stumbling figure of the white man who lurched through the great entrance of the pagan city.

"Ozar! Can it be thou?" gasped the gatekeeper, stepping forward for a closer view. "*Huva!* And the great Tarx reported thee as dead, in the Temple of the Stars!"

And, indeed, Ozar looked more like a mummy come to life, than he did a living thing.

His shoulders and great, muscle-slabbed chest were torn and scratched by thousands of cactus barbs and brush thorns. Alkali dust lay thick on the great welts and bruises of stones and whippy brush, while inflamed areas bespoken the attack of stinging insects and biting flies.

His ocelot girdle was plastered with grime, smeared with dry, brown blood from countless minor wounds; his hands were raw and bleeding from skidding down rocks and sliding along mountain sides on his short cut from the Navajadas, while his leathern sandals were in shreds, from his nonstop trek across the broad floor of the valley.

But the ice-blue eyes were still alive in Ozar's tired face, and the sturdy fingers which clutched the sling-shot thongs about his brow were steady.

"Pukstatl—the queen—is she yet alive?" The words came from Ozar's throat like the clipped tones of a frog on the Crystal Lake. Ozar's haggard face and gaunt cheeks indicated his need for food and drink.

Pukstatl shook his head. He was impatient that his duties as gatekeeper prevented him from seeing the spectacles which the cruel Tarx was staging that morning, for inside Pukstatl's heart burned the inborn cruelty of a native Aztec. But he liked Ozar. What dweller in Karnux didn't? Was not Ozar, according to legend, supposed to be the fair god who would deliver the Aztecs from their bondage under the cruel reign of Tarx?

"Even now, thy slave Larxatun lies bound in the Pit of Panthers," said Pukstatl, waving an armored hand toward

the milling throngs of Aztecs inside the city. "It is reported that the gracious Queen of Karnux has been seized by Tarx's warriors, and is soon to be hurled into the Well of Sacrifice—for Tarx wears the Crown of Victory, my lord, and his word is law!"

Ozar's face glowed with relief, but his eyes slitted at Pugstatl's words. At any rate, Esta and Larxatun still lived.

"The common people of Karnux are with me, Pugstatl!" gritted the white man. "The common people are for Esta, likewise. Come—the time has come for the reign of Tarx to be destroyed. The time has come for the common citizens of Karnux to turn against the cruelties of the blue-feathered warriors. Let us be gone, Pukstatl! Follow me! No need to guard the city gates! *Huua!* The spectacle of the ages—the battle of all time, Pukstatl—is about to be staged, ere this day ends. And it will not be outside the walls, Pukstatl, but within the city! Come!"

FOR a moment, Pukstatl wavered, for in all his forty years as guardian of the gates, he had never deserted his post. But something in the determination which glowed in the depths of Larry Starling's blue American eyes swayed over the Aztec's sense of duty.

Running at top speed, the white man headed for the roiling mass of humanity jammed about the Pit of Panthers. At his heels came Pukstatl, weapons cast aside.

Only the fact that Queen Esta had appeared upon the scene, literally walking into her doom, had prolonged Larxatun's moment of death; for the attention of the Aztecs was divided.

But now, all was in readiness. For a few moments after the Aztecs had seen their beloved queen seized by Tarx's men, a spirit of rebellion had been fanned to fever heat.

Tarx had realized the undercurrent of wrath which seethed through the ranks of the common Aztecs. Even though the high priest wore the all-powerful Crown of Victory, he knew that the Aztecs would resent having their queen thrown into the Well of Sacrifice.

But Tarx was not afraid. He was completely surrounded by a cordon of soldiers. And he knew that the moment the bait meat was lifted from the Pit of Panthers, the attention of the mob would shift from the queen to the grim spectacle of the panthers tearing Larxatun to bits.

A breathless hush fell over the milling jam of Indians, as Tarx lifted a yellow-stained bone whistle to his lips and signaled for the meat to be removed.

Across the sand-covered arena, the body of Larxatun lay, straining and panting in his bonds. His fate would be quickly sealed, once those raging beasts were released.

"Open the panther cages!" Like a bugle blast, the scream of Tarx rang out over the multitude. A muffled scream issued from Queen Esta, to be instantly choked by a soldier's heavy palm clamped over her mouth.

Sturdy-muscled slaves hurried to the rim of the pit, now empty of bait meat. Together, they struggled with the great bars which held the gates intact.

So absorbed were the Aztecs in watching the preparations for Larxatun's torture, that they did not notice the form of Ozar the Aztec threading his way through the mob!

There was a sound of splintering bars, as the raging panthers inside the cages reared again and again against the wooden grating.

Then the doors swung open, and the panthers leaped forth with soul-curdling snarls that caused a shiver to course up the backbone of even Tarx, cruel priest of Mexlitl.

Larxatun's body tensed, as the animals raged forth from the cages, to lap up the dried blood which stained the sand where the meat bait had lain. In a moment, it would be all over.

And then an incredible thing happened. Behind the slaves who had opened the gates, appeared the bronzed figure of a white man, clad only in the fur of an ocelot.

STRAIGHT for the pile of bait meat darted Ozar, brushing aside Aztec slaves like dummies. Running his arms elbow-deep in the pile of fresh meat on the stone rim of the pit, the American shoved a great mass of the bait over the edge, onto the very backs of the panthers.

He was not a second too soon. The panthers, after a quick skirmish over the sand where the bait had lain, were beginning to dart about on fresh scents, like huge ants when their nest has been disturbed.

With the smell of the bait once out of their nostrils, it would have been but a matter of seconds for one of the panthers to have discovered Larxatun's body, some distance away across the circular arena. And then it would have been the finish.

But now, the smell of fresh meat returned to them, and the area beneath Ozar the Aztec became a seething mass of savage brutes, snarling and yowling as they wolfed down the armload of fresh meat.

But Ozar did not pause a second. Before the stunned mob could catch its breath, the American ran along the rim of the pit with the lithe grace of an antelope, until he was safely out of range of the raging animals about the rapidly disappearing bait pile.

Vaulting lightly into the arena, Ozar darted to the side of Larxatun. Sun rays glinted sparks off the obsidian-bladed tip of a knife, as the American severed Larxatun's bonds.

The savage roars of the blue-feathered warriors drowned the scream of rage which burst from Tarx's lips, as he saw the man he had supposed to be starving to death in the dungeon of the Temple of the Stars.

In all its thousand years of existence, the lost city of Karnux never saw a spectacle to equal what happened next.

In a tawny flood across the sand-floored pit came the pack of panthers, attracted by moving prey. Even as Larxatun struggled to his feet, and shook off his ropes, Ozar's sling was spinning about his head.

While Larxatun, stiff from his bonds, fled for the wall of the arena, Ozar sent a stone between the eyes of the bounding leader of that panther horde. The beast somersaulted, dead, to the ground.

Then the white man turned and fled for the wall. Larxatun stood, bracing himself as Ozar leaped lightly from rigid arms to shoulders of the great slave, and thence to the rim of the pit.

Stooping, Ozar's hands caught Larxatun's, and the Indian slave leaped and was pulled to safety by the American, even as the snapping fangs and slashing claws of the panthers crashed like a breaking yellow wave upon the stones under the Indian's soaring heels!

CHAPTER XI.

INTO THE WELL OF SACRIFICE.

AN ear-shattering thunder of acclaim greeted Ozar and Larxatun as they fell back, away from the rim of the Pit of Panthers.

Ozar had come to redeem his people! Ozar had defied the decree of the high priest, under the very nose of Tarx himself! The time for action had come!

And then the torrent of sound ceased save for the screams of the baffled panthers down in the pit, as Ozar the Aztec raised his arms.

"Aztecs of Karnux! Hear my words, O brothers! The time for your fight

for freedom is at hand! But do not risk thy unprotected bodies against the arrows of Tarx's warriors! Come to the armory—where Pukstatl will supply thee with arms! Hear my words, I say! Join Ozar the Aztec against the oppressors of his people!"

Like fire traveling through oil-soaked tinder, Ozar's words inflamed the milling masses of people thronged about the Pit of Panthers.

In the center of the swarming mass of humanity, Tarx and a squad of blue-feathered warriors huddled about the Queen of Karnux. But Ozar knew that the common Indians could not rescue Esta. The soldiers could easily slaughter untold hundreds of Aztecs without a casualty in their own ranks, although they were outnumbered fifty to one.

But the Aztecs caught Ozar's idea. Even as the mob spirit can travel in but one channel when a victim is to be lynched, so did the Aztecs become obsessed with but one desire now—to storm Tarx's armory, and equip themselves with spears and swords.

Again Ozar lifted his arms, as the mob started its stampede toward the flat-roofed stone building near by, which house the military equipment of the Montezirkkan army. But this time, it was Tarx who called out.

"And hear ye this, Ozar!" snarled the high priest, shaking a clenched fist across the arena toward the white man. "Whilst the rabble is arming itself, I and my blue-feathered warriors will be taking the Queen of Karnux to the Well of Sacrifice. Consider well, Ozar, before thou sendest the people blindly into this! The might of Tarx's army is great!"

But the high priest's words were drowned in a pagan roar, as the Aztecs moved in a body toward the armory, with the slave Larxatun at their head, like a field general leading a charge.

At the armory entrance, the gate-keeper Pukstatl was busy piling swords

and javelins outside the doors, to be snatched up by willing hands.

An all-powerful machine of destruction had started to turn against Tarx and his henchmen!

But Ozar the Aztec did not join the mob which headed toward the armory. For to Ozar, the safety of his beloved Queen Esta meant all.

Already, Tarx and his squad of soldiers were making for the great Well of Sacrifice, located at the base of the Temple of Gold. They were dragging the helpless body of Queen Esta over the rough stones.

THE city swarmed with blue-feathered warriors, and they were not idle. Already, alert bows were twanging, and Aztecs were dropping like flies on the streets, victims of poisoned arrows. But where fifty Aztecs were dying before the barrage of arrows, a hundred more were taking their places, hurling arrows and wielding swords.

Even now, the advance guard of the rebelling citizens was charging blindly into the vanguard of warriors, their throats lifted in a song of hate as they attacked the soldiers who had oppressed them for a generation.

Frantically, Ozar fought his way toward the charging slaves and common citizens, as he headed for the Well of Sacrifice by another route that would not expose him to enemy arrows.

Ozar knew that although Tarx was mobilizing his armored men to fight down the revolution which had broken loose within the city walls, the high priest himself would lose no time in getting Queen Esta inside the Well of Sacrifice.

No matter how heavy his losses might be in the ranks of his blue-plumed troops, Tarx was determined not to be cheated of his lifelong ambition—to destroy the Queen of Karnux.

It seemed an hour before Ozar, speed-

ing through deserted streets and darting over the low walls of private residences, came to the Well of Sacrifice.

A hundred feet across, the well was a circular pit drilled out of the earth by the labor of thousands of long-dead slaves. The walls were overhanging, and the water in the depths below was fifty feet deep, seepage from the Crystal Lake.

Far below the surface, in the water which reflected the terraced pyramids of Aztec temples, were visible the bones of untold hundreds of virgins whom Tarx and his predecessors had sacrificed to the great god, Quetzal. In all the history of mankind, no single example can equal for wholesale slaughter, the vicious Well of Sacrifice of the ancient Aztecs.

Ozar made a pitiful figure, as he ran to the edge of the great well. On the opposite rim, a cluster of blue-feathered warriors, led by Tarx, were dragging the body of Queen Esta to the rim of the well.

Tarx, leering across the gaping expanse of space to where the lone white man stood in utter helplessness against such odds, was glad that Ozar was on hand to witness the death of his beloved one.

From afar, came the din of battle—thousands of inflamed Aztecs, fighting to the finish against the tyranny of twenty awful years. Slaves marched side by side with their masters, wielding knives and swords and spears. There was no compromise, no retreat, no yielding. It was an offensive war to the end.

BLUE-feathered warriors were piling up into a carpet of dead and dying, unable to reload their bows fast enough as they were forced back and back and back, by their relentless opponents.

And among all those revolting savages, two Aztecs stood out as leaders that day, directing the fray as lieuten-

ants direct a desperate charge—Larxatun, the ex-slave of Tarx, and Pukstatl, the venerable keeper of the gates of Karnux.

But to Ozar, standing breathless on the brink of the Well of Sacrifice, the drama of that battle for supremacy between the warriors of the high priest and the common people of a lost city was as nothing.

Ozar's hand still gripped his loaded sling, but he knew that that weapon was useless against such heavy odds.

"Witness, Lord Ozar!" came the evil shout of Tarx, across the well. "While my blue-feathered army is reducing thy rebellious friends to corpses, the last of the Montezirkas goes to join the virgins of the sun god!

A scream of despair burst from Larry Starling's lips, and he leaped forward, to run like a deer around the circumference of the well. Even then, he realized that he would be too late.

A dozen bows were drawn back, a dozen arrows aimed at Ozar's fleeting body as the white man ran blindly toward certain death in his desperate effort to reach Esta's side.

But Tarx held his warriors in check. Time enough to slay Ozar, when Esta was out of the way. And besides, the evil high priest wanted Ozar to witness the young queen's fate, above all else.

A high-pitched scream of terror tumbled from Esta's lips, as her struggling form was dragged to the brink of the well.

Ozar stumbled on a loose rock and fell. As he did so, he saw the warriors release Esta, and saw Tarx step forward, his palms planted upon Esta's back, even as the queen teetered frantically on the overhanging edge of the Well of Sacrifice.

And then the American youth's heart went cold, and a sick wave coursed through his body as he saw Tarx shove the queen out into space.

Down, down, down, with the sun rays

catching the glint of her golden bodice, and her raven hair bannering, Esta's body hurtled through terrifying space.

There was a heavy splash which choked her screams, and the lovely queen of the Aztecs had gone to join the fate of her sisters.

CHAPTER XII.

LARRY STARLING'S FATE.

TARX nodded his head in a death signal to the Aztecan archers, and a hail of arrows went with the speed of light toward the spot where Ozar had stumbled and fallen headlong.

But the arrows did not claim their victim. Instead, they glided harmlessly along the smooth stones where Ozar had lain.

For even as the bowstrings released their grim shafts of destruction, Ozar rolled his body over. He was but inches from the edge of the Well of Sacrifice, and the movement carried him out into space.

Instinct had made up his mind for him. In the split tenth of a second in which he had rolled out from under certain death, Larry Starling could not have reasoned out his act.

But now, even as he straightened his lithe body out in a jackknife dive, Ozar the Aztec was glad that he must meet his end in this way. He would swim to Esta, and die in her arms. Even the cruel Tarx could not separate him from his queen, in death.

Splash! The surface of the well water was knifed by Ozar's matched hands, and his body disappeared under the surface of the crystal depths.

When he came to the surface, his ears did not register the taunting shouts of triumph from the watchers on the rim of the well above. His eyes sought out and found but one thing—the form of Queen Esta, rolling over on her side, a short distance away, and then sinking, for the last time.

Down through the crystal depths of the well, Ozar's powerful body dived like a white fish. An instant later, his arms were about the queen's waist, and he was lashing out for the surface.

Their heads broke water together. Shaking the brown locks of hair out of his eyes, Ozar saw that he had swum under the overhanging embankment, so that Tarx could not direct an arrow in their direction.

"Esta, my beloved! Speak to me, ere we go to our deaths together! My queen!"

As a person returning from the dead, the Queen of Karnux opened her eyes—the lovely, dark eyes which had transmitted so often a message which only Ozar the Aztec could detect—the sweetest story of all, which is the same in all languages.

"Ozar—my master——" The queen choked from the quantities of water she had swallowed, and then one gleaming copper arm lifted tenderly about the American's neck, as his firm strokes kept their heads above the surface. "I love thee—I love thee——"

THEY had floated out in the open now, their bodies disturbing the reflected images of many people looking over the brink of the well far above. But the lovers were oblivious of the outside world.

"Come—let us sink out of sight forever, beloved one," whispered Ozar softly. "We must not give Tarx the pleasure of sending an arrow into our heads. And may the great god Mexiitl grant that we may be together in his temple, even as we die together, my beloved!"

Clasped in each other's embrace, the two relaxed, and started to sink. Ozar's face was buried deep in the damp clusters of raven hair which framed Esta's beautiful face—beautiful even now in her surrender to her fate.

As she felt the water closing over her

face for the last time, Esta's eyelids flickered open, and her body tensed in Ozar's embrace. Struggling, she and Ozar came to the surface again in a froth of bubbles. The white man's ice-blue eyes gazed questioningly into hers. Did she fear death?

"But look, Lord Ozar—above us!" she cried.

And then Ozar saw what the queen had meant. For no longer were Tarx and his blue-feathered warrior band on the brink of the Well of Sacrifice. Little did the lovers know that they had fled, to be replaced by Larxatun, and a score of eager Aztecan men!

"Swim about until I lower a rope to thee, Lord Ozar!" cried the Indian, brandishing a wooden sword which was wet from having hacked off the head of the cruel Tuxatl, captain of the guards. "I have sent for a rope, my lord!"

Far below them, they saw Ozar suddenly teem with new life, as he and Esta swam easily on the surface of the dreaded well.

"Tarx is even now fleeing for the safety of his Temple of Gold!" shouted Larxatun, pointing out over the city. "Quick——"

"*Hura!*" shouted Ozar from the depths of the well, with a boisterous American laugh. "Save Tarx for me to destroy!"

Hundreds of spectators, coming from the battlefield from which no single blue-feathered warrior remained alive, witnessed the spectacle of a rope being lowered down the well, which Ozar fashioned into a loop basket in which he and Esta rode, swinging like a pendulum, while Larxatun himself pulled the pair to the brink of the well, amid the thunderous plaudits of the assembled multitude.

For the first time in the history of the Aztecs or their fathers' fathers, the Well of Sacrifice had been cheated of a victim!

TARX lingered at the portals of the Golden Temple until he made certain that his intended victims had been rescued. Then he darted into the darkened interior of the temple, and fled for the holy room of Mexli! the Sun God.

The bitterness of utter defeat crushed the cruel priest's heart as he entered the holy room. In one short hour, he had been tumbled from the peak of power and affluence, to complete and final defeat.

His blue-feathered army, pride of his soul, had been completely wiped out. Step by step across the city they had been pushed, surrendering post on post—from palace to temple to wall to public square, losing every stronghold before the grim, unstoppable attack of an aroused populace, helpless before the revengeful onrush of Larxatun and his people, battling for their independence.

But Tarx, even in defeat, was crafty. He had known that some day, fate might not be kind to him. He had known that revolution and rebellion might, conceivably, catch him in an unprepared moment, and face him with ruin.

And the pagan high priest, being a resourceful man, had prepared adequate means of escape.

Approaching the towering idol of Mexli! Tarx exposed his jade-inlaid fangs in a snarl as he glanced over the Five Sacred Commands of the sun god, carved on the walls beside the idol. Five Sacred Commands, each fraught with seemingly unsurmountable dangers—to be performed by Ozar the Aztec!

Two short months ago, Tarx would not have thought it possible that the white-skinned youth who had fought and won the fabled Doom Duel, could have fulfilled those commandments. Yet he had, and now Tarx was fleeing for his life.

Swiftly, Tarx climbed up the front of the great statue, on steps which were cleverly concealed in the elaborate carv-

ing of the decorative scheme, under his secret orders. Those steps led to the great disk of beaten gold on the idol's chest—the pagan symbol of the sun. But in reality, that disk was a door to a secret passage going outside the walls of the city—an underground tunnel which would lead to safety.

Trembling, the red-robed pagan priest reached the level of the great disk of gold on the chest of Mexlitl. It worked with a series of levers and weights—it could be opened but once, for then, a pair of huge stone tumblers concealed within the walls of the Temple—each weighing five tons—would close the golden disk like a porthole cover, thereby preventing his being followed.

Even as he moved the hidden lever which swung the great disk outward, and then upward, on its hinge, a voice smote Tarx's eardrums—the voice of Ozar the Aztec!

"Halt, foul one! Another step, and I shall slay thee!"

INTO the revealed passageway Tarx darted, his forked tongue slaving over his lips. He could hear the stone tumblers beginning to settle in their grooves, closing the door of his passage forever. At least, Ozar would not recover his crown!

Backing into the dark mouth of the tunnel, Tarx saw Ozar standing at the door of the holy room, his slung shot whizzing about his head with a sharp hum. But already, the golden disk was coming down slowly, irrevocably—a lid to seal his escape.

"*Otske! Yaaah!* Thou shalt never regain thy Crown of Victory——"

Spang! The stone from Ozar's sling struck the high priest's chest like the thud of a bullet. With a moan of agony, Tarx lurched, his bony fingers clutching a hole in his breastbone, from which spurted crimson to leak down between his knuckles.

From where he stood below, Ozar the

Aztec saw the priest pitch forward in a tumble of humming-birds'-skin robes, writhe in agony for a moment, and then turn over, his head and arms hanging over the threshold of the circular doorway. Crimson was dribbling down the priest's arms and off his finger tips.

And then something flashed in the guttering flames of the temple lamps, and the Crown of Victory fell from Tarx's head, to bounce off the base of the idol with a metallic clang. Then, like a hoop, it rolled across the polished floor to Ozar's feet.

Even as he stooped to pick up the band of gold, a piercing scream jarred his hearing, and he looked up, to recoil in horror.

The great stone tumblers were closing the golden disk upon the body of the screaming, cursing priest—settling down slowly, with the weight of ten tons of granite closing it down upon the high priest's ribs and spine and torso as surely as a knife would cleave a melon.

Ozar turned and fled from the room to avoid the ghastly spectacle. But Tarx's scream was cut off, a second or two before the golden disk ground slowly, slowly shut—forever.

The white man paused, as he reached the exit of the Temple of Gold. Out of the curtained shadows came a familiar form clad in a golden bodice and sopping feathered skirt—and the dripping figure of Queen Esta fled into his extended arms.

And then Ozar became conscious of a great clamor, welling forth outside the Temple. As he looked up from Esta's passionate kisses, he saw that every Aztec in Karnux had assembled about the base of the Temple of Gold.

In their lead was Larxatun, bearing the marks of battle, but standing before the white man and his queen like a true leader of men.

"Thy people wish to bow in humbleness before their new king," proclaimed Larxatun, dropping to one knee. "They

wish to hear thee speak—to hear the voice of their deliverer and master forever—Ozar, fair god of the Aztecs!”

Ozar smiled, and looked out over the multitude. As he did so, Queen Esta lifted the golden crown from his fingers, and placed it upon the white man's head. The last of the Five Commands had been fulfilled!

“Words at such a time are as nothing,” the American youth said, surveying the vast assemblage with misting eyes. “My reign shall be simple, my decrees few. To the slaves shall be freedom; to the wicked priests who have oppressed thee shalt there be justice. The Well of Sacrifice shall be filled with dirt, and the bodies of the blue-feathered warriors; for the days of cruelty and sacrifice are at an end forever in Karnux.”

THE voice of every Aztec in Karnux was lifted in song and merriment that evening, as the people who had that day aided Ozar in freeing themselves from the cruelty and bondage of a pagan priest made preparations for the ceremony which should make Ozar the King of Karnux, and usher in the dawn of a new era.

But while Larxatun, as newly appointed captain of the guards, most coveted military honor in Karnux, was setting the stage for the great event, Ozar himself was standing alone on the portico which flanked the royal palace, absorbed with his thoughts.

And as he mused, he watched the golden sun go down, out over the distant

Navajadas. Who knows but that there came to Larry Starling's mind, as he stood there, the possibility that some day, other white men—men like himself—might come to this amazing lost world?

Other men had uncles and cousins and brothers—why not he?

Would he always remain thus—a white god to a great pagan people? Or would the day come, while wandering on some hunting expedition outside the mountain crater, when he might discover the bleached bones of those who had been in his father's geological expedition, and find the diaries of that trip, the record of his own birth?

Possibly. Or yet, he might establish a new line of monarch for the betterment of the Aztecan civilization. Certainly, fate had dealt with him strangely, so far; it might hold still more incredible episodes in store for him, in future.

Beyond the palace walls, he could hear the clamor of the Aztecs, eager to pay him tribute. In his nostrils was the sweet scent of acacia insense; overhead was the blue vault of heaven, scattered with fresh, peaceful stars.

It was a night of love, of rest, of triumph.

Inhaling deeply, Ozar the Aztec adjusted the girdle of ocelot's fur about his body, and settled the Crown of Victory on his brow.

One final glance out over the great lost city, misty now in the soft blue of the Mexican twilight, and Ozar the Aztec turned and entered the palace—to join his queen.

THE END



How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

An Error Of Judgment

By Hal Field Leslie

ASH VOLLMER shoved himself away from the poker table, and came to his feet with the quickness of a panther. For in the level gray eyes of the dusty rider, who had so quietly spoken his name, was an expression Vollmer couldn't quite fathom.

Nor could Vollmer in memory place this tall young stripling, who stood not five paces away, arms folded, hands hidden in the crooks of his elbows. Vollmer's eyes, beady and cruel as those of a vulture, took in the stranger from boots to Stetson—and centered on the ancient, ivory-handled .44 that he wore butt forward on the left thigh, in conventional position for the deadly cross-arm draw.

A breathless hush had fallen on the crowded, smoky room. Across it, Ash Vollmer's voice rasped with the harshness of a file on iron:

"Far as names go, stranger, you've got the best of me. Who do you call yoreself, and why?"

"If you can remember back ten years," said the stranger softly, "you'll remember murderin' a nester named Bannister—Steve Bannister. And at the same time, you gave me *this* to remember you by!"

His right hand lifted into view, fingers spread wide. And slowly recognition—and hatred, too—grew upon the dark, thin countenance of Ash Vollmer.

TEN years ago, in the blue of foothill dusk, these two had faced each other. It was on the evening when Ash Vollmer had come riding his lathered *palomino* up the canyon, to halt where a gaunt old man with kindly face and graying hair, and a level-eyed boy of ten or thereabouts, were laying the bed logs of a new cabin.

Near by, beneath a giant cottonwood, stood the ponderous covered wagon that had brought them down those long and dusty miles from the north. Their horses and the thirty head of white-face steers that were to be the nucleus

of a future herd, were grazing contentedly on the canyon bottom. Here dwelt peace and hope.

"Well, Bannister," flung out Vollmer harshly, "I see you don't quite believe what I told you yesterday. I done give you until this sundown, didn't I, to clear out!"

"Now looky hyeh, Vollmer," said old Steve patiently. "I know you've got more holdings than you can ever use. And we done come a weary ways, me and Bud, to find a likely place to locate. This is the place we've chose. An' this is free range, hereabouts."

"So it is," snapped Vollmer. "Free range for my cows. And I aim to keep it so! I'm here to see that you and yore brat get moving—and I'm setting leather, right here, until you do!"

"Then you've got a long time to set," declared old Steve with sudden grimness. "'Cause me and Bud, we ain't agoin'. Not whatever!"

Ash Vollmer's thin nostrils pinched in and showed dull white against the dark of his hard-cut face. His lids drooped and twitched a little at the outer corners. His black eyes seemed to be aflame behind their glistening surfaces.

"Bud" Bannister had never seen that look on a man's face before, but instinctively he knew it for the look of a killer on the verge of action.

"He'll shoot!" cried Bud. "He'll kill you, gran'dad!"

"I reckon not," said old Steve calmly. "Even a polecat like him, scarcely wouldn't shoot down a man what ain't wearing a gun."

Vollmer's upper lip twisted away from his strong white teeth. "Polecat, eh!" he gritted. "Well, Bannister, you've spoke yore word. Now I'm speaking mine!"

Bud didn't see the motion of Vollmer's dark hand, so amazingly swift was the move. All he saw was the menacing muzzle of a six-gun suddenly jutting out at Vollmer's hip. And it was point-

ing straight at the man Bud loved above any one else in all the world.

With a choking cry, Bud tried desperately to throw himself in front of his stanchly standing grandfather.

Vollmer's gun flamed, a vicious jet of orange in the purpling dusk. The thunder of it snacked Bud's eardrums resoundingly. He stood as if turned suddenly to wood, staring wide-eyed at the wisp of smoke that was draining from the weapon in Vollmer's hand.

Bud heard a queer, choking sound behind him. He turned and saw his grandfather swaying on his gaunt legs. There was a look of surprise on old Steve's rugged face, and his big hands were fumbling at his chest, trying to stem the red tide that was welling from a round hole in his shirt front. Before Bud could speak or move, old Steve toppled forward like a great oak falling under the final destroying stroke of the ax.

Bud went swiftly to his knees beside him. Old Steve neither moved or spoke. The big, kindly hands that had guided Bud along life's road, since the death of his father and mother, were forever stilled.

This was Bud's first experience with violent death. He scrambled to his feet and faced Ash Vollmer. Mingled with his choking grief, was a queer, sick feeling at the stomach—and a burning hatred of the sardonic rider who was sitting motionless atop his *palomino*, laughing silently.

One long look Bud gave the man. Then he wheeled and ran toward the big wagon.

THE cumbersome vehicle was covered with heavy canvas, stretched upon bows of bent hickory. One of the two flaps that closed the rear when on the trail, now was open, and the wide tailboard was down. Bud nimbly vaulted up to the bed of the wagon, and disappeared within its dusky interior.

On a pile of blankets in the wagon, lay Steve Bannister's belt and six-gun. Bud dragged the weapon from its holster. It was a heavy, ivory-handled, single-action .44, and he had a long moment's wrestle to get the hammer back. Then, with the weapon at full cock, he stepped to the rear of the wagon.

Vollmer was lolling in the saddle, callously indifferent to the dead man on the ground. Vollmer had holstered his gun, was building himself a brown cigarette with steady fingers. His black eyes were thoughtfully appraising the whitefaces on the canyon bottom.

Bud's thin frame was trembling in every fiber. He had to use both hands to lift and steady the heavy old .44. However, there was enough of old Steve Bannister's blood in him, to make him instinctively rebel against shooting a man when his back was turned—even though that man be a cold-blooded murderer.

"Ash Vollmer!" Bud's high-pitched voice, strained tight as a tuned fiddle string, cut sharp through the dusky twilight. "Ash Vollmer—I'm agoin' to kill you!"

Startled, Vollmer twisted his *palo-mino* sharp around. He stared curiously at the spectacle of a ten-year-old holding an old .44 with a desperate two-handed grip, and threatening to kill him. Kill Ash Vollmer, the fastest gun-slinger in all the Blue Canyon country! A half-amused frown grew upon Vollmer's dark face.

But it was wiped suddenly away by the blasting report of that big .44. The slug missed him by a hair, whined past his ear, and droned away into the thickening dusk. Vollmer's lean hand darted for his gun.

Bud, seeing that his shot had missed, seeing the menace of death that was in Vollmer's blazing eyes, was suddenly gripped again by that queer, sick feeling at the pit of the stomach.

His knees went weak. The big .44 fell from his hands. He would have

fallen, too, had he not made a swinging lurch to the left, and desperately clutched the hanging flap of the wagon. He stood there, holding himself erect, bravely trying to keep his horrified eyes upon the move of Vollmer's gun.

"So you pulled a gun on me, you little brat!" observed Vollmer harshly. "Well, I ain't going to kill you, but I shore am going to learn you a lesson you'll never forget. I'll learn you what what it means to take a shot at Ash Vollmer!"

With that, Vollmer's gun thundered. Bud felt nothing—only realized that his right hand had gone suddenly numb. It wouldn't hold its grip on the canvass. It fell away. Bud looked at it wonderingly. He saw the red stain that was spreading swiftly upon his palm, but it was a long moment before he realized that his forefinger was clean gone.

Curiously, Bud didn't faint. He heard clearly Ash Vollmer's harsh voice saying:

"You'll never pull a trigger on me again. Me, or anybody! I'll fix that part of it right now."

Vollmer reined his mount close to the tail of the wagon, twisted his fingers in the neck of Bud's shirt, and lowered him to the ground. Then Vollmer swung down beside him.

"Listen, you little whelp," he said coldly. "I'm going to stop that stump from bleeding. And then, after we've sunk yore grandfather in a hole, I aim to throw yore outfit into that wagon, drive you clean over into the next county, and turn you loose. If ever you open yore mouth about what took place here, or if you show yore face in these parts again, you'll get the same dose you saw handed to the old man. You savvy that?"

Bud made no reply. He stood white-lipped, staring fixedly at Ash Vollmer's dark face. Stood moveless, while Vollmer pulled a bullet from a cartridge case with his strong white teeth, and poured

the powder in a neat little mound on the tail of the wagon.

Vollmer pulled a match from his pocket. "Now," he said grimly, "I'm agoing to fix up that hand so it won't bother you no more."

Without ceremony, Vollmer seized the wrist of Bud's right hand. Bud realized what was coming. And, despite himself, he fainted dead away.

THAT was ten years ago. And now, to-night—

Ash Vollmer looked steadily into those eyes that were so like old Steve Bannister's, and remembered well.

"Now," he said harshly, "it's yore move, I reckon. What's the answer?"

"I'm agoin' to kill you, Vollmer!"

Vollmer's eyes narrowed. They studied the hang of Bud Bannister's gun, butt forward on the left batwing. They studied that mutilated right hand. And slowly the lines of Vollmer's dark face *hardened* in that same expression it had worn, just before he shot Steve Bannister—the look of a killer.

"I heard you say that once before," he said contemptuously. "But I don't reckon you'll ever do it. Not with that iron you're wearing, and that three-fingered hand."

Almost imperceptibly, Bud had fallen into a slight crouch. His hands were well away from his body, elbows crooked out and forward.

"I am going to kill you," he repeated stonily. "I'm giving you the square break you didn't give my old gran'dad, but it won't do you any good, Vollmer. You see, when you shot away my trigger finger, you made a slight error of judgment. 'Cause I happened to be born left-handed! Vollmer, go for your iron!"

Only a split-second intervened before Ash Vollmer took the challenge. His lean, dark hand lanced for his gun—a move of smooth and deadly precision. A move that no man had ever been able to match for speed.

Vollmer's gun was clearing leather before Bud moved. Every eye in the room was on him, but few could follow that queer, darting twist of his left hand as it swept toward his holster.

Those who did manage to catch view of it, realized that it was the trickiest draw ever seen in the Blue Canyon country. But none could guess the long and weary hours, through those ten vanished years, that Bud Bannister had labored to perfect it.

And now, Bud's years of patient practice, leading up to this unusual and amazing butt-forward, left-handed draw of his grandfather's old six-gun, had their reward.

Before Vollmer's weapon was half raised, the ancient .44, its worn spots glinting sharp in lamplight, spoke its vengeance thunderously.

Stop That Noise!

By Allan R. Bosworth

DOCTOR JERRY SUTTER tried to shake off the feeling that he was followed as he strode through the old-fashioned gate toward his suburban rooming house. He told himself that it was silly to look back. He even reflected that there was far greater danger to human

life in the bacteria to be found on that gate handle than from all the gangsters in the country.

But the doctor could still feel the pistol that bored into his ribs that afternoon when the two hard-faced men brought the bullet victim into his office, and he could still hear the warning

hissed from the corner of a twisted mouth:

"Forget you seen us, see! And if you report this to the cops, you'll have a case of your own to work on. Get me?"

The ink was hardly dry on Jerry Sutter's diploma. Through horn-rimmed glasses, with eyes unafraid, he surveyed life with a queer combination of scientific exactness and idealism. It was his duty to report the shooting to the police. He had reported it.

Now he squared his shoulders and tried to master a nonchalant whistle, but his lips were as dry as the gravel that crunched under his feet. Moonlight bathed the walk with a sepulchral pallor. Wind-tossed shrubbery reached spectral arms to touch his sleeve. Unconsciously, he quickened his long-legged stride.

The house reared before him, misshapen, forbidding, and strange despite the fact that he had been rooming there three weeks.

There was one light on the fourth floor—the top story of what had been called, in palmier days, "Shackleford Arms." Jerry grinned as he saw the weather-beaten sign creaking in the wind. "Ramshackle Arms" was more like it.

He opened the front door with an old-style pass-key. The whole house was like that—antiquated, and, to his notion, none too sanitary. But it was near his new office and the hospital where he was doing laboratory research until midnight every evening. The stairs were old, too, and they groaned as he climbed to the room on the third floor.

Bacteria such as Jerry Sutter peered at nightly through his microscope undoubtedly flourished in the Shackleford Arms. He always lifted the gate latch gingerly, never turned the doorknob without wondering how many hands had touched it that day, and headed

straight for the sink in the corner as soon as he had switched on his light.

"Bet a dollar there's no hot water!" he muttered, and lost his own bet immediately upon turning the faucet.

Clank! Clank! Broo-oong!

The pipes shook the whole rooming house. Jerry was considerate of the men who kept what he called "white man's hours." He shut the water off and applied medicated soap vigorously. Then it became necessary to have more water for rinsing.

Clank! Broo-oong!

"Swell plumbing!" commented the doctor. "Must have come from the Shacklefords' ancestral home, dating back to the Middle Ages. Well, I've got to wash my hands. Imagine all the bacillæ on the loose around—"

He whirled, tense and listening. Somebody was rapping on his door. The gangsters, maybe. He forgot the noisy pipes as he seized a towel.

THE rapping became insistent. After all, it might be that somebody was ill in the house. There was every chance that some one would be, living amid all the germs.

"Come in!"

Jerry's voice was steady. The door opened to frame a big, red-faced man who wore blue trousers pulled over his pajamas. He was frowning, and so was the bald-headed man at his elbow—the bank clerk Jerry had met a week before. There was still another man beyond them, and the noise of more steps descending from the fourth floor.

"What's the matter?" asked the doctor. "Somebody sick?"

The big man thrust his way belligerently into the room. "Yeah!" he growled sarcastically. "We're all sick! We're sick o' tryin' to sleep with you comin' in at midnight and playin' a tune on the pipes. For the love o' Mike, can't you do your washin' in th' mornin'?"

Jerry felt sudden relief as he reached out to shut off the offending noise. "I'm sorry! It's this infernal plumbing. No matter how I turn it on, it makes a racket."

"Yeah, I'll say it does! Well, now, it's got to stop. I'm a police officer, see? I walk my beat all day and then I come home and try to sleep. Between these pipes and that squealin' radio upstairs, I——"

"Now, Murphy, what's the matter with the radio?" demanded a dark-faced youth who joined the three men in Jerry's room. "I've just been talking to New Zealand. Come on, now, you've got to admit you aren't bothered by a few dots and dashes in the interests of science! My radio doesn't wake you!"

The newcomer was fully dressed. He grinned at Jerry Sutter, and the doctor felt an immediate bond between them. He smiled back.

"You have a short-wave set?" he inquired. "I used to work one before I went to college. Lots of fun. I haven't got time any more——"

"Yeah, but how about this noise? Now look, you guys! I ain't sayin' the radio wakes me up, Miller, but after these pipes wake me I can lie there and hear that *zit-zit* stuff, and it gets on my nerves. I'm tellin' you, if it don't stop I'm goin' to take it into court and have you guys abated as a nuisance!"

Jerry turned on the policeman. "Why not complain to the landlord first?" he demanded. "I've got to wash before I go to bed! Say, if you spent your evenings looking at bacillæ like I see in my microscope——"

"Are you a doctor?" broke in the officer. "Say, is your name Sutter?"

"That's it."

"Oh!" said the policeman. "So you're the guy. Well, I got to hand it to you for havin' nerve. I saw that report at the desk. Say, you've got nerve. Know who them two mugs was that brought that guy into your office? Well, the

short bird was Little Joe Vanzetti, and he's way up on the list o' public enemies! And the tall guy was Max Schwartz—he's plenty tough!"

He regarded Jerry Sutter with growing admiration. The other men forgot to yawn as Officer Murphy turned on them.

"This is the guy I was tellin' you about at supper!" he said. "Maybe we better complain to the landlord, at that! Well, you want to watch your step, doc, that's all I got to say. And for th' love o' Mike, try and shut down on them pipes! I got to get my sleep, see?"

"Sure, I understand!" grinned Jerry. "Do you—do you think they meant what they said?"

"Do they? They'd as soon rub you out as look at you, doc! Come on, fellers. Let's get back to bed!"

Miller, the radio amateur, lingered. Jerry Sutter offered him a cigarette.

"Thanks!" he smiled. "Don't mind those guys. I heard 'em framing to run in on you to-night. The pipes do make a lot of racket. My room's right over yours."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

Miller waved his hand. "Not on my account! I'm always up till two or so—the air's better then. Well, I'll be going back upstairs. Run up some time and try out my set. Good night!"

"Good night!"

JERRY SUTTER undressed. There was a letter he ought to write. He slipped into a robe and sat down at the rickety table that served as a desk, uncorked the ink bottle and then yawned. These late hours were telling on him.

"Let the letter wait!" he muttered. "Chances are I'll have plenty of time to write it in the office—waiting for business. Me for the hay!"

He switched out the light and turned in. For a time he pondered the fact

that he had been threatened by no less than "Little Joe" Vanzetti and Max Schwartz, beer barons and racketeers in general. But even threats by big-shot gangsters can't keep a healthy young man awake when he is tired.

Jerry Sutter didn't hear the front door opened by a pass-key, and the two men who entered made no noise as they examined the desk register with a flashlight. The stairs creaked under their cautious tread, but there were always mysterious noises in the Shackleford Arms when the wind blew.

Jerry slept on until light stabbed into his dreams and something cold and hard bored into his neck. Then he sat up with a start, his eyes wide open.

"Get up, smart guy!" hissed a voice that he remembered from the day before. "You're goin' places!"

"What—who are you? Oh, I know!"

"Sure, you know! That's the trouble, you know too much. We warned you, didn't we? All right. Get into your clothes!"

"What's the idea? What are you going to do?"

"Don't talk so loud!" The gun pressed harder. "You're goin' for a ride, doc. *A one-way ride!* Get busy!"

The taller man turned on the light, thrusting the flashlight into his coat pocket. Jerry Sutter, his brain numbed and at the same time whirling, swung his long legs out from beneath the friendly covers and began dressing mechanically.

"You guys are making a mistake!" he said. "They know who you are at the police station!"

"Oh, yeah?" Vanzetti grinned mirthlessly. "That's O. K. with us, too. We've got an iron-clad alibi. We've always got alibis. And you won't be talkin' any more. Make it snappy!"

Jerry looked around for his tie. Not much use wearing one, at that, but it would give him more time. Time was what he needed—time, and some way

to let somebody know the spot he was in. He glanced at his wrist watch.

It was two thirty. Everybody in Shackleford Arms was asleep. Murphy, the cop, would be snoring sweetly by now, his slumber unbroken by clattering water pipes. Miller, the radio amateur, would be in bed, beyond reach of his call letters.

"Hurry up!" Vanzetti growled.

Groping desperately with the fingers of his mind, Jerry Sutter found a straw of hope. He had to wash his hands. He always washed his hands before going out, but the men who waited to kill him wouldn't understand that. He reached awkwardly for the necktie on the table; his hands shook, and he knocked over the ink bottle.

"Scared, eh?" Vanzetti twisted the words out of the corner of his hard mouth. "Yellow, huh? You ought to have thought of that, brother! Come on!"

"I got to wash my hands!" Jerry held them up, ink-smearing. "I can't dress this way!"

"Leave 'em be!"

"Better let him wash 'em," Schwartz advised. "Might leave finger prints on the car, and you know we'll be ditchin' the car."

"Go ahead, but make it fast!"

Jerry stooped over the sink and turned on the water.

Clang! Broo-oong!

"Hey, not so much noise!" Vanzetti warned.

Jerry turned on him. "Now it's you who's scared, isn't it?" he asked sarcastically. "There's nothing unusual about water pipes clattering in this place at night. You're safe. You know I haven't got a chance, or you wouldn't be here!"

Vanzetti muttered something. Jerry Sutter went on washing his hands, but the water was cold and the ink hard to remove. He turned the faucet on and off, on and off.

Clank! Clank! Clank! Broo-oong! Broo-oong! Broo-oong! Clank! Clank! Clank!

Three short ones, three long ones, three short ones. He repeated. There was no chance for more. Vanzetti moved menacingly nearer. Jerry Sutter dried his hands and donned his tie. He slipped into his coat, wondering if that was the stairs creaking, or just the wind outside the house.

"I'm ready!" he said finally.

Vanzetti thrust the gun in his pocket, motioning toward the door. Jerry opened it and stepped into the hall as Schwartz turned out the light.

"Put 'em up, Joe!"

The hall light switched on. Vanzetti and Schwartz were looking into a police automatic, gripped in the huge red hand of Officer Murphy.

Schwartz snarled and stepped back;

Vanzetti cursed and swung his coat pocket upward.

Murphy's gun roared. A dozen doors flew open. Men were running on the stairs to join Miller and the policeman in the hallway. Jerry Sutter sighed and knelt over Little Joe Vanzetti's body as it slipped, back against the wall, to the floor.

"He may live!" said the doctor in his most professional tone. "And I—well, I *will* live, thanks to you, Miller!"

The radio amateur grinned. "Nothing to it!" he said. "Any radio man wakes up when he hears S O S signals. I had an idea what had happened."

Murphy was clapping handcuffs on Max Schwartz.

"Go call the wagon!" he advised Jerry Sutter. "And tell 'em to hurry, so we can get back to bed. There's too much noise around this joint!"

Horsethief Hanging

By Frederick Alan Mattox

FROM where Curtis Bledsoe and the "Kid" sat smoking brown-paper cigarettes in the shade of a mesquite bush they could see across the broad expanse of Skull Valley in the heart of the bad lands. A cluster of buildings marked a town in the hollow.

"That's Rosy City," Curtis said, "an' a mighty tough town. This is horsethief country. Keep yore eyes open, Kid, while we're in these here diggin's."

"Come on! Let's git goin' an' git somethin' tuh eat in town afore it gits dark on us."

Curtis picked up the dropped reins of his rangy buckskin and swung into the saddle. The Kid's cayuse, a brown mare, had wandered a few paces away. The Kid whistled an odd, birdlike note, an the mare pricked up her ears and came running toward him. The Kid

fed her a lump of sugar from his pocket and mounted. Together the two men picked their way down the slopes toward the town.

Curtis and the Kid were riding northwest across the country, bound from Texas to new ranges in Montana. They were gray with dust from the hundreds of miles that already lay on the long trail behind them.

The horses picked their way through the undergrowth toward a wagon road that ran into Rosy City.

In the town, the two dismounted in front of a Chinese restaurant and tied their horses to a hitch rail. Across the street, a group of hard-faced loungers watched them from the board walk in front of the general store.

Curtis and the Kid went into the restaurant and ate. When they came out again, there were great pools of purple

shadow around the buttes, and the sinking sun was tipping the corners of the false-fronted frame building with flame.

A dark-faced man, one of the loafers from in front of the store, was kneeling in the dust beside the horses. He was examining the hoofs and legs of the Kid's brown mare. He looked up at their coming and scrambled hastily to his feet.

The Kid started forward angrily. Curtis caught him by the arm.

"Easy, Kid," he warned. "We're in a strange country."

The Kid shook himself free. "What yuh doin' around my cayuse?" he demanded of the man with the scarred jaw. The man's narrow eyes glistened guilefully in his dark face.

"Jist a-lookin' at her," he answered silkily. "Nice horse yuh got, mister, nice horse!"

The rest of the men drifted over from in front of the store and stood in a circle, watching.

"Do yore lookin' elsewhere," the Kid said shortly.

The man grinned. "Jist lookin' her over in case I should want her," he stated.

The other loafer grinned with him.

"She ain't fer sale," said the Kid, "now or ever!"

The grouped men chuckled audibly.

"We cain't afford tuh buy our horses," said the scar-faced one, "now or ever!"

The men laughed.

"That's right, stranger," one of them said. "We cain't any o' us afford tuh buy horses, least o' all Scar Carlin there. When we need 'em, we take 'em."

"Scar" Carlin joined his companions, and they returned to their places on the planks in front of the general store.

The Kid glared after them. Curtis's lips were thin.

"Oh, hell!" said the Kid, "what's the difference? I think I'll take a little mosey around, afore turnin' in. Yuh

go on over to the hotel, Curtis, an' fix things up, an' I'll ride out a little piece an' cool off."

Curtis watched him swing into his saddle and go galloping down the street. It was on his lips to call him back, but the Kid was old enough to choose his own actions. It was against Curtis's code to interfere.

Scar Carlin came out of the general store carrying a Winchester rifle under his arm.

"Goin' huntin'!" he said to the loungers.

Their laughter boomed along the street as they watched him make his way past the sun-faded buildings and start back toward the buttes.

A man touched Curtis on the arm. He turned to see a kindly faced, white-mustached miner standing beside him.

"It's a tough break, stranger," the man said. "Yuh might as well ride on alone."

"What do yuh mean by that?" Curtis asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't mean nothin'," the man said hastily, "I got tuh live here." He turned and went down the street.

AT dawn the Kid had not returned. Curtis rode out of town in the cool of the daybreak, following the brown mare's tracks. The early sun burned on the rims of the mesas. Against the blue of the morning, black buzzards circled and dropped—circled and dropped. Curtis followed their message.

He found the Kid lying face downward on the hard alkali, his face in the shade of a green mesquite. Curtis dismounted and knelt by the stiffened body of his friend. There was a hole made by a rifle bullet in the Kid's back.

"Made by a soft-nosed slug," thought Curtis to himself. "A Winchester."

He rose to his feet. There was a single set of boot tracks leading down from a near-by mesa. There were no

boot tracks leading away from the scene. The brown mare was gone.

Curtis slung the Kid over his horse and started back to town.

The loungers were back in their places when Curtis came leading the horse into Rosy City. Curtis came directly toward them.

"Where's the sheriff's office?" he asked.

The men looked at one another, and then one spoke:

"We ain't got no sheriff," he said.

"Got no sheriff?" exclaimed Curtis. "Who takes care o' the law around here?"

"We do," the loungee said, and then added: "As much as is needed."

"Then here's a job fer yuh," Curtis said icily. "My partner's been shot in the back, an' his horse stolen. I want the coyote that shot him!"

There was a brief silence, while the men looked at one another.

"We figure that might have been an accident," their spokesman said at last.

Curtis's gray eyes narrowed angrily.

"Yuh know better'n that," he said. "Ef there ain't no law, I'll go myself."

He turned his back on them and crossed to the hotel where willing hands helped him to carry the Kid inside. Curtis came out again immediately and swung into his saddle. The butts of his six-guns glinted in the sunlight as he rode out of town.

The men on the board walk looked at each other.

"Mebbe three-four o' us ought tuh ride along an' see that he ain't too successful," one of them offered.

Four of the men separated from the others, found their horses, and followed Curtis out of town.

Curtis followed his own tracks back to the spot where he had found the Kid. From there the brown mare's tracks showed indistinctly, but frequently enough for Curtis to follow. He bent low in his saddle and rode slowly, his

eyes on the ground where the trail led over hard ground or rock. In the stretches where the dirt was soft and the tracks clear, he rode swiftly.

The sun climbed into a hot sky. Curtis's way led through mesquite-filled draws, around near serrated buttes and mesas, and once, over a brief stretch of flat country filled with gobernador and Spanish bayonet. By noon the trail was following a dry water course toward the foothills.

A cluster of cottonwoods showed ahead of him. He went forward cautiously. A faint plume of blue smoke was ascending from among the trees!

Curtis took advantage of every possible bit of cover. His horse's hoofs were almost silent in the sand of the dry river bottom. The last fifty yards there was nothing to hide him. He spurred the buckskin into a gallop and rode in among the trees.

Scar swore and started to his feet, his hand going for his gun. Curtis drew first and fired. Scar's gun went spinning.

Sullenly he stood glaring at Curtis.

Curtis dismounted and untied the lariat from his saddle.

"I've seen enough," he said, "tuh be sure yo're the coyote that got my partner!"

"I'll save yuh any doubts," Scar told him, "I am. What yuh goin' tuh do about it?"

"Hang yuh!" said Curtis grimly.

Scar's face paled, but he kept his bravado. "Yuh cain't do it," he said, "yuh'd lose yore own hide."

Curtis cut a bit of rope and bound Scar's hands behind his back.

"The boys'll be here any minute an' get yuh sure!" Scar warned desperately.

Curtis untied the brown mare and led her out. He forced Scar into the saddle. Deftly he made a loop in the lariat, fitted it over Scar's neck, threw the length over a cottonwood limb, drew it taut and tied it.

Suddenly the terror in Scar's shifting eyes gave place to burning triumph. He laughed, sitting rigidly on the brown mare's back, the noose tight around his throat.

Curtis turned. Four men were riding up the dry wash, whipping their horses in their hurry, leaning forward in their saddles to avoid the clawing limbs of the mesquite.

Curtis swung into his saddle and rode to meet them. They came together fifty yards down the arroyo at a point where the cottonwoods hid Scar and the brown mare from view. The men drew rein in a cloud of dust. They eyed Curtis grimly, fingering their guns.

"What yuh been up tuh?" demanded one of them suspiciously. "Ridin' off that way without waitin' fer us."

"I been huntin' a hoss thief," said Curtis evenly.

The men, grim-eyed, closed in around him.

"Yo're in the wrong country, stranger," their spokesman said. "We don't allow that kind o' huntin' here."

The men's hands rested solidly on their gun butts. One of them nudged Curtis's mount with his stirrup.

"Git goin'!" he said. "We figger as how yo're leavin' the country, an' we're

ridin' part way with yuh tuh see that yuh git a good start."

The four riders closed in, two on each side of Curtis, leaving the way open toward a break in the line of hills. Curtis rode forward, his hands in plain sight on his saddle pommel.

"An' be sure that yuh don't come back this a way," the rider said.

Curtis shrugged and pursed his lips to whistle. He whistled an odd, bird-like note. In the cottonwoods, the brown mare pricked up her ears, gathered her muscles, and came running. Maybe she thought the Kid was waiting with sugar in his pockets.

Curtis's captors looked over their shoulders at the sound of the hoofs. Curtis reached for his guns. His hands came up filled.

"Reach 'em high, gents!" he ordered. The hands of the astonished men shot into the air.

"Where's Scar?" gasped the leader.

"Swingin' in the cottonwoods," Curtis said. "He shot the Kid, but he fer-got tuh shoot the hoss. He should 'a' remembered that a man's hoss don't never fergit what a man teaches her, but then I guess Scar wasn't the kind of a man that even a hoss would love like that."

The Inspector Listens In

By R. R. Pitts

THE gangster leaned forward in the darkness, held his ear to the closet door and listened intently. Some one had entered the room outside; a thin slit of light appeared under the closet door. He heard a door click shut—heard the brisk voice of the man he had come to kill.

"That's all, Simpson," the voice snapped. "But keep your eyes open downstairs. I expect Donahue to strike

any hour of the day, and I don't like this suspense a bit. I'm nervous."

"Yeah," drawled a big bass voice. "I understand how you feel, Mr. Wilson. I'd feel the same way if Tim Donahue had me marked for the spot."

The man in the closet grinned sardonically and released the safety catch on the little stub-nosed .25 automatic which he held caressingly in his long, slim hands. The big bass voice continued:

"I hope you get him. It'd certainly be a good riddance all right."

The first voice said: "If Inspector Davis gets me the information I expect, I'll have Tim Donahue behind the bars for keeps before the week has passed—if!"

"Well, see you in the mornin', Mr. Wilson. Good night."

A silent pause. Breathlessly the gangster waited, listening; heard a door open, then click shut. Silence. This business of bumping the city's district attorney was not to his liking. But his hatred for the clever little man had driven him to step forward when Tim Donahue had asked for volunteers.

With his free hand he slipped a flashlight from his pocket and pressed its button. For several seconds he stared directly into the light—to concentrate the pupils of his eyes so the bright light of the room outside would not blind him.

Then he shoved the flashlight back into his pocket, opened the closet door and stepped into the brilliantly lighted room.

On the other side of the room there was a small, gray-haired man. A lighted match was held to a cigar which was clinched between his thin lips. He did not see the gangster who stood silently scowling at him, with a leering grin spread across his strained and taut features.

From a small desk near the windows, a telephone bell shrilled discordantly. The gangster jerked around nervously, his beady, black eyes flickered to and fro. He hadn't anticipated this! Suppose that was one of the detectives on guard downstairs calling to see if Wilson was all right!

Wilson turned and started toward the telephone, saw the tall gangster crouched before the closet door; he paused for an instant, then calmly ignored the little stub-nosed automatic which was aimed at him and crossed the room to the desk.

Again the bell shrilled.

The gangster stepped forward swiftly and jabbed his gun into the little man's side.

"Answer it, Wilson!" he hissed, "Get rid of whoever it is. Understand? Hold the receiver so I can hear, too. But remember—one false word and I'll let yuh have it!"

WILSON glared up into the gangster's black eyes for an instant, then nodded silently, picked up the telephone, and raised the receiver to his ear with its mouth upward.

The gangster leaned forward, his ear close to the receiver.

"Hello!" Wilson snapped into the telephone transmitter.

A voice rasped from the receiver: "That you, Frank?"

"Yep. What is it?"

"I've found the dope you asked for," said the voice, "and, brother, it's red-hot stuff! Thought I'd call up first to make sure you were in. I'll be right over!"

The gangster jabbed his gun deeper into the little man's side.

Wilson said:

"No, don't come now, Joe. It's not important. I'll see you in the morning, but keep up the good work and listen in again to-night. Good-by."

Wilson replaced the receiver and set the telephone upon the desk. He whirled around suddenly and faced the gangster.

"What do you want here, Grant?" he snarled. "How did you get in? I thought I had this place guarded!"

"Glad to see me, ain't yuh?" the tall gangster's voice was harsh with sarcasm. The leering grin had returned to his thick lips. His black eyes glinted coldly.

Wilson pointed at the man with his cigar and growled: "I'm never glad to see such gutter rats as you! What's on

your mind? Spill it damn quick and get out!"

"Well, Mr. District Attorney! I'd think yuh'd be kinda glad to see *me*. Yuh see, Wilson, *I'm* the last person yuh'll ever see alive. So yuh better take a good look while yuh can!"

"So-o!" Wilson cocked his head to one side in a characteristic pose. "You're threatening me, is that it?"

"Yeah," the gangster sneered, "I'm threatening yuh. It's curtains for you—see?"

Wilson smiled and sat upon the edge of the little desk. He leaned forward. "Did Tim Donahue send you, or did you come of your own accord?"

"Donahue sent me, but that won't do yuh any good. 'Cause yuh ain't gonna live to tell anybody, see? I would've come anyway. Remember I said I'd get yuh if my brother was sentenced to the chair. *You* were the cause of that! *You* sent him to his death. Well, *I'm* sendin' *you* to yours. I'm——"

He stopped suddenly. His beady black eyes flashed with the pent-up hatred within him. He leveled his gun at the back of the little man who had calmly turned his back and ignored him. The little runt! Didn't he know he was going to die?

But he wanted to make the little man suffer—just as his brother had suffered. He wanted to see the little man drop to his knees and beg for life—just as his brother had done in the courtroom. Merely shooting the man wasn't enough!

"Yuh're gonna die, Wilson," he gestured menacingly with his automatic. "I'm gonna send yuh on a one-way ride, get me?"

Wilson turned and faced the gangster, blew a cloud of smoke into his face. The tall gangster stepped back, raised his gun.

Wilson snapped:

"Tim Donahue sent you here to bump me; but you want to see me suffer and cry for mercy. Is that it?" His small

hand played absent-mindedly with a paper weight upon the desk, he raised the cigar to his lips. He smiled at the gangster.

The leering grin upon the tall man's pinched features faded into an angry scowl. Never before had he hated a man with such venom. His hand squeezed the little automatic slightly. He'd shoot him in the stomach—it would hurt worse there.

"Say, Slim." Wilson's manner had suddenly changed. His tone of voice was one of admiration. "How the devil did you get in here? I thought I had this penthouse rather well guarded. I have a man from headquarters on the elevator, and that's the only way a person can get up here. I don't see how you managed it."

Wilson had touched upon a weak spot that is common among criminals—*vanity*. "Slim" Grant was no exception.

He smiled a proud smile; yet, it was tinged with contempt.

"Aw, that wus too easy. Yuh may be pretty smart in th' courtroom, but yuh're sort o' dumb when it comes to hiring protection. Hell! Them headquarters dicks are all wet!"

"Now I wouldn't say that," Wilson snapped. "We have some pretty smart men on our police force, Slim."

"Yeah. Pretty smart! Sure! Look how they fixed *you*. A flattie on th' door downstairs and another one in the elevator. And a couple watchdogs to trail around town with. Now, that ain't good protection. Too bad yuh couldn't hire a couple good rods like me."

"But how did you get up here?"

"Simple!" The tall gangster sneered his contempt. "I came up the fire escape."

"By Jove!" Wilson exclaimed, "I never thought of——"

"Say!" cut in the gangster, "are yuh tryin' to stall for time or something?"

Wilson did not have time to answer. A door flew open behind the gangster

and two men plunged into the room—guns ready in their hands.

Slim Grant flashed a glance over his shoulder, gasped, and whirled back to the little man seated upon the desk. But even as he turned, a well-aimed paper weight struck his gun hand. The little automatic fell to the floor.

Slim's left hand slid beneath his coat lapel and snaked out again; and a large .45 was clutched in that hand. But his first shot missed—Wilson was dropping behind the desk when he fired.

The second slug from the .45 plowed its way into the surface of the desk just as the two men opened up.

Before, they couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Wilson, but now their volley of lead tore into the tall gangster's side. He twisted around and fell.

ONE of the detectives said a few minutes later: "Inspector Davis called me on the phone downstairs, and said there was a guy up here in your penthouse. He told me and Simpson to beat it up here, so we did. But what I don't understand is how he knew!"

"It was this way," Wilson explained. "Inspector Davis had been gathering some dope on the Donahue case and

called me to-night to see if I was in. When my telephone rang, I had just finished lighting my cigar—the match was still in my hand. Then Grant shoved a gun in my side."

Wilson paused, crossed to the telephone and held it up for the two detectives to see. He continued:

"I broke the match in half, and when I lifted the receiver, with my other hand I wedged the piece of match under the receiver hook. Therefore, when I replaced the receiver the wedge would not let the hook go down and break the contact—the circuit remained open! I called Davis by the wrong name, said the dope he had was not important, hung up before he could reply, and immediately started talking to Grant. Quite naturally, Inspector Davis wondered what I meant and continued to listen in. He heard our conversation through the telephone transmitter, then called you. Quite simple. But what a nerve-racking five minutes that followed!

"And by the way," he added a moment later, "after I get this dope from Inspector Davis, I don't think I'll need your protection much longer—but it might be a good idea to guard the fire escape after this!"

Watch the next issue of Top-Notch for the
second complete novelette of

"The Diamond Spearhead"

The New Adventure Series

By BEN CONLON

Author of "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef"



At The Top-Notch Mike

STATION WTN—New York! This is the station, ladies and gentlemen, located on the fifth floor of Street & Smith's building, the home of good fiction, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Your announcer wishes to give you some special information concerning the July issue of Top-Notch.

The editor of Top-Notch has managed to secure the latest novel of that well-known writer of adventure fiction, J. Allan Dunn. It's called "Stolen Money," and will appear—complete—in the July issue.

Probably no adventure-story writer is so familiar at first hand with out-of-the-way corners of the earth as J. Allan Dunn. Many of the scenes of "Stolen Money" are on the islet of Socorro, in the Revillagigedos group, belonging to Mexico. You wouldn't find one globe-trotter among many thousands who had

ever been there. But J. Allan Dunn has been there, and you'll be interested in his descriptions.

Imagine yourself in the hero's position! Taken for a ride, as it were. But not in a sedan. In an airplane. In a giant amphibian that can do much better than a hundred miles an hour—and marooned like Robinson Crusoe in a remote speck of the great world where no one would ever find him.

An unusual story, this, filled with sparkling twists and surprises, so I guess I'd better not spoil the kick by telling too much here. But watch for this yarn. Remember! It will be in the July issue of Top-Notch, on the news stands Friday, June 16th.

An entirely different type of adventure story is Ben Conlon's complete novelette, "Rolling Down to Rio." This is the second of Mr. Conlon's "Dia-

mond Spearhead” stories. If you read the opening story of the series, you’ll enjoy this second one. But even if you did not read the opener, you can go right ahead and find interest in “Rolling Down to Rio” from the first line to the final period.

There’ll be the usual collection of short and short short stories, too. All in all, quite a number—that July issue of Top-Notch!

Probably there is no American magazine circulating in more out-of-the-way corners of the world than Top-Notch, which is fitting for a publication carrying adventure stories dealing with the fringes of civilization.

Every little while, letters from Top-Notch “fans” arrive from unusual foreign places, and just the other day one was received from Mr. Boris M. Grebnev, of Northern Caucasus, U. S. S. R., as follows:

“I have just finished my reading of the first part of ‘Fandango Island,’ by Fred MacIsaac, and now I am beside myself. To think only that the books and magazines of the type I like best—sea stories, detective mysteries, adventure, humor—are as scarce here as hens’

teeth, and that only occasionally does a copy of Top-Notch come to my hands. Am I to miss the second and third parts of this thrilling novel entirely, and the sea stories by Albert M. Treynor, Ben Conlon, and other Top-Notch writers? It is incredible!

“Would any of your readers please furnish me with January and February numbers of this excellent magazine, do you think, or with even other copies? One cannot take without giving, and you will readily understand my unwillingness to put myself under obligation to anybody, and so I suggest *The Young Guard* (bi-monthly), *Our Way* (quarterly), and *Moscow News* (weekly), for one’s choice.

“I have never been abroad, except two months’ vacation in Japan, and I have scarce spoken for years to any Englishman except my teachers. But there is no greater pleasure for me than writing letters and reading English books. Anglo-American literature interests me to the degree of passion.

“Hoping to have the pleasure of hearing from you—Boris M. Grebnev, care of M. M. Blankoff, 1, Malo-Zazarnava, Prohladnaya Station, Northern Caucasus, U. S. S. R.”

**HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH!
READERS' BALLOT**

Best story in this issue.....

Next best.....

Best “short short” story.....

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors?.....

.....

Remarks and suggestions.....

Name and address.....

I think I'll just have time to read a few letters and readers' ballots from Top-Notch fans in places not so far away.

From Montreal, Canada:

I have read many of the Top-Notch books and among the best stories I have read is "Ozar the Aztec." I hope that they may be continued. The letters in the back of the Top-Notch for April say that they would like to have the Top-Notch weekly, but consider the people who like your book, but can't afford it every week. They would be missing story after story for the sake of those who are not considerate of others.

During my reading, I wonder why you don't put in some jungle stories, and as one reader said, cut out the Short Short stories and add a new jungle or Northwestern Mounted Police story or even an animal story. The best magazine, I am not afraid to say, is the Top-Notch, because of its mixture of stories.—
CLEMENT NORMANDIN.

From Richmond, Virginia:

I like Top-Notch very much. Dunn, Bosworth, Conlon, Wood, MacIsaac, Seabrooke,

Boston, Hendryx, Burks my favorites. You see I have a lot of them and maybe some more I can't think of now. Best story in latest issue, "Gold of Gambiri." Best short story, "The Kick-back."—ROBERT NORTON.

From Westmount, Pennsylvania:

Best story in your latest issue—"Conjure Cay." Best short short story—"Trail's End." Very good!—W. L. AUSTIN.

From Fall River, Massachusetts:

I like Western stories. Those by Tex Bradley and Galen C. Colin are good, and Northwestern stories by James B. Hendryx and J. Allan Dunn. You ought to give us more love stories, too, like in the old Top-Notch. I have read Top-Notch for almost fifteen years, since before the War.—T. BOLO.

P. S.—Your very short stories are among the best.

Time's about up, folks. Listen in again on June 16th. Your announcer wishes you all a very pleasant

Good night!

NEXT ISSUE!

(July Number—Published June 16th)

A COMPLETE ADVENTURE NOVELETTE

STOLEN MONEY

By J. ALLAN DUNN

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