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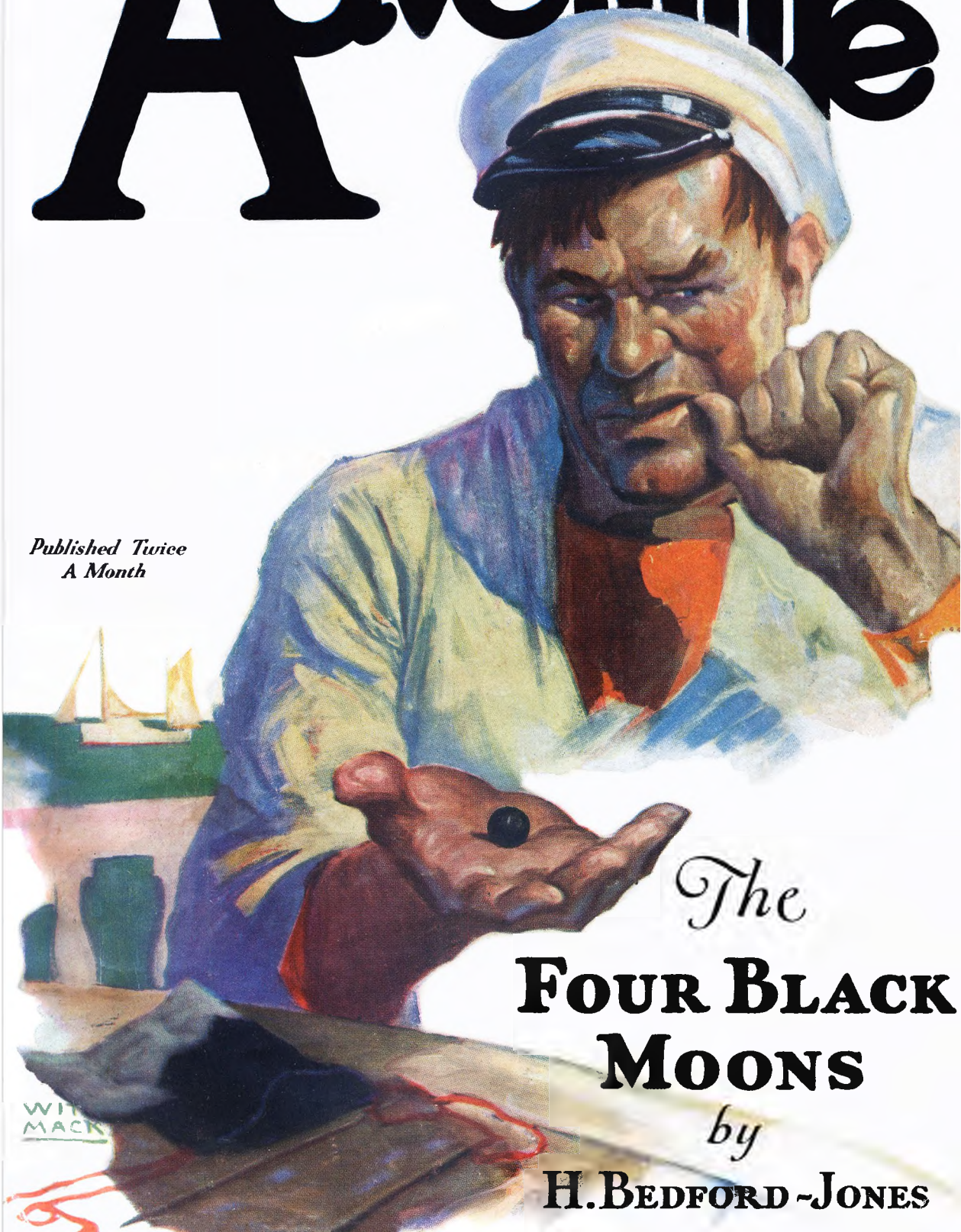

The Four Black Moons

by

H. Bedford-Jones

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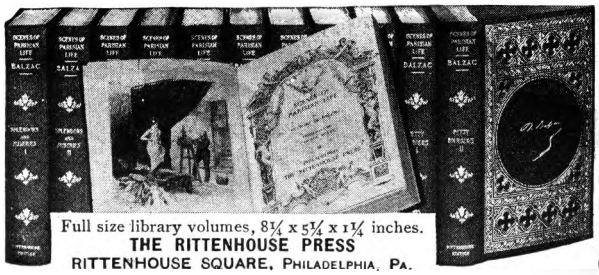

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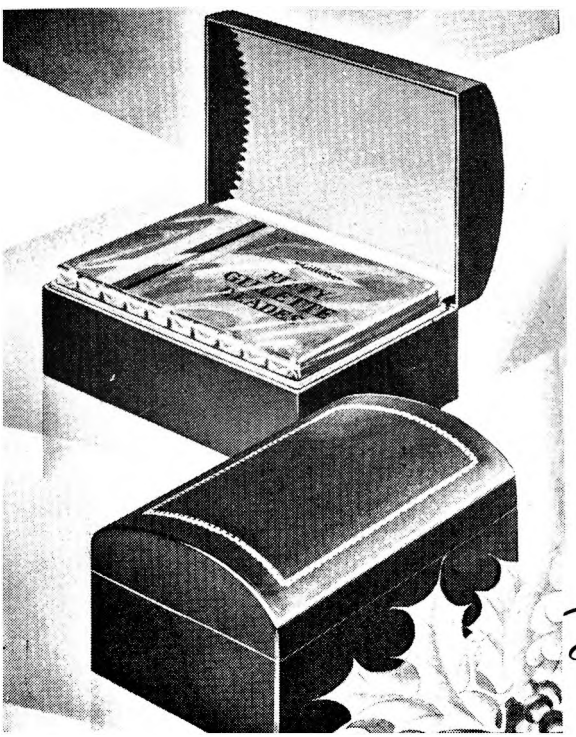

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Anthony M. Rud
EDITOR

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The FOUR

A NOVELETTE OF THE CHINA SEAS AND A KING'S RANSOM IN PEARLS

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

A MAN was walking along the road that led down from the high Malay mountains to the sea—the hill road, the jungle road, the sea road, with Kuala Bekut at the end.

Why he walked was, of course, a mystery to every native who saw him. Perhaps he was merely in a hurry and had been unable to obtain any conveyance. He was a well knit man, his whites were tailored, his pith helmet almost new. Beneath it, his features showed brown, resolute, alert; the clean cut features of a soldier who has learned to master others by first mastering himself. Self is the first enemy, particularly of a man alone in the Malay States.

Clifford's brain was clicking to certain words as he walked, at his tireless, swift pace that ate up the downgrade miles at five to the hour.

"If Ransom is there as he promised—tomorrow is the eighteenth—if Ransom is there, I'm saved!"

The words fell into a species of march music, keeping time to his steps. He saw, yet seemed not to see, the natives on the road—the Tamil coolie lines, the Javanese road workers, the Malay farmers. His thoughts were on Kuala Bekut, the little town at the river mouth.

The valley of the Bekut outspread before him, the sea glinted in the distance. On a hillside slope above the stream the sun struck down on blue figures, raw yellow earth—Chinese miners, moving along the notched tree trunk ladders. A gorge

BLACK MOONS

was past; he was over a bridge and sweeping down into the valley, nearing the end of his road.

A kite sailed overhead on lazy wings, a moving fingertip against the sky, and a heat haze was dancing along the road ahead. Coffee gardens with native women at work weeding; a native shop, with long lines of rattans holding fruit, dangling bottles of *strop*, the unspeakable drink, in the sunlight; a little throng of loafers centered about the trim-blue clad Malay constable; houses, coolie lines — and there, suddenly, was the end of the road, as Kuala Bekut opened out on its hillside.

One or two red tiled roofs; the high fence of a jail; the Sikh barracks, its iron roof glimmering heat; the wattled walls, the thatched green and brown roofs; the sun shot green of trees, hiding village and sea and river mouth. The spruce whiteness of a police station halted Clifford; a constable appeared, bringing a drink of water before it was asked. Clifford drank thirstily and gave thanks.

"This is Kuala Bekut?"

"Yes, *tuan*."

"Is there a ship here?"

"Off the river mouth, *tuan*. Two days since it came."

"Is there a shop or bazaar here called The Abode of Ten Thousand Joys?"

The constable, like all his race, despised and hated the infidel Chinese.

"Ya Allah! There is such a shop, *tuan*. It is not our fault. *Apa buleh buat?* What can one do? The infidel is everywhere. This bazaar is straight ahead down the road."

Clifford struck out again into his long, swinging, even gait, leaving the constable

at the doorway staring after him with melancholy, wondering eyes. An erect Sikh saluted him, but Clifford did not see the gesture.

The bazaar showed at last, the gaudy red and gold sign proclaiming it for what it was—not an impressive place. He turned in at a narrow doorway, passed the usual Confucian altar with joss sticks smoking before the sage, came into a dark little shop and found himself confronted by a polite Chinese.

"My name is Clifford," he said abruptly, not returning the greeting of the yellow man. "I do not seek goods, but a man. Is this the shop of Li Kim? Good. I desire to ask for a man named Ransom."

The yellow man bowed.

"He sits even now in the room of Li Kim, who is at home sick. We have been told you would come."

Clifford followed to the rear of the shop, passed through a dark entry, and his guide pulled aside a curtain. Clifford stepped into a small room filled with objects; a man seated in a chair smoking glanced up, then sprang hastily erect. A burly, powerful man with a hard square face and a large mouth, thin lipped.

"Jack Clifford! By the lord Harry, I'm glad to see you! Safe?"

Clifford shook hands. Then, suddenly, his face looked gray; he took off his pith helmet, seemed trying to speak, could not. Ransom caught his chair and shoved it forward just in time. Clifford's knees buckled and he sank down, Ransom gripping his elbow.

"Thanks," he said. "Left Tambelang about 4:00 yesterday—been going ever since like a machine you don't dare stop. Stiffish climb on the upgrade, before I crossed the divide. Afraid I'm a bit done in . . ."

His words trailed off with the slowing, jerky motion of a machine that has indeed run down. His eyes closed, and his chin dropped on his breast.

"By the lord Harry! Sixty miles from Tambelang!" ejaculated Ransom. "And you did it. Why, it's impossible! I say, Clifford—"

He leaned forward, shook Clifford by the shoulder, but Clifford only slumped a bit in his chair.

II

RANSOM stood hesitant for a long moment, looking down at Clifford. Then he shot a swift glance around.

The curtain was down across the doorway. The *kang*, or platform, that served as bed and opium bench, was empty except for a tray with tea outfit that stood on a teak stand. A few teapoys stood about the room. The walls were bare of everything save dirt. On the floor were piles of little boxes; a writing stand held brushes, ink tiles, paper. A half written sheet of rice paper showed how Li Kim had been taken ill that day while going over certain memoranda with Ransom. The little boxes might be opium or other things that Ransom had smuggled in from the steam tramp off the river mouth. But here was something vastly more important than opium.

Ransom moved abruptly, sharply. He leaned forward and, a dark light stabbing in his eyes, ran his hand over Clifford's body. He found a few battered, sticky fragments of chocolate bar in one pocket; in another a pipe and pouch of tobacco, a few matches. Hastily, almost feverishly, Ransom went over the unconscious figure. He unearthed a battered passport, some twelve pounds in mixed currencies, and an old fashioned, large gold hunting case watch and chain. Nothing else.

With an expression of dismay and a low, startled oath, he frisked Clifford's body, sought beneath the armpits and knees, sought a money belt, found absolutely nothing else. Ransom sniffed, spat something under his breath, then went to the doorway and clapped his hands.

Presently Clifford opened his eyes. Ransom held a stiff brandy peg to his lips, and he drank some of it.

"Silly of me," he said calmly, sitting up. "A bit of food will buck me up."

"It'll be here in ten minutes," said

Ransom, and sat down on the opium bench. "Here, have a cigaret. Mean to say you've covered sixty miles, hill trails, since yesterday?"

Clifford smiled. The smile lighted up his face, robbed it of harshness, gave a glimpse of the warm nature beneath.

"Had to do it," he said, and lighted the cigaret handed him. "Safe to talk here?"

"Absolutely," said Ransom. "Li was taken ill after lunch. The old devil stuffed himself. I gave him a whacking liver pill, and he went home to his Malay wife. The shop's mine, while I'm here, so loosen up. Have you brought the stuff?"

Clifford nodded.

"Yes, and that's the trouble."

"Huh?" Ransom scrutinized him skeptically. "Trouble, is there? I'm dashed if I see how. It was arranged that you'd get the pearls from Sui Wen in Tambelang; I'd be here with a ship; we'd take 'em on to S'pore and turn 'em over to Sui Wen's firm there and collect our money. Why any trouble?"

Clifford relaxed, pulled at his cigaret, exhaled gratefully.

"Details," he rejoined. "Sui Wen was to buy the pearls from the rajah at Tambelang—a straight business deal, and a whale of profit in it. At the last minute somebody in the family smelled a rat and raised a howl that the rajah was selling pearls belonging to the state and so forth. The rajah tried to get 'em back; Sui Wen refused. This was yesterday morning. Sui Wen came to the club and gave the things to me at tiffin. He had arranged for a motor car to pick me up after dark and run me over here. I could see he was pretty nervous about it all, but he stuck to his guns. He had the Four Black Moons, and it meant something like a fortune to his firm, and he had 'em legally. Well, about three that afternoon I went down to the bazaars and dropped into his place. They said he was writing letters and had given orders not to be disturbed for any one. I knew the letters were for me to take to Singapore and I went on into his private office."

Clifford finished the brandy peg, leaned back, puffed.

"He was there," he pursued calmly, "with a handsome *kris* between his shoulders. I took one quick look, and went out. The rajah had done for him and, if I stuck around, I'd get the same thing, or else would have his murder blamed on me. I had the Four Black Moons in my pocket, you see, and couldn't risk any police inquiry and so forth. I couldn't risk hiring a car, a horse, anything. My only chance of getting clear was to do the least expected thing—and I did it. I walked down the street and kept on walking and hit the mountain road and kept going—and, by the eternal, I got away with it! But they'll be after me, quick enough. If you hadn't been here I'd be done for."

Ransom stared at him, cheroot clenched between teeth, admiration struggling in his dark eyes with wonderment and suspicion.

"Mean to say you've got 'em with you?" he asked. Clifford merely nodded. "Well, by the lord Harry! This beats any book story I ever read. Killed him, huh? And to think of you legging it sixty miles in a day. I always knew you were a wonder, but this beats anything—it does for a fact! Where've you got the pearls?"

"Safe," and Clifford chuckled. "I'm done in, yes. Tell you later about 'em. The main thing is to get out of here and get to sea as soon as we can. You know how things are here. They'll find out quick enough at Tambelang about a white man on the road. That means a wire or a phone call here, and the devil to pay. They'll hardly put the police on me, but there'll be hell to pay all the same. When can we clear out?"

"Hm!" Ransom's eyes narrowed in calculation. "Can't get over the bar until about 9:00 tonight. Have to wait for the tide. I've got a ramshackle little old tin craft, Malay master and crew, Chinese *chin-chu*, cockroaches and rats galore. She'll make S'pore all right if she holds together that far. Cost me some money, too."

Clifford shrugged.

"No matter. We clear five thousand pounds and expenses if we deliver the Four Black Moons in Singapore, so we should worry over costs."

"Got a bill o' sale?" asked Ransom. Clifford laughed at this.

"I don't know what Sui Wen got, but I haven't any. Don't need any. Those four pearls are priceless, almost historic things; they don't carry any bill of sale, either. No more than a million pound banknote does."

"Huh!" said Ransom. "Why do these chinks take chances? How do they know you and I won't collar the pearls and skip?"

"They know me," said Clifford laconically, and it was answer enough.

A BOY entered with a tray, brought a teapoy beside Clifford's chair and set the tray on it. For ten minutes Clifford ate hungrily, but not too heavily, under the gaze of Ransom. Then the latter rose.

"I say, Clifford, I'll slip over to the godowns and send down a boat with a chit to the skipper. He'll have to be ready to leave tonight, get up steam and all that. The crew are probably drunk in town, too. Want to go aboard now, or tonight?"

Clifford considered.

"After dark is better," he said. "I'll stay here, if I may, until we go. Take my shoes along and get me another pair, about the same size, and some socks. My feet aren't in any too good shape after my hike."

He stripped off shoes and socks, showing blistered and bleeding feet; it was characteristic that he gave no evidence of pain as he took off skin and socks together. Ransom swore softly.

"I'll have a boy come right in and bandage up those feet," he said, taking a shoe.

"Might be a good idea," said Clifford. "I've had worse, with army boots. I'll probably be asleep before the boy gets here, so tell him to go right ahead, regardless."

He rose, removed the tea outfit from the opium recess, and Ransom threw down a quilted silk mat from a shelf. Clifford stretched out, smiled and turned his face to the wall. He was asleep before Ransom left the room.

Ransom prowled among the bazaars for twenty minutes, and by a miracle finally obtained a second hand pair of heavy boots, just the thing to encase Clifford's feet and protect them. Then he took his way to the riverside. Ransom was pretty well at home anywhere out there, for he had spent the past ten years knocking about the Malay States. He had not done too well for himself either, due to a variety of causes, mostly indefinable. A few months previously he had run into Clifford and his fortunes had picked up. Ransom could be told to do a thing, and somehow he would do it—just as he had accomplished the miracle of getting to Kuala Bekut with a ship on a certain date.

Along the bank of the Bekut were the godowns and struggling native houses, some of them sprawling out over the water, on black piles made from *nibong* palms. Thatched roofs, green dense foliage, mat roofed craft, canoes, bathing rafts beyond the houses; and the mile wide river with its foliaged islands, all shimmered under the heat of late afternoon. The iron roofs of the godowns shone like corrugated strips of glass in the white glare.

Ransom did not have to send his chit after all. The *Muk Gow* was Chinese owned, and an agent of the firm was located there. At the agent's office Ransom found the Malay skipper and the Chinese supercargo, and he bluntly informed them that the *Muk Gow* was sailing with the tide that night at 9:00.

The dish faced skipper, Kasap by name, shrugged and assented.

"Very well, *tuan;* but as Allah liveth, half my men are ashore with women at this very hour!"

"*Kasihan;* you have my sympathy," said Ransom, with a grim smile. "Shall I go and round up these brethren for you?"

"No, no," returned Kasap hastily, for he knew Ransom by reputation. "If it

be the will of Allah, I shall find them and get them all aboard."

"I can not answer for Allah," said Ransom, "but I can tell you that it is my will to sail with the tide at 9:00, and that is sufficient. Have a boat here at 8:30, awaiting me."

Kasap assented to this in his meek Malay manner, and Ransom departed. Nearly all Malays are meek; whether by nature or by policy, is another matter. Ransom went up to the district and port doctor's house, having received an invitation to do so when the doctor came aboard the *Muk Gow*. He spent the remainder of the afternoon there, with cool drinks and the doctor, and the two men got so well acquainted that when Ransom finally rose to depart he was not too warmly urged to remain.

Meanwhile, one would have said that a keen stirring breath came down from the mountains and swept over the coffee farms and the folk working in the fields. It passed over the rice paddies where men and women, in blue cotton and faded sarongs and girt loins to keep off the huge leeches of the paddies, were at work weeding. It passed on into the narrow streets of Kuala Bekut, and must have put strange things into the hearts of the brown folk there, for men fell to talking, and their eyes shot hither and yon, and fingers touched the hilts of *krises*. The tall Sikhs felt something amiss, but no hint of it reached them, since they were infidels like the Chinese.

So with the coolness of approaching evening, Ransom came back to the shop of Li Kim, where Clifford awaited him, sleeping.

III

CLIFFORD did not know Ransom well, had never sought to pry into his inner self. Men do such things from fear, and Clifford possessed the peculiar faculty of not fearing any one. He accepted Ransom as a rough, efficient ally, a man who would stick at nothing, who would accomplish everything, and whose partnership was invaluable. He had found Ransom to measure up to this standard, which was all he asked.

But now, as they sat at dinner in the shop sanctum, Clifford wondered a little. He had wakened to find the things in his pockets not just as he had left them; pipe and pouch were in different pockets, and the tobacco in the pouch, which he had kept flat, was teased out as if fingers had searched it. Yet, if Clifford now wondered, it was not from fear.

The meal was fetched in to them, Malay style. There were various curries, the bowls arranged on brass trays, with huge masses of rice. Clifford had learned the practical wisdom of eating native fashion —stirring the curry into the rice with the fingers, and lifting masses of it to the mouth in like manner. No stomach could handle the quantity of rice required to maintain life, were that rice eaten with a spoon and aerated. The fingers knead out the air, mould the rice into a compact ball containing no oxygen; and thus it can be taken care of by nature very readily.

"Li Kim will be here soon," said Ransom. "He has to finish up a few accounts. I brought him up some stuff myself. It'll pretty near clear expenses for us."

Clifford looked at the boxes on the floor, then at Ransom. His eyes were clear, direct, striking out as always like a flash of steel.

"I've warned you often," he said quietly. "We can't afford to mix drinks."

"Nonsense!"

Ransom leaned back, laughed, reached for a cheroot and bit at it. His hard square face was good humored, his dark eyes were half mocking.

"You're no old maid. You've done a bit of smuggling, a bit of pirating—more'n I know of, perhaps. But you've let out enough things to show me. Nobody's going to suspect a white man of running a bit of mud."

"That's just it," said Clifford, drinking his tea and getting out his pipe and pouch. "You aren't suspected; white men regard your caste as their own. You should live up to it. As to what I've done in the past,

that's in the past. What concerns me now, is that what I do is legal. Our present job—it's perfectly legal. The pearls were bought, paid for and I'm delivering them."

"Sure you're not tempted?" said Ransom, with a laugh. But his eyes did not laugh.

"Ransom, if you were trusted to the extent I'm trusted in this matter, on your bare word alone, there could be no temptation," said Clifford. "Now, look at these little boxes. Don't you realize what they mean? That you've gone back on me, betrayed me."

"Oh, hell!" exclaimed Ransom with scorn. "You know—"

"I know, yes," broke in Clifford, quiet, implacable, unbending as steel. "You may take chances; I can not. You're tied up with the White Lotus Society, and they've got you to bring this stuff. I've told you I can't stand in with you if you continue to be in with that gang of yellow crooks. You know what the Singapore police would—"

"By the lord Harry!" cried out Ransom, sudden passion darkening his face. "What are you prating for? Haven't you ever done anything crooked? And those chinks are square."

"All right." Clifford made a little gesture; hand and eyes and voice all spoke just one thing—decision. "No need to argue it. We part company at Singapore."

Ransom was shocked and stared hard at him, incredulous.

"You mean it, you mean it, Clifford?"

"Absolutely. Why not? We'll each have a good stake. We can afford to part."

Ransom knew his man too well to attempt argument; he could no more shake one of Clifford's quiet decisions than butt down the stone mosque across the street with his bare head. He grimaced and held a match to his cheroot.

"All right. I'm sorry, that's all. There's old Li now, I expect."

Li Kim it was, a feeble, stringy old man, strong with the sweetish roast coffee odor of the opium smoker. Li staggered weakly into the room, saluted his two guests with an air of unspeakable misery that was even past any courtesy and collapsed upon a teapoy.

"I received your message," he said to Ransom, in a falsetto voice but excellent English. "We finish our accounts; I can not let my *comprador* go into it. I am a sick man."

"You'll be all right in the morning," said Ransom. "This is a friend of mine, Li, so we can speak before him."

"Very good," said Li, and took up his brush without looking at Clifford. "I shall finish and pay you and go home to die in peace."

A Straits Chinese, quite evidently, and English school bred, or he would never have thus spoken of dying. None too fine a character, else he would not have been here in Kuala Bekut, an outlying member of the infamous White Lotus Society, as choice a collection of thieves and crooks as could be found in the East. Clifford sat watching the old man; as far as Ransom was concerned, his decision was reached, announced, and the matter was ended. Ransom, however, was by no means over it, as his reflective scowl betrayed.

"When one is sick," said old Li, without looking up or ceasing to trace his 'grass writing' characters, "one hears the birds chirping in the thatch. There is some talk about a man who came here today from Tambelang. It is no concern of mine what these brown sons of turtles say or do, but if that man were here, I think it would be an excellent thing for him to depart from Kuala Bekut speedily."

"He awaits the tide," said Ransom briefly.

Li Kim said no more, but finished his accounts, wrote out a check on a Singapore bank and handed it to Ransom. The latter nodded and pocketed it, and Li Kim rose.

"You will excuse a sick man, my friends," he said. "The shop is closed, but a man waits to be at your service and let you out when you depart. You will not go by the front way."

Alone again, Ransom gave Clifford one significant look.

"There y'are," he observed. "For all your talk about the White Lotus, partner, you know why he gave us that warning? Because I came to him from his friends, and because you're a friend of mine. And believe me, we're not leaving a minute too soon!"

"Exactly," said Clifford. "The warning was not needed, and I don't choose to be under any obligation to the White Lotus gang. We've an hour or more to wait, so I'd better show you about the Four Black Moons. If anything happens to me, you carry on and deliver 'em and collect. You know where?"

Ransom nodded silently, a gleam darting into his eyes at Clifford's words.

Clifford moved the smelly kerosene lamp closer, picked up a teapoy and set it down before him and took out his watch. An expression of amazement, almost ludicrous, came for one instant on the face of Ransom; and Clifford caught it.

Smiling a little, Clifford held up the big gold watch, glanced at the curtain across the doorway, then pressed the spring. The front of the hunting case flew open, and Clifford looked at the face of the watch.

"Must have stopped," he observed.

He closed the front of the watch and pried with his thumbnail at the reverse side. In a moment this came open, to reveal, not the usual inner case, not even the works of a watch, but instead, a fluffy mass of cotton. He plucked out the top layer of this, then released the watch from its chain and laid it down, open, on the stool.

"Not a bad idea," he said dryly. "I've used it a few times before this—never for anything half so worth while, though."

Ransom caught his breath, leaned forward, stared down at the stool with a queer wild greed in his powerful features. Circled by the gold, four round objects showed against the white cotton. They were almost of a size, and all four were of the same indescribable hue, a luminous gray verging upon a *clair-de-lune*. Four huge, perfect, magnificent pearls, any one of which would have beautifully graced the throat of an empress.

"By the lord Harry!" exclaimed Ransom, in a low, thrilled voice that rang upon the silence strangely. "So that's the ticket, is it?"

"That's it," said Clifford quietly, watching the man's face, not the pearls. "The Four Black Moons. Hard to set any particular value on this old watch of mine—just now, say a hundred thousand pounds, or fifty thousand, or what you like. And they're perfect as the day they came out of the shell."

Ransom put out a finger gingerly and touched the four pearls one by one. He saw no beauty in them; he saw only what they represented in pounds sterling.

"By the lord!" he murmured. "The Four Black Moons!"

"Well, you'll know where they are if I get done in," said Clifford calmly and, replacing the layer of cotton, he shut up the watch, snapped on the chain and pocketed it again.

Beads of sweat were standing out on Ransom's forehead in the lamplight.

IV

HIS FEET washed and lightly bandaged, new soft socks and the heavy boots protecting them, Clifford could walk well enough; he would have walked well enough in any case, despite the pain. He was that sort. At Ransom's side in the moonlight, his step was quick and lithe as ever.

They passed in silence down the street, each of them on the alert, Ransom with his hand on the pistol in his pocket. Clifford had no weapon, but Ransom had another pistol for him aboard the *Muk Gow*. Nothing happened; no one paid the two white *tuans* any attention at all, though they kept the middle of the road.

Plunging into the thick foliage of the Malay village, they came to the godowns without incident. A constable straightened up with a salute; Ransom called out, and a voice floated back to him. The

boat was awaiting them in the shadows of the piles.

"Huh! Too good to be true," said Ransom, as they stepped in. "That you, *serang?* What's the news?"

"The news is good, *tuan,*" responded the figure at the helm. It was the conventional Malay greeting, and meant nothing. "We sail in half an hour. The crew are aboard."

The boat slipped out into the moonlight, with a *slap-slap* of water under her bow. The islands ahead loomed like a solid, impenetrable mass; the river was empty, desolate. The mass opened up. The boat slid gradually in among the islands and presently came into sight the riding lights of the *Muk Gow.*

Ransom relaxed his tension and Clifford smiled a little—he too had been tensed, expectant, looking for some craft that might waylay them.

"The things we worry over never happen," he said softly to Ransom. "The wise man is ready for the unexpected."

"Sounds too damned Chinese," grunted Ransom. "I bet you're ready for a real turn in!"

"You win," said Clifford, and yawned.

So they drew in under the dark side of the *Muk Gow* and were presently on her deck, the figures of brown men in *sarongs* flitting all about. Except for the Chinese steward, the cook, and the *chin-chu,* or supercargo, every soul aboard was Malay, many being of Sumatran blood, as the sparse, wiry chin beards bore witness. The skipper was shrilling out orders from the bridge, and Ransom took Clifford in tow, leading him to the row of officers' cabins directly under the bridge.

"This tinpot was built before passengers were invented," he said. "However, there's plenty of room and to spare; we have adjoining cabins. What d'ye lack in the way of clothes? Pajamas? Razor? Slippers?"

"If you've a spare suit of pajamas I'll be glad," said Clifford. "Also my gun. The rest can wait till morning."

"Well, we're safe enough now, at any rate. Here's your den, partner."

He opened the double doors of a cabin adjoining his own and switched on the light. The cabin was fairly clean, very bare and small. Ransom went on to his own quarters and in a moment came back with a fresh suit of pajamas over his arm, and an automatic pistol.

"Gun and nightie," he said, with a laugh, and laid them down. "What about a drink before turning in? I've some prime Scotch and Three Star in my bag."

"Before dinner, not after, thanks," returned Clifford, who was already removing his dusty garments. "Save my share for tomorrow."

Ransom nodded and looked with the same wonder he had always felt at the clean, wiry, almost delicate torso of Clifford—no bulging muscle, no hairy mat, the skin fine and white as a woman's. The two men said good night and parted.

"Sixty miles in a day, and always doin' that sort of thing!" muttered Ransom, as he went into his own cabin. "Regular hellion in a scrap, got a whip of a brain; army officer, lord knows what all. And look at him! Well, one thing sure, he's got the Four Black Moons right in his pocket."

RANSOM got out a bottle, poured a drink, lighted a cheroot and looked at the wall with moody, smoldering gaze. He was well aware what sort of message had come down from the hills to Kuala Bekut. He knew it must have reached some or all of the Malays aboard. The rajah had sold the Four Black Moons; that much was settled. What remained unsettled was the point of honor, the shame brought upon Tambelang by the white man, the infidel. Recovery of the pearls was no longer sought; it was taken for granted that they were gone. Just as Sui Wen had been punished, so Clifford would be punished. Probably there was a reward already promised for his blood.

As he considered these things Ransom's eyes took on a calculating, glittering expression and his teeth gripped the cheroot hard.

"Why not?" he murmured. "He's kicked me out proper for nothing at all. High handed pirate, that's what he is, prating about a bit o' smuggling when lord knows he's stuck at nothing half his life! Got some money now and feels too good for his pals, that's about the ticket."

He poured another drink and sat in moody silence, his eyes darkling with somber thoughts. Presently he rose and looked out. The engines had been throbbing for some time; from the porthole he saw the glitter of moonlight on open sea. The *Muk Gow* had left the river mouth and was on her way south.

Moonlight suggested to Ransom's mind those four softly glinting globules of ashy gray, the Four Black Moons. Why not, indeed? There was no record of Clifford's presence aboard the coaster. Ransom himself could leave her at any port down the peninsula. If he had the pearls, he certainly would not go to Singapore, where Sui Wen's firm was powerful; no, better to skip out, get north to Saigon, and from there over to Manila—with money instead of pearls. The sale would be quick and for cash down in Saigon, where Frenchmen asked no questions.

With a deft toss Ransom finished his drink and then got into pajamas and slippers. He went out into the passage, came to Clifford's door, tried it gently. As he had expected, it was locked on the inside. His wide, thin lips curving in a smile, Ransom went on and sought the bridge. He found the Malay skipper there.

For a long while the two men, large white man, small brown man, stood in the moonlight at the port side of the bridge, but their voices could not reach the man at the wheel. Then Ransom grunted an assent and went below for the night, and the *Muk Gow* slid on out into the moonlit China Sea.

Morning found the coast a dim blue line of mountains off to starboard. Clifford came out on deck, met Ransom, and the two men stood in the forward well deck while Malays flung buckets of water over them. During these morning ablutions, however, Clifford kept his pajama coat close to hand—so close that it was splashed and wetted by the flung water, and something heavy in the pocket showed black and ominous through the thin cloth. Ransom, towering beside him, hairy body thick muscled, looked as if he could break the slender, lithe figure of Clifford with one hand.

The two breakfasted with the skipper, who was served separately as became the tenets of his religion. Clifford was very cheerful, and his jokes soon had the brown man laughing heartily; but Ransom said little until the meal was over.

Abaft the bridge a tattered awning had been spread. Clifford stretched out in a long Singapore chair and filled his pipe leisurely, while Ransom chewed at a whitish Dutch cheroot and scowled at the horizon. Clifford broke the silence.

"You know, Ransom, I'm no fool."

"Huh?" Ransom turned to him, met the warming smile, met the straight, level look of the clear eyes. "What d'ye mean by that?"

"I mean," responded Clifford deliberately, as he tamped down his pipe and got out a match, "that I know you pretty well, old man. You're apt to fly off at tangents. You've had a hard time of it, and a little money looks big to you. Get that out of your head; money won't do half for you that a clean brain will."

"By the lord!" exclaimed Ransom. "Sermonizing, huh? Where'd you learn so much?"

"Experience," said Clifford with a smile. His features looked thin and high boned in the sunlight reflected from the deck. "I was thinking about us—and these Malays. We're not in the clear—not until we set foot ashore at Singapore. If they did me in, then they'd go for you too, in order to clean the slate, wipe out both infidels at one crack. So be careful, old man."

Ransom nodded and let it go at that. He was not sure what to make of this warning, not at all sure what it meant. Clifford said queer things at times. After a little Ransom got up and went

below. He encountered the Chinese steward in the passage.

"At tiffin," he said curtly. "The fish curry. You understand?"

The steward assented.

V

NOON passed. Clifford and Ransom waited until the skipper had finished his noon sights and calculations, for he was a navigator after a fashion. Then they left the awning shade and went below to mess.

The three of them sat at the table, Clifford near the door, Ransom opposite, the brown man at the head. The steward brought in the various dishes, curries for the most part, with heaped plates of rice, with tea and bread and whatnot. The skipper talked of a brown lady who awaited him at Singapore, and Ransom swung him into a discussion of Siamese ports, and there were stories.

Clifford said little. For an hour past he had been conscious of a rather singular affability in Ransom; something about the man struck him as not natural. The skipper was entirely natural, but his eyes flitted in queer sharp looks. So with the steward, so with the brown men he had passed on deck. Clifford wondered at himself, thought perhaps he was still under a strain and liable to delusion. Yet he had the feeling, potent despite its vagueness, that always came to him at times of crisis, and that had many a time pulled him through; a feeling as if he were trapped, a feeling of suspense, of something about to happen—and swiftly.

The fish curry between him and Ransom was appetizing. He helped himself liberally and pushed over the dish, for this was Ransom's favorite curry. Ransom grunted, already occupied in mixing rice with prawn curry, and ignored the dish, went on talking with the skipper about Siamese ports. Clifford gave him a sharp glance, then with a lift of his brows dipped his fingers in the rice and went about his meal.

Presently he caught a keen sidelong look from the Malay skipper, not at him, but at the fish curry. Again the odd quick sixth sense arose in him; this time warning him most definitely, as though with some mute agonized appeal. Could this dish, so hotly seasoned, be set down here for him? . . .

"Back in a minute," said Clifford calmly, and rose. As he passed out to the deck, Kasap looked after him, narrow eyed; Ransom's stare followed him inquiringly.

Clifford was only two minutes in reaching his cabin, but these two minutes had all the protracted extension of imagination that comes to a drowning man; they seemed an hour. He remembered half a dozen little things, looks, words, actions on the part of Ransom. Half the Malay crew flashed before his mind's eye, their glances at him, their dish faced meekness, their possibilities. His own position loomed appallingly before him—alone here on this ship. For he was alone. He felt it intangibly yet definitely. He could no longer depend on Ransom.

Thus, when he reached his cabin, he did not hesitate at all. It was as though he knew positively that the curry had been poisoned for him. Any sort of drug might have been mixed with that curry. Native drugs were many. There was the Chinese steward, too. He or the cook might be members of the White Lotus, and at a word from Ransom they would not hesitate to arrange so slight a matter.

Too late. Clifford felt the premonitory symptoms even before he had cleared his stomach, felt the sharp darting pains that nearly paralyzed him. His limbs were turned to lead; sense of touch, of feeling, slowly deserted his extremities. They must have used *datura* or some such swift and deadly drug.

Lie down he would not. He threw his pistol on the bunk and got out of his jacket. His fingers were almost useless, as if a tourniquet had gripped them, keeping all the blood from circulating. Clifford forgot everything now except the fight for life; forgot Ransom, Kasap, the crew. He forced himself to stumble up

and down the cabin, drank quantities of water, washed his stomach repeatedly. He had no idea of the lapse of time or of anything else around. When his legs could scarce support him, he leaned against the wall, swung his arms, tried to keep the blood circulating.

Little by little, so imperceptibly as at first to seem delusion, the pains passed and his hands and feet began to regain normality. Then, even in his first exultation, came weakness, a mortal weakness. It would not last, he knew, yet here it was, the strength ebbing out of his whole body. He sank down on the edge of his bunk, trembling as with fever, then recollected the brandy in Ransom's cabin.

Somehow he got to the door, turned into the passage, found Ransom's cabin unlocked. He staggered in and saw the brandy bottle in the rack above the wash basin. He seized on the bottle and took a long swig of the fiery stuff. It left him coughing, yet sent fire through his veins, pulled him together.

" —in there," said Ransom's voice, in Malay. "Coughing, been sick. Now's the time to do him in."

Clifford laughed a little. Queer that this touch of slang should be the same in Malay and English. He was still laughing as Kasap slid into the cabin, knife in hand, and hurled forward in one wild, savage leap. Clifford, still holding the brandy bottle, acted without conscious volition, by sheer instinct. He twisted aside to evade the knife, yet could not evade it, and he felt the stinging wrench of the steel in his flesh. There was a thudding crash. The bottle smashed in his hand. Kasap stopped short and rocked ludicrously on his feet. His brown skull was shaven, except for the one lock by which he would be eventually jerked to the Paradise of True Believers; and over this shaven skull darted brandy and red streaks of blood. Flesh and bone had caved in under the blow of the heavy glass bottle, and Kasap pitched over sidewise and lay quiet. The reddened knife was still in his hand.

CLIFFORD, blood spreading over his shirt, did not see Ransom at all. Ransom's heavy fist cracked against his jaw and knocked him headlong, sprawling. He lay on his back, eyes closed, and Ransom rubbed his knuckles as he stared down.

"Ugh! Ugly mess, all right," muttered Ransom. A soft shuffle of feet from the passage caught his ear. He swung around, went to the door, found the steward peering in. "Get out!" commanded Ransom. "All of you, get out and stay out of here!"

He slammed the door, but knew the steward had seen and would report what lay within the cabin. Ransom turned and looked at the prostrate figures. He needed no second look to see that the skipper was dead. He stood over Clifford a minute.

"Kasap didn't sink the knife in him, but got him all the same," he muttered, with a nod of satisfaction. "So you will throw me out for nothing, huh? You're fixed, my fine gentleman. And blasted near fooled us all, at that. How the devil you suspected that curry, I can't see, but the combination got you. Blasted good thing you ain't quite dead, and it was Kasap done it and you done for him—that lets me out all down the line. Now we'll have witnesses and so forth, all shipshape. But first off we'll make sure o' that watch."

He deftly removed watch and chain; Clifford carried them in a watch pocket at his belt. Ransom shoved the watch into his own pocket, then went to the door. As he anticipated, at the end of the passage stood the steward and one of the brown mates. Ransom beckoned them.

"Come along," he said. "Cap'n Kasap found Tuan Clifford drinking in my room and went at him with a knife. Did him in. Tuan Clifford killed the captain. Enter things up on the log, understand? Have Tuan Clifford carried to his cabin—here, I'll do it. Change the course; head in for Kuala Pahang and report this to the authorities."

"Yes, *tuan*, that were best," said the brown mate.

Others came; there were witnesses in plenty. They all seemed more interested in Clifford than in the dead skipper. Their eyes flitted to Ransom in a way the latter did not like, and he hurriedly stooped, gathered up the body of Clifford in his arms easily enough.

"Out of the way! I'll soon see if he's dead or not."

They let him pass. He entered Clifford's cabin. Clifford's white jacket was thrown on the bunk, covering the pistol there. Ransom laid down his burden on the bunk, then made a swift examination. To his unspeakable disgust, Clifford was not dead at all, was not even in danger of death; the knife had gashed him across the ribs, scarcely doing more than slitting the skin.

"By the lord Harry, what blasted luck!" said Ransom, straightening up.

He scowled at the white and red figure. Finish it he could not; such work was a bit too stiff for him, too cold blooded and deliberate. But it must be finished, and at once. The blame of the second knife thrust would fall on the dead skipper. It must be done before Clifford wakened too.

With a sullen oath, Ransom went out and slammed the inner door after him. In his own cabin he found only the steward cleaning up; the body of Kasap had been removed. This was no work for the yellow man. Ransom ignored him, poured a stiff drink from his remaining stock and then went out and sought the bridge.

There he found the *serang* and first officer talking, the second mate having the deck. Down below in the forward well deck the crew were clustered in an excited knot. Ransom nodded to the officers and beckoned the *serang*—a tall Sumatran, with ragged wisps of stubbly beard, his torso marked by white patches.

"Come outside," he said, and the *serang* followed him to the break of the bridge. Ransom turned. "He is not dead. Kasap did not do good work. It must be finished, so all men will think Kasap struck twice. Go!"

The *serang* grinned and touched the *kris* at his belt.

"*Ya Allah, tuan!* Here is a *kris melela*, a royal knife with ridged blade, and seven times has it drunk blood and never failed."

So the *serang* went below, and Ransom crossed to the officers.

"Enter this up in the log, if you keep one," he commanded sharply. "Have it signed by the witnesses. Tuan Clifford is dead. He was stabbed twice by Captain Kasap. I will sign also. There must be no mistake, for questions will be asked by the magistrate."

"Such is the business of magistrates, *tuan*," said the first officer, and smiled. His eyes went to the *serang* descending the ladder and came back to Ransom. "Twice he was struck, you say? That is well. I shall myself verify the fact—presently, when the *serang* has returned. We will have the statement ready after a little."

Ransom knew that the *serang's* errand was guessed by the others. He turned away, for sweat was thick on his brow and neck, and lighted a cigaret.

He passed on abaft the superstructure to the chairs beneath the awning. As he sank into one of them he noted with satisfaction that no time had been lost in changing the course. The *Muk Gow* was no longer heading south, but now was pointing about west by south, evidently making for Pahang. Ahead of her the blue mountains were rising high into the heavens.

With a sigh Ransom relaxed in his chair and fingered his watch pocket. He glanced around. No men were at work here and, as his chair was almost against the superstructure, he was out of sight of any in the pilot house or on the bridge. Yes, it was safe enough to have a look here, far safer than below in his own cabin —just now. And he was hungry to get the Four Black Moons out into the sunlight, to see them and touch them here in all their glory. That one glance under the kerosense lamp had been enough to fire his blood. What must they be like by daylight, glinting with splendor unutterable?

He got out the watch, his fingers shaking a little. Cleverly arranged, this watch, weighted cunningly, so that the absence of works would never be suspected. He fumbled at it with his thumb, and pried the back lid open, shielding the watch in his hands.

Ransom stared blankly down at the thing he held, poked at it with one finger, sat like a man paralyzed. The cotton was there, yes—but the Four Black Moons were not there at all.

VI

IT IS odd how a remark, how a pause of a fractional moment, how a laughing look may change the course of lives. The *serang* had paused to touch his *kris*, to speak of it, to boast that it never failed. Perhaps just this little pause had changed everything.

Clifford came awake all at once, conscious of sharp pain that had roused him. He lay on something hard, which hurt his gashed side cruelly. Realizing immediately where he was, knowing he must have been laid here temporarily, he did not pause to reconstruct what might have taken place. The swallow or two of brandy had brought him to himself. The deadly weakness had vanished. True, he was by no means recovered, but—

He twisted around, got a hand beneath him and brought out the pistol. The feel of it gave him new life. He lifted his feet from the bunk and sat up, conscious now for the first time of a bruised jaw. What had hit him? Ransom, of course. He remembered hearing Ransom's voice outside the cabin, remembered the words clearly.

A soft *sluff-sluff* of naked feet and the *serang* slipped quickly into the cabin, naked *kris* in hand. He halted abruptly, looking into Clifford's pistol, caught beyond escape.

"Drop your knife and go into the other corner there," snapped Clifford. "Call out and I'll shoot."

The *serang* took no chances. He could not beat a bullet out of here; hurry and lack of caution had trapped him. He opened his hand and the *kris melela*, the ridged kris with its brass inlay, clanged slightly on the deck. He went on into the far corner indicated by Clifford and there was no fight in him.

"I came to see Tuan—" he began.

"*Diam!* Silence!" said Clifford, and rose stiffly. Going to the door, he shut it and slid the bolt, not taking his eyes from the *serang*. "Who sent you here? No lies!"

"Tuan Ransom sent me, *tuan*," came the reply, "to see if you were awake yet."

"I said no lies," said Clifford. "Turn your back and put your hands behind you."

The Malay obeyed. Clifford laid by his pistol, picked up the flame bladed knife and jabbed at his bed sheet. In five minutes the Malay was securely trussed with strips of cotton.

"Now, call out if you wish, and I shall kill you," said Clifford. He felt for his watch, and laughed grimly to find it gone. "Tell me one thing, and I spare your life. There is blood money on my head? Is that why the captain tried to kill me?"

"Yes, *tuan*," said the *serang* submissively. "Word came from Tambelang."

"Good. Be silent."

Clifford considered very swiftly. He knew Ransom, he knew the native character, he knew his own plight. If he remained here in this cabin he was a lost man. Ransom would come to see if he had been finished, or others would come, and all too quickly. His one chance, and slender enough at that, was to strike first. His sole hope to remain alive was to master the *Muk Gow*, and he had odds of a hundred to one against him. He was dealing with a pack of mad dogs now; every thought of law, of right or wrong, of after results, must go overboard, if he were to live.

"I'll live!" he muttered, and a thin smile touched his lips.

He got into his jacket, at cost of much pain to his stiff side, and buttoned it trimly. Then he caught up his pistol, opened the door, looked out. The passage was empty. Clifford slipped out, auto-

matic in hand. He looked entirely himself again, for the jacket covered his blood soaked side; and the crisis, with its nervous energy, had brought color and life into his face.

He knew better than to make for the bridge by the forward ladders. That way he would be seen; otherwise, he had a chance to gain the bridge unseen and strike hard. Not hesitating, he turned quickly aft, his stockinged feet making no noise, and ran along the port passage. No one was in sight.

The after ladder now, going up to the bridge deck. He paused, looking down across the after well deck. A single figure was in sight there, that of the steward going aft to the galley. Clifford waited until the yellow man had disappeared, then he turned and went up the steel ladder swiftly. Next instant he was on the bridge deck. It was empty.

Ahead of him were the boats on either side, the stretched awning, the empty chairs. He broke into a run again. If they did not see him from the bridge, he might make it. And make it he did, though at a cost. The pain of his side stifled him, and the effect of the brandy was wearing off fast, so that, when he came around to the ladder on the starboard side, going up the short distance to the bridge, he was more than a bit shaky.

At this exact moment Ransom was down below, seeking the *serang*, and finding him.

THE MATE was on the bridge and a Malay was at the wheel, for the old *Muk Gow* far antedated any steam stearing gear. The mate, who had served aboard the yachts of two sultans in his day, had the only pistol in the crew. He was standing beside the wheel, looking at the coast mountains through a pair of binoculars, when a startled cluck from the steersman made him turn. The figure of Clifford was at the top of the ladder, hand and pistol hidden from sight by the starboard corner of the bridge apron.

The mate made the supreme mistake of jerking out his pistol and trying to use it.

Clifford was on the bridge before the mate's pistol was more than out. To the sharp blasting report, the mate jerked around and fell out through the open port door of the pilot house. The weapon whipped out of his hand as his body was halted at the top of the port ladder and it fell out of sight to the deck below.

The man at the wheel felt the searing whine of the bullet past his head and cringed as Clifford stepped in upon him. He made no protest as Clifford took the *kris* from his side. One glance showed Clifford their course, and he understood Ransom's plan perfectly. He had already guessed that Ransom was behind the change of course.

"For what port are you heading?" he asked the frightened Malay.

"For Kuala Pahang, *tuan*."

"Good. Break out a British flag from the locker and hoist it ensign down. Swiftly!"

Startled cries from below apprised him that there was no time to waste, but the lascar was wasting none. Clifford accompanied him outside, watched him in grim silence as he bent on the bunting and ran it up. Clifford was also watching the bridge ladders, and the next instant he saw two Malays come crowding up the port ladder. His pistol flicked up and the shot cracked out. One of the brown men fell backward, the other slipped back down with a yell of fear.

"Come here!" Clifford's voice brought the Malay helmsman back from the halyards. "Go below. Tell those in the engine room what has happened. I control the ship. Tell them that if steam falls off or the engines are stopped, I shall come down there and shoot. You understand? Then go."

The man scurried away in all haste.

Now through all the *Muk Gow* ran the soft padding of naked brown feet and the shrill voices of men; presently these sounds of tumult quieted, as hurried hearts took counsel together and gained of boldness from one another. Malays are ever strong when supported by agreed plans. It is

only under the influence of *lateh*, the nervous sickness, that one becomes individually bold unto all things. So the ship fell somewhat silent, but the engines were not stopped, for those below had received Clifford's message; and while the outcome might rest with Allah, they were not anxious to provoke destiny in the least.

Clifford slipped a loop over a helm spoke, thus keeping the ship more or less upon her course. He got a chair from the pilot house and moved it out to the front of the bridge, and was from this position able to command the entire bridge, though he could not command the starboard ladder where lay the dead mate, or the after portion of the bridge itself. He sat there in the sunlight with the pistol balanced on his knee, and the warm sun and crisp salt wind heartened him. Presently he took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, teased a little tobacco in his palm and began to fill his pipe, carefully and evenly, as a pipe should be filled.

"Clifford!" The voice of Ransom lifted up to him vehemently. "You up there?"

"Aye," returned Clifford briefly.

"I'm coming up. Alone."

"Aye. Take the port side."

Clifford sat motionless in the deck corner, hand ready poised to use his weapon. Ransom came up the ladder quickly and, being all a-stare at the wheel house, did not see Clifford until the latter spoke.

"I'm here."

"Oh!"

With the word Ransom swung around, startled, and for a long moment stared at Clifford in silence. His heavy, square features were mottled purple and pink with excitement, his eyes were alive, sweat streamed unheeded down his cheeks. Then he blurted out abrupt and hasty words.

"Listen—there's hell to pay down there! They got the mate's gun. *Serang* is running the show, him and the second officer. Whipping up the religious stuff—kill the infidels and all that. The whole gang will be swarming around here in no time."

Clifford's eyes struck out at him, calm, steely, clear. In the rather thin, harshly cut features was no trace of any feeling or emotion whatever.

"Let 'em," said Clifford quietly. "Sent you up to bargain, did they?"

"No," said Ransom, flushing more deeply. "Listen, you hand over them pearls, Clifford. Then I'll stick with you. My gun and yours—we'll hold 'em—"

His words trailed off, for Clifford sat there smiling at him.

"Didn't find the pearls in the watch, eh?" said Clifford pleasantly. "So now you're not so anxious to see me done in—before you learn where they are. Come, come, old chap. I told you that it was dangerous to go off on tangents. Run along below before the fuss starts."

Ransom flushed deeper and deeper. He had come prepared for trouble, ready for it, but he had not expected this sort of treatment from the man he had betrayed. It staggered him, this cool absence of rancor, this quiet advice to get out of harm's way.

"By the lord Harry!" he exclaimed of a sudden. "And you take it like this? Listen! They're going to finish you. They know you're hurt. They know you'll get three or four, but it don't worry 'em. When they get worked up to the right pitch—and they got some *bhang* and are smoking it to help along—they'll come on the jump. It won't be long, either."

Clifford shrugged lightly and carefully tamped his pipe and placed it between his teeth, a pipeful he was destined never to light.

"You coming with 'em?" he inquired.

"Blast it, no," cried Ransom angrily.

"All you want is the pearls, eh? You don't get 'em," said Clifford. "I'm not buying you, old man. Go on down and lock yourself in. You'll pull through safe enough. I learned quite a bit ago that you'd gone back on the deal, so I shan't turn over the pearls to you at all. You'd skip with them. That's why you're heading for Kuala Pahang. If I go, then the Four Black Moons go with me and won't

be found, ever! The chinks will know I'm straight enough, if I'm dead."

"Huh!" Ransom stared at him. "Wonder you don't lift your gun and use it on me."

Clifford's brows went up a little.

"So? You can't help your nature, Ransom. No, I'm not anxious to drill you. No use calling names, either. Come with 'em and I'll drill you quick enough first one, but it'd be rather silly of you. The pearls are gone. You've nothing to win."

"Gone?" said Ransom, starting. "By the lord, I believe you flung 'em overboard!"

"Nobody else is going to get 'em, that's sure," said Clifford calmly. His quiet poise was like an icy hand on Ransom's fever heat.

"*Ya Allah!*"

One wild, shrill, fierce yell came spouting up from somewhere below. Ransom swung his head around, listening. Clifford did not move.

"Hear that?" said Ransom, wrinkling up his flushed features. "They're about ready. And they'll come in a flood, I can tell you. Got half the black gang with 'em. My lord! To think of you takin' it like this, Clifford! But that's you all over. I might have known it."

"Sure," agreed Clifford calmly. "Better get on down. There's another yell. Go down and lock yourself in, old man. They'll be pretty sick of fighting when they get through with me. I've a gun and a *kris*. They won't want to tackle you. Besides, the blood money is on my head. You'll be safe enough once they cool down."

Slowly it was borne in upon Ransom that the man sitting here, the man with whom he had companioned and fought these many months, the man whom he had betrayed and sought to rob, meant exactly what he said to the very letter. Clifford knew that he could not hope to beat back a determined rush alone with a gun half empty. The man was simply sitting here waiting for the end, determined to see it through, to go down fighting. And the pearls had no doubt gone overboard long since. That would be like Clifford, too. They would never get any advantage out of him.

"To hell with you!" cried out Ransom, with sudden fierceness. He lifted one fist and shook it angrily. "To hell with you!"

"*Ya Allah!*" came a wilder, louder yell from below, like an echo. Clifford took the pipe from his mouth, dropped it into his pocket. His hand closed on the automatic.

"Get out," he said briefly. "They're coming. Get out, quick."

"To hell with you!" cried Ransom, his eyes very bright. "Better man than I am, are you? I'll show you! By the lord Harry!"

Feet pounded the deck plates and ladders, voices rang shrilly from port and starboard and from aft, a pealing shout to Allah that echoed through the ship. His oath unfinished, Ransom turned, jerked the pistol out of his pocket, lumbered across the bridge to the port rail. A brown figure leaped up before him, *kris* flaming in the sunlight, and went rolling to the sharp report of his pistol.

And now, in the hot sunlight, the old *Muk Gow* thrilled to the sounds of battle, to the shrieks of dying men, to the clang of flaming *krises* splitting the sunlight like birds and clashing on the plates, to the barking reports of automatics. The living tide of brown men shouted to Allah and flowed up on the bridge, over it, and hung poised for a space as a breaking wave hangs poised above a rock before shattering and falling back. But one of those brown men had the pistol of the dead mate and could use it.

VII

AT SUNSET that day the coast patrol *Natuna* came out of Kuala Pahang and drove down on the old coast tramp whose ensign showed upside down. Way fell off the *Muk Gow*. There was no sea running, and as the two craft slid alongside, sullen Malays lowered a gangway. A trim Englishman mounted, with

half a dozen seamen following him, to the steamer's deck, and he went on without pause to the bridge.

There he halted and tried very stiffly not to show any of his surprise at the scene of death which greeted him. The only living thing there was a slender man in whites who abandoned the wheel to come out and meet him, rather slowly.

"I say!" exclaimed the officer. "This is a bit—er—out of the way, what? Mutiny or piracy, sir? You're the skipper?"

Clifford looked at him and smiled a little.

"No. I'm a passenger," he said. "It's a native outfit all through. They thought my partner and I had some pearls, you see. Quite a mistake on their part. One thing and another went wrong. They failed to poison us and so they got rather ambitious. It was costly."

"Quite so, my word!" said the other, looking around the bridge and looking back to Clifford again. "Your partner, you say?"

Clifford gestured to port.

"He's there. They got him. They had a pistol. Poor Ransom! I want him taken care of, if you don't mind. And if you've a doctor, he might look me over. I got a stab or two in the back and thigh—managed to tie 'em up myself."

He took the pipe from his pocket and was holding it between his teeth. The officer, rather embarrassed, got out a match box.

"Light, sir?"

"Eh? Oh!" Clifford laughed, took the pipe from his mouth, pocketed it. "No, thanks, but I'd like a cigaret if you can spare one. Then we'll go into details—"

"Right-o," was the cheerful response, accompanied by a cigaret. "I say, you come along aboard us, and we'll take in this ruddy craft. Doctor and drink, what?"

"Right," assented Clifford, and pulled at the cigaret. He wondered what the officer would say to the information that the pipe in his pocket was stuffed, not only with tobacco, but with the Four Black Moons!

However, the fact never got into print—in Singapore.

A Story of the Amazon Jungle

THIS storm will continue all night, senhor, and well into tomorrow. So it is useless for me to leave camp.

I had intended to lurk near a certain hollow tree, where I might catch for you an *eiá*. But that owl eyed night monkey will not leave its snug nest while this wretched weather persists. Thus we must let it rest until it again stirs abroad.

And I am not grieved. In truth, I should shed no tears if that little animal entirely escaped me. Very well, senhor; frown at me if you will. I am your employee, and am paid to hunt down all Brazilian creatures which you believe worth sending to your museum in the North. And I shall try to get that *eiá*. But if he, or she, is nimble enough to elude me I shall not shoot as it runs to the high branches. Instead I shall wish it good luck.

Why? Well, listen to an old bushman's story.

Years ago I was floating down the Rio Jutahy, on my way to this vast river Amazon. I was in a canoe with my comrade Pedro, two empty rifles and almost nothing else. We had just escaped from gigantic savages who had robbed us and meant to torture us. And, though we had saved our lives and regained our liberty, we were in bad case—hurt, starved and lost. We could not know what lay ahead.

It was morning, dull and dreary. No rain fell, but the sky was thick and the air clammy. The river was in flood, dirty and dismal. The shores were dark with endless jungle, in which we saw never a house. We paddled slowly, watching for anything which might promise a meal, but finding not even a fruit tree. At every stroke we grew weaker from hunger; for we had eaten nothing for two nights and a day.

At length the river bore us into a long straight stretch. Halfway down this, on the right, rose a short but bold hill.

"That place looks interesting," said Pedro after a moment of gazing. "Let us land there and see what we can find."

"*Bom*. Good," I agreed.

And we paddled with more vigor. A hill, in flood time, is likely to be well populated by animals driven to the higher places by the rising water. This one, heavily forested, should hold much meat. And, though we had neither bullets nor matches, we might manage to kill some-

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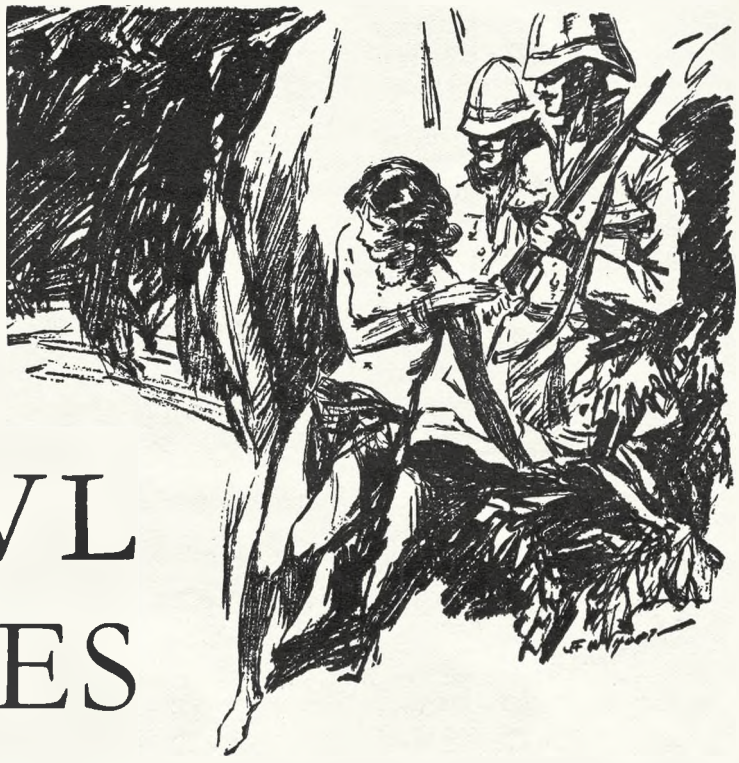


OWL EYES

thing and eat it. We had one knife and knew what to do with it; and we were so famished that we were willing to devour our food raw.

We went ashore quietly, tied the canoe and set about making a better weapon. With the knife I cut a long pole and some flexible but tough vines. Pedro bound the hilt firmly to the shaft with the bush cord. Thus we had a spear.

As we worked, we listened for sounds of life in the woods nearby—the rustle of leaves, the faint footfalls of some wary beast, the sniff of nostrils which had caught our scent. But we heard nothing. Not even the lofty boughs gave out any voice of bird or monkey. The place seemed deserted.

"Something must be living here," Pedro whispered. "Something which has killed all smaller beasts. A jaguar, perhaps, or a great serpent."

"I can eat either of them," I muttered. "*Vamos!*"

So, leaving our useless guns in the boat, we stole along the base of the hill, watching ground and tree trunks and branches.

At our left rose a steep slope, densely overgrown. At our right lay water, deep and dark, which did not disappear as we moved inland. By the time we were halfway around the hill we knew that it was an islet, lying in the mouth of a broad creek.

The jungle stream flowed smoothly out from the unknown *terra firme* at the east, met a face of rock on the isle, divided and slid away on each side to meet the river. And when we stepped on the stone we found two unexpected things—a canoe port at the water's edge, and a path leading up the hill.

The path was narrow but well worn. It ran straight for a few yards, then curved away to the right and vanished behind thick brush. We looked up it, found it empty; studied its near dirt and saw no fresh footprints. Then we glanced at the

port and at the trees beside it. One of them showed, around its butt, a chafed ring made by a rubbing rope.

After a wary look up the vacant creek we stepped to the tree and eyed the rub mark. It was a little dull. Several rains had beaten on it since the rope had last been loosed. We scraped the bark with our thumbnails, looked around again and then turned to the foot track.

Up the slope we went with scant caution. It was clear that whoever used that port had been gone for a number of days; and we expected to find only a hunters' camp, made by Indians who lived up the creek and who came down occasionally to hunt and fish. Although we were not likely to find anything fit to eat there now, we might pick up something else which would be useful. Indians often leave various things at a camp which they are accustomed to visit.

The path wormed along through the brush with slight swings but an easy grade. Soon we reached its top. There we halted, amazed.

"*Valhame Deus!*" muttered Pedro. "We are in luck!"

Before us was a small, but well kept, clearing. In its center was a neat little house of palm, with a wide veranda. Under that outer roof was a round clay fireplace. And from it floated thin smoke, which drifted away from us on a faint breeze blowing down the Jutahy.

The one door of the house was shut. We looked all around for the guardian of the fire, but found nobody. The veranda was empty, the clearing was vacant, the edge of the encircling woods was blank.

SAYING nothing, we sneaked toward the house. Ordinarily we should have given the usual call of greeting—"*O da casa!*"—and then advanced in friendly fashion. But now we were too desperate to be friendly. We went at the place like Indians creeping up to kill the owners; Pedro with lance raised, I with hands empty but ready for throttling, both with eyes fixed on the door. We had no reason to expect a cordial welcome from the man whose food we meant to eat. And, as our proverb has it, *a necessidade carece de lei*—necessity knows no law.

Reaching the door, we shoved it open. It yielded at once. We sprang through, then stopped, somewhat taken aback. A startled cry had sounded, and a small figure had jumped from a hammock to a corner. It was a woman.

A woman pale of skin, but not white. A woman of some light Indian tribe, wearing only a narrow *tanga* of blue cloth around the hips. She stood there against the walls, little hands pressed against them on either side, long black hair hanging over one shoulder, brown eyes wide with fright. Those eyes were so large, in truth, that for the moment we saw little else of her. They were as noticeable as dark pools in an isle of sand.

Nobody else was there. After one glance around I demanded:

"*Comida!* Something to eat!"

She stood in the same frozen position. But her eyes moved a little and her expression showed that she understood.

"Poor little thing!" murmured Pedro. "She is scared almost to death, and it is small wonder. We must look exceedingly tough just now. Keep that harsh voice of yours quiet, Lourenço, and let me handle the matter."

With that he smiled at her. I shut my mouth and waited. Pedro could make friends with any one if he tried, and especially with women; for he was tall, slender and handsome. I was what I am now—short and ugly, in looks and in speech.

The little woman looked at him, forgetting me, as women always did when they saw him clearly. And the stiffness went out of her body, the fear out of her great eyes. She did not return his smile. But her hands sank from the walls and she stood more easily.

"*Esfaimamos.* We are starving," he then explained. "Please feed us. We shall not harm you."

She watched him a little longer. Then her face brightened. And she spoke.

"*Bem,*" she said. "All right."

And she walked calmly toward us, passed us and went through the doorway toward the fireplace. We followed.

Reaching the clay cone, she picked up something which we had passed without seeing it—a large pot at the edge of the coals. She took new sticks of dry wood from a pile beside the stove, slid them into the embers and blew them to flame. Then she set the pot among them and squatted to watch the cooking.

We stood behind her a few minutes, waiting and watching. Then an appetizing smell came from the pot, and we forgot everything but our hunger. I grasped the cook by a shoulder, swung her aside and pulled the jar off the flame. After that we scooped out the food by the handful and gobbled it.

It was a sort of fish stew, thick and warm, and so full of nourishment that we could not eat all of it. At length we had to stop and look around us for water. We found it in a couple of bowls which the girl had brought and quietly set beside us. We drank, arose rather sluggishly and looked at her with more interest than before.

She was young and quite good looking. Her body was shapely, her hands and feet tiny. Her face was round, her mouth and nose and ears very small. Her brown eyes, on the other hand, were even larger than they had seemed in the house; much too large to harmonize with her features. Above them was an angular mark tattooed in the forehead—three narrow black stripes, starting from each brow and the bridge of the nose, which met in a peak at the edge of her hair.

Those lines, and the big eyes beneath them, reminded me vaguely of somebody or something I had seen somewhere else. At the moment, though, I could not remember just who or what that other creature might be. While I still stared at her, Pedro solved my puzzle.

"A perfect *eiá*," he muttered.

"*Por Deus*, you are right!" I agreed. "The rare little owl eyed night ape! She even has the three lines on the forehead, exactly like those of the monkey. And those eyes—"

I stopped, for those eyes had become distrustful. My gruff voice was not to her liking.

"And the same sensitive and gentle disposition, if I am not wrong," he added. With that he smiled again at her and gave thanks for our food.

"*Graças*," he said. "It was very good."

Her face brightened in answer to his pleasant look, but she seemed not to understand his words. After watching her a minute he asked, speaking slowly—

"You do not comprehend Portuguese well?"

"*Pouco*," she replied. "Only a little."

"I see," he said. "And nobody ever thanked you before, or told you anything was good, so you do not know those words."

Then, changing to the Tupí language which is known to most of the Indians of our Amazon, he asked:

"*Tupí akuan tchirah?* Do you understand Tupí?"

"*Akuan!*" she answered, with a quick smile. "Yes!"

"That is good," he said. "Have no fear; we are friends. How many live here?"

Her smile disappeared. She looked toward the path and up at the sunless sky, as if wondering what time it might be. When she gazed again at us her expression was anxious.

"Have you a canoe?" she asked.

"*Arekoh*," he told her. "We have."

"Go now!" she advised.

"*Anihahoh apotare*," he refused. "*Hembara ahreteh*. We will not go yet. We are tired. What bothers you?"

"I am afraid," she confessed.

"Of us?"

"No."

She turned her face toward the down-river side of the island. She could see nothing, nor could we, except the high forest surrounding the place. But it was clear that she expected something from that direction.

I thought of our canoe, lying at the riverside with its paddles ready to any hand. And said I:

"Pedro, I will move our boat. Meanwhile, use your time well."

With that I went straight toward the point where our *montaria* should be, intending to go down through the woods without traveling the roundabout route of the path and the shore. But I soon found myself on another track. It was as narrow as the one leading to the creek, and not noticeable until my feet were on it. Then it led me to a flat topped cliff, from which I could see for a long way up the Jutahy.

Below this stone lay dead trees, cut down years before to open the view. I looked at them, and up the river, and down again at the base of the crag, and back at the path, which was well worn. And said I to myself:

"Somebody here is not at all willing to be found. And he is no Indian. With all that jungle yonder to hide in, no Indian would do all this work."

Then I went back far enough to find firm footing on the steep hillside and descended to the *montaria;* paddled it to the upper side of the isle, hid it among waterside bushes and returned to the clearing.

PEDRO and the little woman were gone from the fireplace. I found them in the house. Two hammocks now hung there, instead of the single one we had first seen. And the two young people sat in them, facing each other and talking in friendly fashion. At sight of me, however, the girl fell silent and my partner frowned.

"You work too fast," he grumbled.

"You work too slowly," was my retort. "I did not expect to find you two in separate hammocks, to say the least. But I can take another walk."

"There is a path behind the house," he suggested.

"*Bem,*" said I. "When I return I shall cough before entering."

"She is not that sort," he asserted. "But take your walk."

So I went again. I found the path he had mentioned, followed it to the end, and saw that it was the mate to the one I had discovered on the upstream side. It led to another lookout point which commanded the lower river.

Nothing at all was on that sullen water, but I squatted and watched it until my stomach told me that the hour must be noon. Then I went back. On emerging from the forest I coughed loudly and repeatedly. Pedro came strolling around a corner, smiling.

"Your good sense is exceeded only by your noise," he joked. "But both are unnecessary. Dinner is hot. Come and eat."

At the fireplace I found the girl again watching the pot. She looked up at me and, rather to my surprise, gave me a friendly smile.

"I have told her that you are not such a scoundrel as you look," Pedro plagued. "Now try to look pleasant, for once."

I grinned, and she laughed in response. And when I squatted by the fire she gave me a bowl of stew before serving Pedro. Without words, she showed that she was sorry for her previous distrust.

We made another hearty meal of it, in spite of the heavy breakfast we had recently devoured. The little woman stood always ready to refill our bowls, taking no food for herself. The last helping she gave Pedro emptied the pot. He refused to take it, and told her to eat. She looked at him oddly, hesitated, then squatted and proved that her appetite was good.

"He is a brute," said Pedro.

"Who?" I asked.

"Her man. You can see that she is accustomed to keep a huge pot of food ready for him and to give him all of it, without thought for herself. And you will remember that after first feeding us she advised us to go quickly. She fears him, and with good reason. Have you noticed her back?"

"No." I looked at her, but saw only her front, since she was facing us.

"It is scarred by cruel whippings," he told me.

"*Bicho!*" I growled. "I should like to teach him manners! Who is he?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "She will not talk about him. She made me explain who and what we were, and told me some things about herself, but she would say nothing about the man.

"She herself is of a tribe farther down the Jutahy, she says. Her people named her Eiá, because she was so much like that little animal; and they put those lines on her forehead to make the resemblance complete. She has been here a long time, and is afraid to try to escape. I judge that she was stolen by the fellow who brought her here, though she will not say so. And I think he is white, or partly white, and a fugitive from the law."

"Everything indicates that," I agreed. "This hidden home, and the path on the inner side of the island, and two lookout posts on the upper and lower sides, were never made by an honest man. Are you sure that there is only one man?"

"Quite sure," he declared. "There is nothing inside the house to show that there could be another. Indeed, the place is so bare that even this one fellow must be desperately poor. But he has a gun. I saw a cleaning rod in one corner."

"Hm!" said I. "Well, what shall we do? Go now and let her get new food into the pot for her master, or stay awhile longer? I feel inclined to rest here until tomorrow, but—"

"So do I," he interrupted. "And if the boss comes home—"

Smack! Sudden as a slap in the face, rain fell. It hit the roof and the earth hard and heavy, as if somebody overhead had opened a gate in the sky. We peered out and up, then shrugged.

"We stay," he decided.

And to the tiny woman he announced, in the Tupí:

"*Yehih anihahoh apotare.* We are not going today."

For a second she looked glad. Then she glanced again toward the river, plainly uneasy. But as the rain continued to hammer down she ceased to worry.

"*Amanaokyre potare imahn pateh,*" she said. "It will rain a long time."

"All day," he nodded. "Let's go into the house."

She hesitated, her eyes moving once more toward the Jutahy. Then, rather timidly, she murmured—

"Wait awhile."

And she walked into the house and shut the door.

We waited. Soon the door reopened, and she came out with a rolled bundle and a small packet. She dropped the roll, laid the package on it, and motioned first to the roof rafters, then to the fire.

"*Hembara ahreteh,*" she said gently. "I am tired."

And, with that hint that she wished to be alone, she returned inside and again closed the door.

The things she had brought us were two good hammocks, a length of tobacco and some *tabarí* bark. We seized first on the tobacco and the bark; made *cigarros* and lighted them at the fire. Thereafter we hung the beds from the roof poles and loafed.

The ease, the smoke, the big meals, the steady rain all made our lids heavy. But we did not go to sleep. After a time Pedro rose and stole to the door. Softly he opened it far enough to let in his head. He stood there a moment, then came quietly back.

"She sleeps," he told me. "Curled up in her hammock, as peaceful and trustful as a kitten. But that is not what I went to look for. I wished to see whether she had given us her own hammock and the other one. And she has not. Both are still hanging there. And I can swear that when I came out there was no other in the house!"

"You are sure?"

"Sure. I looked at everything while I talked to her in there. And, as I told you a few minutes ago, there was not even enough comfort for one man. There was no tobacco; I asked for some. Now there are tobacco and bark and two extra hammocks. And these hammocks are almost new, and— Well, it is odd."

He drew again at his *cigarro.* I puffed at mine. At length I said:

"There is more than one odd thing about this place. Even our little friend is odd. She sleeps in the daytime, like the *eiá* she resembles. She was asleep this morning, when most Indian women are up and doing. She sleeps again now. And—"

"And while she sleeps," he interrupted, "it would be well for us to disappear."

"Why?"

"Because we both want to know more about the boss of this isle, and we may learn more about him by going than by staying."

"Where do you expect to find him?" I puzzled.

"Here," he said.

I stared at him, looked all around at the gloomy forest and frowned at him again. He lay grinning and smoking, but saying no more. Something in his eyes, though, gave me a clue to his thoughts. And, after watching the rain a minute, I said:

"I see. After so wet a day, there will be a clear night and a moon."

"Just so, old fast thinker. *Vamos!*"

So we tossed our cigaret butts toward the fireplace, took down the hammocks and went out into the wet.

WE WALKED back to the canoe, boarded it and paddled it a little way up the creek; found a snug nook and hid it anew. Taking the knife off its shaft, we cut poles and leaves, from which we fashioned a flimsy but waterproof hut. Thereafter we hung our hammocks, put the spear together again, lay down and enjoyed a long, peaceful *sesta*.

Near night we bestirred ourselves again. As we had expected, the rain now was dying and the thick sky showed signs of clearing after dark. In the last dim light of the dull day we walked through the woods and found a spot where we could squat in dense cover and watch the canoe port on the isle. Soon afterward we saw again the little Eiá.

She appeared, not from the steep path, but from the forest at one side. She stood a moment looking up our creek, then sank and, sitting on her heels, stared soberly at the water. Evidently she had gone all around the islet in search for our canoe, and now, convinced that we had gone without an *adeos*, she was far more lonely than before we had come into her life.

Before long, however, she arose and went to fishing. She had a line and a hook baited with white rag, and proved herself deft in their use. It was the feeding hour of fish, and they bit readily. In a short time she had pulled in several fine *pescadas* and a big *tucunaré*. The last gave her a good fight, and she enjoyed the struggle. Her eyes and teeth flashed as she got him inshore, and when she had broken his back with her killing stick she capered about like a joyous child. But before she mounted the path with her catch she looked all around for us again, and her face grew solemn.

Then she was gone. And for some time we saw nothing more at the port.

The sickly daylight died, and blackness swallowed everything. But at length the moon broke through the blanket of cloud. Soon the sky became clear and the water shone. A breeze played over the river, changing at random; and at times it brought from the isle a smell of smoke, which made us crave more food and tobacco. Although we still had some of the tobacco and bark given us at the house, we had no matches. So, as time crept on, we grew more and more restless.

We could picture the big eyed girl over there, now as wide awake and lively as a true *eiá* of the night, roaming about her lonely clearing. We could almost smell and taste the new fish stew cooking in the large pot. We knew we had only to paddle back there to receive a glad welcome. At last I turned to Pedro and opened my mouth to grumble. But I stopped my tongue before it could start.

Into the quiet had come a sound. It came again, and again, from somewhere downstream. Something was bumping softly on wood.

Gradually it approached, pausing often, going on again with regular beats. It was the paddle of a single boatman, rather

tired, touching his gunwale with the shaft at each stroke.

Then into the shining water at the lower mouth of the creek crept a dugout; a narrow craft, riding very low, looking almost too small to carry the man who pushed it along. He was a big fellow, broad bodied and thick armed, with hulking shoulders. As he drew nearer, we saw that he was white.

He was naked to the waist, and the light skin of sweaty arms and shoulders shone under the moon. His face, though, was almost black from long hair and beard. The hair hung over his brows; the beard blended with thick fur on his chest. Out of that dark mask his eyes glinted watchfully, seeing everything in sight and looking for more.

As he came abreast of us he halted his paddle and peered straight at us. We knew we were entirely hidden; but we also knew that he had felt our gaze. A man does feel eyes on him at times, especially when he is alone and alert. We knew this well, and made a defensive move; we turned our faces toward each other, and thus broke the mysterious connection between our brains and his. And we did not look again at him until we heard another dip of the paddle.

He slid his canoe onward, now watching the port. But when he reached the mooring place he did not tie up. He looked all around again, then shoved the boat onward and kept going. His paddle now worked without a sound, and his head and body leaned forward, as if he suspected and sought enemies. Silently he faded away on the channel where I had first concealed our *montaria*.

We grinned at each other and waited. Soon the night traveler reappeared in the lower waterway, pushing his boat without caution. Having scouted the whole shore of his islet, he was assured that all was well.

Without another glance toward our dark ambush, he drove directly to the ringed tree and tied up. Then he lifted from the bottom of the canoe a sizable bundle, which he pitched ashore. From the bow he took a rifle, a machete, a shirt and a slouchy hat. For a moment he stood taking one more look around—a fierce, shaggy figure, clothed only in loose trousers. Then, heaving the bundle up on a shoulder, he swung away along the path.

In three strides he was gone in the bush. And we arose and were gone in the forest.

WE RETURNED to our hut, took down the hammocks and paddled down the creek to the port on the isle. There we paused to inspect the small canoe of the big traveler. It was thin and light and slender; a craft which could be driven fast and concealed easily; a sneaky sort of boat, such as might be used by a man whose work required speed, silence and stealth.

After looking it over we quietly moved our own dugout onward to the bushes under which I had screened it before. Then we climbed straight up through the woods. I now carried the spear. Pedro bore his rifle. Although it was empty, nobody but ourselves knew that. And sometimes the mere show of a gun is very helpful.

At the edge of the clearing we stopped in shadow. There we watched.

Beside the fireplace squatted little Eiá, watching the pot. The man was not in sight. The doorway was open, and beyond it burned a weak light. With the bright moon shining on the clearing and the fireplace belching fresh smoke, we could see nothing more within the house.

After awhile, though, the man bulged in the opening and came through. He marched to the fireplace. The tiny woman looked up at him, and seemed to grow even smaller, as if she shrank with fear.

"Ready soon!" she cried out. "Very soon!"

"Why is it not ready now?" he snarled. "You lazy—"

The name he called her was vicious. And his action was worse. He seized her

hair, yanked her to her feet and kicked her. Then he threw her headlong. She pitched to the ground, rolled over, scrambled up and ran behind the mud stove. There she stood silent, but poised to dart away. Evidently she expected more and worse punishment.

Pedro's breath hissed between his teeth. I muttered a curse on the big brute. But we remained in cover, for he made no further attack on his woman. He only growled at her and then squatted to hurry the cooking.

Although the fire was already doing its best, he grabbed several fresh sticks from beside the clay cone and shoved them into the flames. Then for a minute or two he hunched there scowling at the pot. The light around his feet grew brighter as the new fuel blazed up. The heat grew greater, too. He moved backward a little, grew still again. Another minute passed.

Suddenly he shot a hand to the base of the bright furnace and snatched something. He peered at it, searched the ground, seized something else. Then he sprang up, looked around, turned to the girl.

"Who has been here?" he demanded.

She stood dumb. But after a few seconds she answered—

"Nobody."

"Liar!" he yelled. "Traitor! Sneak! Harlot! You have had two men here! Who were they? Where are they?"

She gave no answer. Paralyzed, she stared at something he held between thumb and fingers. Pedro guessed what it was.

"Our cigar butts!" he muttered. "We are fine fools. We should have thrown them into the coals."

"Fools indeed," I grunted, remembering how we had tossed those stubs away without a thought. "Well, let us go and interview the gentleman."

But we had no need to go to him. He came to us.

With a roar of fury he flung down the butts and started for the woman. In his right hand gleamed a knife blade.

"By all the devils, I will cut out your tongue for this!" he swore. "And your eyes too, you sly slut! I will find those men and kill them! And you shall never see another man nor tell another tale—"

She sprang back from him, dodging around the furnace. He plunged after her. With a cry of despair she dashed for the woods. As luck would have it, she ran straight toward us. And we broke from cover to meet her pursuer.

Her great eyes now were full of horror. And the cruel face of the black bearded tyrant behind her showed that he meant to do just what he had threatened. And, though she ran with frenzied speed, he was faster than she. His long legs were swiftly overtaking her short ones when we jumped out.

"*Para!*" barked Pedro. "Stop!"

Little Eiá did not stop. She dashed past and was gone. But the man halted in midstride. His body jerked back, his legs stiffened, his heels dug dirt. He slid a little distance on the wet soil, then stood rigid.

"*Boas noites,*" added Pedro, his tone sarcastic. "Good evening. We are the men you wished to kill. Start it whenever you like."

He stood with rifle up, though not aimed. The islander had only the knife, and it seemed hardly likely that he would dare to attack us with that. But he was hardier than we thought. For a few breaths he stood petrified, staring at us. Then, quick as the strike of a snake, he threw his knife.

It hit Pedro. I heard the blow and a gasp of pain. I saw another steel blade flash upward in the moonlight. As it flew forward I dodged, then plunged at him with the lance.

The knife hissed past me. I speared the thrower in the belly and jerked the blade upward. He screamed and sagged back, clutching the pole with both hands, trying to shove it away. I rammed it back all the harder, turning the steel sidewise. Then I yanked it out and stood waiting.

He fell and squirmed, gripping at his

ripped body. For a moment he flopped about the ground. Then, gasping a curse, he quivered and lay still.

I watched him until a wheezing noise drew my gaze back to Pedro. He was sitting on the ground, struggling for breath, rubbing his stomach, but not bleeding. Soon he got up, breathing more easily. As he arose he picked from the ground the knife which had struck him down.

"It turned," he explained. "He did not take time to balance it right. So it was the haft, not the point, that struck me. But it hit hard as a bullet, square in my stomach, and knocked me almost out. He certainly worked fast."

"And straight," I added. "He missed me by only a hair's breath."

WE LOOKED a moment at the sprawling shape which now stared blankly at the moon. Then Pedro turned to the forest.

"Eiá!" he called. "Eiá!"

No voice answered. No leaves rustled. Nothing moved.

"Go and find her," I urged. "I'll go to the house."

So we separated. He walked into the shadows, calling again. After giving the dead man one more look, I advanced to the dimly lighted doorway.

Inside the house I stopped, staring at the floor. On that hard earth was much more than had been there when we left the place.

A candle, set in the neck of an empty bottle, gave a wavering light. And around it were strewn things which had been in the heavy bundle brought home by the lone prowler of the Rio Jutahy.

There were three good guns, two strong hammocks, a pair of machetes, several boxes of cartridges, some sizable packages of matches, a large rubber sheet and quite a number of other things; such things as would be carried by men making a long canoe trip. Among them were clothes—shirts, trousers, belts, hats. One of the shirts, I saw at a glance, was discolored by a large dark stain. And I did not need to look more closely at it, or to examine the others, to read the whole story of their journey to that hidden house on the isle.

They were the loot from some canoe whose owners now were dead. Those men probably had been shot while asleep by the bearded creature who now lay outside. At any rate, they had been killed, robbed, stripped and, no doubt, thrown to the crocodiles or the man eating *piranha* fish. Quite likely they had been adventurers like ourselves, traveling that wild river to discover whatever they might—rubber trees or medicinal roots or rare orchids or anything else worth finding. And their reward had been the most common thing in the jungle—death.

I was still standing there when Pedro returned. With him came Eiá. She walked close beside him and kept looking back, as if still afraid of the inhuman bully who now could harm her no more.

"I found her down in a black thicket," he said, as he approached. "It was so dark there that I could not make out anything at all, but she saw me plainly and came to me. Those eyes of hers were made for the night. Now keep her company while I— Ho! What have we here?"

"Plunder of dead men," I explained. "That fellow was a river pirate."

He looked at the litter on the floor, then around the room.

"There is other stuff hidden here," he declared. "And we shall soon learn where it is. But first—"

He glanced at the robber's woman. She was again looking out at the clearing.

"As I was saying, you can keep company with our little friend while I feed the crocodiles," he added.

And he walked back to the dead man, gripped his feet and dragged him away down the path. Soon sounded a heavy, muffled splash.

At that noise Eiá took a slow, deep breath, as if freed from a burden. She looked up at me, down at the booty and across the room. Then she said:

"Come. I show you."

She crossed to a far corner. I followed

with the candle. She grasped a small stub on the rear wall and pulled. Out swung a small door, so cunningly hinged to a post as to be invisible when closed. Beyond was blackness.

We went through the opening and were in the murderer's storehouse.

Between the false wall and the true one was a space about four feet wide, making a narrow but deep closet. In this was a tier of pole shelves. On those shelves lay the loot from at least a dozen killings.

The top shelf held guns and machetes, butts and hilts outward, ready for seizure. Lifting the candle, I counted ten rifle stocks and fourteen knife handles.

The lower shelves supported a jumble of other stuff which I did not examine until later, for just then Pedro came in. He stood a minute looking and saying nothing. Then he walked back to examine the plunder on the floor.

I joined him there, and we opened a package of matches, made cigarets and smoked.

"Two men," said Pedro. "There are three guns, but the third is the one that killed them. Poor devils!"

Then he turned to Eiá, who had followed to stand close beside him, and questioned her anew. This time she answered without evasion . . .

HER OWN people lived on a side stream only three days' journey down the Jutahy, she told us. But she had not seen them for many months. The white man had captured her one day while she was at work on the tribal plantation, some distance from the *maloca* in which all her people dwelt, and had carried her away. Ever since then she had been his slave on the islet.

She knew nothing about his life before that time. She did not know even his name. To her he was simply "Cariwah", the Tupí word which means "white man." And, since he never told her anything, she had no real knowledge of just what he did when he was away from this hidden home of his. Having seen what he brought back with him, though, she could guess.

He had gone out whenever he felt like it, stayed away as long as he wished, come back whenever he might. Sometimes he brought back a load of loot, sometimes not. In either case, his temper always was bad; and if he did not find hot food ready for him he made her suffer. So she had learned to keep the pot always full and the fire always alight.

In all the time of her captivity she had seen no other white men until we came. Sometimes she had spied a few Indians passing in canoes, but had not dared to hail them. None of these ever landed on the island, though it looked like a good place for hunting. Instead, they went past without delay, watching it cautiously. Thus she had long ago given up hope of escape.

That was her whole story. When it was done she hurried out to save the food on the fire from burning. We looked after her. Then said I—

"It was lucky that we stopped here."

"Lucky for everybody but the owner," Pedro replied. "We came here destitute, and we go away well equipped. Our little friend leaves her prison—"

"To go where?" I interrupted.

"Back to her people, of course. Where else?" He frowned a little.

"That suits me," I told him. "But from the way she looks at you I judge that she would as soon go to the Amazon. So you'd better tell her—"

"Yes, I suppose so." And he walked out to Eiá, who met him with a smile. Calmly he told her that on the morrow we would carry her down the river.

"It is good," she answered softly. "I will go with you, Cariwah."

"And we shall take you straight to your old home," he added.

Her smile faded. She looked long at him, her great eyes wistful. Then a cloud darkened the moon; and she turned away, walked out into the gloom and was gone a long time.

We looked after her, sorry for her, but saying nothing more. In our roving, fighting lives was no place for any woman.

We went back into the house and selected everything necessary for our further journeying. We found all the cartridges to be of the usual bush caliber, .44. So we took them. But we left the rifles where they lay; we knew and trusted our own. We also took machetes, knives, hamhocks, clothes, tobacco, matches, fishing lines and hooks, and whatever else we could use. When we had fully supplied our own wants we bundled up the other things for Eiá.

There were many articles which, to any jungle Indian, would be more precious than much gold. As we looked over the loot it became clear that at some time the river pirate had slain some trader and brought home his trade goods—knives, hooks, beads, buttons, mirrors, bright handkerchiefs and similar stuff. With these and the rest of the booty which we packed up for her, the little woman who had vanished from her home long ago would come back very wealthy.

"*Por Deus*, what a fool that fellow was!" I said, when the work was done. "With all this stuff lying here useless, he kept on raiding the river to get more things he did not need. And he lived like a lonely jaguar, when he could have made himself a little jungle king. With these trade goods he could have bossed a whole tribe, instead of one poor little woman captive, and sat here at ease while they fed him, and—well, he was a fool."

"Maybe," said Pedro. "But no more so than some other men. I can think of two fools who did not need to come to this Jutahy, but who came, and have taken some hard knocks since coming, and may take more—and all because they could not sit still in their comfortable *barracao* at home."

"True enough," I admitted. "*O que o berço dá a tumba o leva;* whatever is born in a man goes with him to the grave. Well, if we two idiots are to travel again in the morning we ought to be taking a sleep. But first you had better find the heiress to all these riches and send her to bed. She can not sleep tomorrow."

HE NODDED and went. The moon had come out again while we worked, and our little world was bright once more. He walked away toward the path to the port and was gone. I hung hammocks from the rafters, as before, and promptly went to sleep.

Quite a long time later I awoke to find that the two hammocks had become three. In the one nearer to me rested a little shape under a thin blanket. In the outer one lay Pedro, softly snoring.

For a while I lay marveling at the trustfulness of the girl, who, with a whole house to sleep in, evidently felt more at ease between two strange men than alone inside her own walls. But then I realized that after recovering from her first scare she had known, somehow, that we could be trusted. Otherwise she could, and probably would, have treated us quite differently. She had plenty of weapons inside the secret closet and, in spite of her gentle nature and her slavishness toward her own tyrant, would be likely to defend herself against newcomers who were evil. Remembering how she had fought and killed big fish, and how she had danced around their bodies afterward, I could see that she was not entirely soft; that she had also a little hard savagery which, if she had thought us to be beasts, might have moved her to bide her time and then shoot us in the backs.

She could, of course, have done the same thing to the white brute who had controlled her. But, being Indian, she would not think of that. The Indian woman is born to be dominated and, often, abused, by the one man who becomes her mate. Usually she can not choose that mate; she is sold to him by her father, or captured by him and carried away. Indeed, many tribes still carry on the pretense of capture, with ceremonies of pursuit and fight to rescue the girl, though every one knows that she has been sold for a few arrows or a good blowgun. And if she dares to lift a hand against the man who has made the capture or pretended to do so she is disgraced for life. The thing

is as old as the world. So it is born in her to submit to whatever her mate may do to her. But any other man whom she distrusts had better beware. It is as natural for her to defend herself against him as to endure brutalities from her husband. Thus she acquires great merit in the minds of her own people; and almost all women are guided first by consideration of their reputations.

After thinking this over, I slept again. Then it was morning.

The dawning was clean and clear. We arose, ate and went. We left the door open, the useless rifles still on their shelf, and the pot still on the dying coals. Perhaps some other starving rovers have made use of all of them since then. At any rate, we had all we needed, and with that we were satisfied.

We took with us the low, slim, fast canoe which lay at the port—the death boat which had carried a stealthy killer along the Jutahy many a time, but which now bore only his loot. Little Eiá rode in our own *montaria*, cuddled up amidships, and the dugout of her dead master towed behind.

She lay silent, watching Pedro and the shores as we glided on downstream. And on the third day she turned us into a creek mouth on the right side of the river. She could have gone past that creek without question from either of us, and thereby have fastened herself on us for some time thereafter; for we newcomers did not know one such place from another. But she took no advantage of our ignorance. She told us where to steer inland, and when we stopped at the shore she took a paddle and stepped out.

"*Adeos*," she said. "My people do not welcome white men. It is best that I go home alone."

And she entered the little canoe laden with her Indian riches, cut the tow rope and drew alongside. There she grasped our gunwale with one little hand and turned her great eyes once more on Pedro. Very softly she said in the Tupí:

"*Ikuana Tupanah deirum, Cariwah.* God go with you, white man."

"And with you," we both answered.

Then she pushed away and voyaged up the creek, swinging her paddle a little clumsily, but drawing steadily away. Pedro suddenly shoved his own paddle into the water, then caught it and sat rigid, looking after her. Slowly the narrow boat went on around a curve, drew into the great green forest and disappeared. And the tiny woman who drove it never looked back.

We sat there for some minutes, saying nothing. Then, still silent, we shoved our dugout away from the shore, drifted back into the river, turned and paddled on down the Jutahy. As usual, we had left behind us the life of yesterday and were on our way to that of tomorrow.

But many a time since then, senhor, I have thought of that little Eiá girl and of what she did for us. And more than once afterward I have seen a real *eiá* in the woods, at a time when I needed meat, and have swallowed my hunger and gone on to kill something else. And, though I may go out tomorrow night to catch for you one of those wide eyed little folk of the jungle, I will not kill it, nor even hurt it. In fact, I tell you frankly that I may not even bring it back to camp, to be caged and watched and finally skinned and stuffed and stuck in that museum of yours. After I look into its eyes I may let it go. And if you do not like that, you can get some other man to do your hunting!

Como? Did you say that if the museum should happen to lack an *eiá* it would never know the difference? Very well.

Valhame Deus, how it does rain!

BESIEGED

By B. M. BOWER

A Story of the Montana Range

WITH his big gray hat far back on his head and his high heel riding boots hooked over the edge of the neatly brushed stove hearth, Tiger Eye Reeves sat very still, drawing his mouth harp absently across his sober young lips. On the bunk over in the far corner Babe Garner lay, his head high and his six-gun beside him where his right hand would drop to it easily, and turned a leaf now and then of a dog-eared book he called "Less Mizzerbles".

The kid was thinking of an old man dead in the valley a few miles away, murdered that day in his own dooryard by a killer hidden behind rocks on the ridge above his house. He was thinking of that murder and of Babe, wondering just where Babe stood and how much Babe knew about it. What thoughts went shuttling through Babe's brain would never be tattled by his lips; nor by his eyes that slid away from a sidelong glance toward the stove just as the kid lowered the mouth harp from his lips and turned his face to the bunk.

"Yo'-all plumb shuah old Pappy Murray was a cow thief, Babe?"

"Shore he was! Why, hell, I told you a thousand times, Tiger Eye, there ain't an honest man in the hull valley. Not a

one. Like huntin' coyotes. You know damn' well you don't have to pick and choose the ones that'll pull down a calf if they git a chance. Any coyote's a calf killer. Same with them nesters down there. They're a damn' bunch of outlaws and you can't go amiss. Old Murray—Say, how'd you come to know he was shot, if you was off over on the river side of the Bench where I sent you?"

"Nevah did ride to the rivah today, Babe." The kid's voice was soft and slow but it held no apology for failing to do what Babe had told him to do—Babe being his boss over here at Cold Spring camp and getting his own orders straight from the Poole. "Got right curious about something in the valley, so I taken a jog down off the Bench to see fo' m'se'f."

"Yeah? What was that?"

"Cain't say fo' shuah, Babe."

The kid did not care to admit even to Babe Garner that he had gone down to Murray's place because a girl's hair was so long and so yellow that it tangled itself in all his thoughts—Nellie Murray.

"Had your field glasses, didn't you?"

"Field glasses cain't show yo'-all what's on the othah side of a rock ridge, Babe."

"Poole riders 'll be shot on sight down there. I told you that, Tiger Eye. You was takin' too big a chance."

"No biggah chance than some othah Poole ridah taken, going down to kill old Pappy Murray."

"How'd you know it was a Poole rider? You didn't see 'im, did you?"

"No, suh, I nevah did see him."

The kid went back to his playing and his thinking. "*Way down upon the Swanee River, far, far away-y . . .*" That was the creek fringed with cottonwoods, running through the Murray ranch. He seemed to be riding again along the wagon rutted road through the edge of the grove, his heart thumping because this was the trail that led to the house where Nellie lived. "*All the world am sad an' dreary . . .*" He was hearing Nellie's mother wailing and crying beside the bony old man lying dead in his own dooryard with a bullet hole in his back. "*Far from the old folks at home . . .*" The kid's own mother weeping beside his dead father, away down in Texas.

Killer Reeves, who never killed save for good cause—or what he thought was good cause—shot in the back last winter, away down on the Brazos. Too much killing. The kid hated it with a hatred that sent a hot wave of rage up his spine.

"How'd you know it was a Poole rider, then?" Babe flung down his book and sat up, eyeing the kid sharply while he pulled tobacco and papers from his pocket. "Nesters ain't above dry-gulchin' each other if they've got a grudge, and layin' it to the Poole."

"Nestah wouldn't hit out fo' the Bench aftah he done his killing. The Bench is Poole ground. Leastways, that's what yo'-all been tellin' me, Babe."

"Which way'd he go when he hit the rim?" Babe held his book of cigaret papers in his hand, unconsciously riffling the leaves without taking one out. His eyes, the color of steel on a frosty morning, were boring into the back of the kid's head.

"Cain't say, Babe. Plumb rocky along the rim."

Babe studied the kid for another ten seconds and gave a grunt that seemed to release a tension within his mind. He pulled out a cigaret paper and creased it into a trough, into which he sifted a little tobacco from a small cloth bag.

"You come into camp here actin' like you thought I done it," he stated calmly, lighting a match with his thumbnail and deliberately breaking the stub in two while the kid watched him with an unblinking steadiness in the stare of his yellow right eye.

Babe met that stare for the space of one heart beat and looked away.

"Shuah would hate to think that, Babe."

The kid wiped his mouth harp on his sleeve, but he did not raise it again to his lips.

"Shore hate to have you, Tiger Eye.

Hate to see you throw in with the nesters, too." Babe scowled at the smoke spiraling up from his cigaret. "Might as well git this thing cleared up right here, kid, and be done with it. I don't like the idee of you thinkin' I'm the kind o' jasper that would lay behind a rock and shoot anybody in the back. 'Nless I had darn' good reason for it," he added as an afterthought.

THE KID sat whistling a whispery little tune between his teeth while he looked at the wall where the dishpan hung behind the stove. He wished Babe wouldn't take just that tone. Babe knew he wasn't throwing in with any nesters, or if he was, Babe didn't know how or why. 'Peared like Babe was trying to make an argument.

"You thought I done it, because you found pieces of match behind that rock and I've got a habit of breakin' my matches in two. Plenty of men break their match stubs. What made you think I was down there?"

"Nevah said I thought it, Babe."

"You looked it when you come to camp."

"Cain't tell a thing by my looks, Babe. This yallah eye of mine is plumb deceiving, sometimes."

"What gets me, Tiger Eye, is how you come to take it to heart the way you do. Ain't a bigger cow thief in the country than old Murray. He was bound to get his, sooner or later. 'Nless he was a p'ticular friend of yourn—'

"Nevah was no friend of mine, Babe."

"Well—they say he's got a good lookin' girl. You seen her?"

"Wasn't no girl theah, Babe, when I rode along to the house. Heard a woman screaming and a-crying like my own mammy cried when Pap was bushwhacked. Killahs don't think about the woman's side of the mattah, I reckon. Right nice little old lady, making pies fo' her man. I taken him in and laid him on the baid, and I taken two pies out'n the oven befo' they got burnt. Killahs don't think of the women, 'pears like.'"

"Well, neither do the cow thieves think of the women. They know what'll happen. They know, and they take their chance. Same as we do. Hell, a nester wouldn't think of the women if he got a chance to dry-gulch a Poole rider. Don't think there wouldn't be women cryin' around if a Poole rider was to get shot. Joe Hale, he's got a wife and two kids. He breaks his match stubs in two, same as I do—but you don't think Joe was down there layin' for old Murray, do you?"

"No, Babe, I don't think that."

"And far as the women are concerned—" Babe rose from the bunk, hitching up his trousers' belt as he sauntered over to the water bucket and lifted the dipper with a jangle of tin— "far as the women are concerned," he repeated, holding the full dipper poised while he looked down at the kid, "they got to take their chance same as the men. There's always women cryin' over some man. There always will be, as long as there's a man to cry over. What you goin' to do about it? A man can't set and roll his thumbs all his life, just so his woman won't have cause for tears. They bawl a lot—but they git over it."

"Reckon you're right, Babe."

The kid slipped his mouth harp into his pocket and stood up, his tawny hair six inches nearer the pole roof than was Babe's sleek black head.

"Darn' right I'm right. 'Course, you're young yet, Tiger Eye, and comin' right from home and losin' your dad like you done, I can see where it would kinda rile you up, happenin' along right at the time when old lady Murray was takin' on. It ain't pleasant for nobody. This is war, and war's what Sherman said it was. But you've been so growed up and steady, far as I've seen, I shore never expected you'd git chicken hearted over a dead nester all at once. 'Course, if it was the old lady and her pies that kinda stirred you up, I can understand that all right. It's too damn' bad—but I can't see as there's anything we can do about it."

"If ever' killah was fixed so he couldn't

shoot a gun, theah wouldn't be no moah killing, Babe."

Babe finished his drink and jangled the dipper into the bucket. He walked to the stove, lifted the lid, looked in and closed the opening again.

"I'd rather be dead than have my hands smashed the way you smashed Jess Markel's. So would any man that was a man."

"If it was a nestah, Babe—"

"Oh, hell! A nester's different. Bust a nester's knuckles with a bullet any time you feel like it, kid. But me, I'm liable to need my gun hand some of these days."

"I said killahs, Babe."

"Well, Poole riders have to kill when they git crowded too hard. You know that, Tiger Eye. Didn't you bump off a nester yourself a few days back, when he was tryin' to git a potshot at you over on the rim?"

The kid looked down at Babe and a slow smile straightened the curve of his lips.

"No, suh, I nevah did kill that nestah," he drawled. "But I shuah did taken the shoot outa him, Babe."

Babe shivered as if a cold wind had struck his bare flesh, but he didn't say again that he would rather be dead than crippled. The kid knew he thought it, though. Plumb strange Babe would be so scared of having his knuckles stiffened so he couldn't pull a trigger. Babe seemed to think the kid was cruel to do that to a killer. Seemed to think it was all right to shoot the life out of a man, though. Never said a word about that being cruel. The kid's eyebrows came together in a puzzled frown while he studied Babe at the window, peering out into the faint moonlight.

"She's bankin' up again in the west," Babe said, turning restlessly, his voice deliberately cheerful and casual. "I'll go turn the horses in the stable. It's liable to rain all night, by the looks."

"Reckon so, Babe."

The kid turned and picked up the two water buckets.

TEN FEET from the cabin door they separated, the kid going to the spring just beyond the house, Babe walking on to the corral. The kid listened to Babe's footsteps, a wistful ache in his breast. Babe was the only friend he had in this new world into which he had ridden so blithely to find life so bitter with murder and hate. Couldn't call Nellie Murray a friend, exactly. Didn't want to, either. Yo'-all can't feel friendship for a girl like that. It's got to be something more than friendship, if it's anything at all. Different with a man. The kid had counted on Babe's friendship and on his being square so a fellow could trust him. But if Babe had waited like a coyote among the rocks and had shot Nellie's old pappy in the back, he was just a mean, lowdown killer and nobody could trust him. A man like that would shoot his best friend in the back if he took a notion.

The kid would have to be mighty certain it was Babe, though, before he would believe it. He'd want some kind of proof and it would have to be mighty strong. He couldn't believe it, and yet he couldn't put it out of his mind, either; and the vague distrust hurt like a physical pain.

He stooped and dipped a bucket into the deep little pool of Cold Spring and watched the veiled moonlight glisten on the wavering ripples it made. Nellie Murray's hair was almost the color of that shine in the water; more of a gold color, but shiny and wavy like that. And her old pappy was dead down there in the valley, and her brother was dead, and even if they had been cow thieves like Babe claimed they were it was mighty hard on Nellie and her mother.

The kid lifted the full bucket out and set it on the ground, reached behind him for the other bucket and tilted it slowly into the broken, gleaming water. It darkened abruptly and he glanced up to see the thin edge of the moon dive deep into the mounting cloud bank. Reckon Nellie was feeling pretty bad, right now. Trying to hush her own tears and comfort her mother and take it all on her own

shoulders. Nesters swarming all over the Murray ranch by now, most likely. If he should saddle up and ride back down there they'd kill him if they could. Make more trouble for Nellie, that would. No sense in that. He'd do more good if he stayed away and found out who the killer was.

He lifted the second bucket out with a heave and went up into the path and so to the cabin. Babe came in, bringing an armful of wood which he pushed under the stove to dry.

"You don't want to let old lady Murray's cryin' worry you, Tiger Eye," Babe said abruptly when they were pulling off their boots. "It's too damn' bad, but it can't be helped. We all got t' go sometime."

"I know that, Babe."

"Best not to waste no sympathy on a nester. They don't deserve no sympathy; man or woman, they're all tarred with the same stick."

"Who d'you reckon done it, Babe?" The kid spoke softly into the darkness as Babe settled himself in the blankets.

"Damned if I know."

"Murray's boy was shot awhile back, too, wasn't he, Babe?"

"Yeah, believe he was. How'd you find out so much, Tiger Eye? That was before you come into the country."

"Fellow can heah right smaht if he lays low and listens."

"Uh-huh. Been puttin' your ear to a crack, huh? You want to watch out, kid. That's damn' dangerous—sneakin' down amongst 'em. You stay up on the rim and use your field glasses more. It ain't what that bunch says; it's what they do that the Poole's interested in."

"Nevah taken much of a risk, Babe."

"You keep out of the valley, just the same. 'Bout as safe down there as a rattlesnake den. You hear me, Tiger Eye?"

"I heahs yo'-all."

"Well, you heed me, too. Ever let 'em git the upper hand and hell 'll be poppin' around here."

" 'Peahs like hell's been doin' a right smaht of poppin' already, Babe."

"They ain't got the best of the Poole, yet. They're scared. We're all picked men, now. We shoot too fast and too straight to suit 'em. And you're the quickest man with a gun that's ever come into the North, Tiger Eye. Honest, I ain't never seen your equal—and I've saw some pretty gun work in my time. You're goin' to be valuable to the Poole, once you git over that sympathy of yourn for nester women. You got to cut that out or you won't never git nowhere."

The kid did not answer that, and presently Babe's breath fell into the slow rhythm of sleep.

II

THE KID'S mind jarred back from deep dreaming and he opened one eye to see a yellow streak of sunlight on the cabin wall high in a far corner behind the stove. By that he knew he had slept late. Usually they were ready to ride out along the rim when the sun showed above the mountains. Babe's side of the bed was empty, but there was no breakfast smell in the cabin and no crackling of fire in the stove. Gone to look after the horses, probably. Babe must have slept late himself. Must have been Babe shutting the door that woke him.

The kid pulled himself up in bed, knuckling his eyes like a child. He wished he could bring his dream out into the real side of life with him, and live that instead of the lonely routine that made up his day. Wiping the dishes for Nellie Murray—that's what he dreamed he was doing. They had been having a great time together, talking and laughing, her long yellow braid swinging on her shoulders when she laughed or moved suddenly and her eyes shining blue with little crinkles of fun at the corners. It was something of a jolt to come back to this log walled room with its one window and the crude, makeshift comforts of a line camp.

But this was reality, and the other was just a dream. The kid swung his feet to the floor and reached for his clothes. Babe

would expect breakfast to be ready when he came back. Reckon Babe sort of knew the kid had lain staring up at the roof till the coyotes were yapping for dawn, and that was why he didn't say a word when it was time to get up—just crawled out and went on to feed the horses. Killer or no killer, Babe was right kind and thoughtful thataway.

The kid started a fire in the stove, set a kettle of water over the blaze, and washed his face and neck and ears in the tin basin on the bench. He leaned before the crooked little mirror and combed his tawny hair that immediately returned to its unruly waves when the comb had passed. He shoved another stick of wood into the stove, picked up the basin and pulled the door open to fling the water out upon the ground.

The basin jerked spitefully in his hand, a round hole cut through its upper side where the water spurted through. From a clump of bushes over by the corral the bark of a rifle tardily followed the bullet. The kid let go the basin and dropped to his knees, then fell forward on his face and lay there with his arms stretched out in front of him. From across the narrow, high walled slope the echo of the shot came sweetened and softened by the distance, and then the morning was still and sunny again, with a meadowlark singing untroubled down by the spring.

The kid's fingers stretched slowly to their slender length, relaxed a little, stretched again, moved this way and that until they encountered something which they clasped so firmly the knuckles turned white. Babe's foot. Babe lying there on his face within a few feet of the door, shot down while the kid lay dreaming that he was wiping dishes for Nellie Murray who had laughed into his eyes. It wasn't the shutting of the door—it was the rifle shot that had wakened him. Babe, shot in front of his door, just as Nellie's old pappy had been shot. Even at that moment while the kid was taking a firmer grip of that limp foot he wondered if Babe was only getting back what he gave old Murray.

The man with the rifle was keeping himself mighty quiet. The kid lifted his head an inch and looked out from under his eyebrows to where the smoke still hung in a thin haze before the clump of service berry bushes. The killer would have to make a run for it across open ground if he left there. The kid reckoned he wanted to wait awhile and see if the cabin sheltered any one else. Sneaked up there before dawn, and now he couldn't leave till his work was finished.

Woodpile out there was right handy. Unless the shooter stood up and looked over the bushes he couldn't see what was on the ground in front of the door. Chopping block in the way, and a scatter of dead branches. Couldn't see if a body moved an inch or two. Plumb lucky, that woodpile was.

The kid squirmed backward, dragging Babe by one foot. Slow. Back an inch or two, and wait a minute. Injuns couldn't crawl any slower. Babe groaned at the third pull, and the kid's heart gave a flop and then raced for joy. Babe was alive yet. Something to pull for, now. Babe groaned again, not loud but kind of slow and drawn out as if his misery was the dull, wearing kind without any sharp pain to call a man's voice between his teeth. Seemed to hate the pulling. The kid gave the foot a little shake sidewise.

"I'm draggin' yo'-all inside the doah, Babe," he muttered in a tone that would not carry beyond the woodpile. "I'm playin' daid and creepin' slow. Just keep still and he'p a little when I pull, and I'll get yo'-all inside directly."

Babe did not answer except with a groan, but he pressed one hand hard on the ground and pushed backward when the kid pulled again, so the kid knew Babe heard and understood all right. The kid hurried after that. He wanted his body all inside the door as soon as possible, and with a last wriggle his tousled damp hair went in past the door jamb. Like a cat he was on his feet then and had Babe inside with one great yank and slammed the door shut.

A BULLET cut a splintery path for itself in the thick slabs, but the kid did not care for that. He was hastily pumping a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle when that happened, and he sent a shot through the window and into the clump of service_berry bushes by the corral. He did not expect to hit anything but the bushes, for there was a rock pile back of the thicket. But he served notice that he was getting into action, and the fellow out there had better lay low. Then he turned, picked Babe up in his arms and laid him on the bed.

"Got me in the side," Babe muttered in a husky tone quite unlike his natural voice. "Stop the bleedin', can't you?"

"Shuah will, Babe." The kid's voice was soft and reassuring, but his eyes and his mouth were grim. "They taken a shot at me, too, but they nevah touched me. I aim to get right busy with my gun when I get yo'-all fixed up."

"Damn' coyotes. Got me when I stepped outside."

"That's what a killah always aims to do," the kid observed dryly. "Always aim to down a man at his own doah."

Whether Babe caught the significance of that remark or not, he made no answer to it.

The kettle was boiling on the stove and the kid brought basin and clean dish towels and a bottle of carbolic acid and set them on a box beside the bunk, moving with a sureness and a swiftness as if he had done this thing before and knew exactly how to go about it. He pulled off Babe's shirt and studied the round, purplish hole on Babe's right side just under the curve of his ribs. He slid his hand under Babe's body and felt his back. He uncorked the carbolic acid bottle, poured sparingly into the basin of hot water, watched the milkiness spread and stirred the water with his fingers before he dipped in a cloth.

"Old Pappy Murray wasn't as lucky as yo'-all," he mused aloud. "Killah got him in the back, and the bullet went on through his lungs. Reckon he didn't live a minute."

Babe didn't say anything to that, either. He fainted, which left the kid free and unhampered in his crude surgery.

"I taken out the bullet, Babe," he said calmly when Babe came back to consciousness. "Wasn't moah'n three, foah inches deep. Cain't figure it, lessen it come from ovah across the field. Nevah did come from the berry bushes, or it'd go on through. Two men out theah, I reckon."

Babe's fingers moved gently to the bandage. The room reeked of carbolic acid, oddly mingled with the smell of coffee boiling. The kid brought a cup, lifted Babe's head while he drank.

"Two, you say?"

"Two and likely moah. Shuah was a spent bullet got yo'-all down. *Hombre* in the bushes shot at me—I saw the smoke."

"And me down! They'll git us, Tiger Eye."

"In a pig's eye."

"Git my rifle and—help me on my feet."

"Yo'-all lay quiet. I taken charge today, Babe."

The kid was loading Babe's rifle, and now he placed it on the table, pushing aside the jelly glass of tin spoons and a can of syrup to give plenty of room. The sun was still slanting a beam in through a crack over the door, but it fell now on the back wall instead of the roof. He peered out through the window toward the opposite side of the shallow basin in the faint hope of seeing there the man who had shot Babe, but the low rocky ridge could have concealed half the men in the county. He gave up looking and turned his rifle upon the clump of bushes over by the corral.

Three shots carefully spaced brought a spiteful volley in reply. Babe glowered at two round holes in a log over the foot of the bunk and then twisted his head to look at the kid.

"Git back away from that window! Want to get your head busted with a bullet?"

"Ain't cravin' it. Call a few bullets in heah, and he might reckon one laid me

low. I'm playing possum from now on, Babe."

"You're playin' hell," fretted Babe. "What you doin' now?"

"Aim to cook breakfast now while theah's a chance," the kid replied tranquilly. "Smoke's going up the pipe now. When it quits theah won't be any moah today. Aim to have it lookin' plumb daid around heah later on."

"It'll look dead enough all right," Babe muttered.

The kid added more water and more coffee to the big pot, stirred the fire and set the pot in upon the coals where it would boil quickly. This was something more than a sneaking, sunrise attempt to murder them as they left the house. His three shots through the window proved that. The cabin was still under fire and there would be no letup now. Strong black coffee would come in handy, even if it had to be drunk cold.

" 'Peah's like the nestahs are aiming to take theah revenge fo' old Pappy Murray," he remarked while he turned a hotcake expertly in the frying pan.

Babe grunted an oath which trailed off into a groan. Later, as the tides of pain swept in upon him he did a great deal more of swearing and groaning. Twice he tried to get off the bunk, but the kid forced him back again and returned to his task.

PLAYING possum had so far failed to have any effect. A fairly steady stream of bullets came spatting viciously into the cabin, and the table was littered with glass from the window. It fretted Babe, who was beginning to talk feverishly.

"What they doin' out there? Sounds like a whole damn' army."

The kid was digging loopholes between the logs wherever the chinking invited such effort, and he had every reason in the world to believe they were going to be needed before the day was out.

"Five guns speakin' out theah," the kid replied equably while he gouged at the last hole, which would overlook the path to the spring. "One ovah by the corral's the closest. I'll be ready to say howdy to them *hombres* directly, Babe."

"Shoot to kill when you start in," Babe urged. "Ain't goin' to try bustin' knuckles now, I hope."

"Cain't see any knuckles to bust, Babe."

The kid's face clouded. He pushed his rifle barrel through the hole between two logs, and his yellow right eye was as unblinking as a tiger's when it looked down along the sights, and caught a glimpse of gray hatcrown among the bushes beyond the spring. He didn't want to kill. Hatcrown—head, shoulders below . . . The kid couldn't see the man he swiftly visioned but he aimed where a shoulder should be and pulled the trigger. There was a sudden and violent agitation of the bushes and a man went streaking it back toward his more discreet companions. The kid's finger bent again deliberately and the man's swinging right arm jerked upward and went limp at his side. The kid made sure of that before he withdrew the rifle from the hole and crossed the room to another.

"Git anybody?"

The kid did not answer at once. He was squinting toward the little ridge, whence most of the firing had come. The besiegers had a clear view of the cabin and their line of retreat lay open behind them down to the valley. They had the heart of real killers, the kid thought with a curl of his lips. They weren't taking any chance whatever.

"Taken the shoot outa one, Babe," he said at last.

"Kill 'im?"

"Reckon not. Shot his ahm down, 'peahs like."

"F'r th' Lord's sake, don't go and git chicken hearted, kid! They won't show no mercy to *you*. Never mind any nester women bawlin' around—they shore as hell wouldn't bawl if you was killed."

"Don't reckon they would, Babe."

The kid was aiming at a shiny spot out there on the ridge, where the sun struck a rifle barrel. Back of that shine there crouched a man. The kid couldn't

see him, but again he formed a mental picture of the form and sent a bullet across to say howdy to a shoulder—or to the rock that sheltered it from hurt.

"Git anybody?"

"Cain't say fo' shuah, Babe." The kid picked out more chinking and brought the field glasses to bear upon the place. " 'Peahs like he's right oneasy, Babe."

He swept the glasses slowly along the crest of the ridge, glimpsed other betraying signs and laid them down that he might pick up the rifle again.

"Shoot t' kill, why don't you?" Babe's voice was high and querulous. When he turned a strained look upon the kid his eyes were glassy and had an anxious stare wholly unlike Babe Garner. "Damn their arms and shoulders! You can kill if you want to—anybody that can whirl and bust knuckles the way you busted Jess Markel's can put a bullet through a man's heart if he wants to."

"Reckon I could, Babe."

"Well, damn it, do it, then! When you draw a bead on a nester, git 'im right. Cripplin' only makes 'em madder. There ain't no comeback from a dead man."

"Ever' man that's killed has got folks that take up the fight," the kid said patiently. "Take that Murray killin', Babe. Down on the Brazos—"

"We ain't down on the Brazos. The Murrays is fixed right, I tell you. Nobody left but the old woman and the girl, and if they git flossy about it they're liable to be served the same way."

The kid's face paled and hardened.

"Shootin' women—that's not the way of Texas killahs, Babe."

"The hell it ain't! All the killers ain't from Texas, lemme tell you. There's just as good men in little old Montana as ever come up the Chisholm Trail. A nester's a nester. Man or woman, they're goin' to be cleaned out before the Poole's done with it. Old Murray and that damned cow thief of an Ed, they're just the beginnin'." And then Babe gave a crazily reckless laugh and pointed a finger admonishingly at the kid.

"You got 'em out there before you, Tiger Eye—any jury in the world would make it self-defense. You don't have to worry a damn' bit. Now's your chance. Git 'em, kid! Damn it, don't you know there's a bounty on nesters? You can collect five hundred apiece for 'em, and no questions asked."

"That the price on old Pappy Murray, Babe?"

"Hell, it's the price on any damn' nester! Didn't the Old Man tell you so?"

"Nevah did tell me that, Babe. Mistah Bell taken my name and wheah I'm from and all, and asked right smaht questions. Nevah did tell me anything, 'cepting I was to get my o'dahs from yo'-all."

"Damn' right you git your orders from me. I order you right now to lay 'em cold. Kill every damn' nester you can draw a bead on, out there. Save goin' after 'em in the valley. Hell, they're out to kill you, ain't they? You and me both! Git 'em, or they'll git you. Git the damn'—"

Babe trailed off into a meaningless mumble from which an oath rose now and then to a vicious distinctness. Crazy with fever and fretting because he couldn't stand up and fight. That bullet hole was deeper than the kid had said, and though he really had taken out the bullet he had got it from the back where it was lodged just under the skin. No use telling Babe he was shot through. A man's mind can take hold of a fact like that and double the danger with worry. No use telling him, and no use arguing with him either. Babe was out of his head. Anything he said now was just fever talk—things he had heard and things he had thought mixed together. A man was liable to say most anything when he was out of his head thataway.

III

FOUR bullets zipping in rapid succession through door and window raised an invisible deadline between the bunk where Babe lay and the loophole over by the stove where the kid stood watching through the field glasses and

locating each rifle that spoke over on a low, boulder strewn ridge across the narrow pasture. A faint puff of smoke, a glint of sunlight, a hat crown ducking out of sight behind a rock.

"Why, dammit, you come here with the dead list in your pocket; that proves you're a Texas killer," Babe cried suddenly from the bunk, his sick brain seizing anew upon his grievance. "I knowed all the time you was lyin' when you said you found that map where the wind had blowed it into a bush. You was headin' straight for the nesters with that dead list, and you knowed what you had to do.

"You made a slip-up with me when you said you was goin' to Wheeler's place because Nate Wheeler come first on the map. I like you, kid, and I've let you make out like you're a nice little lad that wouldn't kill a m'skeeter. But I ain't a damn' fool. I ain't never asked no questions, either. You had the dead list and that was all I needed to know. A man ain't expected to go 'round shootin' off his mouth about what he's doin'. Nobody wants you to advertise yourself.

"But damn it, you've crippled one of the best shots the Poole has got, and you've been runnin' on me about beefin' old Murray, and you claim you won't kill a nester yourself for love er money. Looks pretty damn' scaley to me, kid—damned if it don't. Looks like they've got you workin' for 'em. Damn' spy, for all I know."

"Yo'-all's just talkin' now, Babe. I cain't pay no mind to fevah talk. Yo'-all lay still and calm yo'se'f down, Babe."

"Calm myself down! Yeah, like hell I'll calm myself down! I know what you poured into that bullet hole to eat the hull damned insides outa me. Poured in half a bottle of carbolic, that's what. Eatin' a hole I could ram my fist in. Et into my stomach now—I can taste the damn' stuff."

"That's just the soreness of the hurt, Babe. Why, I wouldn't do that to yo'-all, nohow."

The kid turned and looked at Babe, the field glasses dangling in his left hand. Crazy, that's what ailed Babe. Bullet wound a-hurting him and the fever coming up.

"Oh, no—you wouldn't do a thing to me!" Babe's heavy sarcasm weighted the words with venom. "Poison me, that's all. Frame it with your damned nester friends to come and shoot me for you. I knowed it when they dropped me outside the door."

The kid was trying not to listen. In one ear and out the other—that was the only way to do with fever talk. Plumb foolish, thinking he would pour carbolic acid into a bullet wound. Babe was shuah a sick man, all right.

He took up Babe's rifle and sent a shot over to where the little blue smoke clouds betrayed the position of the nesters. It wasn't much of a target; whether he wanted to hit a man or not, it was unsatisfactory shooting. Always before, Tiger Eye Reeves knew exactly where a bullet would strike before he pulled the trigger. It worried him now to have to shoot at a puff of smoke which the wind was whipping up away from the rocks.

"How you comin', kid?" Babe's voice sounded strangely rational after a long silence, as if the fever cloud was lifting from his brain. "Don't let 'em sneak up on you, Tiger Eye."

"They's keeping ovah on the little rock ridge, Babe. They won't come out in the open, 'peahs like."

"Herdin' us in here till dark. They'll sneak up on us then. You can't expect to stand 'em off after dark. Gimme a drink, will you, kid?"

"Shuah will, Babe." The kid laid down the rifle, picked up the two buckets and ducked crouching across the cabin. "Reckon I'll make me a loophole on this side the doah," he drawled. "How yo'-all feeling now, Babe?"

"Like hell. Like a red hot iron runnin' through me."

The kid slipped an arm under Babe's neck and raised his head so that he could drink. Babe looked up at him with shamed questioning.

"Guess I was throwin' it into you

kinda free and promiscuous, awhile ago, wasn't I, kid? Never had anything knock me out the way this damn' bullet hole has done. Shore you got the bullet out?"

"Shuah did, Babe. This heah's it."

The kid picked it up, rolled it in his palm while Babe regarded it curiously as a boy would gaze upon a pulled tooth.

"Hunh. Never flattened itself none. .30-30. Wonder it didn't kill me."

"Right smaht distance ovah to the hill, Babe. Seems right strange to me they don't crowd up."

"Foxy, that's why. Herdin' us in here till dark, I tell you. They're playin' safe, that's all."

"Man that built this cabin shuah made a mistake," mused the kid. "Window and doah facing out ovah the basin, and no back doah whatevah."

"Facin' south to make it warmer in winter. Wasn't a damn' nester in the hull valley when this cabin was built. That's why there ain't no back door."

"Reckon we bettah cut anothah doah when this fight's ovah, Babe."

"When this fight's over we won't need no other door," Babe retorted grimly.

"My old pap always said no fight's ovah till the daid are counted. Cain't count you and me among the daid yet, Babe."

"How's the water holdin' out?"

THAT meant Babe wanted another drink. The kid filled the tin dipper, hoping Babe would not notice how he had to scrape the bottom of the bucket to do so. He hadn't thought of the water problem, but it loomed rather large now. Couldn't get to the spring while the daylight held, and Babe's thirst was growing. If the nesters stayed where they were they had him trapped. About noon, now. Seven hours and more till dark. The horses tied in the stable. They wanted water, too. The kid's mouth tightened at the swift mental picture he had of Pecos standing tied to the log manger, disconsolately nosing at the coarse weeds and stubs he had discarded before. Babe's brown horse, too. The other two were in the pasture and all right, but those two tied in the stable couldn't eat or drink till he got to them. And the one door and the window were letting in bullets like a sieve. Plenty buried in the cabin walls, too, the kid reckoned. Couldn't bore through the tough old logs, at that distance, though they might if the nesters got closer.

"Plumb lucky fo' us, Babe, we've got open ground cleah ovah to that rock ridge," he observed with more cheerfulness than he felt. "They cain't come up on us, long as I'm shooting."

"You wait till it comes dark!"

"Why, shucks, Babe! Yo'-all talk as if I'm goin' to set heah and wait till they come poking theah haids in the doah!" The kid stood up and began feeling along the rear wall just under the roof. "Covah up yo' haid, Babe, lessen yo'-all want yoh eyes plumb full of dirt."

"Think you can git out through the roof?" Babe tried to prop himself on one elbow and watch, but the pain turned him dizzy and sick and he lay back panting and grunting at his helplessness.

"Shuah goin' to try," said the kid grimly.

"They'll shoot you like a rabbit."

The kid shook his head and stepped up on the foot of the bunk where he could bring his full strength into action, prying and pushing at the dirt covered poles of the roof. Had the ridge beyond the little flat been higher, the nesters over there would have seen him when at last, with a final avalanche of clods and dust on the bunk, his head poked through into the sunlight. But the cabin stood on a little ridge of its own and only from the bluff opposite could one look upon the farther slope of the roof. The kid made sure of that before he went any farther.

"Cain't see me nohow, 'lessen I stand up," he called guardedly down to Babe. "Bunched ovah theah in the rocks, 'peahs like."

"Dunno what good it'll do you," Babe muttered. "Mebbe when they bust in tonight you can drop down outside and make a run for it—but I can't. It's all

day with me, anyhow. God, I'm dry! Gimme a drink before you go, will you, Tiger Eye?"

"Shuah will, Babe. I'll get a bucket of watah directly."

"You stay inside. They'll fill you with lead, kid."

"Nevah will see me, Babe. Gully back of the cabin goes to the spring and beyond."

"That's right. Look out fer snakes, kid. Rattlers down there. Might better be shot than bit."

"Lawsee, Babe, nevah did see a old woman worry like yo'-all!"

The kid laughed and picked up a rifle, thrust it through the nearest loophole and fired three shots, aiming at the likeliest looking retreats over on the ridge. That would keep them minding their manners, over there, at least for awhile. No use giving them any encouragement to leave the ridge and creep closer, at least not just now when he was going to be busy.

He poured all the water into one bucket and set it on a box close to the bunk where Babe could reach the dipper if he had to. Yo'-all couldn't tell what might happen in the next hour or so—and it wasn't snake bite the kid was thinking of, either. Glad Babe had reminded him, though. Never would have thought of snakes, with all the other matters on his mind. Fix that, easy enough. Pull on the old wolfskin chaps and let the rattlers try their teeth on the tough hide and long matted hair. Take mighty long teeth to go through that.

Another thing. Tin bucket might shine or rattle to warn a nester with sharp eyes and ears. No hurry. Time to make all safe. Whole afternoon to work in. The kid found a gunny sack under the bunk and covered the bucket with that. He also found a tie rope and fastened it to the pail.

Babe lay with his eyes closed, dozing or in the stupor that was seizing him more often since the heat of the day began. The kid had meant to send a few shots over to the ridge before he ventured forth, but he hated to waken Babe with the noise, so he kindled a small fire in the stove instead and let the smoke advertise a live man's presence. An old trick, but so natural a one that so far as he had ever heard it always worked.

Shots from the ridge answered that challenge. The kid waited until the firing ceased, then took his bucket and crawled out through the roof, dropping noiselessly to the ground and sliding at once into the brushy little gully that separated the cabin from the bluff behind it.

From the cabin to the spring was no more than fifty yards, straight across the open ground as the path went. By way of the gully it was twice that distance because of a brushy point that jutted out toward the bluff. The kid was tempted to scramble up over the point to where the spring lay just beyond. But the thicket would have made rough going and any stir among the bushes might attract attention from the ridge, and he kept on around the point, going as quietly as he could among the loose rocks.

It was easy to understand why this gully lay unused and practically unknown. The fringe of wild rose bushes grew tangled with wild hop vines at the top, the bank was steep and gravelly and the bottom was rough. Not even a cow path dignified it as a passable route to the spring.

The kid did not feel that he was taking any risk, but he had been well drilled in caution, so he went sneaking along, keeping close under the bank and stopping every few feet to listen and peer ahead. And that is how he sensed a human presence near. He could not see any one, and it was so quiet that he could hear a lone mosquito humming over his head. Yet he knew that some one was hiding in the bushes just above the spring, lying close under cover and watching the cabin and the open flat beyond.

IV

"YO'-ALL bettah crawl back outa that bresh." The kid spoke with an ominous kind of calm. "Come damn' careful, lessen yo're hungry fo' lead."

Immediately the bushes shook as if swept by a sudden gale. A pair of legs with blue overalls tucked into worn riding boots came squirming backward into view. The kid reached out and grabbed one and gave it a vicious yank, and the form it belonged to came sliding down and landed pretty much in a heap at the edge of the pool. The kid stepped back, his gun sagging at his side and his other hand going up mechanically to claw at his hat.

"Ah—excuse me, Miss Murray," he blurted, crimson to his collar.

Nellie Murray, in her father's clothes and with her father's gray Stetson tilted over one eye at a most rakish angle, stared up at him with astonished blue eyes.

"Ah—good evenin'," the kid stammered again. "I hope yo'-all will excuse me—"

"I never even heard you!" gasped Nellie. "I thought you were in the cabin. Wasn't it you, shooting?"

"Yes'm, I reckon it was."

The kid was trying not to look at her. He had never before seen a girl dressed up in a man's clothes and he thought she must feel mighty bashful without her long skirts. Shuah did look cute, though. He dared one swift glance from under his hat brim and looked away, guilty but entranced.

But Nellie Murray was not thinking of her appearance. She got to her feet and stood looking at the kid doubtfully.

"How'd you get here?" she demanded, a puzzling frown wrinkling her forehead. "They said if they covered the door and window they'd have you bottled up, unless they could get you first shot as you came out. I heard them talking at the ranch. I couldn't slip away till things settled down and they'd gone."

While she was talking the tilted hat lifted in a small gust of wind and her thick yellow braid came down off the top of her head. The kid caught the hat and held it while she coiled her hair again and reached for the hat. It wouldn't go on, with all that hair. She must recoil the braid, tighter and higher on her head.

The kid took off his own hat, compared the two and saw that his was considerably larger. He blushed redder than before when he held it out to her.

"Reckon mine is some biggah," he said shyly.

Nellie looked at her old hat and her eyes filled until her lashes were wet.

"Ed wore it—and then my father. Both gone. I wouldn't want you to wear it, Mr. Reeves. It—seems to be unlucky."

"I shuah would rather take the bad luck than have you do it."

She let him have it then, and she took his hat and wore it. The kid's heart went jumpy as she stood there so slim and straight in her old pappy's overalls, tucking soft, yellow strands of her hair under his hat. Just standing there so near her brought a lump into his throat.

"I had to dress this way so they wouldn't know who it was if they saw me," she said with the first hint of an apology she had given.

"Yo'-all should've stayed home," he told her gently.

"I had to come and warn you if I could. I know you didn't shoot my father, but they'd kill you just the same. They're out to kill any Poole man they can find. And we owed you a favor. So I tried to beat them over here to tell you they were coming, but I almost ran into them on the lower trail and had to ride away around and come down the hill afoot. My horse is back up there, tied to a rock. I never thought it would be so hard to come down off the rim in the dark. I just got this far when the shooting started, and I knew I was too late. I can't get back, either, till dark. They'd see me, sure."

"It shuah was kind of yo'-all, but I wish yo' hadn't come, Miss Murray." The kid's face was grave, his eyes more tender than he guessed. "Babe's shot, and I'm aimin' to get him outa heah tonight. I was on my way to the stable to get the hosses."

"I'll help. I'll go crazy if I don't have something to do."

The kid tried to persuade her to stay under the bank by the spring, but he was secretly glad she wouldn't do it. There wasn't any danger at all, so far as he

could see. The stable was off to one side, completely out of the range of firing. To reach it from the ridge the nesters would have to cross an open stretch of level ground where one man had already come to grief. The kid did not believe they would try it again before dark.

From the spring to the stable there was a well beaten trail through a choke cherry thicket, and the kid led the way, thrilling to the sound of Nellie's footsteps behind him. The stable door was sheltered from view of the ridge by the small haystack and by the clump of service berry bushes where the nester had hidden that morning. There really was no danger of being seen at the stable. The kid went quietly to work saddling the horses while Nellie stood and watched. It was all so simple that the kid almost forgot the rifles over on the ridge. But while the horses were drinking thirstily from the pool the crackle of more shooting reminded him that the battle was still going on.

"Reckon I bettah get back to the cabin and answer those shots with a few of my own," he said uneasily to Nellie. "I'll take the watah bucket. If yo'-all would follow along with Babe's hoss I'd be much obliged, Miss Murray."

"You aren't going to try and get away down the trail, I hope. You never would make it alive. They're watching for that. They wouldn't like anything better than to have you try it."

THE KID only smiled at her vaguely as he led the way down the gully, with a bucket of water in one hand, Pecos' lead rope in the other, old Pappy Murray's dingy gray hat riding precariously on the top of his head and his eyes and ears on the alert for rattlesnakes among the rocks. He walked fast, but his thoughts went faster.

Nellie, coming along behind him, with never a whimper of fear for herself, filled him with a great wonder. Made a fellow feel like he could stand up and fight the whole world. Made him feel cheap and no-account, even while he was all happy inside. Made him sorry he couldn't be more worth the trouble she was taking.

Shuah complicated matters, too, having her along. Going to be bad enough, making a run for it with Babe. Never planned on having anybody else to look after—Nellie Murray, least of all. They'd need another horse, and they'd need somebody that could shoot and hold back the nesters. The kid didn't see how he was going to make it, but it never occurred to him to change his plan. There wasn't any other plan to change to; not unless he just rode off with Nellie and left Babe—

"Reckon yo'-all bettah wait down heah with the hosses." The kid turned and set down the water bucket. "I'll tote Babe out and put him on his hoss."

"Through the roof? You can't do it alone. I'll have to help."

The kid looked down at her with a flame in his eyes which she must have mistaken for anger, for she caught him by the arm and stamped her foot at him.

"I hate a man that thinks a woman can't do anything but faint and cry when there's danger to meet. Do you suppose I thought I was going to a Sunday school picnic when I started over here to keep that bunch from murdering you? I did it to stop all this killing. I don't care who it is, murder doesn't wipe out murder. But you can't talk to those darned fools and make them see it. They're after Poole blood, and all mother and I could say didn't do a bit of good. They just think we're soft!"

She was talking so fast the kid could only stand and look at her and wonder at her courage and her beauty and the incredible fact of her being there at all.

"You've got to have help, and you may as well own it first as last." She must have thought his silence was plain stubbornness, for she gave his arm an impatient shake. "You can't do it without me."

"Yo'-all can't go in, Miss Murray. They keep on shootin' at the cabin. Bullets come through the doah and window like bees into a hive in a plum thicket."

"I wouldn't get hit any quicker than you would." But she let her fingers slip

from his arm. "Well, all right—you go on and boost him through, and I'll stay outside and ease him down to the ground. But do be careful, won't you—Bob?"

"Shuah will—Nellie. I cain't say what I want to say," murmured the kid helplessly. "I nevah did see a girl like yo'-all—"

He turned abruptly away from her and climbed the steep bank of the gully, his eyes swimming with moisture so that he could scarcely see where to put his feet.

Babe lay with his eyes shut and his face twitching with the pain of his wound, and he did not pay any attention to the clods of dirt that rattled down on the blankets. The kid picked up one of the rifles and began shooting at the ridge, rushing from one loophole to another to make it look as if two men were handling the guns.

He even achieved what might be called positive evidence of that fact, by tying a string to one trigger and, with the rifle braced in a loophole, firing that gun with his own. Several times he did that, cunningly spacing the shots so close together that the nesters would believe it impossible for one man to handle both guns. Once he achieved the feat of shooting both at exactly the same instant. He was so proud of that he wished Nellie was there to see; or that Babe was awake so he could tell him. They'd think Babe wasn't hurt so bad he couldn't fight, and they'd hold off till dark, maybe longer, before they tried to rush the cabin.

The air was thick and acrid with powder smoke. The kid looked at his old silver watch and saw that the afternoon was half gone. No use moving Babe yet. He'd die on the horse before they could get him out of the gully. It would have to be dark when they made it.

Nellie, out there—she must be hungry, hiding in the brush since dawn. Mighty hungry himself, now he got to thinking about grub. The kid reckoned it would be safe to have a little picnic out back of the cabin in the shade. Just him and Nellie. Babe was all right. Nothing to do for him but let him lie quiet as long as possible. Asleep, by the look of him. Sleep shuah is a merciful thing when a man's hurt. Better than being awake and talking crazy. Looking at Babe lying there so quiet, the kid could not believe he was a cold blooded killer. Not the kind of a killer that would shoot an old man in the back. Babe was too big hearted for that.

The kid wrung out a folded towel in cold water and laid it across Babe's forehead before he crawled out through the roof with a picnic lunch for Nellie. The men on the ridge would have been astonished to see the two sitting there with their backs to the wall of the beleaguered cabin, feasting contentedly on cold sourdough biscuits, cold bacon and dried-blackberry sauce.

Once in awhile the kid would remember his responsibilities and would crawl reluctantly into the cabin to take a look at Babe and send a few shots across to the ridge. Then he would crawl eagerly out again and the low murmur of voices and stifled laughter would go on, oblivious to danger and the passing hours.

THE KID was holding his mouth harp between his cupped hands, watching Nellie from the corner of his eyes. He played "The Mocking Bird" softly, with more trills and chirps and warbles than he had ever attempted before in his life, and his booted feet kept time with noiseless tappings on the ground. The basin was very quiet, the shadows were stretching long and lean to the eastward. Nellie sat curling the end of her yellow braid absently around her fingers, her eyes downcast and her lips half smiling.

"Listen to the mocking bird," listen to the mocking bird!
The mocking bird is singing all the day—"

"Damn it, Tiger Eye, why don't you shoot to *kill!* What you so damn' chicken hearted for? Damn' cow thieves—"

"Babe's woke up." The kid lowered the mouth harp from his lips, heaving a deep sigh as he wiped it on his sleeve and slid it into his pocket. "Plumb outa his haid again. Reckon it's time to be moving,

Nellie. Shuah do hate to see this evenin' end. I shuah do."

He sighed again as he rose, hitched up his gun belt and looked gravely down at her.

"We all could get out o' heah easy if it was just us two. But I cain't leave Babe. He's been pow'ful good to me, Babe has."

"Of course we can't leave him. They'd kill him, sure, and there's been too much killing already. We'll make it somehow. I—you can just do anything, Tiger Eye!"

"Shuah feel like I could, from now on," said the kid, looking at her with shy meaning, and started to climb. "We'll make it," he called softly down to her. "We've plumb got to make it."

They did make it. Down the gully, with Babe tied on his horse, insensible to pain or motion. Fifty yards, a hundred, with the rifles on the ridge barking foolishly at the empty cabin. Rough going, among the brush and rocks. The kid walked ahead, leading Babe's horse and steadying Babe's limp body all he could. Nellie stumbled along behind with the kid's brown horse Pecos, carrying the water that might save Babe's life. Slow work. There were places where the kid must move rocks before the horses could go on.

The sun went down behind the rim, the daylight was merging into dusk when the kid forced the horses up the steep bank and turned them toward the Big Bench. Nellie's horse was tied to a rock up there. They couldn't go off and leave her horse, even if she didn't need him to ride. The kid knew that, but his heart was growing leaden at the thought of how their trails must part. And who knew when or how they would meet again?

"Say, where you think you're goin', Tiger Eye?" Babe roused suddenly to consciousness and speech when they stopped beside Nellie's horse circling the rock anxiously in the starlight.

"Reckon we'll go on ovah to the Poole, Babe."

It was the only thing to do, but the kid's heart was not in it. The trail separated here. Nellie Murray never would ride to the Poole ranch; Babe could not go to the valley.

"What you goin' to the Poole all of a sudden for?" Babe's voice sharpened. "Think you'll beat me to the bounty? You've got another think comin', kid. I'll do the collectin' on this one."

"Don't know what yo'-all talkin' about, Babe." The kid glanced uneasily toward Nellie. "I'm totin' yo'-all ovah to the Poole, account of that bullet hole in yo' side."

"You're a damned liar!" Babe's voice was abnormally loud and distinct. Nellie, mounting her horse, reined close to listen. "You're goin' to try and gyp me outa my money for old Murray. You can have the pay for gettin' Ed Murray, if you want to be on the grab, but I'll be damned if you're going to collect for the old man!"

"Oh, you—you fiend!" Nellie forced the words out through her clenched teeth. "Paid killers, both of you!"

"Ain't paid yet, but I'm sure as hell goin' to be. Damn' right!" The febrile strength that had upheld Babe there for a minute began to ebb. He swayed in the saddle. "Dirty work—and it's money talks, in this neck o' the woods. Damn' right I'll be paid! Tiger Eye ain't goin' to get the best—the best of me. He can't—"

His head lolled on his chest then as his body sagged against the ropes that held him in the saddle.

"You killer!" Nellie jumped her horse toward the kid, whose hand went up mechanically to catch the bridle before he was trampled.

"Yo'-all cain't believe that, Nellie. Babe's plumb crazy in the haid, to talk thataway."

"Crazy—yes. Crazy enough to let out the truth. A Texas killer. Just a lowdown, sneaking, heartless killer!"

She had pulled her quirt from the saddle horn, and she struck him across the face; swift, slashing blows which the kid never felt at all save in the heart of him. He just stood there in the starlight and held the frightened horse quiet, while the quirt he had given her left its

mark on neck and shoulder and cheek.

"And I trusted you like a fool—and thought you were good!" With one final blow her arm fell to her side as if in despair at ever wreaking vengeance upon him. "Shoot *me* now, why don't you? I'll turn my back!"

"Yo'-all's crazy as Babe." The soft drawl of his voice had a chill. "Yo' brothah was shot befo' I come into the country. I nevah did kill a man in my life, but I'm plumb tempted to right now —'lessen he's daid a'ready."

"Why? Because he gave you away?" Her voice shook with stubborn rage.

"Yo'-all knows bettah than that, Miss Murray. Yo'-all knows in yo' own mind I nevah hahmed a livin' soul." He leaned forward, staring up into her face with a cold intensity that thrilled her with something like fear. "But that ain't sayin' what I will do f'om now on," he added sternly.

"Bob! If you didn't—if I knew—"

"Evenin', ma'am. Yo'-all knows the way home."

He loosed the bridle and struck her horse on the rump with the flat of his hand and watched her go, and the thud of hoofbeats on the prairie fell like blows upon his heart. When no sound came back to him the kid mounted Pecos, took Babe's bridle reins in his hand and rode away into the night.

The DUELING OAKS

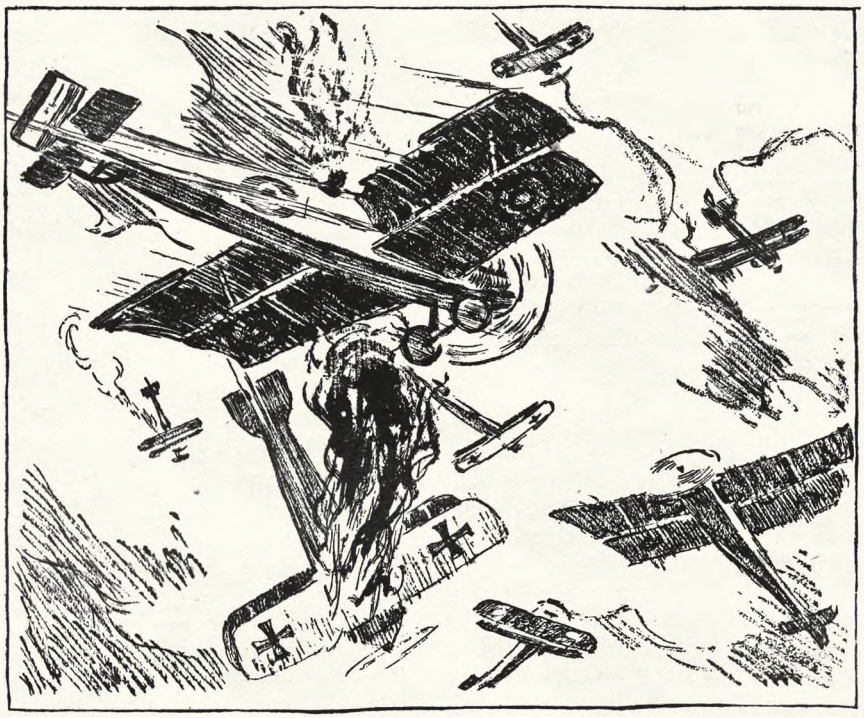
(New Orleans)

By COURTNEY McCURDY

THEY stand staunch still, though gnarled and season-scarred,
The sturdier for Time's hard buffetings;
And dream, perhaps, of tunes the bullet sings,
Pale dawns, proud voices challenging "On Guard!"
Death taking up the dice that Danger flings,
Bad manners mended, brave romances marred,
Red mornings, afternoons adventure-starred,
When Prudence had not yet clipped Valor's wings.

Memorials, they, of those barbaric days
When men laved not with law an insult's mud,
When injured Honor sought no balm but blood,
When Pride moved haughtily in its high ways:
"Days that are better dead", say some; but I
Have heard the old oaks, in their brooding, sigh!

A Story of the War Flyers



AMBITIOUS *and* CONSCIENTIOUS

By H. P. S. GREENE

"SEE THAT M. P. lieutenant there, Blackie?"

"Yes, I see the dirty twirp. How I keep my hands off him I don't know. I'm not certain whether I'm losing my nerve or acquiring discipline and self-control. Why, the other night—"

"Yes, yes, you told me about the other night. But you don't need to worry any more about that bird. Right now I wouldn't be in his place for a thousand dollars."

"You don't say, Bill? You don't mean to tell me he's in bad?"

"In bad? He's in worst! Listen. You know all about how he's been going up to every one he sees with a woman and saying—"

"Do I know about it? Didn't I tell you about the other night when—"

"Yes, you did. Well, he did it once too

often. This afternoon he went up to a guy who was just getting into a car with a woman, and said— 'Hey, Lieutenant, get away from that tart!' "

"Well, look what he said to me."

"Yes, but this was different. This was General Hannahfeeld's son, and the woman was the Duchess Pullet, or something like that, who has a château down the river. She's an American, and a great friend of the general's wife, and she drove into town to take the general's son out to her place, and then that lousy policeman came up—"

"Is that a fact, Bill?"

"Truest thing you know, Blackie."

"Well, I must say you've taken a load off my mind. That M. P. was souring my life, and I didn't know what to do about it. Now I guess I can trust the general to take the matter out of my hands."

"Yes, I think you can safely leave it to the general, to say nothing of the duchess and the general's wife."

"Well, Bill, that's the first time I ever knew of a general being good for anything. But say, you wouldn't know the old place around here now, would you?"

"No, you wouldn't. Just think of the old days when a hundred or so of us cadets were the only American soldiers they'd ever seen, and Vouvray '93 was six francs a bottle, and we owned the town on a hundred dollars a month. Why, we wouldn't have known an M. P. from a stretcher bearer, and the medical major who examined us was the highest rank we'd ever seen. Now you can't spit out of your bedroom window and hit anything lower than a colonel. It certainly was tough when they took me off flying after my crackup and put me to work in the office here. I envy you getting to the Front, Blackie."

"Well, Bill, of course I'm glad I went, now it's over with, but there were times I wished I was selling chewing gum in some canteen. Say, it seems to me there's been a let-down in efficiency since the Armistice. The waiters are slowing up. Hey, *garçon!*"

"Say, Blackie, I've been meaning to ask you what happened to Charley Maddocks. Didn't he go up to your group and get reported missing? Did they ever find out what happened to him?"

"Why, Bill? Was he a particular friend of yours?"

"Well, I'd hardly say that, but I knew him quite well. He and I went through ground school together. He always seemed like an ambitious, conscientious sort of bird."

"A-ha! You summed it up there. Ambitious and conscientious. You admit he was! I take it from that that he wasn't a particular friend of yours. Ambitious and conscientious. You've put your finger right on it. That's the whole thing in a nutshell, and that's what ruined him. Cæsar was only ambitious, and you remember what happened to him. But when a guy's both ambitious and conscientious, he hasn't got a chance."

"You know what happened to him, then? I thought he was listed as missing."

"He was, and I guess he still is, officially, but those things get around. I'll tell you what I know, and you can judge for yourself . . .

"CHARLEY and I were both up doing day bombardment with a French squadron, and we got along all right. Made about a dozen raids apiece, and got away with a few scraps all O. K. Then our Army began to get some planes of their own, and we were called in to act as flight leaders in one of the new squadrons they were making up. When we got to the group we found Major Dunhill in command. You remember him here. He called Charley and me in and said:

" 'Now you two men will act as flight leaders in one of the new squadrons, and it's up to you to make a showing. Everybody is sore at the Air Service, and the Air Service is sore at the bombers on account of the commanding officer who preceded me leading a squadron of Breguets over and running out of gas, and presenting the whole outfit, planes, pilots and observers to the Germans. We've got

to make a showing,' he went on. 'Flight leaders who make good will be promoted to captains, and the one who makes the best showing will get command of the squadron, and a majority. Now it's up to you.'

"All he seemed to think about was making a showing. And you see how foxy he was trying to be, trying to set Charley and me against each other to make a showing for *him*.

"Well, I must say I didn't fall very hard for it, because I'm too lazy to be ambitious. A first lieutenant's the ideal rank, except for pay. A captain is likely to have some job with responsibility shoved on to him, and a shavetail draws the dirty work, while a first lieutenant can be inefficient as hell and get away with it, and run around and have a good time. So I didn't fall much. But Charley! You could see the change in him right away. He started to throw out his chest and strut around and try to make a showing of authority like a major already. He was ambitious.

"The other birds who were to make up the squadron came in the next day, and we all went down to Columbey to fly up our ships. It was the first time I'd seen 'em, and I almost died. No, you're right. I know I don't have to tell you about 'em. But the square fuselage with its hinged top reminded me of a Coffin, and the Flaming part was added quick enough after a few burned up.

"I took mine and tried it out up and down a road I knew the length of, and averaged up the times each way, and figured out she'd make around eighty or eighty-five wide open and rattling.

"Then I flew over to my old French squadron and had a race with a Breguet and got beaten. Next day when I left, all the Frenchmen tried to kiss me goodby, because they were sure they'd never see me again. Of course, I told Dunhill I had a forced landing.

"Our mechanics were already there at the field, and we put them to work on the old crates right away. They had no guns, and all of them had to be re-rigged, and most of the motors needed a lot of tuning up. The poor macs worked fifteen or eighteen hours a day trying to get them so they'd fly. And then we had four or five wrecks on account of the adjustable stabilizers, and some kind of a trick super-charger they had.

"Remember, nobody, pilots or mechanics, had ever seen one before. And the best part of the whole thing was it was raining most all the time, and the ground was so soft and muddy that we broke props when we tried to take off and find out whether they'd fly or not after we thought we had them fixed. We were all up in the air the night of the eleventh when Dunhill called Charley and me up to his office.

" 'Gentlemen,' he said, without cracking a smile, 'your flights will leave here at daybreak tomorrow morning and report at O'Toole for the purpose of protecting Spads on their patrols. Since your ships are bi-place and have an observer with two guns pointing behind, you will be able to protect the single-seater Spads from an attack from the rear.'

"I could hardly believe he wasn't joking. It didn't seem possible, leaving everything else out of consideration, that anybody could send a crate that would only make eighty miles an hour to protect a bunch of ships that would go a hundred and twenty, and could barely keep from losing flying speed and falling at eighty. It was worse than sending a freighter to protect a flotilla of destroyers. But I saw he was serious about it. Still, I thought I ought to put in a protest.

" 'But, Major,' I said, 'how are you going to protect something you can't keep up to? And besides, we're not ready. Some of the ships haven't any guns, to say nothing of bomb racks, and we're supposed to be a bombing squadron.'

" 'Look here, young man,' he said, 'you're here to take orders, not to ask questions. I've got orders to send you to protect Spads, and I've got to make a showing. I've got nothing to do with the Ordnance Department. If they haven't supplied guns for you, that's their hard

luck. The officer responsible will no doubt be disciplined for inefficiency.'

" 'But what good will that do the poor bozos who get shot down without any guns to protect themselves with?' I wanted to know.

" 'That will be enough from you, young man,' he said, and from the tone of his voice I knew he was right, and I'd better shut up. 'This group has got to make a showing. And don't forget what I said about a squadron commander being appointed. The officer who makes the best showing will undoubtedly receive the promotion.'

"CHARLEY and I saluted and went out, because there was nothing else to do. But I could see he was worried. Ambition and conscience had him like two dogs fighting over a bone. After awhile he said—

" 'Look here, Blackie, what are you going to do about those crazy orders?'

" 'Do!' I said. 'There's only one thing to do. I'm going to tell my boys it's all damn' foolishness, and to lay off.'

" 'But it's orders,' he says weakly, 'and this is the Army. Besides, the major said we'd got to make a showing.'

"I didn't have a word to say to that. But all the time from then on, I could see pretty well what was running in Charley's mind. Between ambition and conscience he was about crazy. I'm not troubled that way.

"I called the birds in my flight together and made a speech. They were like most every one is when he first gets to the Front—glad to get a chance at some action at last, and nervous and scared. Or not exactly scared, but scared they will be scared, if you get what I mean. I told them:

" 'Now, look here, you guys. This is all strictly unofficial, and if what I'm going to say should get out, I might be shot at sunrise, but I'm trusting you not to say a word. And remember that these aren't orders I'm giving you, just hints. Tomorrow we are ordered to go to O'Toole and protect Spads. If you've got any sense at all, you know how foolish that is, because sooner or later the Spads will run away from you and leave you all alone and lonesome, and some bright young Boches will gang up on you and shoot you down.

" 'Now my confidential advice is this. Break down, get lost, or land in a treetop, but don't go anywhere near the Front with a bunch of Spads, or you'll have hard luck. I'm not going to say another word, but one to the wise, or even the halfwitted, ought to be plenty. Above all, study your maps so you'll know where the Front is and be able to keep away from it. And remember this is just a hint.'

"WELL, next morning it cleared up some, and we managed to get off the ground with only one crackup, and when the seven crates left in my flight landed at O'Toole we made quite a showing. There were four of them including mine that had guns on them, and two patrols of Spads we were supposed to protect; and I sent one of the armed machines along with one gang and took the other myself.

"I flew away from the field after the Spads, and as soon as we were out of sight I went over to a French airdrome and had a drink. After an hour I went back to the field and reported that I couldn't keep up to the Spads. My pilot said the same thing. But one of the ships that Charley sent over didn't come back. It seems the Spads left it, and the birds in it got lost, and finally landed in Germany.

"On the afternoon patrols we were supposed to protect I sent up the other two crates that had guns and went along myself to have a look at the war. I had a good observer, Micky Miller, and reports said there weren't many Boches in the sky, so I felt fairly safe. I took off a little before the patrols and got some altitude so I could see things.

"When I got up to the lines I began to be sorry I'd come, for the pilot's visibility is terrible in a Coffin. He's right up

between the wings, and can't see much of anything. But, as I said, I had a good observer, and trusted him not to get caught napping. I wonder where he is now. Last time I heard of him they were picking tracer bullets out of his leg.

"After awhile I saw a patrol of Spads idling along with a Coffin struggling in the rear. The Spads S'd a little once in a while, so it could keep up. Then all of a sudden the Spads saw a Boche observation plane, and they all gave her the gun and went away after it, and left the Coffin hanging in the air. They didn't catch the Boche, and I guess they forgot all about the crate that was supposed to be protecting them, for they all went right on and never came back.

"Then I saw three Boches—Fokkers—going for that one American plane. I started to go down and try to help, but I didn't have a chance. Before my mess of junk got going there was a burst of flame and black smoke, and two men and a Coffin were going down.

"It always gives me a crawly feeling way down in the guts to see anybody going down in flames—even a Boche. When those two birds in that Coffin went, just as a result of damn' foolishness, and not a chance of their being any use, it made me sick. But all I could do was to get away from there before they got after me. When I got back to O'Toole I found Charley quite anxious.

" 'Say,' he said, 'one of my ships hasn't come back. Know anything about it?'

" 'Yeah,' I said. 'I saw it go down in flames after the Spads went off and left it with some Fokkers. It made quite a showing.'

"I never saw a man look sicker than Charley did then, and I thought he'd tell what was left of his gang to lay off trying to protect Spads from that time on. He was about cured of being ambitious, with two ships and four men lost.

"But I didn't reckon on his being so conscientious that he wouldn't criticize an order from up above, and later on I found out that he didn't say a word.

"My two crates reported in all right by telephone. One guy landed and drilled a hole in his gas tank, and another who didn't have any tools to work with knocked out three of his spark plugs with a stone. I couldn't do better myself, and knew that I had the makings of a good flight.

"The next day I sent the bird who'd reported that he couldn't keep up with one patrol, and detailed myself to the other. I took off first to get a start and some altitude, and cruised around, looking the country over. After awhile I saw another patrol of Spads, six of 'em, with a Coffin bringing up the rear. I was afraid the goof in my patrol might have lost his mind or his patience and be obeying orders, and decided to go down and find out. But before I got started, hell started to pop.

"Right out of the sun I saw 'em coming, Fokkers and Fokkers and Fokkers, red and blue noses, twenty or thirty of them, two circuses at least, and they went into a running dog fight with the Spads, who were trying to get away. I don't blame 'em. Would you go up and punch Jack Johnson in the nose? And it wasn't their fault some high ranking halfwit had sent that Coffin along with them. Four Fokkers stayed behind to finish it off, and they were all over it.

"Well, there's no fool like a damn' fool, and I put her into a dive and went down. From the way she strained and buckled I thought sure I'd lose my wings when I tried to pull out, if not before, but I was sore. One Boche got right in front of my guns and started down like he was out of control, but just then the Coffin blew up, and the other three Fokkers hopped on to me!

"To this day I don't know how I got away. Their damn' bullets tore the fabric and splintered the struts while I put the old can into evolutions Immelmann never dreamed of, before another bunch of Spads came along and chased 'em away. I managed to ease my crate down to a rough landing in a little field somewhere back of Saint Mike, and a little boy came up and felt the right wing to see

what it was made of, and I'll swear it fell off!

"Well, the order for us to protect Spads was rescinded that night, and next morning we went back to our own field. When Charley and I went up to headquarters to turn in our reports, Major Dunhill rubbed his hands and asked—

" 'What kind of a showing did you make?'

"Charley didn't say anything, but I couldn't resist getting off:

" 'Six men missing, four of them down in flames. There wasn't any other outfit made a showing like that!'

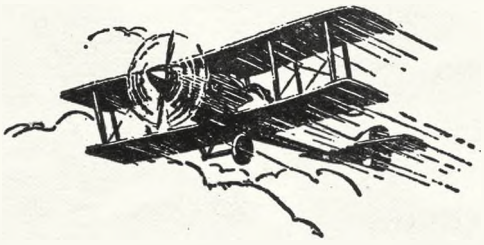
"I was disgusted and didn't give a damn'. But from then on it was nip and tuck whether Dunhill or I would get the ax first. I guess because I flew around and made good bait for Fokkers and he stayed on the ground was the reason it was him.

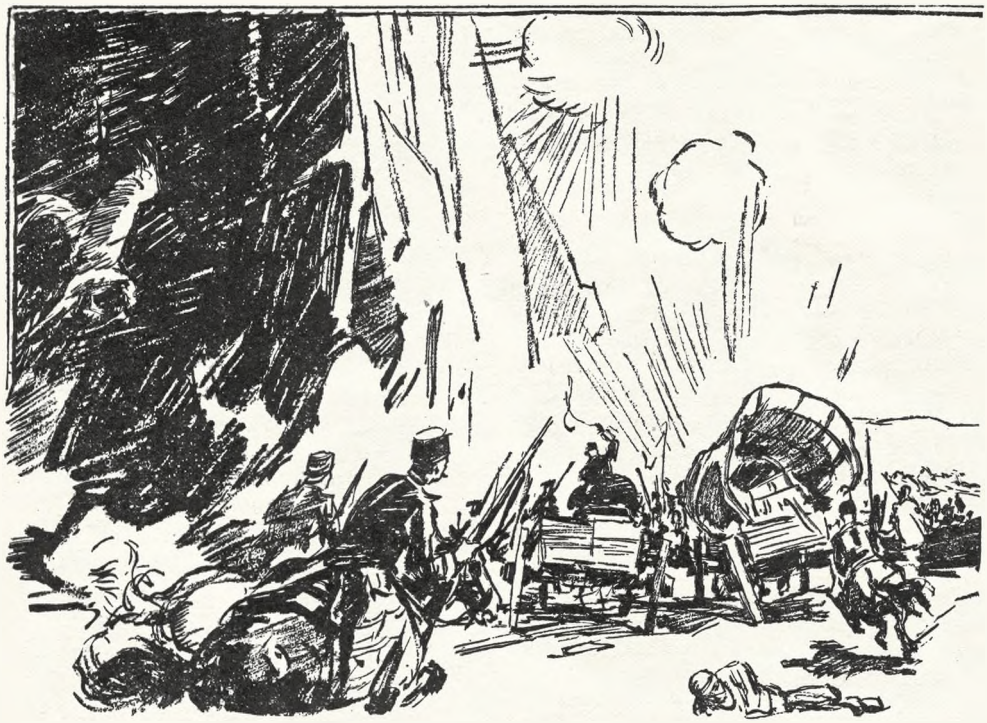
"Charley felt so bad on account of having those dead men on his conscience that he'd hardly say a word to anybody, but still his ambition was beginning to come back, and next day he got another blow. A young, dapper looking bird in pink breeches and captain's bars blew in from some British outfit he'd been flying with and told us he was our new commanding officer. That was the last straw for Charley. Next day he was reported missing."

"But what really became of him?" Bill inquired.

"As to that I couldn't take oath," Blackie replied. "But he got up early in the morning, had his ship loaded with bombs and plenty of ammunition and a sandbag for an observer, and took off. That was the last official news ever heard of him.

"But a few days later a couple of our birds got brought down alive, and when they came back after the Armistice they had a story. The Germans at an airdrome they were taken to told them about how a lone foôl in a Coffin had come over and dropped bombs and shot them up and raised particular hell before he was brought down flaming. Now you can make your own guess, but mine is that it was Charley trying to do penance for his sins. You must bear in mind that he was both ambitious and conscientious."





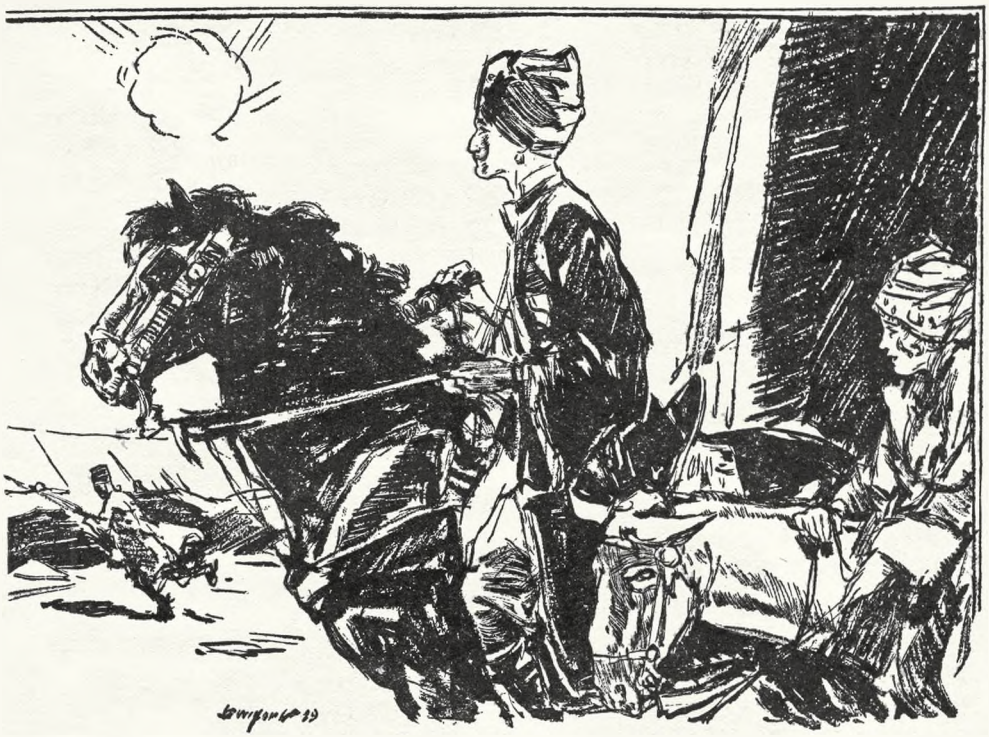
Concluding

The INVISIBLE GUNS *of* KABUL

THE WORLD WAR robbed Angus —nicknamed Gup—McLeod of his finest comrades and brought about the faithlessness of his wife. Gup attempted to bury himself in India, but he was too much of an individualist for such passive cynicism. He soon resigned his commission, horsewhipped Major Glint and fled to the border state of Jullunder. Gup was handsome, and six feet two. The Ranee of Jullunder was beautiful. In younger days she had been Lottie Carstairs, a singer in London, who disappeared from England about the time the late Rajah of Jullunder returned from Europe to his native Hills.

Gup and the ranee fell into a sort of proud love. He offered her his loyalty—up to the point where Jullunder conflicted with India. She offered him the commandership of her army.

The army was a Hillmen force, weaned on wind and barley and reared on plunder, eager to fight in any direction. This army was concealed in a mountain-fortress near Khyber Pass. There, also, the ranee held



A Novel of the Afghan Border

By TALBOT MUNDY

court, and there in the caverns were horses, mules, ammunition and a huge chamber full of poison gas which a Russian had concocted. On the morrow Gup was to be sworn in as commander-in-chief of the army. Gup had no love for the Emir of Afghanistan, who was attempting an alliance with the ranee—Gup suspected that several of the ranee's advisers were in secret communication with the emir.

So, on the eve of Gup's initiation as commander, he resolved to clear Jullunder of suspects. With his Pathan escort he seized Harriet Dover, the ranee's secretary; an Indian woman; Jonesey, a queer fellow who had gone native in the Hills; and the Russian who had manufactured the poison gas—all enemies of the British Empire.

Gup was remembering two promises he had made. To the ranee he had pledged loyalty to her army; to Tom O'Hara, of the Indian service, he had promised to throw his influence against the emir, and for India. But Gup Bahadur needed no pledges to lead him. He had a Scotch

conscience, he was in love with the ranee and he knew that the good of Jullunder demanded that if he fight any one, it must be the scheming Afghan emir.

When the day dawned that Afghanistan and India were to meet in Khyber Pass, Gup was riding away from the fortress with his prisoners. And, in her royal peacock room. the ranee thought Gup had deserted her. But Gup was planning a campaign of his own. Was he not commander-in-chief of the army? His Pathan guards rode alongside his great black stallion, eager to dispose of Harriet Dover, or whoever else threatened the power and glory of the ranee—glorious Lottie Carstairs.

* * *

One vow—one Vow Inviolable stands,
And none can break it. Neither life nor death
Nor Devils; no thing made with hands,
Imagin'd or imbued with living breath,
Nor all eternity can alter it. Not sun nor stars,
Nor mob's opinion, nor law, nor learned lies;
No sin, lack, punishment, nor prison bars
Can change God's word: who tries shall rise.

CHAPTER XXI

"HE'LL LIVE FOREVER. HE'S TOO MEAN FOR THE DEVIL TO LET HIM DIE."

GUP TRUSTED Jonesey to show him a place where he could camp without interference, yet without being too inaccessible or too far from the central stage on which the coming crisis must be set. He knew that Jonesey was suffering ecstasy of curiosity. He enlightened him enough to keep that curiosity alert and alive, while Jonesey strode along beside him, clinging to a stirrup leather.

"To empty a tank of difficulties, pull the plug," he remarked. "I've pulled it. Now watch things happen."

"Only Allah can guess what will happen," said Jonesey. "But are you such a fatalist?"

"No."

"You'd call yourself an opportunist?"

"No. I'm a man with a job. I'm the plug; I have pulled myself."

"I have heard of pulling camel's noses, and one's own leg. Well, I'll put you where you can look down like an eagle. But of what use are your prisoners?"

"None," said Gup. "I am satisfied if they are no use to the enemy."

"Which enemy?"

But Gup was neither to be drawn so easily nor disposed to let good curiosity go to waste.

"I wish I knew," he answered.

"May I talk to them?"

"Talk all you like. Say what you like. But tell me what you learn."

Soon Jonesey vanished, making his excuse that the track was too narrow to cling to the stirrup. But that did not prevent him from walking beside a burdened mule. Gup could hear him, chattering to Harriet Dover as if there were nothing else to talk about beneath those quiet stars, than poets and the difference between Welsh hymns and purely pagan mysticism. He was asking no questions, doing all the talking, offering a frantic woman something else to think about than her own despair.

As far as Gup could overhear he dropped no hint of what was really on his mind. He flattered her intellectuality; he made her feel that there was no philosophy, no knowledge that she could not fathom. When he asked her a question at last it was:

"Which stirs your soul more—the cry of the muezzin from a minaret, or organ music?"

Gup could not hear her answer, a mule's stumbling interrupted, but her voice seemed to have lost its strained antagonism.

Hour after hour the trail led upward, along sightless ledges, around shoulders of enormous spurs that upheld ponderous, looming cliffs against a moonlit sky, skirting shadowy ravines in which a night wind moaned of loneliness, until, soon after midnight, they reached a level place,

an acre in extent, where once there had been cultivation and a spring wept musically. Once there had been a *sangar*—one of those rock built fortress houses in which Hillmen are weaned on wind and barley—but the Indian troops had burned it in a border war. It was a cairn now, blackened with smoke.

Along the ragged front there was a sheer drop of a thousand feet, but a wall had been built partly for privacy, partly to break the wind and keep cattle safe, but principally for defense against neighbors. Silver and luminous black in the moonlight, less than rifle range away across a grim gorge, was a similar ledge where a *sangar* once had been. There was a track, such as goats might use, connecting the two ledges, but it was more than two miles long, ribboning in moonlight, like a zigzag pen stroke, all along the flank of the gorge and back along the farther side.

They pitched the tents. Gup went to the wall, when he had blanketed the stallion. Leaning on its breast high bulwark, he stared at the valley before him, opening a mile away between the edges of a broken range. An earthquake probably had done that havoc. Mile on mile, between enormous hills, there lay a moonlit plain, level and strewn with boulders, two dry rivers wandering across its face. Heaped around its rim there lay the wreckage of shaken hillsides, taking on fantastic shapes in the slow flow of a fluffy mist. And it seemed that under almost every boulder was a crimsom fire. Dark shapes, that in the distances seemed like insects, moved in the manner of men in bivouac. No other movement in the world resembles that.

They were not big fires; fuel was being husbanded. Gup tried to count them and to estimate the numbers of the *lashkar* lurking there, but beyond that there were several thousand men he could not guess their number.

Jonesey stole up silently and leaned beside him, spreading his splay beard on the wall until his head looked like a battle trophy stuck there to grin at the gates of death.

"I swear there is no god but God!" he exclaimed, quoting the Moslem formula. "But what is God? And who are we? Look what a woman's idea can do to men who never saw her! If there is one man there, there are ten thousand. Fuel, food, ammunition—each man has carried his own from some hungry valley, or from some place such as the *sangar* on this ledge once was. You can stir men with the hope of loot. You can summon them with empty promises. But you can't hold them and keep them silent and obedient with less than an idea—an idea that is over their heads, but not too far over them, or they will call you a heretic. Have you a better idea than she had? If so, India is yours, my son. There are the men who will present it to you, seethed in its own red gravy!"

"What have you learned?" Gup asked him.

"Not much yet, except that she thinks you smarter than you are. She accuses you of having intercepted letters she expected from Peshawar."

"Wish I had," Gup answered.

"And she wants to talk to you," said Jonesey. "May I come and listen?"

Gup pondered it, drumming his fingers on the dew-damp stone.

"Is she alone in her tent?" he asked at last. "All right. Crawl up behind the tent." He had a notion that the more that Jonesey knew, the more likely he would be able to trap him.

NOISILY he summoned guards and posted them just out of earshot of low voices, taking care that Harriet Dover heard him order them to keep everyone else at a distance. He whispered to them to let Jonesey do exactly what he pleased. Then he strode up to her tent, where she lay on a cot by the light of a candle lantern.

"Care to talk to me?" he asked her.

"I may as well," she said. "You are the last card left. It's you or suicide."

"People who really mean suicide don't talk about it," Gup assured her.

"True. But you're the only alternative.

That's why I consent to talk to you."

He sat on a mule pack in the tent door, where he could watch the camp and see her at the same time. His back was against the tent pole. Moonlight spread the shadow of the tent in a pool of velvet black behind him and he supposed that Jonesey lurked there—not that he really cared or thought that Jonesey was important at the moment.

"You are a much smarter man than I thought you were," said Harriet Dover.

But Gup had not brought her for that sort of conversation.

"Shall I have that Russian brought up here?" he asked. "Or would you prefer to talk frankly without his assistance?"

"Are you bluffing?" she asked.

"Try me."

"What do you want to know?"

"About your sending poison to Kabul —and why you did it."

She paused so long that Gup began to suspect his bluff had failed. He heard a movement in the darkness at his back and wondered whether she, too, heard it.

"Oh, well, what difference does it make?" she said at last. "I sent a woman to Kabul with some poison for the emir's wife."

"Why?"

"What an idiotic question! So that he might make Lottie his queen. Why else?"

"But why?"

"You know her now. You have talked with her. She is as hopeless as you are. Kind, too kind, sentimental. Is there anything worse? She can dream, but she isn't ruthless, and she dreads the mud and blood that makes dreams come true. She would make a nice, good looking queen, but as a kingdom builder she is a disastrous failure. Let the emir have her!"

There was another long pause, broken by the noisy prayers of a Hillman of Gup's bodyguard, who had seen the bivouac fires in the Valley of Doab and remembered what the Koran has to say about the baleful flames of hell.

"It appears to me," Gup said at last, "that in spite of your superior brains and ruthlessness, and her excess of sentiment, you are not so well off as she is. What do you suppose is going to happen to you?"

Harriet Dover laughed mirthlessly.

"I know you're not going to kill me, if that's what you mean! You're another of life's bitter disappointments. When you first came, what with Rahman's account of you, and your eyes and your great freckled fists and your shoulders, I almost hoped! It took me five whole minutes to undeceive myself. I was right when I called you a blond beast. You are a mere Nordic animal, full of hypocrisy that you think is your soul! Oh, you despiser of opportunity! Can't I tempt you even yet to sin like a hero? Take Lottie if you want to. Seize her, seize her goods and cut loose. I could make you conqueror of half a world. Or take me, if you like. I could never love you, but I could make you love me—and I could turn you into the man you will never be otherwise! But no, you won't—you can't. You have morals. I would rather have measles! Jonesey would be likelier than you; at least he has no morals. But he isn't a man; if he had been, he would have knifed you when you stole his maps."

Again Gup heard quiet movement in the deep, black shadow behind him. He hoped Jonesey had heard that comment.

"What would you call failure?" Gup asked tartly.

Harriet Dover sneered.

"Oh, I broke down. I know it. But it was too much work and worry, not stupidity such as yours and Lottie's that made me crack at last. But I'll get over it. I'm over it now. Are you the cad I've called you—or don't you kick a person when she's down?"

"What do you suggest?" Gup asked her.

It was her turn to be silent. She lay on her chest with her head toward him and the candle shining near her face. His face was as clear as a cameo in moonlight. He had laid aside his turban; she could study the shape of his head as well as his profile.

"You have imagination," she said at last. "You are a smasher, too, when you once get started. But you get drunk on

romance like an imbecile. You are drunk on it now. Try to get sober and listen to me."

"I listen."

He was listening again to noises in the shadow at his back, wishing that Jonesey would keep still.

"I am not romantic and not a natural born fool. Ten minutes after you came I knew we were done for. I saw ruin staring at us, with your great fists and feet making it worse every minute. Do you think I was such an idiot as to count only on the emir, or to trust the emir? I have taken every possible means of playing safe, and I will save you, even now, if you will listen to me. The emir is on the move. I know it! That isn't guesswork; I know it! I have written a letter to Glint in Peshawar. I have offered to do what he wants in return for an amnesty. I can include you in that, if you can only intercept Glint's answer before it reaches Lottie's guards."

GUP LOOKED relaxed, but every sinew in his body was ready to leap into instant action. Those sounds in the darkness behind him had become too noticeable not to make him nervous. It seemed impossible that Harriet Dover did not hear them too, although they were not loud. Perhaps she was trying to hold his attention while something happened. She began speaking louder:

"Resignation is no refuge for my spirit. I can not be defeated as long as I breathe."

There came a sudden sound of struggling in the darkness at Gup's back—then a gasp—then a voice:

"I knew it! Look at her knife—a yard long! Might have stuck me with it! Damn all Afghan women! Lie still, or I'll brain you with the hilt of it!"

Gup did not move, except to rest his elbow on his knee. If Tom O'Hara was there, there was nothing to worry about.

"Cheerio, Tom!" he said quietly. "Want any help?"

There came the sound of a terrific kick. Bibi Marwarid crawled on hands and knees into the tent in front of Tom O'Hara, who had stuffed her shawl so far into her throat that she was strangling; she got rid of it at last and lay gasping on the tent floor. Tom O'Hara squatted in front of Gup, his nose broadening and descending as he smiled. He was unshaved; reddish hair and wrinkles stirred in whorls around his owl's eyes.

"Where is Jonesey?" Gup asked.

"Slumberland. I hit 'im. Bad egg—lucky I didn't kill 'im. Should have. He knew her game. Fixed it up between 'em—stick you in the back and steal the works!"

"Where were you, Tom?"

"On my way from that other ledge to this one—halfway around the gorge when you arrived on the scene. Sick o' that place. No grub there. Got a bite to eat?"

Gup summoned the guard, who commanded the cook, who abused the pot and kettle person, who cursed a wood and water Joey. Presently a fire was lighted and the smell of coffee stole on the mountain air.

"She said it," said Tom O'Hara, staring at Harriet Dover, whose face in the lanternlight looked wanly poetic.

Her hair had come down; its dark coils shaded away into shadow; she was oval face and thin hands, nothing else—a phantom.

"It's true she wrote it. I saw it—I've a copy of it. She wrote it to Glint and he answered it. Here's his answer—see the blood on it? My man Ismail stuck a knife into the runner. I've eleven men out scouting. News of the emir, too. He's on the move behind a screen o' cavalry—they're halfway to the Khyber."

"Indian army napping?" Gup asked.

"Not much. Plenty o' news comes down the Khyber. A man told me this afternoon—he was hurrying hotfoot to join the emir, but I think he's one of our men taking a long chance, though he didn't admit it—told me our crowd acted rough at Amritsar—shot a thousand of 'em with machine guns. He said it was a general was drunk. But I see it. I see through it. Shoot a thousand and save a hundred

thousand—maybe a million. Hell to pay —and think of the foreign newspapers— but they've got the Punjab meek and afraid to lift a finger. Same with the rest of India; they think they'll get shot if they ask a question! The country's quiet. They can move the army. Dirty work, but I see through it. Had to do it. Glad it wasn't me that gave the order, that's all. I'd ha' done it, though. I said they'd have to do it—said it a year ago. I wrote it; doubt if anybody read it, but I turned it in—the report's in Delhi."

"Tell me about Glint."

"He's nasty. He'll live forever, that man will; he's too mean for the devil to let him die. She wrote him offering to turn loose poison gas and empty the ranee's roost—wrote she has a Russian who will do it if she says so. Stipulates a pardon for herself and any other woman she cares to name, also a hundred thousand rupees and a clean bill for Jonesey. Wants that all in writing, and reserves the right to settle in Kabul if she sees fit."

"Nothing about the ranee?"

"Not a word. Forgot her, maybe! Glint writes back—see? Here's his letter. Tells her to do it and trust him—trust him, mind you! Says he'll see she gets paid by results. Reminds her there's a reward for you, dead or alive."

"Sure you knocked Jonesey out?"

"Stunned him good. What are you going to do with this young woman?"

"Two of them," said Jonesey. He appeared within the tent; he had crawled in through the far end.

"He has an automatic," Gup said quietly.

"So've I. So've you," said Tom O'Hara. "One of us 'll get him. Had he two automatics? I've got the one was in his cummerband."

GUP REACHED into the tent and drew out Jonesey by the beard.

"Search him," he said, and Tom O'Hara went farther than that; he stripped him, using the Afghan woman's knife to cut the clothing from his back.

"No," he said, "no weapons." Then, to Harriet Dover, "Lend the man a blanket, he's indecent."

Jonesey shrugged himself into a blanket and sat perfectly calmly with his back to the moonlight.

"In the name of Allah, what next?" he remarked. "Myself and two ladies—three innocents—what will you do with us?"

Said Gup:

"If I felt free to follow inclination, I would kick all three of you and turn you loose to walk to Kabul."

"We could walk to Kabul better if you didn't kick," said Jonesey. "You have big feet."

Gup stared hard at Harriet Dover.

"Do you trust Glint?" he asked.

"No."

"Then why did you write to him?"

"I hoped to be able to blackmail him. If he had sent a compromising answer—"

"I have it—I have his answer," said Tom O'Hara. "There's enough in it to break him when the *burra sahib* sees it. They're all looking for a chance to jump on Glint. Negotiating on his own, trying to steal the credit; watch him—Glint goes home on half pay! Hope I travel by the same ship. I've a girl in Copenhagen and my long leave's overdue."

"What do you want?" Gup asked, and Harriet Dover stared at him. "Shall I send you back to Lottie with a letter telling all I know about you?"

"No," she answered, "I will go with Jonesey."

"I am not sure I will not kick Jonesey over that cliff."

She laughed.

"Then let me tell you. You won't do it. Why? Because you are a coward. You are afraid to kill a man."

Gup knew then how much he had risen above what he had been when he whipped Glint. Her sneer made no impression on him. He knew, and he knew it so well that he did not have to prove it, that he was capable of throwing all three of them over the cliff if that should appear to him wise. He could do it without malice, anger or

regret. But he did not have to do it. He could see no probable danger in letting all three go. He could prevent their returning to the caverns to make trouble there. No goal was open to them except Kabul, and the emir's army probably would seize them on its way south.

"The emir," he said, "is welcome to you—you three and the Russian. The four of you leave this ledge when I do and you shall have a week's provisions."

"Mules, I suppose?" she suggested.

"No," said Gup. "You walk. I need the mules."

He summoned the guards and posted them much closer to the tent, then strode away with Tom O'Hara to where coffee and hot cakes waited. To the captain of his guard he said:

"If Jonesey, those two women and the Russian steal mules tonight, permit it. When you change sentries at the tent, tell the relief to pretend to go to sleep."

"Why did you change your mind?" asked Tom O'Hara.

"I didn't change it. But if they think they are running away they will keep on running. I hope I've seen the last of 'em. I don't want to have to do anything drastic."

"Sure," said O'Hara, "I get you. Men in love are always that way. I've a girl of my own in Copenhagen. Me—I wouldn't bump a fly off if I didn't have to. Gup, do you know this is the first coffee I've had since I left Peshawar! Hey-yeh! But it warms the hungry cockles o' y'r inner man! Here's to the man who invented it!"

* * *

There came a day—a day of wakening
Wherein the essences of knowledge won
By travail set the Soul within the Thing
So swelling, as the seeds swell in the sun,
That habit like a split shell yielded. Deeds
Were as inevitable then as doubt had been.
It dawned in consciousness that all man needs
Is work to do and faith in Force Unseen.

CHAPTER XXII

"NOW I'LL BE IN COPENHAGEN INSIDE OF A MONTH!"

GUP and Tom O'Hara shared one tent that night, Gup on the cot because O'Hara insisted that to "sleep soft" while on a job would ruin him; he seemed to fall asleep the very second that he curled up in a heap of horse blankets. But Gup did not sleep until he saw four mules go stealing off into the night. The captain of his guard came and whispered to him to make sure that he knew it. Gup sent men to follow and make sure that the mules turned northward.

"Pursue them if they try to get back to the caverns. Otherwise let them go."

Then he, too, slept until the sunlight touched the mountain peaks with silver. When he awoke he saw Tom O'Hara sitting like a vulture in the tent opening. Before he could speak to him O'Hara had a prayer mat spread and was setting the example for all the camp, performing the Moslem prayer ritual, bowing toward Mecca.

"You ought to have joined it," he said presently. "You never can understand 'em until you pray with 'em. I used to act it, but I've a girl in Copenhagen that's a saint. She taught me better. She heals 'em—laying on o' hands. She taught me to pray with any man, with 'em, mind you—no tongue in your cheek. I've learned 'em good since I took to doing it. Cuss 'em and they cuss you. Bless 'em and they maybe wonder who gave you the right. But pray with 'em—I mean pray, not play at it—and you can tune in on their emotions, catch yourself thinking their thoughts. If you're awake, you think 'em first, forestall 'em. Then the gov'ment says, 'That fellow's crazy, but he knows his stuff—he knows it.' And I do know it. How do I understand you? I was an ostrich once myself. I'd be one yet if I hadn't one time got a crazy notion to spend a sick leave in Denmark."

"How about being seen here, Tom?"

"That's all right. Jonesey was the only

man who knew me. All the others think I'm a *mollah*, who can talk English from having been in Delhi prison, convicted o' murder. The story is, I escaped by a miracle. But that's dangerous. They have a way of asking for another miracle. I'm good at prophesying, and I've the Koran pretty near by heart. But I can't heal 'em the way my girl does; and tricks —hell, they're too risky. All the same, we're going to have to stage a miracle. Listen to me now."

They strolled together to the wall and looked over, but nothing could be seen. The fluffy mist had gathered in the gorge and lay there like cotton wadding. Eagles sat preening their wings on the crags, waiting for wind to move the mist and make things visible.

"Midnight tonight," said Tom O'Hara, "there'll be upward of thirty thousand men in that valley below. Maybe you knew it. I've been there talking with 'em, when they first began to drift in. They say fifty thousand, not counting the ranee's regulars. I say thirty thousand all told, and I'm nearer the mark. That's thirty thousand sticks o' dynamite. How did you leave the ranee?"

Gup told him in full detail all that had happened since they last met. The only detail he avoided was the intimate personal one, but Tom O'Hara, with a strange reddish gleam in his eyes, filled in those gaps easily.

"I knew it. If you scratch a Moslem in Morocco, Gup, a Moslem bleeds in Kandahar. Did you suppose you could even like that woman and all these hills not know you love her? Ostrich! It's all over the hills that you went in there and took her, honest outlaw fashion. Hell! D'you know how fast a rumor travels? It's in Kabul by this time. The emir knows all about it, multiplied by x and carried to the *nth*. He's on his way, behind a screen o' cavalry. He's not moving, I'll bet you, as fast as he thought he would. You can't run India, you know, and snooze on the job. Our folks sent some lively lads awhile ago to stir up the Shinwari tribesmen, and some others, and the emir hasn't got it all his own way. Besides, I fixed 'em. I wrote it and they did it—for a wonder. He had lots o' spies in India and we fed 'em full o' strictly secret information, most o' which was that if he comes we'll lay the country waste in front of 'im. You see the force o' that? He thinks he can't live off the country, so he has to bring an awful heavy baggage train and all the money in the Kabul treasury. Do you know how those lads love looting? Some of his nominal subjects are on his flanks like flies on a sore horse. He has to use half his men, I'm betting you, to guard that baggage train. That's me—I did it. He's moving slow; and every hour is an hour against 'im. Our folks are mobilizing troops along the border faster than the emir thinks. Now what was your plan?"

GUP HESITATED. He had told his plan to no one. He was almost afraid to tell it to Tom O'Hara, dreading Tom's caustic comments. Almost any plan evolved in mental solitude looks good until it is spread before competent eyes.

"I'm to be sworn in tonight as commander-in-chief," he answered. "I propose to tell them that the emir is coming to seize their ranee with all her caverns, weapons and supplies. I am hoping to get them to follow me against the emir, on the ground of *izzat*—honor. Probably can't stop him, but—I think he'll wish he hadn't started."

"And afterward?"

"Not likely there'll be any afterwards. Lottie refused to be persuaded."

"Ostrich!"

"Lots of the men may refuse to follow me instead of her. I'll do what I can with the remainder. And, of course, you can't lead men like those from he rear. I'm pretty sure to get mine. But I think I'll stop the emir long enough to let our Indian army mobilize against him."

"All right. Suppose you get yours. Nobody minds dying—except me; I'm off for Copenhagen soon as this show's

over. What about Lottie, as you call her. What's she to do?"

"Depends on me, Tom. If I pull off what I hope tonight, she may give in. That will mean I shall have all the troops —perhaps, as you say, thirty thousand. It's no secret from her that I think she has been doing wrong. She knows I intend to try to right it. I've given her the chance to find out whether or not she loves me. If she does, she will come with me—against the emir. With thirty thousand men we will have a reasonable chance to make things hot for him. If she doesn't love me, what she will do will be none of my business. If she loves me, she will die with me rather than not undo the harm she has done. But we may not have to die."

"And then what?"

"I shall expect the Indian government to do the decent thing by both of us."

Tom O'Hara's nose behaved exactly like an owl's beak, when he chuckled. His eyes almost vanished amid wrinkles and the reddish stubble of a five day beard.

"Gov'ments," he said, "aren't decent. They can't afford to be. Gup, you're a cross between a fool, a genius, a good sport and an ostrich. But I like you first rate. Now listen— Lord, look at that mist!"

The morning wind was moving and the mist rolled up in front of it in mother o' pearl waves, green and the gray of rocks and pinnacle crags showing where it eddied and broke. Then the sun rose over the range and tinted it with gold and opal. Into that glory an eagle plunged and came up sparkling with his feathers dew wet.

"And there's idiots who say there isn't any God," said Tom O'Hara.

Then the wind blew chill and gusty from the northern snow, and in a moment the mist scattered into tails and drifts, until only thin hurrying streams of it were left and the gorge lay naked.

"See 'em?" Tom O'Hara never pointed but the movement of his head was like an owl's.

Streaming along toward the broken gap that opened into the valley of last night's bivouac fires were men, looking like insects, hurrying in single file and shapeless with the loads they carried. First there were tens—then scores—then hundreds, answering the ranee's summons.

"MIND you," said Tom O'Hara, "most of 'em are poor. They're tired. They're hungry. Some of 'em, I'll bet you, have met Jonesey on the way. He and the Dover woman and that she-Afghan devil will have told 'em three or four different tales to set 'em by the ears. They know by now the emir's on the march; likely enough he'll loot the home of every man who isn't loyal to him. They're taking a long chance and they know it. Soon as they reach the valley they'll hear the tale I told there yesterday."

"What's the matter with my plan, Tom?"

"Might be worse—not bad for an amateur. Let's patch it. Listen, Gup—no plan's any good that doesn't lead direct to what you want. I want my long leave and a ticket to Copenhagen. You want Lottie. Am I right? Then get her, you big ostrich! Listen, I crossed the border with three thousand dibs in my wallet, a cake o' chocolate and half a loaf of bread. I gave away the bread and chocolate and spent a thousand dibs. That gave me five-and-thirty first class hairy liars and five fair-to-middling information men. I don't pay liars to sit still and scratch 'emselves. They've gone to work. And I don't pay information men to keep me ignorant. At my game ignorance ain't bliss.

"So there's five-and-thirty different stories circumlocuting around the hills, not counting the ones I've told. And I know most of what's been happening. I know what the Dover woman did—and you don't know the half of it. I knew Jonesey's game, and you'd never guess the half o' that. They're both cracked—they're as cracked as coots. She tried to sell you to Glint; she tried to sell the ranee to the emir. Unknown to you or the

Dover woman or the ranee, Jonesey tried to sell the whole outfit, you included, to a Shinwari named Bakar Sakao, who's a dark horse and might start a rebellion behind the emir's back. And what for? She wants power. Jonesey's in love with her. The Afghan female is in love with Jonesey. Don't argue, I know it. I knew it three days ago."

"Is that the tale you've been spreading?" Gup asked.

"Hell, no. I've told fairy tales. But you always have to have some truth in 'em—about as much as you'd put salt on meat. Too much is a mistake. Too little is stupid. I've sent out five-and-thirty versions of a story that the emir is on his way to bag the ranee for his harem and to loot those caverns to supply his ragamuffin army. And I've paid two *mollahs*—paid 'em handsome—to go into that bivouac yonder and say, they pretending, mind you, that they have it from the emir straight, that the emir intends to burn the homes, sell the wives and daughters and cut the throats of all the men who don't join his army before he gets here. There'll be some who won't believe that—there are always *some* sensible men—but they'll be outnumbered ten to one. So you see, it's all set ready for you. All you have to do tonight, at midnight, is to play your ace of trumps."

"What if they take the *mollahs* at their word and flock over to the emir?" Gup suggested.

"What if it snows ink? Things don't happen quite as suddenly as that. Don't they think she's a wonder? Aren't you another wonder? Do you think I haven't spread a yarn about you, too? Do you think they won't wait to see tonight what happens? If you do, you don't know Hillmen. They'll be all there, ready for you to turn the trick on 'em tonight."

"Looks pretty much like my plan," Gup answered.

"Yes, but there's more to it. You've got to keep 'em idle until the emir passes, if you can. Then swoop down on his baggage train. That's the worst that can happen if you play your hand right. Better yet, hold 'em and frighten the emir back to Kabul! Try it. I doubt you can do it. He'd lose his control of his own men if he ordered a retreat, but you can try it. And above all, don't let him seize those caverns! If he gets those he'll have a base that might take us years to smoke him out of. Now you know it. You know the whole layout. Hullo—see that? Three of our planes. They're following the Khyber, looking for the emir's cavalry. But they're too high to see much. They're afraid of the broken air among these peaks."

THEY breakfasted beside a small fire, and all that morning they watched the gathering *lashkar* pouring in droves and driblets through the gap into the Valley of Doab.

Several times during the day a messenger found Tom O'Hara with news of the emir's movements, but the news was never twice the same and for the most part Tom ignored it. He appeared to have a sort of instinct for discrimination between true and false. He also appeared to feel that he had shot his own bolt, and he had the rather rare gift of being able to sit still and await events when he had done his utmost.

"What's the tale about me that you've told?" Gup asked him.

"I've said you're Allah's sending. Mind you, I'm a *mollah*. What I don't know ain't in the Book. I've said you're sent to save the ranee from the emir. Listen. Look at me and look at you. You're six foot and how many inches? You're handsome. Have you ever seen an uglier specimen than me?"

"Heart of gold, Tom. Heart of gold," said Gup.

"Heart of impudence. My girl's a saint and she's as sweet to look at as a lily o' the valley. I went up and took her. She thinks I'm wonderful. The Danish bloods were after her like hawks after a partridge. I met her one day, and the second day she was mine and she knew it. I could whistle her half around the world from Copenhagen and she'd come."

Gup glared moodily across the valley.

"Women vary, Tom."

It was then, at last, that Tom O'Hara sprang his knockout blow at indecision. Even then he did not quite reveal the depth of the anxiety that had kept him all one night and all one valuable morning perched on a ledge while the Afghan army advanced hour by hour on India.

"Don't you see, you ostrich, that unless you grab her you haven't a chance? You walked out on her, and that was genius. And you took Jonesey and the Dover woman; that was genius. It leaves your ranee up against her own problem. You challenged her, and that was all right if you meant it. But she's a woman; she's going to have to know you meant it. Idiot! While you've sat here she's been thinking and doing!"

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"Is she a suicider? No. Is she proud? Yes. Does she want to get caught by our crowd and put in prison for the rest of her life? Not likely! Has she brains? You bet she has. Is she desperate? O' course! She's just about had time to realize what Jonesey and the Dover woman did to her grip on things. Does she want to lose you? If she does, I'll eat my dagger! But will she give in to you or any other man without being made to? Hell! If she's that kind she couldn't have done what she has done. It's her privilege to be conquered—slap up, good and proper. She has earned it. And because you're half a genius and half an ostrich, you've made her think you're too romantic to do any dirty work. Hell! Women aren't romantic; they're ruthless and they want it ruthless."

"What then?"

"You've disappointed her, and that was so stupid it was almost genius! She thinks she understands you perfect. She can see you riding through that gap tonight all ready to make a fine speech and steal her army from under her beautiful nose. Do you think she'll let you do it? Hell! Unless she's ten times crazier than the Dover woman she'll set a trap and catch you on your way in! And if I know a from izzard, she'll send Rahman to the emir to make a brand new set o' terms. You'll end up in Kabul, a sort of he-concubine like a prince consort; and our Indian army will take a licking, for which I'll be the first to blame you, Gup, and the last to forgive it."

"What do you suggest?"

"Go grab her—ostrich! Set a trap and catch her! Tell her where she gets off! When you ride into that gap tonight, she comes along obedient, not leading Gup Bahadur by the nose. You not only grab the army then, but you get you a fine woman that'll know there's only one man fit to look at. She won't think it, she'll know it! And listen to this, Gup. Listen careful. Gov'ments are no more romantic than women. They listen to force and to nothing else. It's either force o' circumstance or votes or money, or else force o' bayonets and bullets that makes 'em behave. You've one chance for the two of you to come out o' this mess free and reputable. We might clear you, perhaps, but not her—unless you have an army in the field to bargain with. D'you get that? If you can offer *quid pro quo*, they'll treat you handsome. If you can't—well—you've heard of the six foot argument? The hangman's rope, black cap, the Lord have mercy on your soul, a six foot drop, and nothing more to say—that's over with."

"Not so simple, Tom, to take her in a trap. Suppose we set a trap and fail?"

"You won't fail if I talk to your bodyguard."

"Talk to 'em then."

"I knew it. I knew you'd do it. I wrote it. I sent a message to Peshawar yesterday. I said Gup holds the joker. He'll play it. Now I'll be in Copenhagen inside of a month!"

* * *

A word then that was but a word before—
A dead drop added to a sea of sound,
Whose barren offspring was an echo and no more,
Became more potent than the reeking round

Of massed artillery. One word could swing
Such forces into instant action as the sum
Of man's whole armament on foot and wheel and wing
Could not prevent, nor treason overcome.

CHAPTER XXIII

"*HUZUR*, I AM PROUD OF YOUR OFFER TO FIGHT ME!"

TOM O'HARA had not understood Gup perfectly. He had gained his point but he did not know how he had gained it. Gup had made his utmost sacrifice. He had thrown his self-respect into the scale against the emir's invading host. To him, with his chivalrous notions, there was nothing conceivable, less honorable than to set an ambush for the woman he loved and do by violence what he had hoped to do by force of character and rigid adherence to principle.

To him it was almost as if he had taken his proud soul and thrown it into hell for the sake of his own countrymen, who had outlawed him on false evidence. He would do what he could to save India—but at a cost that was beyond computing. It left him nothing, not a last shred of his treasured self-respect. But men don't see much while they are on the testing rack. Some women see much more clearly. Onlookers sometimes see, but almost never understand.

That night, when the bivouac fires were glowing in the Valley of Doab, and before the moon had risen, Gup, with Tom O'Hara on a mule beside him, led the four-and-twenty stalwarts of his bodyguard into a dark ravine that was nearly midway between the guarded entrance to the ranee's caverns and the great grim amphitheater where the *lashkar* waited.

It was darker there than any visible darkness; Gup's disgust was added to it. He was hoping that some accident would save the ranee from his ambush, and yet knowing that he would use every faculty he possessed to foresee accident and to put her to that last indignity of being kidnapped. He could imagine her sense of hopelessness and crushed pride. He would have preferred that it should happen to himself.

The bodyguard had been rehearsed all afternoon by Tom O'Hara, who had told them a marvelous story. They were to save the ranee from the treachery of her own supposedly loyal protectors. Agents of the emir, according to this owl eyed *mollah* who appeared to know so much, had persuaded the ranee's bodyguard to run away with her and surrender her, alive and lovely, to the emir. He even named the exact amounts of money that the culprits would receive. Gup's bodyguard, accordingly, was primed with zeal, its edge whetted by indignation. It was understood there should be no waste of gentleness that night. But it was also understood that there should be no noise.

The pass was narrow where that dark ravine loomed into it. The ranee's regulars, with Rahman leading on a big brown mare, went streaming by like shadows, making scarcely more sound, because there was a sense of drama and of vast events impending. Gup's black stallion Iskander had to be thrown, and his head smothered under blankets, to prevent him from screaming a challenge.

The ranee's men had not brought the machine guns and there were no impediments except their rifles and bandoleers. But almost at the last there came a gift of a hundred oxen from the ranee, wild eyed and crowding together in fear of the darkness that echoed their pattering feet. Thereafter, silence and a long wait. The ranee's sense of drama was too acute to permit her to appear before the stage was set and the full moon rising.

It was certain she would not come unprotected, and not on foot. Gup had sent two men to watch for her coming and to bring specific information. One came back panting with word that fifty horsemen waited for her outside the gorge near the entrance. Presently the other came and said she rode, surrounded by her women, and that another fifty horsemen followed. Gup had four-and-twenty men, himself and Tom O'Hara.

She was coming slowly; four of her women were very indifferent riders, so the horses were held back to a walking pace; besides, the moon was only just appearing over the rim of the world; its light had not yet reached into the gorge, although the sky was a-swim with liquid gold that made half of the colored stars look pale. Nothing was more certain than that her bodyguard would fight like demons to protect her; that was a point of personal *izzat*, on which no picked Hillman would have two opinions; they would die to a man rather than let a hair of her head be touched.

BUT FOUR of Tom O'Hara's hand picked liars had been summoned and carefully drilled. They, and some unattached villagers, found wandering and bribed with unheard of munificence, were stationed on a ledge that overhung the route by which the ranee had to come. Between them they had one old service pistol and ten cartridges from which the bullets had been drawn. They also had sticks and cans and a can with pebbles in it. They were capable of sounding like a hundred men; and they were half a mile from where Gup waited, thus permitting him plenty of scope for action.

The gorge where Gup was hidden was defensible by ten men against ten times their number. There was a back way out of it that led by winding tracks and over a ragged range to a valley that opened southward; but in front there was only an opening ten feet wide, that was flanked by unclimbable rock, and defenders would have the advantage of darkness, whereas an attacking force would have to deploy in moonlight that was growing stronger every minute.

Gup had to spare four of his men to create a diversion in front of the ranee's advance guard. Instead of being stationed on a ledge they were concealed amid boulders that no horse could possibly negotiate, at a point where they could sweep the pass with rifle fire. They were middle aged men deliberately flattered for the self-restraint that it was hoped they had. Their orders were to make no sound until the men on the ledge, lower down the pass, should set up an alarm. They were to wait while they counted two hundred slowly. After that they were to fire one shot apiece at nothing.

If they were attacked they might defend themselves, but until that happened, they were on no account to kill anything but horses, and not horses unless the ranee's guard should gallop past them to take higher ground; then they might kill horses to prevent the guard from galloping back again. They asked why they should not kill men.

"Because," said Gup, "it will be hard to tell friend from enemy."

It was one of those plans that might go wrong if a flea bit somebody. It was a hair trigger plan, of the sort that Tom O'Hara loved and Gup detested, but Gup was in no mood to enjoy anything just then. The details of the plan seemed burned into his brain and he could see a hundred flaws in it. To him, as the moon rose slowly and began to flood the narrow pass with silver light, leaving his own side of it in even deeper shadow, it seemed like probably his own last effort, and a shameful one at that.

He would have laid odds, had anybody cared to ask him, of a hundred to one that the ranee would escape. There would be some decent fellows shot, good horses killed, and nothing more accomplished than to arouse indignation. He himself would be left at large without friend or following, since failure is the unforgivable offense in love and war. Thereafter his only hope would be to ask Tom O'Hara to plead his cause with the Anglo-Indian authorities; and that was not hope, it was a vision of hell.

However, a man can suffer pessimism and still steel himself. The first sound of the hoofbeats of the ranee's guard found him keyed and alert, and his voice, as he talked in low tones to his men, was calm and reassuring, so that they took their cue from him and were no more excited than

leopards lying in ambush. When he ceased speaking there was no sound other than the mysterious, slow drum beat of the oncoming hoofs of the ranee's guard—until their leader drew almost abreast of where Gup waited. Then a shot spat from a ledge half a mile lower down. The advance guard wheeled and clattered back to surround the ranee and her women. She was easy to see; the moonlight touched the jewels in her turban.

There was another shot from the ledge, followed by a noise that might mean anything—clattering, startling, possibly a hundred men, perhaps more. There was a leather lunged shout from the commander of the ranee's guard and the rear guard galloped back to investigate. Another shot spat from the ledge and they answered it with ragged rifle fire from horseback, making the whole ravine alive with echoes.

The commander of the ranee's guard decided to advance, there being small sense in waiting to be fired at in a narrow pass, and he still had fifty men. He spared one more. He sent a galloper to tell the rear guard what he intended doing and what they should do. Then he resumed the march, his face in moonlight showing irritation rather than anxiety. He had not ridden fifty paces, and the ranee was almost abreast of Gup's dark lurking place, when four shots spat forth from the boulders higher up the pass; their echoes went like whip cracks cannoning from crag to crag.

THE COMMANDER of the guard was swift. He made sure there were thirty of his men surrounding the ranee and her women; then he led the remaining nineteen up the pass to investigate. They were met by deliberate fire from four well hidden rifles. They answered it with vicious volleys. Gup heard the ranee's voice, but it was drowned in the din of echoes, and amid that din he let the stallion Iskander to his feet. He gave no order. It was the stallion who neighed.

Gup and his men went bursting, two abreast, out of the dark mouth of the gorge, Gup leading. They divided right and left. They sent the ranee's horsemen reeling. There were shots fired—there was saber-slashing, but it was all over in thirty seconds. Gup's great stallion Iskander came up sliding on his heels beside the ranee's mare; she found herself seized in Gup's right arm, wrenched from the saddle and borne away into engulfing night. Gup shouted and his men wheeled, shepherding the rear. They were all of them back in the pitch dark gorge before the ranee's men could form again around the women amid riderless horses, wondering what had happened.

Within a minute a dozen shots fired from the top of the rocks that overhung the entrance of Gup's hiding place informed them and sent them scattering for cover.

Gup set the ranee on her feet and sprang to the earth beside her. He could hardly see her, but he seized her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth.

"Do you understand what has happened to you?" he demanded. "I have taken you, Lottie. You're mine. You'd better yield now." He could feel her heart surge against his.

His men were keeping up a steady fire against the ranee's guard, who had dismounted, ordering the women behind boulders. They were answering the fire excitedly from behind any scrap of cover they could find. The captain of her guard had come galloping back and there was a stuttering din in the pass that almost drowned the ranee's answer.

"Make the most of your moment, Gup. My men will rescue me."

Then Tom O'Hara stepped out of the darkness, leading Gup's great stallion that had strayed.

"He's done it, your Highness! I knew it! I knew Gup'd save the day. Now it's your turn and you save it. Give you sixty seconds—sixty times enough for a woman to make up her mind! Yes or no? Is Gup your man or isn't he?"

"For God's sake, mind your own affairs, Tom!" Gup exploded. "Listen to

me, Lottie." She struggled but he refused to let her escape out of his arms. She had her hands against his shoulders, pushing him, and even in that darkness they could see each other's eyes. "Either you yield to me now, this minute, on your honor—or you come with me to India and leave that army to its own devices!"

"You—you do this treachery—and speak to me of honor?"

"Yes."

"I hate you!"

"No you don't. You only hate your disappointment. You'll recover from that. I'll show you how."

"You expect me to yield to threats?"

"Yes. They're more than threats. I will do what I say." He began to let go of her—loosened the weight of his arms.

"You demand to be loved?"

"Yes, or start for India this minute."

"Well, Gup, I suppose you'll have to be. I didn't believe you were this kind of man. I had given up hope of you. Do you mind not hugging me in front of that person? Who is he? And besides, you hurt my ribs."

It was Gup who had to leap up on a shelf of a tall crag in moonlight and send his voice bellowing down the gorge to stop the firing. Even so, a dozen bullets splashed against the rocks around him before they ceased shooting in order to hear what he said. But it was Tom O'Hara, self-appointed liar to the lords of destiny, who clambered up beside him and explained, appealing to the Prophet of Allah to be his witness:

"Nobles, there has been an error! Word came that the emir's men had ridden south to seize your ranee. Word came they had seized her. Gup Bahadur heard it. Gup Bahadur rode with four-and-twenty men to get her loose again! And, lo, in darkness he mistook you nobles for the emir's misbegotten dogs! But, Allah, what a leader! What a Rustum, who can smash such ranks as yours and pluck a prize forth! *Akbar! Akbar!*"

"*Akbar!*" they answered, but it was not exultant shouting.

They were ashamed of having let their ranee be snatched away from them. Their *izzat* was involved; and Gup's men were more than inclined, they were next thing to impossible, to keep from glorifying their own *izzat* at the ranee's men's expense. The commander of the ranee's bodyguard was furious when he found he had been outwitted and beaten by such a handful.

There were eleven of his best men wounded and three good horses slain; he swore he would have revenge for it. There was no calming him until Gup stood out in front of him alone and told him bluntly he might either touch hilt, go away and join the emir, or fight with any weapon that he chose.

He touched hilt—laid three fingers of his right hand on the hilt of Gup's jeweled scimitar.

"*Huzur*," he said, "I am proud of your offer to fight me."

That, though, was not the end of it. It only increased the high spirits of Gup's men, who were delighted, too, by the double deceit that had been practised. They were as pleased with the trick played on themselves by Tom O'Hara as with the grossly untrue explanation that had stopped the fighting. Lo, these were men of a double and mirthful cunning, this Gup Bahadur and this *mollah* with the owl's eyes! Allah! Moreover, they themselves were crafty fellows—good, bold horsemen, who had made eleven picked Afridis bite the dirt! If the ranee had chosen, she might have set them there and then at one another's throats; and with the rear guard clattering up there could be no doubt what the end of that would be.

THE RANEE saved that moment. She rode forward, beckoning her women. That gave Gup excuse for thundering indignation. Were they rats or a loyal escort? Would they let their ranee ride alone and unprotected while they played at who could talk the loudest of his own shame? He rode on and they followed, not without some scuffling to see who should ride first. Finally Gup sent his

own men in advance and massed the ranee's men behind him, riding alone beside her, followed by the women.

"What were you planning to do, Lottie?" he asked her. "Would you have set a trap for me?"

"Yes, Gup, I was desperate. What have you done with Harriet Dover?"

"I sent her and her friend and Jonesey to the emir. Why?"

"Because I have found out what Harriet Dover was doing. She had several hundred men prepared to seize me and carry me off to the emir. For all that I know, she and Jonesey may have corrupted more than half the men. They had the Russians working at it."

"What have you done with the Russians?"

"Rahman locked them up."

"What have you done with the men they had corrupted?"

"Nothing. That was Rahman's idea. I thought it better to face my whole army tonight and try to win them back to me. But, oh, I'm glad you came!"

"We will win them," said Gup. "And we will turn your nightmare, Lottie, into a rather decent job of work! You know that the emir is on the march? Let's see how far he gets without our leave!"

Then suddenly an argument occurred to him that he had never used to her. He wondered he had never thought of it before.

"Do you realize that he would overrun Jullunder? You have built up this wonderful army. Now together let us save the Jullunder that you worked so hard to build up when you were ranee."

He felt jubilant, although he wondered at himself—at the ups and downs from morbid gloom to thrilled expectancy and back again. He felt ashamed of that, and the shame made him more determined.

"Whoever the lords of life are, Lottie, and whoever God is, let's live today as if we die tonight and will have to answer for our deeds. No more welshing; both of us have had enough of that. Let's play onside."

"It wasn't always easy to do that, Gup, without some one I believed in to do it with me. There was only Rahman, and Rahman is simply personal. If I ordered Rahman to march on Delhi or Kabul he would do either with equal readiness. He might grumble, but he would never dream of disobeying me."

"Good," said Gup. "We will give him orders fit to be obeyed."

The great gap that opened into the Valley of Doab was a luminous mystery of silver and gloom. The naked rivers lay like crayon strokes where their low banks shed the moonlight. The walls of the valley on one side were in darkness, jeweled with the crimson flicker of a thousand bivouac fires. The other side was liquid with a mystery of moonlit color. There was no sound. The silence made by thirty thousand men has vibrance of a sort that no word dignifies—a nameless thrill, inaudible yet sensed. Gup's stallion neighed and he was answered by the whinny of a hundred mares that set the crags echoing for league on league until the maddening music of it died away in silence.

The path lay straight between the snake-like river beds. Gup's horsemen two or three hundred feet ahead, they two rode side by side, Gup's stallion cavorting as if he knew he bore the chieftain on whose shoulders rested hope and faith and the responsibility for thirty thousand lives. He snorted and his arched neck sweated as he tossed his head and ambled to the rhythm of some cosmic symphony.

Rahman had massed the *lashkar* into solid, serried ranks around three sides of an enormous rock like the lap of a seated mountain. Cliffs at the back of it rose like folds of monstrous drapery, against which fifteen hundred feet in air an enormous bonfire glowed like a ruby set in leaping shadows. Suddenly Rahman spurred his mare and reined her on her heels. He swung his saber and a roar went up from thirty thousand throats that seemed to shake the mountain.

"*Akbar! Akbar!*"

Echoes thundered through the crags. Then silence, while the ranee and Gup rode side by side into the square in the

midst of the men, where Rahman kissed his saber-hilt and sat his mare like the embodied spirit of armed arrogance obedient to nothing but his chosen leader. He looked solid. The rest were phantoms.

There were scores of *mollahs* crowded in the front ranks—men on whom the spirit of the Hills depends for energy that stirs and guides the savagery latent in all Hillman hearts. Gup knew that on them depended the result of this night's work. He needed no whisper from Tom O'Hara; he had sensed the keynote of the situation. He gestured, upward, with his right hand.

"The *Kalima!*"

Tom got off his mule and scrambled up the rock. For a moment he stood recovering his breath. Then he gestured weirdly, like a brown, mad, solitary hermit *mollah* whom the hand of God has touched with frenzied vision of the sights unseen by mortal eyes. And suddenly his voice went wailing over all that multitude, clarion clear, yet pleading none the less, as if the spirit of the night were giving tongue and wondering why men were faithless.

"*La illaha illa 'llah Muhammad Rasulu 'llah!*"

THEY chanted after him in unison the fundamental ritual of Islam, until all that valley murmured it and the rhythmic challenge that there is no god but God went rolling up to heaven through the throat of the thunderous cliffs. When all was still again a man who fed the bonfire on the ledge leaned over and repeated it, hands to his mouth, screaming the magical words that have stirred more hearts to frenzy than ever drink or the love of women did.

So they chanted again, and Gup made note of the acoustics of the place. He had no hope of making thirty thousand men hear all he said, but he hoped to make half of them hear it, and it seemed to him that the rock where Tom O'Hara stood, with its cliffs at the rear to throw sound forward, was the key position.

He dismounted and helped the ranee to her feet. There was a path that Tom O'Hara had not noticed in his hurry to climb the rock. Up that he led the ranee, and before the chant was finished she and he and Tom O'Hara stood side by side, looking down at a sea of faces glistening in moonlight.

"Like the old days, Lottie. There's your audience!"

"Speak first," she said. "This is yours. I yield it to you."

And so Gup waited grimly until silence fell, not stage struck and not doubting, but aware of his own ignorance and grim because he meant to let no ignorance limit inspiration. If the lords of time and tide and decency and common sense had use for him, he and his lips were at their service. It was as if he listened with an inward ear for guidance. And none came. He could think of no word that would grip that audience and bind it to his bidding.

"Always try your voice first," Lottie whispered. "Feel your way. Don't waste effort until you know you've got them by the ears."

"*Allaho Akbar!*" he shouted, then repeated it.

The second time he felt the vibrance that assured him he had pitched into the right key. Then, as suddenly as light leaps when a flint strikes steel, he knew he had the right idea.

"Nobles and men of the *lashkar*—Hillmen all!" he shouted; and his voice went forth as if it rolled on wheels. "In Allah's sight we stand here willing enough to die, if we may die as men should. There is no man—none, in whom the breath of Allah hath not stirred a love of life. And shall a man love life but not his liberty?"

"Don't tell 'em too much," murmured Tom O'Hara in the long, dramatic pause, wherein the champing of a horse's bit was as distinct as sleigh bells.

"Your ranee gathered, fitted out and paid this *lashkar* for a purpose," Gup went on. "But she has summoned it for a different purpose; and as Allah is my witness, I stand here ready to devote my whole integrity and honor to the cause confronting us. Noblemen and stalwarts

of this *lashkar*, I demand the same of you!"

There was a rustling in the ranks, then silence, as a sea of faces strained to listen.

"Is this your land, or another's? Whose salt have you eaten?"

"Good!" said Tom O'Hara. "Now you've got 'em!"

"Does it suit your sense of honor that an upstart emir on a shaken throne should dare to send his spies to stab or poison her who has been so generous?"

There came an answering snarl of indignation.

"Is it your Honors' pleasure that that same emir, having failed in his attempted treachery because of the vigilance of faithful men, shall march unchallenged with an army through your land and seize your benefactress? Has *izzat* no answer to that insolence? Has Hillmen's honor become dung beneath an Afghan emir's feet?"

A murmur grew and swelled into a roar —a veritable tide of anger. Waves of it leaped backward as the front ranks tossed their repetition of Gup 's speech to the men in the dense-packed distance. Gup raised his hand for silence.

"Do your Honors please that an insolent, upstart emir shall invade your territory with an army—which he will feed on your corn and cattle—pay with the plunder of your villages—reward with the right to seize your wives and daughters?"

"Allah!"

Yells began to punctuate the surge of anger. It was more than a minute before Gup's raised hand imposed another stillness.

"Has he asked your leave? Has he offered to pay passage money? Has he guaranteed your liberties? And is his word worth the bleat of a goat without pledged security? And if he plunders India, what profit will you have? Will he not leave you starving at his rear, with your homes burned and your cattle slaughtered? If he fails, will he not try to retreat and leave you to face the revenge of the Indian army? I demand your judgment of this matter!"

THEY delivered judgment instantly. They made the mountains ring with execration of the emir, summoning the wrath of Allah to resist him. Gup caught one swift glimpse of Rahman's upturned face and saw him grin; he knew by that, far better than by all the noise, that he had won his audience. He had to wait a long time now for silence, because the *mollahs* were deliberately stirring passion; they had sensed a changing tide and, like all politicians, they were quick to swim with it and claim the credit for having caused it.

"I offer myself to lead you," Gup said at last. "And I demand in Allah's name your oath of loyalty to these eternal Hills that Allah gave you for a heritage! And if ye follow and obey me, I will pay you from the plunder of the emir's camp. Whereafter, ye shall find yourselves possessed of grateful friends in place of powerful enemies. And the next emir and the next will think ten times before they trespass."

Thirty thousand throats let loose a roar that made that vast valley a cauldron of monstrous sound, in which the *mollahs* began working up the maddening, rhythmic "*Din! Din!*" and there was no more silence, nor a chance for any man to get a word in. Crags and caverns echoed and reechoed with the "*Din! Din!*" that cannonaded back and forth from cliff to cliff.

Gup took the ranee in his arms and raised her shoulder high, as if she were the standard of their savage *izzat* and the pledge of his fulfilment of his oath of leadership. They went wild. They broke ranks. Men in the outer pools of moonlight began firing off their rifles at the sky, and by the time Gup set the ranee on her feet there were thirty thousand rifles spitting spurts of flame and Rahman was cursing the *mollahs*, raging at them, sending them scattering to stop that madness.

"Your one mistake," said Tom O'Hara. "Now they'll expect Lottie to ride with you into the thick of it."

"Why not?" Gup answered.

"I said it. All along I said you were as crazy as a March hare! Man alive, she's

a woman. You can't take a woman with you into battle."

"Why not? Joan of Arc went in! Why shouldn't a woman purge her soul as simply as a man? She made this situation. She shall mend it."

The ranee laid her hands in his and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, Gup, I love you!"

"Sing to them then, Lottie."

Rahman's efforts and the *mollah's* savage vehemence were restoring quiet. Tom O'Hara gradually drew attention to himself by posturing as if he preached a *kutbah* from the rock. Officers' voices were already audible above the din. It only needed novelty to restore order. Discipline would follow.

"Sing to them, Lottie."

"Sing what? I can't make my voice heard."

"Yes you can. Sing that song you promised you would sing to me, that song that you said explains you—the one you wrote yourself and set to music."

"But the words are English."

"No matter. It's the voice that counts, voice and sincerity. Sing to 'em."

He raised both hands in air and silence fell. It fell mysteriously, like the mist that was now creeping in twin streams along the river beds and dimming the crimson bivouac fires. A vapor, shoulder high, came flowing through the ranks and whitened as it gained intensity, until a horde of turbaned faces seemed to swim on a tide of sea pearl. She sang:

"High have I soared and only
I and the winds were lonely;
Uttermost peak and mountain crest
Mothered the young rain to their breast—
Higher I soared and only
I and the winds were lonely.
Rain met the river, snow met the rill;
I and the winds sought still.
Love, I have sought you deeper than wells—
Deep in the anguish no tongue tells,
High in the light of hope. Wide ways I go,
Asking of purple crag, valley and snow:
Where is this depth? Where is this height?
Higher than sky be it, deeper than night,
Farther than footsteps ever have trod.
I'll find though I must steal its key from God.
Then my own soul said: Blind thou art—
Blind, for the door stands open,
Nearer than death, nearer than breath,
Open in some one's heart."

Her voice ceased but the echoes carried the song from crag to crag.

* * *

All universes answer to the thrill
Of one man's victory. And one man's fear
Is felt by millions. And one man's will
Can make a vanguard of a beaten rear,
So be he feel the flood of vibrant rays
Like music leaping from the master bell
When every bell in tune to it obeys
In far-flung carillon—"All's well! All's well!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"AND A TICKET TO COPENHAGEN."

THERE was no time lost and none to lose. Gup first of all reduced the risk of treachery; he weeded out such men as Rahman thought were doubtful quantities, deprived them of their weapons, sent them scattering whichever way they pleased and sent scouts, almost on their heels, to bring news of the enemy's movement.

"And now all prisoners, Rahman. They are a risk and a nuisance; turn them loose too. Where are the Russians?"

"Gup Bahadur, there has been another accident," said Rahman. "They were taken to the summit of that crag for exercise. They fell. And when a man falls all that distance, he is dead, by God."

If Rahman could have had his way he would have "accidented" more than Russians. Some of Gup's scouts guided in an insolent Kabuli Khan, commanding a whole squadron of the emir's mounted *sowars*. He demanded the surrender of the caverns and delivery of the ranee's person as a hostage for good behavior, toying with the white flag on a lance as if he thought such social amenities ridiculous. He felt he should have come with more men and have raped that stronghold.

Rahman begged to be allowed to introduce him and all his squadron, excepting one man, to the execution crag; one man should be sent back with his head and eyebrows shaved, naked, on a baggage camel, to relate to the emir what had happened. Gup gave the Afghans fifteen minutes to be out of sight and sent two squadrons to pursue them, Rahman objecting sorrowfully.

"Gup Bahadur, to make Hillmen stand and fight it is a wise way to offend their enemy so bitterly, by God, that they know they must fight or the enemy will treat them likewise."

Then, for a space of three hours, there was mutiny. The *lashkar* was unanimous. To a man they were determined to invade the caverns and defend them, they not realizing that to do so would make them as helpless as bottled up hornets.

"As a hole in the earth to a fox," said Rahman, "so is a rocky refuge to a Hillman. A fortress fascinates them."

And on top of that, while Gup sat the stallion Iskander in the gorge outside the entrance to the caverns, listening to the arguments of *mollahs* who had made themselves the spokesmen for the men, there came a runner from Peshawar, shepherded by Orakzai Pathans who had been paid extravagantly to protect him to his destination.

He bore an envelope wrapped in a piece of cloth, addressed to "Gup McLeod Bahadur," which was either a sarcastic insult or else a mysterious compliment. Gup tore open the envelope. Within, on plain paper without heading or date, was a note in pencil signed with the initials of the High Commissioner:

> "O'Hara's reports have arrived. What can you do on the emir's right flank? If he once breaks through the Khyber there is no knowing what may happen."

Gup folded that and put it in his pocket. Perfectly he understood that it was meant to be a tactful, unofficial promise of forgiveness by the Indian government, contingent on his making himself useful now. But he sent no answer. He left liaison work to Tom O'Hara, who was down in the radio cavern, standing over an Eurasian who was trying to send signals to Peshawar. He set his teeth at the thought of any direct communication with the authorities until after something much more definite than that was done to rehabilitate his friends. He set himself last. There was Lottie first to be considered. And he counted as friend each man who dared to stand with him against the emir's hosts—even the fools with spittle on their lips who clamored at his stirrup to be let into the caverns.

"I will fill the place with death if one man tries to enter!" he announced. "There is poison gas, made by the Russians. I will turn it loose. But any man who prefers the emir's service has my leave to go this minute."

"Allah!"

"Yes, as Allah is my witness."

THEN he and Lottie rode to the Valley of Doab, those *mollahs* following, and once again they stirred the *lashkar's* sense of the indignity that any emir should dare to use their valleys as a highroad for his troops. Again Gup promised plunder from the emir's camp. Their mood changed and he inflamed it, telling the news, that the scouts had brought already, of a column coming down on them with the smoke of burning villages behind it. Then, because he knew that at any minute, for their own ends, the *mollahs* might try to resurrect that craving to be safe behind impenetrable walls, he galloped back and ordered Rahman to prepare to evacuate every living man and animal.

"Then bring up all the dynamite we have, and all the loose powder you can lay your hands on. Set half of it in the narrowest gut of the Snake's Mouth. Put the rest of it near this entrance. Set fuses and stand a guard ready to blow up both entrances at the first attempt to break in."

Even Rahman almost mutinied at that, but Lottie backed Gup loyally and Rah-

man, remembering a legend, laughed, though with a wry face.

"By my beard—are you a new Iskander and Bucephalus? Will you slit the throat of safety, to encourage us to win?"

"You know as well as I do, Rahman, that our one chance is as an army in the field, free to move and smite swiftly."

In the distance, in the clear blue sky above the Khyber, he could see ten British planes observing the emir's main line of advance; they looked like sea gulls circling above shoals of fish; and there were small black dots in the sky that he knew were vultures following the emir's columns, for the crimson harvest. Scouts brought word that a league long column of the emir's men, marching light and without artillery, was pouring through a pass some twenty miles away, to the northward, and all men knew that column could have only one objective. Gup sent at once for Tom O'Hara.

"Tom, write me a *laissez passer*, to Peshawar, for every woman in this place, except Lottie, and for all their baggage, with an escort of a hundred mounted men. Ask them to let the men and mules return to me. And tell them that if the women are shown the least discourtesy—"

"No need to mention that, Gup. They'll intern 'em, of course, and send the men back as requested."

"You don't care for a command, I suppose?"

"You said it. At my own game I'm a useful specimen. Besides, I've a girl in Copenhagen. I'm not looking for the next world. Copenhagen suits me."

Gup left more than a thousand men to guard the cavern entrance and to keep communication open. Several hundred more were needed to carry out the ammunition boxes. That attended to, he galloped with Lottie and Rahman to the ledge overlooking the Valley of Doab, on which he had camped two nights before and where the tent pegs were still upstanding in the ground. From there, without glasses, they could see the snake-like movement of the approaching Afghan column. Its speed was noticeably faster than that of Europeans on the march; there were mules and baggage camels, but not many; and the Afghan general was so reckless, or else in such haste and so ill informed, that his advance guard consisted of only a squadron of cavalry riding in close formation.

"The first round will be ours, Rahman! If we can't lick that lot, we don't deserve our dinner!"

There was plenty of time to decide on a plan and Gup and Rahman found no trouble in agreeing about details. Obviously, they must hurl that column back by the way it had come and, if it should not be badly enough or swiftly enough defeated, drive a wedge between it and the Khyber to prevent its making contact with the emir's main advance.

The chief difficulty was an almost total lack of staff officers and of almost any means of signaling; they were forced to depend on the natural fighting instinct of the Hillmen, who would keep in touch for their own sakes, and who knew the ledges and the tracks that led from ridge to ridge; but to keep them in hand after the first shot was fired looked like a stark impossibility.

Rahman accepted the post of honor in command of the troops who must bear the first shock of engagement. The captain of the ranee's bodyguard had been promoted to command three thousand men, as much to salve his injured feelings as for any other reason; he and his brigade were hidden amid boulders on the lower slope facing the mouth of the Valley of Doab. Another three thousand men, in command of a Sikh named Baba Singh were stationed to block the highroad leading to the caverns. Fifteen hundred more were then spread fanwise across the mouth of the Valley of Doab with orders to retreat up the beds of the rivers and draw the Afghans after them into the valley, where all of the rest of the *lashkar* was hidden amid the rocks at the foot of the enormous walls. Then Rahman, with only fifteen hundred, marched northward up the gorge to meet the enemy and throw up a barricade of rocks from cliff to cliff

in the narrowest place they could find.

And now there were more planes visible above the Khyber. There was a far off drumfire of artillery, but it did not sound like weight of metal or effective numbers. Probably the emir's troops were surging toward India, resisted by a fraction of their number who were holding on, to gain time until divisions could be rushed to their support. Perhaps there was not more than one division of the Anglo-Indian army available; Gup knew nothing about that; neither did Tom O'Hara; all troop movements had been kept so secret that not even Harriet Dover's spies had learned how many hours or days the Indian army might need before it could oppose effective strength against an onslaught. There might be a rebellion in India. The whole Punjab might have risen. Something was bringing the emir down in all that haste.

PRESENTLY Gup heard Rahman hotly engaged with the enemy, up the gorge. He left Lottie on horseback, on an eminence inside the Valley of Doab, where she could be seen by all the *lashkar*. Then he galloped up the gorge to see how Rahman fared.

"They bring artillery," said Rahman. "Two mountain batteries are taking up position on that ledge. When they get our range, we can never hold this heap of stones."

Even as he spoke a shell from a screw gun that had been packed on a mule's back to a mountain ledge fell and exploded about four hundred yards away, killing some of the Afghans' own riflemen, who had thrown up a low wall of rocks of their own. A second shell fell closer to the target. A third fell only fifty yards away.

"Fall back now, Rahman. It will take them twenty minutes to reach another ledge to fire from. Then fall back again before they get the range."

He returned to where he had left Lottie. Her bodyguard and his were clustered near to serve as gallopers. From where they sat their horses they could watch Rahman skilfully managing indignant men, who wished to be reinforced, and falling back too rapidly to be enfiladed from the overhanging ledges of the gorge. He was cleverly encouraging the Afghans' over-confidence. They followed him too eagerly when he reached the mouth of the Valley of Doab and retreated past it toward the highway leading southward to the caverns. Before he reached that he was reinforced—stood—began to fight back savagely. He and his men were a dam that checked the Afghan flood, which spread into the mouth of the Valley of Doab, trying to outflank him.

Then Gup's fifteen hundred opened fire, shooting and retreating into the rock strewn valley. Checked by Rahman, the Afghans turned into the valley, pursuing the fifteen hundred, when suddenly the three thousand commanded by the former captain of the ranee's bodyguard opened a withering fire from their cover of boulders.

The Afghans turned three ways. Their center hurled itself on Rahman's front; their left wing faced a hail of bullets from three thousand invisible riflemen; their right wing poured into the Valley of Doab, where apparently they hoped to find some outlet that should bring them to the caverns or bring them behind Rahman's rear. And because Gup's fifteen hundred steadily retired along the river beds in front of them, that seemed the line of least resistance; also, in that valley there was room to form ranks and recover confidence; so into the valley, following his right wing, the Afghan general crowded his hurrying men, including his mule batteries, which he hoped to turn on those unseen riflemen among the boulders who were raking his left wing. He left the mouth of the gorge to the northward almost empty.

Then Gup gave the signal to the hidden *lashkar*, riding into full view and waving his cloak. The valley became a shambles then—no stopping it. The mountain batteries — the one advantage that the Afghans had—were caught between a cross fire of machine guns as they tried to

take position on some slightly rising ground; they instantly ceased to be anything but carrion and metal.

The Afghan general fell with nearly all his staff and there arose a roar of "*Din! Din!*" as merciless as the howl of winter storms, outroaring the machine gun stutter as a chorus drowns orchestral music. There were not many prisoners left to take by the time Gup's gallopers had reached the *mollahs* and persuaded them to stop the slaughter.

And then Tom O'Hara, dodging between rocks until he reached Gup's stirrup:

"That's all, Gup—let the doctors clean up the mess. We've the radio working at last. News from the Khyber. Our fellows are catching it hot and the emir looks like breaking through. The North end o' the Khyber's chock-a-block with all his baggage wagons. Get a move on—don't waste men on guarding prisoners—strip 'em, take their weapons and chase 'em back to Kabul! Get your men in hand before they know it. 'Clap 'em due east, find your way to the Khyber somehow, over the mountains—a hell of a trail, and you've got to make it! Leave Lottie to me—I'll get her to Peshawar somehow."

"Care to go with him?" Gup asked her.

"No. You know I won't. I go with you."

"You heard her, Tom?"

"I heard it."

"Do your job, Tom. Reach as many *mollahs* as you can and preach loot to 'em. Tell 'em the plunder is all in the Khyber, waiting to be seized. Get busy."

Lottie and Gup divided forces for the moment, rallying the men. Her presence on a battlefield astride a red Kabuli mare and escorted by fifty mounted men who did her bidding even to the point of herding away with naked saber blades the hot eyed plunderers who were stripping dead and wounded—was something so new, so amazing, so original that men obeyed her, wondering what next the way of Allah would unfold.

And Gup found Rahman—told him the news in almost Tom O'Hara's words.

"God," said Rahman, "and by my beard, I have seen the impossible come to pass so often that I say no longer: 'None can do this or that.' Nevertheless, I believe this is more than the Prophet himself could bring to pass—be blessings on him! To the Khyber—now—with thirty thousand men—in time to stop Afghans who hurry to loot India's cities?"

"Now!" said Gup. "And in time!" he added. "And your turn for the rear guard, Rahman. Take five thousand men, load every mule we have with ammunition, load every man with all the rations he can carry, and follow us. Who is the best guide?"

"Pepul Das."

"Find him. Send him to me. Is there a trail that a horse can follow?"

"No, Bahadur. Mules, yes—but in the darkness?"

"Full moon, Rahman. Get a move on."

"All right, Gup Bahadur. By the leave of Allah we have wrought one marvel. Let us do this other. Leave that stallion with me and I will send him to Peshawar for you when the fighting is all over."

"What do you mean?"

"The *burra sahibs* in Peshawar will forgive you. They will forgive her. Will they forgive me? Nay, and I will never ask it. Rahman must take to the Hills!"

"You must think a hell of a lot of my friendship! Do you suppose that she or I would accept an amnesty in which you weren't included? Either we all go free or none of us. Who are you that you should be too proud to share luck with your friends? Shake hands, you damned old loyal rogue! I'll meet you in Peshawar or the next world. We will all take tea with the High Commissioner!"

THEN frenzy, followed by a nightmare. All that evening and all that night Gup led and the *lashkar* followed him. There were times when he tied Lottie to her mule, in case she should fall asleep and pitch down some almost bottomless crevass, but he spared her no more than he spared himself; he let her see this thing

she had begun, to the dregs of its crimson finish. There was neither military formation nor any attempt at it, nor any possibility of keeping it; the *lashkar* streamed in endless zigzag lines, in single file, like insects on the face of a dead moon. There were several trails; each had its advocates and each man chose whichever leader took the trail he fancied, over raw, grim mountains echoing to the distant thunder of contending guns.

And many a man went down to death that night on rocks where none but kites would ever find him. Many a score of loaded mules slid kicking to the depths of some dark chasm, some blown off the sloping ledges by a graceless wind that howled from the northern snow. There was neither halt nor help for any one. Whoever could not march might lag and lose himself; who lost himself might cry his lungs out to the heedless night, where moonlight only made enormous shadows deeper and all sound was changed into mocking echoes flung back from the owl roosts on the face of tortured rock.

But when the cold dawn touched the mountain tops with shimmering silver, and then mauve, and it was still dark in the Khyber, Gup Bahadur, with a woman's hand in his, stood staring at the snow white mist that lay in the bed of the dreadful gorge like a glacier steadily moving—split suddenly, at measured intervals, by flames of crimson and electric blue when shells burst and the crags exploded millions of echoes.

There was an army's rear and all its baggage train beneath that soft white mist. Perhaps there was an emir and his staff. There might be wagonloads of minted money. And beside Gup, and around him, and along the jagged cliffs on either hand, their faces strained with weariness and cruel with anticipation, stood, lay, knelt and leaned the grim, indomitable vanguard of the *lashkar*—possibly three thousand men. They were starving, but the loot lay underneath the mist. They were so dog weary that they had to pause and gather strength for the descent into the pass; but they were as hunting dogs that gather new strength from the rock they lay their bellies on and no man flinched from the final most exacting effort.

And again Gup led them, though he left Lottie alone at last, on a ledge whence she could look down but be unseen by any save the vultures' eyes, that were waking to scan the Khyber for the meal that it has furnished to endless generations of vultures as the conquerors passed to and fro and the Hillmen picked off laggards or the beasts of burden died beneath their loads.

He led, not loving what he did; his own weariness of body and mind was almost absolute, and not even the thought that he was saving India from probable disaster stirred him much. He was a man in a dream.

They dropped into the mist like devils homing into hell's mouth, streams of laggards pressed forward by Rahman's rearguard overtaking them. Hot breathing, they moved in silence until forms in the mist took shape and they knew themselves to be, by Allah's grace, a swarm of hornets loosed, as it were, at a helpless snake that turned on itself and writhed. There was no holding most of the men; they were plunder hungry, almost slaying in their sleep, their savagery stirred and decency all dormant. There was not a man but bore some grudge against the Afghan government; there was hardly a man but believed his village had been burned by Afghan foragers. However, Gup did gather his own bodyguard and Lottie's around him; he persuaded them to do valuable work, more effective than murder in checking the emir's onslaught.

They dubbed themselves the damage doers—the destroyers. Suddenly appearing through the mist, they broke the wheels of ammunition wagons. One park of ammunition wagons, jammed in the gut of the pass and waiting for the pressure of troops in front to be removed before trying to advance, they raided and burned. The explosions of that slew hundreds, men and animals, and stam-

peded a kneeling herd of several thousand baggage camels, whose loads were heaped beside them ready for the morning's march. The camels turned back northward—goblins in a panic—carrying their terror with them through the mist, stampeding in turn the mules and horses of the commissariat and its escort of cavalry, halted for breakfast and grouped around bivouac fires.

That panic sped up Khyber as a wind goes through a forest; word went with it that the front had suffered a reverse. Rumor piled on rumor until men said that the emir had been slain—that the British guns were coming—that a thousand planes were coming—that the war was already lost—that a hundred thousand Indian troops were surging into Khyber's throat to march on Kabul.

But even the shock of suddenness must cease, and when the mist dispersed itself before a northern wind there was some gallant work done by the emir's officers restoring discipline. But the rear was already in full retreat and word had reached the emir that a force of God knew how many British-Indian troops had managed somehow to outflank him. Reckless and irresolute by turns, he gave the order to retire and sent his gallopers up-pass to try to clear the way and to learn the true news. It was they who told him, too late, what had actually happened and he began to fight a stubborn rearguard action, hoping to hold up the British-Indian advance until he could regain the lost initiative.

IT WAS the British planes that caused Gup's raid to cease. Not knowing friend from enemy, nor even knowing what the cause was of the sudden backfire of the emir's forces, they encouraged it by dropping bombs promiscuously into any group that they could reach, and even by swooping and flying low, raking the rallying Afghans with machine gun fire. Gup's Hillmen then remembered their eternal hills where no such fighters in the sky could find them. Loaded down with plunder so that they could hardly climb, they swarmed back to the heights from which they had descended; and there, on the summit, finally Gup rallied a force together and fell back toward where Rahman struggled with his column of supplies and ammunition.

He hoped to strike again, to fight a genuine action this time in the emir's rear, perhaps to swoop like a blast of wind down some ravine and drive a really vital thrust into the emir's fighting ranks; but to do that he must gather his men, rest them, feed them and persuade them to stow their plunder somewhere under guard. But that hope faded. He had hardly found Lottie and mounted her on a starved, leg-weary mule when it dawned on a firebrand general in the emir's rear that the way to prevent a repetition of a raid in flank was to swarm the cliffs and retaliate.

He was a man of action, swift and resolute; within an hour he had a full brigade of infantry in hot pursuit of Gup's famished *lashkar*. Gup turned southward, looking for water and a place where he could stand at bay and give his overloaded men the respite that they needed, sending a message to Rahman to turn southward, too, and try to join him. There was no fuel, no food; some of the men slew mules and ate the raw flesh. Rahman sent word back that he was trying but that all his mules were foundered and most of his men, too, almost at the end of their strength.

The Afghan general pursued with vigor. There was nothing for it but for Gup to abandon hope of striking again at the emir's column. He turned westward, looking for Rahman, and finally found him near a watercourse, where a ragged ravine and a long ridge between two peaks provided standing ground that he could hold as long as food and ammunition lasted.

All that day and the following night they rested, snatching what sleep they could and keeping up a desultory fire against the Afghans, who were satisfied to hold them there, since the position

could not be taken by assault without artillery and reinforcements that were not forthcoming. Gup sent scouts to find out what was doing in the Khyber, but few of the scouts returned and they who did brought different tales, from which he gathered that the emir was perhaps retreating—drumfire, gaining in intensity, suggested that, too—but that his supplies were going forward and there was nothing remotely resembling a rout.

"And if we stay here long enough the kites will have us all," said Rahman. "I say, retreat to the caverns. Of thirty thousand men we have perhaps a sixth remaining. *Insh'allah*, when another day dawns we shall have a sixth of these and they will tell us we are not good leaders."

Gup agreed and an hour before daylight the discouraging retreat began—discouraging, although the Afghans made no effort to pursue them, being satisfied to seize the position that Gup had abandoned, presumably to make sure that he really was retreating and to guard against further raids. From that Gup surmised that the emir's withdrawal up the Khyber was continuing.

And then, shortly after dawn, came Tom O'Hara, bleary eyed from lack of sleep, on muleback, followed by a dozen men who seemed to think he was a sacred mystery incarnate, to be followed to the world's end if he demanded it. As soon as he saw Gup striding beside the famished mule that Lottie rode, he sat and waited for them on a hump of rock that made him look more than ever like a huge owl meditating on the mysteries of mice.

"You've done it, Gup. I said it. The emir flummoxed. Where are you going?"

"Back to the caverns," Lottie answered.

"Not you! Take my tip and come with me to Copenhagen. Gup 'd like it."

"By my beard," said Rahman, "I smell treachery!"

"Not you. If you can smell it you've a long nose. You're down on the list at G. H. Q. as slated for some sort o' title—*sirdar*, prob'ly. Me—I did it—told 'em in a letter how you played a good game."

"Why not the caverns?" Lottie asked him.

"Blew 'em up. I did it."

"Tom O'Hara—why?"

"Flummoxed the emir. Gup left dynamite and powder in the tunnels. I exploded it and let the roof fall in."

"But the wounded—"

"Sent 'em to Peshawar. That Sikh doctor ought to stand for Parliament. He's hot stuff. He evacuated 'em in one hour, each man with a label on 'im."

"But the guards?"

"Hell! Didn't the wounded need an escort? Didn't I tell 'em you were taken prisoner by a British airplane. Didn't I let 'em carry all your money with 'em, so the emir shouldn't get it. Didn't I promise 'em half of it? And didn't they scoot with all of it, ten miles this side of the border?"

"And all my treasures?"

"Jewelry went with the women. It's in Peshawar. The rest o' the junk—forget it. They'll be diggin' for it for a hundred years to come."

"But why—why did you blow up the caverns?"

"Had to. Jonesey and Harriet Dover and Bibi Marwarid had the guard all fixed. They'd doubled back and done more talking than ten bishops."

"You mean they returned there after we left?" Lottie asked.

"Hell, no. They were in there before you came away. No one had told the guard not to admit 'em. They'd a plan all set to admit the emir's men; and Jonesey had tipped the emir's scouts to a path by which he could send all the men he could spare from somewhere near the south end o' the Khyber. He'd have had it if I hadn't acted. I was not but in the nick o' time."

"Where are Harriet and Jonesey and Marwarid?"

"Oh, I told the guard to take 'em to to Peshawar. The guard bolted, but the doctor took 'em. Don't worry about 'em—they'll get short shrift—Andaman Islands for the women—rope for Jonesey."

"I won't have that!" Lottie answered.

"Lump it! Maybe you can save 'em. Gup's on velvet. So are you. I said you'll marry 'im and get to hell out of India. I wrote it. Am I right? You two leave India with passports O.K. and a clean bill o' health in writing if you want it, saving and except that you agree to pay for the care o' the wounded that the Sikh took to Peshawar—and *et cetera*—you pay your own bills. I don't know how rich you are, but they do, and I told 'em you'll act handsome. Glint is on his way home, caught with the goods. I doubt he'll rate a pension. Caught him trafficking and proved it on him. He was corresponding with the emir—crazy as a coot—offering to arrange terms that'd stop the fighting. Can you beat it? He's as crazy as the emir."

"Who is still in the Khyber. Have they stopped him?" Gup asked.

"Hell! You did it. The minute you put the wind up his rear he was beaten. It's a shame, though; our men can't take full advantage of it. India's too rebellious to make anything excep' a quick peace look like turkey to our side. They're crowding him, but they're negotiating while they fight. They're ready to sign 'most any sort o' peace that'll keep him north o' the border and leave our reg'-ments free to sit on India. Hell! I said it. I said they'd have to do it. I wrote it. I wrote it a year ago. I wrote that if they give that emir rope enough he'll hang himself as sure as my name's Tom O'Hara. Let's go."

"Where to?"

"To Peshawar, you ostrich! Come and have a drink with the High Commissioner. He's wild to meet Lottie—only sorry he must keep it secret—see—I have it in my pocket. Here's his promise to set the drinks up if I bring the two of you umbrageous to his house. I need a drink. I ought to snaffle something out of all this."

"Is a drink all you're likely to get, Tom?"

"Hell, no. I get long leave—and a ticket to Copenhagen. You two'd better travel by the same ship. Come to the wedding. Will you? I said it! I wrote it. I told her we'd have a wedding she'll remember to her dying day!"

THE END

The Luck of the Rolling Jinx

A Story of the Fire Fighters

By KARL W. DETZER

CAPTAIN KITTY MALLOY commanded the Rolling Jinx. His first name was Dennis, but he lost it—and two toes and a chunk of his right ear—at a fire twenty years ago. After that his mates called him Kitty, out of respect for his nine lives. The Rolling Jinx, as the rankest recruit in the department knows, is Engine Company 13.

A shy, sober minded man, Kitty Malloy had mopped up a thousand smudges before he was awarded the double bugles of company command. His luck—or his ill luck, if you will—was a matter of boisterous dispute on the late night watches in a hundred engine houses. There were brawny smoke eaters who contended that he was the luckiest man in the business; else how could he have lived so long? They admitted, of course, that it was ill fortune to serve with him, as the records of the mutual benefit and the widows' pension fund proved. Others, shouting

just as noisily, declared that a cross eyed black cat would not have him for the trouble he made.

"It's a cloudy night I'd let me or my outfit get Siamesed up with him on a job!" more than one company commander affirmed. "He'd kill us all, and crawl out alive himself when it was over. Was a single brick to let go, it falls sure as fate on the man standing next him."

Kitty Malloy, ignoring the talk, shuffled about his smoky duties with the lopsided swagger that he used to conceal his limp. But often he complained privately to Battalion Chief Joe Grogan that men were not what they used to be in the fire business. Not by a hose length, they weren't.

"To hear 'em talk of luck and the like you'd think it was a blasted experience meeting. But I never see a man stick his head into a armful of fire and get frost bit. When you go after it and get burnt, that's bad luck, devil take 'em; but if you stand acrost the street and throw your stream from a nice, safe sixty foot, that's good luck!"

Smoky Joe Grogan would grunt then, shift his cigar in his wide mouth and look speculatively at the alarm instrument bolted to its oaken stand. He was fond of Kitty, felt sorry for him; and he did have a bad reputation.

"Remember the time," he would ask, "when me and you went out on that drug store job?"

So Malloy would forget his luck and what men said of him and would talk of fires he had fought, of battles lost and won, while Smoky Joe chewed his cigar and urged him on. It was good for Kitty to get his mind off his troubles. And good for the fire business, too, perhaps.

"Just don't hear what they say," Grogan sometimes advised. "It takes more'n a lot of ree-cruit gabble to do harm to a man."

But the recruit gabble persisted. Engine 13, with its crowded, tindery district and its thousand alarms a year, was undermanned always. Probationers pulled strings at the city hall in their efforts to prevent assignment to it. Seasoned firemen threatened to resign if sent to Kitty Malloy's outfit. Until finally, when a tough job popped off the alarm recorder, often as not Malloy would charge out to duty with only three pipemen on the tailboard to do his bidding on the Rolling Jinx.

The chief of department mentioned Kitty's lame foot casually to him one day and suggested with some embarrassment that the captain might be getting too old to bunk out on night alarms.

"You got a idee of pensioning me?" Kitty roared then. "Put me on the shelf and you'll know the meaning of bad luck. This district can't get along without me. It'd burn like a lumber yard in a gale, it would, and your pretty parade boys would stand off and let it—"

"For the good of morale," the chief interposed.

Kitty silenced him.

"Morale and be damned!" he yelled. "That's another new fangled notion, along with luck and the like. Morale don't put out any fires I'm acquainted with, Chief. It takes water. And you can't put water where it's needed from acrost the street. To drown out a fire you got to get a-holt of it, wrassel with it, be close enough to spit in its eye. Ain't my fault if somebody gets hurt. Pension me? You got another think coming!"

That night, when the chief of department put the matter up to the battalion chief, Smoky Joe agreed with Kitty.

"Best leave him on the job, sir," he advised. "What I'd do in this district I've no idea, was you to pull him out. Why, whenever there's a hot job to smother, I got to send somebody in—somebody that likes to get et up by fire."

"The men are afraid to work 'side of him."

Smoky Joe admitted that.

"And it's unfortunate," he agreed. "But if you'd retire old Kitty there'd be a hole a mile wide in the battalion. I'd need him. The Rolling Jinx ain't a kindergarten, mind, and we want somebody there that's got more guts than an angleworm."

"We'll try a few months more," the chief consented. "But it can't last, Smoky. Never. The men are afraid of him. I'd be afraid to be under a falling wall with him."

Grogan shrugged and puffed his cigar.

"I would myself," he admitted. "With him, or with you, or with St. Peter for that matter. Under falling walls ain't my idea of a nice gentle pastime. But with Kitty falling walls is just another day's work. He eats 'em up."

"Very well, then," the chief said. "One more chance. But those two squadmen getting electrocuted in that basement yesterday, following him in—"

"Sure, it looks bad. But he put out the fire, didn't he? He says they was careless. Managed not to get hurt himself."

Kitty Malloy heard frequently that winter that he was slated for retirement, come what would, before midsummer. He accosted Smoky Joe with the rumor. The battalion chief, instead of denying it, tried to comfort him.

"Go a bit easy," he would recommend. "Don't push so hard when you're up against a job."

"The fire don't know no better than to push," Kitty would answer soberly. "Somebody's got to hold it. If I don't keep stopping 'em every day there'll be a lot of politicians running downstairs at the city hall some morning when the wind's right. No, Chief, we got to hold 'em down. Make 'em stay small, and then there won't be no big fires in the district. Luck be damned. Who ever heard of luck in the fire business? It's guts, that's all!"

BUT HIS bad record continued. In January, at a tallow and hide warehouse, a floor dropped on Engine 13, and two broken arms and a fractured skull resulted. Kitty got a scratch across the cheek that healed in a week.

On the twenty-eighth of February Kitty Malloy led his company of four scared men into a lampshade factory, just as a back draft kicked down the stairs. A recruit died, there, with flame in his lungs; three others were seared and scorched; only Kitty Malloy crawled out unhurt.

"We best get rid of him quick," the chief of department said.

March found Engine 13 wetting down a print shop when the walls let go, and three men were injured, and again in May one of Captain Kitty's men drowned in a flooded cellar.

"He's got till August first," the chief decided.

Smoky Joe Grogan dragged hard on his cigar that night when Kitty strolled in for his regular weekly conference.

"You been running in worse luck than usual," he commented. "I guess the stuff's off, Kitty—"

"Luck and—"

"Be damned to me," Grogan supplied. "Sure, and I never said you wasn't a fireman, did I? But the Big Boy downtown, he says it's hard on the business. Says you ought to take your pension."

"I won't," Kitty growled.

"I'm a friend of yours, ain't I?" Smoky Joe asked.

Malloy nodded unwillingly.

"You're that, until you go talking about putting me on the shelf."

"It isn't me. It's the Big Boy. He says August first—"

"Leave him say it to me, personal," Kitty broke in. "I'll get out when I'm put out. Until then . . ."

"Very good, he'll put you out," Smoky Joe said. "And I'm sorry. We've been a long time together in the business."

Smoky Joe watched the summer march across the city, drying old roofs, kindling fires at unexpected hours in unexpected places. June came in hot, and the dusty blackboards on engine house walls were packed with alarms. The Rolling Jinx rushed out to its breathless duty forty times the first week; small blazes, for the most part, that Kitty Malloy smothered with a handpump or a single line.

There were four men on Engine 13, now, besides the captain—two old-timers

with good records behind them, two recruits fresh from drill school, and without influence at the city hall. Malloy drove them expertly; bullied them at their tasks; kept his record clean. Not a fire escaped from him, and only twice in two months when the Rolling Jinx stilled out alone on a single engine job, did he have to call for help. Smoky Joe, riding more quietly to alarms, with his cigar clamped tight in his firm lips, nodded to Kitty approvingly, but wasted no words.

After all, it would be better for his reputation, if Kitty were not quite so energetic. If he would accept more help the men in his company might not have so many accidents. Nothing had happened to any of them now, not even a scratch, for four weeks. One more try, the chief had said.

Smoky Joe did not mention the matter to Kitty again. But he hoped eloquently that August first would arrive without further catastrophe. So June dragged on, and the night of July third arrived.

The joker alarm instrument early went into action. In the streets of the near north side, native and adopted Americans made merry with contraband firecrackers, and before the sport was well under way sirens began to shrill and bells to clatter. Farther south and west other patriots annoyed the department. But in the retail district, and in that neighborhood of tall warehouses toward the river, departmental wheels stood motionless.

KITTY MALLOY was sitting out the last hour of his trick between eight and nine that evening. He planned to go to bed early. Pipeman Hadden would relieve him promptly at nine and stay on till midnight. Hadden, Captain Malloy reflected, was a likely recruit. His arms were long and his hands large; that awkwardness would give way in time to strength.

Benedict would relieve Hadden at twelve, and at two Riley would relieve Benedict for the dog watch. A pair of good men, Riley and Benedict, old-timers, with fifteen years each in the business. They were slipping a little, and Kitty suspected that when he was not listening they sometimes talked, like all their predecessors on Engine 13, of bad luck. The other recruit, Mulcahey, the boy with the red hair, would take the final night trick, from four to six. He, too, was likely material; seemed to need a lot of sleep, but that was hardly a fault. There he was now, dozing on the hose box of the pumper.

Captain Malloy tipped his chair against the wall under the blackboard and listened comfortably to the staccato voice of the joker, cackling its grim witticisms.

"Calling Engine 14," he said to Benedict, who stood beside him when a still alarm sputtered in.

He leaned forward and picked up the telephone receiver. Benedict, standing silent, heard the crisp voice of the operator at alarm headquarters, blurred now by the receiver against the captain's ear.

"Grand and Wells," Kitty reported. He placed the receiver gently upon its hook. "I hope it's a blasted false alarm. I've no stomach for that district."

The joker chuckled again.

"3—1—10."

Truck No. 10 was following Engine 14. Then Squad 1 stilled out for the same location, and finally an insurance patrol made for the scene.

"I'll wait up a minute," the captain decided, and eyed the clock that pointed to nine. "See if they report back to quarters."

Hadden slouched forward from the kitchen where he had been listening to the radio, hands in pockets, elbows thrust out awkwardly at his sides.

"What's that one?" he asked.

"Sounds like work," Engineer Riley answered. "Grand and Wells."

He put down the evening paper and, strolling toward the pumper, glanced professionally at the gages on the dash. The clock ticked unemotionally; it pointed to one minute past nine. Out in the street traffic rumbled by. Crowds were swarming into a pair of theaters at the next corner.

"Engine 14's there by now," Riley volunteered. "It can't be much or else they'd be hollering for help."

Mulcahey lay down again, sleepily, on the hose. Malloy glanced from the clock to the pumper, in the exact center of the apparatus room. It was a thousand gallon outfit, with its air chamber over the front end like a sparkling brass puff ball, and the numerals 13 painted in gilt under the driver's seat. A good rig, Kitty Malloy told himself; he would hate to give it up, hate to trust it to any other man. He had spent ten years in command of that pumper, and he felt a rich, warm affection for it—such an affection as a skipper feels for a trustworthy ship. They called it the Rolling Jinx, did they? The dirty slanderers!

The clock pointed to three minutes past nine. Riley, without comment, tested his lights. They made a pair of bright spots on the white panel of the door, red and green spots. The telegraph key remained mute.

"No. 14 found something there," the captain grumbled, "or they'd be reporting home before this."

"Found something," Benedict agreed. "That's no false alarm."

"We don't go unless they pull a two-bagger," Kitty said.

"I hope they don't." Hadden spoke huskily. "I ain't hankering for a workout."

He looked uneasily at the captain, and Kitty knew instinctively what he was thinking. He was not hankering for any bad luck.

The box alarm recorder roused itself. With a whir of small cogs it began to spit white paper tape through the slot in its glass dust cover. The steel jaws of its punch snapped together, biting holes in the ribbon. Eight punches in a row—two more, six.

"There's 14 pulling the box." Malloy limped rapidly across to the pumper and jerked his bunkers off the running board. "No. 826—Wells and Grand."

Mulcahey pushed his red head over the side of the hose compartment again at the words and stared down at his officer. His mild blue eyes were open wide, as if searching for trouble and hoping not to find it. Riley climbed up to his seat on the right of the pumper and tested the starter. The engine caught with a roar and a sputter of smoke. Riley listened to it for a moment carefully. He was a small, graying fireman, whose face had been tanned by his hundred close-up battles with flame, and his hands, as he turned off the switch, were capable and precise. Benedict, in the doorway, squinted northwestward; he could see nothing. Returning to the pumper, he picked up his rubber jacket.

Sitting on the running board, Kitty pulled his bunkers over heavy woolen socks. There was something uncomfortable in the way the men were acting. As if they knew that any fire on the night of July third might be a bad one, and if they went into another fire with Kitty Malloy, they were apt to get hurt. He slid his toes into the bottoms of his bunkers and stood up, yanking the long rubber legs of the waterproofs past his thighs, and snapping the harness buckle at the waist. His eyes, as he picked up his shoes to set them away, rested a moment on the calendar above the alarm stand. August first, the chief had said.

"I hear Engine 11." Benedict spoke over his shoulder. "She's rolling down Austin." In a moment he added, "Truck 9 goes on that too?"

Malloy looked at the clock before he replied. The hands stood at seven minutes past the hour.

"Truck 9," he assented. "We used to go too, instead of 98. But they put them in our place when they changed the running card. Don't want to pull us too far from downtown."

Riley, slouching in his seat, tried to whistle, but broke off suddenly on a false note. Hadden climbed to the tailboard and reached across the hose for his leather fire hat, which he set firmly on his head. He found his gloves, then, stuck into the folds of the fabric line, and pulled them on seriously.

The box alarm recorder spoke fussily: "8—2—6. 2—11."

"Roll!" Kitty yelled. "Roll on the two-bagger! Riley, it's us they want!"

HE STUMBLED over the step, barking his shins on the edge of the tool box atop the running board, and clawed up beside the driver. The motor thundered. Benedict and Hadden swung to the tailboard, just as Mulcahey slid down off the rear of the hose box. The wheels turned. The siren whined. As the second round of the 2-11 chattered in over the wire, the Rolling Jinx nosed into the street. Riley swung his wheel expertly and the pumper turned to the right. Kitty forgot August first.

"Faith o' Moses!" he bellowed. "It ain't a funeral!" He prodded Riley in the ribs. "Get there! Get there, I say! What for you backing up?"

The Rolling Jinx wallowed ahead through traffic, and once over the bridge put on speed more to the captain's liking. Malloy glanced at Riley—he wished that his driver did not look so desperate about his job. Why, with a face set like that you were begging trouble, hunting that bad luck they talked about so constantly.

"Left next corner," he shouted, and ground the crank of the siren with his left hand, while his right jerked spasmodically on the lanyard of the brass bell over the hood. "Go, now. Nobody's holding on to your coat tails."

The air was heavy with smoke at Clark Street, thick enough to dim the lights in shop windows. Kitty sniffed. That was not coal smoke he smelled. It hung like yellow fog around street lamps. Two blocks ahead, under a low cloud, he made out the huge black silhouettes of apparatus, already cluttering the street, and the red and green reflections of headlights on departmental rigs.

"Take next hydrant," he ordered. "Swing to right—here at corner. Quick! There's Engine 10—beat 'em to it. Beat 'em. Good!"

While the bell still chattered and the wheels were skidding toward the curb, he leaped to the pavement and ran heavily forward through the smoke. Riley, sliding down from his seat, looked after him ruefully and shook his head.

"Old man's on a tear," he said.

He unbuckled the hard rubber suction pipe and swung it expertly, with a double curve, toward the hydrant. Hadden slapped up the lid of the tool box on the right running board and fished out a long handled spanner.

"Three-inch line," Benedict ordered, and Mulcahey began to pull bulky hose off the right hand side of the box.

At the hydrant Riley warned:

"Look out for yourself. Take no chances." And Hadden, panting, agreed.

Captain Malloy, running clumsily with his lopsided gait, bored through the smoke. The fire lay west of the street intersection. Already three lines of fat hose streaked along the pavement. Police were driving the crowd back; over building tops the sirens of apparatus wailed; the rumble of motors harried the air with quick vibrations.

Battalion Chief Grogan stamped out of the dark; an electric lantern swinging from his elbow was reflected on his long, wet white slicker.

"Companies!" he was shouting. "Companies report!"

"Thirteen!" Kitty Malloy cried. "Thirteen ready, Joe."

Grogan halted, peering through the smoke. He shook his head once, irritably, then said:

"Good. It's that pants shop—Birk and Eisenbaum's. She's got a holt, Kitty, in basement. Running up the shaft already. Like to mushroom any minute. Go in basement rear. Two lines, Siamese yourself. Drown it."

"Yes, sir." Malloy swung about.

"Hold on!" Grogan ordered. "Don't lose your shirt. Wait till you hear what I got to say. I'm pulling a four-bagger. You'll have backing. Plenty of it. So have a thought. Go easy. Don't take no chances."

The captain was charging toward his company.

"Five section of elephant trunk," he yelled, "and five of regular. We Siamese ourself. Inch and seven-eight tip. Get going, men, get going!"

Hadden already was dragging forward the three-inch line; Mulcahey struggled opposite him with the two and a half. Benedict, who moved slowly, as if he had all eternity, was pulling the heavy brass Siamese nozzle off its double riding pins on the left running board. Riley fussed with the motor, his head pushed under the hood.

Kitty grabbed the line impatiently from Hadden's awkward fingers and plunged on with it.

"Bring the pipe!" he commanded.

A LIEUTENANT, loping past with a flying squadron, paused, seeing Kitty's undermanned crew; ordered two of his own men to drop out and help Engine 13 drag line. Kitty plunged into the alley with Mulcahey at his boot heels. Smoke was heavier there, the acrid smoke of burning cloth that obscured the thin light which trickled in from the street. Mulcahey was coughing when he held up the gaping end of his hose line to the intake of the Siamese pipe. Brass clashed on brass, and Kitty Malloy panted, with his mouth hanging open, as he tightened the coupling thread. The other hose took thirty seconds more. With two lines dragging after the Siamese, Malloy turned to the blank, unlighted brick wall on his left.

He stooped, running his fingers cautiously over the uneven surface at the height of his knees. The rough texture of the brick scraped the callouses on his palms. The wall was cool, surprisingly cool for so hot a night, and with such a fire burning beyond it.

"Here's the door," Benedict shouted out of the dark. "Hey, Cap! The door."

"Ain't going in door," Malloy replied. He spit up a mouthful of smoke and added, "Cellar window. There's one here—I've saw it in daytimes often. There—"

He fumbled a moment. Hadden and Mulcahey, holding the pipe behind him, heard him swear once, violently. He bent lower and grunted; grunted again.

"Wrecking bar," he ordered. "Benedict, bring pry bar off a truck. Door opener, anything that'll take holt. There's iron gratings."

So thirty seconds were wasted while Benedict ran back to the street, and thirty more while he returned. Mulcahey was coughing again. Hadden mumbled.

"What's that?" Kitty Malloy demanded.

"I said I don't like basement jobs," the pipeman replied stubbornly.

The blunt claw of the door opener caught under the edge of the iron grating. Malloy pried.

"Hand here—give hand. Don't like 'em, you say? What I care what you like? We go in basement. Grogan's orders. Basement's where the fire is at. Heave now—harder. That's it."

Bolts creaked and snapped. Kitty pawed at the iron grillework, yanking it up. He tossed the bar into the alley behind him.

"Pipe," he ordered. "Take a holt and get set. Now water!"

Benedict cried:

"Engine 13! Charge the line!"

Other firemen, back in the dark, took up the shout. Malloy heard the hiss of air at the tip. That meant that Riley had pushed open the water gate. The two squadmen who had paused to help lay hose now ran off to other duties. The stream was on its way through the double line. The fabric bulged.

"Grab her!" the captain commanded, and pushed the snout of the big pipe at the basement window.

Glass rattled out, and smoke kicked after it. Malloy leaped into the shallow pit and gripped the tip of the nozzle. Mulcahey and Hadden clung to the butt. Benedict, running up heavily, squatted atop the hose.

Water churned out. Its spray, beating up from sills and walls, pelted Malloy's face. He crouched lower. Deep in the basement he made out the hazy glow of fire against thick smoke, colored umber

and buff and rich sienna, flashing into blackness, burning up bright again. Smoke pinched his eyelids and stuffed his nose like wads of cotton. He drove his stream forward. Spray cleared the air momentarily. Where were his men?

"Come in!" Kitty yelled back at them. "Waiting for a invite or something?"

He wormed through the broken glass, smashing the slim mullions of the sash with his knees. It was a four-foot drop to the floor, and he slid it cautiously, gripping the tip. Mulcahey was in the pit behind him; the other two lay on their faces just above.

"Come," the captain bade once more, and stepped forward a pace.

The pipe followed, wobbling once as Benedict released his hold to slide after Mulcahey. The stream drummed against rafters with the roar of a thousand geysers. The basement was strangely cool. To Kitty that meant drafts with good footing, and a shaft job up above.

SMOKE churned; the men could not see it, only feel its eddies against their throats. The stream pressed out of the tip with a roar that deadened the sound of distant flame. Kitty Malloy, feeling the throb of rushing water with his experienced fingers, knew that Riley and the pumper were doing their best, up there in the street. With a tip of this size, and as much back drive as there was, he must have a nozzle pressure of fifty pounds and be throwing close to seven hundred gallons a minute. Seven hundred gallons ought to discourage any fire, even a pants shop blaze like this.

Benedict slid around Hadden and took his place opposite Kitty at the tip. The butt twisted obstinately in the hands of the two recruits.

"Step up," Kitty ordered.

He sensed the crew's unwillingness. Fire outlined the door fifty feet ahead, a misty rectangle against the blackness of the cellar. No water dripped through floors yet—the other companies above were not throwing heavy streams. The air thickened; still there was no heat.

Kitty Malloy swore under his quickening breath. Cold smoke, this, the deadliest kind. Without warning it would put you on your back, send you frothing to your knees, or drive you out of the nearest window. And if it got Engine 13 this time . . . He tried not to let the first day of August cross his mind.

"The dirty slanderers," he muttered; then louder, "Up a bit."

Three feet forward. Three more. Mulcahey was choking now. Kitty pretended not to hear. The fire shone brighter in the oblong doorway. But he would beat it. He would not retreat. Straight into the heart of it Kitty drove his stream. He could hear the smash of timbers as water pounded them, and the crackle of steam, and the wash of hundreds of spent gallons.

"Get forward to that door!" he commanded. "Hit it nice from there."

"Hot!" Benedict protested. "Too hot —there. Here—cool."

"Up at it!" Malloy shouted.

The line advanced, hitching an inch at a time in unwilling hands. Bent over the tip the captain guided his stream. There were longer moments of darkness. He was discouraging it, all right. If he could get close enough to come to grips—

Somewhere behind him he heard his name shouted, then Smoky Joe crawled up to him.

"How you making?" the battalion chief asked.

"Good."

"Big Boy just took charge. She's going through roof. Four floors, all et up by fire. Out front windows. Just pulled first special."

"Where's me backings?" Kitty wanted to know.

"Coming. Two companies. Here in a minute. Laying their lines. Don't go any farther till you hear 'em."

The battalion chief started back at once, crawling through water that ran in crazy, dirty rivulets across the cement floor. Glancing over his shoulder, Kitty was blinded by the flash of the electric

lantern on Grogan's elbow. It *was* smoky. No doubt about it. In twenty feet the light was obscured.

Three minutes—three choking minutes crawled by. Still no helpers. Four minutes, five. Kitty growled resentfully. What was the matter with those boys outside? Did the whole fire business have cold feet? They did not like cellar jobs, preferred to stay in the air and push water into gratings with a flat lipped Egan pipe. That was the thing to do, if you could not get into the cellar. Sometimes one hit the fire that way—not often.

Again Kitty growled. Joe Grogan was getting too cautious, now that he wore the crossed bugles of battalion chief. Going too slowly. Giving too many orders. Engine 13 ought not to have to wait for backing. They ought to work ahead now—this minute. The fire was brighter again. He was not checking it. If he could get through that door—

Heat rolled out now. Flame showed its ruddy face around corners. Arms of it stretched down the passage. It danced on quick feet along the wet cement. Kitty leaned over the nozzle tip and breathed air bubbles from the stream. He would wait no longer for backing.

"Move up!" he yelled hoarsely.

"Can't!" Benedict cried. "Fry us, any closer. Grogan said wait."

"Up!"

Kitty crawled ahead, clutching the tip. Would they follow or not? Not, eh? He felt the kick of pressure as their fingers relaxed. He wasted breath on another shout, and heard Benedict talking crazily about bad luck. Bad luck? They would learn what it was this time! It *would* be bad luck if they did not follow. A falling wall would be easy to take alongside what he would bring down on them. He pressed the shut-off valve, cutting his stream. He could not hold that volume alone. The hose reared up behind him in protest before the churn valve, on the pumper back in the street, took off the added load. A heavy roaring spray piled out of the wide tip.

"Come!" Kitty shouted once more.

He wallowed forward on elbows and knees. It was hot in here. He straddled the kicking line, better to handle it. Again he must reduce his shut-off. Not much of a stream, this. Thin spray, when he needed high nozzle power. But it spit out bubbles of cold air, and Kitty could breathe again. It was worse than he thought. The fire yelled derisively at him. He could hear his three men shouting; they were back there somewhere. They would not desert him completely, but neither would they come on. And he had no club this time—the trial board would not turn an ear his way when the others told that Grogan had said wait for help. Damn Grogan! He was getting too cautious.

KITTY hitched ahead three feet, drove a moment from there, hitched again. Anger at his company, at the impudence of fire, pressed him forward, put strength in his knotty hands. Water was dripping on him from above. He drew his head down into the collar of his rubber coat and felt small, hot cascades pelting his helmet. His own stream burrowed into the flame. He was pushing it back again. That was the elevator shaft just ahead. Fire roared up it. Flat on the floor he sprawled and lifted the nozzle tip. This was a grand place to wash the shaft down. Here he would stick.

The Rolling Jinx did not need any backing. Let the others stay out in the alley, or up in the street grandstanding. This was no time for grandstanding; no time to wait in the alley.

Behind him he heard a shout, voices lifted excitedly against the clamor of flame.

"That might be Grogan now," Kitty told himself, "bringing his backing."

His head was heavy—this smoke was bad. Getting worse. He needed sleep. Again he pushed open his red eyes. No time for sleep. Not when he was as close as this to the center of the blaze. He lifted the tip higher and drove. The Rolling Jinx did not need help. Back

along the line he heard voices again, dimly.

"Elegant spot to hit it," he mumbled.

Fire drew away from his onslaught. The light that had blinded him was dimming, flame scrambled up the shaft, retreating from his stream. He did not have the strength to follow it up. Could not turn on full pressure. Could not see!

He heard Grogan.

"Get out, men!" the chief was shouting. "Kitty says everybody out. He's coming hisself."

Out? Kitty Malloy coming out? Damned if he was! Why, he just had found a good place to work. Again he heard Joe clearly:

"Out! Beat it! Cap Malloy's orders."

Kitty laughed, then growled. He cursed the fire that tried, emboldened, to crawl back at him. The voices behind him were plainer—

"Cap said to stick." That was Benedict.

Grogan answered with a roar:

"Malloy says beat it quick. He's coming hisself. Run!"

Again Kitty laughed.

"Ain't he the liar?" he said. He tried to call, "I say, Joe . . ."

His helmet became too heavy, suddenly. Here was a good place to sleep. Needed sleep, he did. Fire was going away. He had beaten it. Had time to sleep . . .

He felt Grogan's hands snatching at the hot rubber of his slicker.

"Malloy—out!"

Grogan's hands clawed at him again. Kitty shook them off impatiently—smoke was too thick to see.

"Leave me be," Kitty muttered.

Grogan's fist struck him sharply on the jaw. The nozzle whipped out of his hands. Its cold spray hit his face and he heard Grogan's big voice again, panting slightly. He tried to fight back, was being shaken. His heels dragged on the cement.

"Give me hand," Grogan was demanding of some one. "Engine 13 all out?"

Kitty felt himself boosted.

"All but captain."

"This is him," Smoky Joe was saying. Kitty's head rang; his ears could not be hearing aright. "It was Malloy helped me—I was lost down there. He helped *me* out. Steered me to the window. Talk about luck!"

Cool air poured into the blistered skin on Kitty's face. Two men were leading him, supporting him on their arms. What did Joe Grogan mean? Kitty Malloy had not helped him. The battalion chief was lying again, lying just as he had a minute ago to the men. It was Grogan who ordered the crew out, not their captain; Grogan who yanked him up through the window. Again Kitty heard—

"His luck's changed this time."

Behind in the suffocating darkness a deep grunt sounded, then a roar like hailstones on a tin roof. Floors were falling. Bricks tumbled out upon pavement. The pants factory had dropped into its basement. Men were yelling. Sharp orders snapped across the air. Streams rumbled. In it all was a note of terror.

"Thirteen? Crew safe?"

Kitty, staggering at Joe Grogan's side, recognized that voice too. It was the Big Boy, chief of department. Grogan was answering:

"All out! Malloy had ordered 'em out."

Kitty tried to speak. His raw throat closed on his words.

"Ordered them?" the chief cried. "I thought he'd kill 'em, Smoky."

"Backed 'em out fast and steered me after 'em, Chief."

"I didn't," Kitty panted. "I told 'em move up!"

Grogan swung on him:

"Never mind talking, Malloy. Chief knows all about it. You guessed them floors was going to fall."

"Joe brung me out, Chief!"

"Brung you?" Joe Grogan laughed. "He's loco, sir. Batty with smoke. He don't remember what happened. Saved his men, and me, and now don't know it!"

The chief cleared his throat.

"I ain't so dumb, Smoky," he said.

"Me, either!" Kitty cried. "He's covering me up, sir."

The chief shook his head. He looked at Kitty reflectively.

"It ain't you he's covering. It's a hole in his district a mile wide. He wants to keep the lid on it. Guess you win, Smoky."

"Thanks, sir," Grogan said. "You see, Kitty, the men thinks there's luck in this business. Say there's a jinx. Well, we killed it tonight. If it was you sent 'em out, just before the floors dropped, why, they'll say you've got good luck now."

"The dirty slanderers!" Kitty growled.

TRACKING

With a Few Words on Getting Lost

By WILLIAM WELLS

THE ART of tracking or trailing, that is, following men or animals by their footprints or other indications left of their passage, is to many people a great mystery, but as a matter of fact is nothing but a good pair of eyes trained to close observation and a knowledge of how and why certain causes produce certain effects.

I remember hunting with a friend who shot a bull elk. The bullet passed through the animal's lungs in such manner that the elk ran nearly a quarter mile before it fell. Although the animal left a perfectly plain trail—fresh dirt kicked up, bent-over grass and weeds, here and there a splatter of blood—it seemed wonderful to my friend that I could find it in that thick mass of brush and trees. Or how I knew that it was a lung shot, though spots of bright, frothy blood told this.

Yet that man was a banker who could distinguish at a glance the difference between a true or a forged signature and between real and counterfeit money, though to me they would appear exactly alike. Our different abilities were simply a matter of training.

A trail may run over soft ground with no vegetation, where any one can follow it, or over hard, bare rock where apparently no trace is left. Yet in most cases a crack Indian tracker, especially one from the deserts and barren mountains of the Southwest, will follow one nearly as easily as the other.

Almost all rock has on the surface minute vegetable growth, moss, lichens

and the like, small loose particles of stone, wind-blown sand or dust in slight depressions, any or all of which will show to the trained eye evidence of having been trodden on or disturbed.

All pieces of rock, no matter how small, have the under side darker in color than the side uppermost and exposed to the weather. Thus they show at a glance if they have been recently turned over. The same applies in a lesser degree to particles of earth or sand. Also, a very slight depression in earth or sand shows a difference in shade from the surrounding surface, especially when the sun is low.

Where there are grass, bushes or other vegetation, tracking is easier. Grass bent down toward the sun shows a shade of green quite different from that standing upright. Bent away from the sun, another shade; at right angles to the sun, still another; and, of course, across grass wet with dew or rain a fresh trail is very plain.

In brush or tall weeds, leaves which have been brushed against show more of the light colored under side. There are often bent or broken twigs and leaves torn loose and lying on the ground.

The age of a trail is told in various ways. Wet grass when pressed down picks up particles of earth or sand. Any grass stems, leaves or twigs that are broken off show by the amount of drying that has taken place how long they have been broken. On damp ground the amount of drying out at the edge of footprints tells, also, the stage of discolored water in swamps, the margins of streams and like places. In open country the absence or presence of wind during the last day or so shows in the drift—or lack of drift—of sand or dry earth into footprints.

In snow the edges of fresh footprints are always of the same texture as the surrounding surface, gradually freezing hard, and after one night are a mass of frost crystals. In loose, deep snow it is often difficult to tell which way an animal is moving; but any snow pushed up will be thrown forward of the footprint. Unless the snow is too deep, a man or animal will put its foot straight down and drag it forward in lifting it, so the slanting side of the hole is the direction in which the trail leads.

A knowledge of the country and of the habits of animals is a great help in trailing. If you become convinced that a man or animal is heading for a trail, a gap in the hills of rough country, a waterhole or anything of that kind, don't lose time tracking, but head for the spot and pick the trail again there.

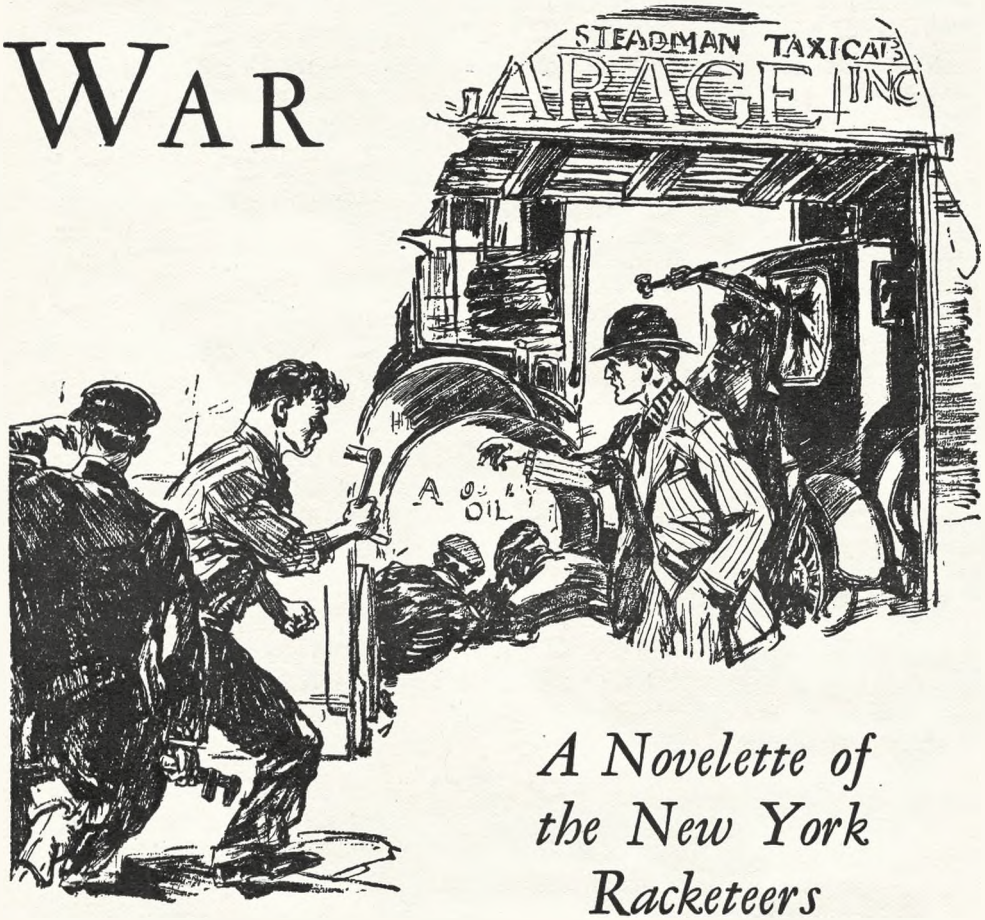
A word on getting lost may not be out of place. Every one gets lost on occasion —woodsmen, Indians and all. I have been lost more times than I have fingers and toes, but I always arrived where I was headed for in course of time. Being lost on a desert with no water handy is the worst—but no tenderfoot should tackle a desert.

Most people get lost in the woods or mountains. The thing to do is to sit right down and stay there until somebody finds you, for it is a lot easier to find a lost person if he is somewhere near where you might expect him to be than if he is running wild in the worst country he can find—which they always do. It is astounding how crazy people become when lost. They forget there are such things as points of the compass, that water runs downhill and that following a stream in the mountains will bring them down out of them to where people live; they forget that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. All they can remember is to hit a high lope and keep it up until they drop.

Always carry matches and, when lost, pick out a place where fire can't spread, build a big fire and pile on a lot of green stuff that will make plenty of smoke; then sit tight. It takes quite a while to starve to death. Before long somebody will show up, maybe only a forest ranger wanting to know what in blazes you think you are doing. Explanations are a blamed sight better than having some one find your bones hidden where nobody thought of looking for you.

TAXI WAR

By WILLIAM CORCORAN



A Novelette of the New York Racketeers

SUCH things no longer happen, in these more disciplined days when the New York Police Department rules the Hack Bureau with an iron hand. But this was another time, when feuds of such nature were only of passing interest to the busy Department. It began in this wise.

A taxicab drove slowly down a street in the East 90's, the driver holding a crimsoned handkerchief to his face with one hand. Spring showers had wet the pavements and sent little rivulets of rain water hurrying along the gutters; but now the sun shone, and it warmed the long row of flat houses of faded gentility on the north side of the street. Close to Avenue A the cab driver sounded his horn and turned in the open doorway of a grimy little garage.

He stopped the car just within the entrance and edged out of the seat. Across the concrete floor he walked in wobbly fashion to the tiny office partitioned off at

one side. There he paused and, with a shudder, spat on the floor. He rid himself of a certain quantity of blood and one broken tooth; and having done so, he fainted and keeled over with a crash into a stack of tire rims.

At the sound Eric Stedman spun about from his desk in the office. He saw the driver falling and leaped to save him. He succeeded in guarding the stricken man from further harm among the heavy steel rims and, lifting the limp body, carried it into the office and laid it out on a table. He straightened the dangling limbs and felt of the sagging, swollen jaw. The former were sound and whole, but the latter was unmistakably broken. Blood trickled from the lips. The driver, a tall, slender young Italian, was in bad shape.

A face expressing concern and curiosity was thrust in the office door.

"What's the matter, Eric? What happened to Joe?"

Stedman spoke over his shoulder.

"Get on the phone and call an ambulance, Jim. Busted jaw and a lot of fancy bruises. He needs attention in a hurry."

Jim Watkins entered and picked up the telephone, jiggling the hook for quick service.

Eric filled a small tin pail with warm water from the washstand in the corner and bathed the driver's face with a wet towel. He felt the young Italian's pulse and was satisfied at the steady beat. This was no job for an amateur, and as long as Joe Cardoni's heart pumped firmly it was perhaps better that he remain unconscious until medical relief arrived.

Watkins, in touch with Bellevue Hospital, was promised an ambulance immediately, and he came to Stedman's side to watch in dour compassion.

"Now what do you suppose happened to him, Jim?" he said. "There's not a mark on the cab."

Eric Stedman regarded the comatose driver.

"This is no accident, Jim. Look here." He lifted one of the Italian's hands and displayed the knuckles, on which the skin was cut and broken. "The kid has been scientifically manhandled. He put up a scrap, but they were too much for him. They used brass knucks to polish him off. I've seen jaws like that before."

Stedman dropped the bruised hand to the table. He uttered a soft curse at those responsible for the youngster's condition.

"Dammit, why did they have to pick on the kid?" he said. "There isn't a nicer lad behind a wheel in New York, nor one less likely to go hunting trouble." Eric Stedman was not long from behind a wheel himself, and his drivers were still his friends.

"Joe Cardoni never went hunting this," said Watkins. "I know the kid."

Eric Stedman smiled wryly, with a little twisting of the mouth.

"I'll learn who did this, Jim. Joe was driving my hack when it happened." His voice acquired the timbre of anger. "And I'll ram it down the throats of the entire city that no one can touch my drivers. I'll crack six jaws if necessary to prove it."

Jim Watkins regarded him with friendly skepticism.

"Maybe, Eric. That's a large order."

The wry smile returned to Stedman's features.

"Oh, well! I suppose so. But—hell, I liked the kid."

Eric Stedman was himself not so very much older than the "kid." He was twenty-seven, and he had fought his way through a world in which brass knuckles were not an uncommon peril. His apprenticeship at taxi driving had been served in its toughest days, and he had started in business with a capital consisting of a shoestring of cash and a vast resource of nerve. He was a husky figure of a man, deep chested and broad handed. His features were uneven, but they were attractive and full of strength; and his deep blue eyes, wide apart, and dark brown hair with soft waves in which appeared glints of red, were striking enough to permit one to call him handsome in a hard, resourceful fashion.

Eric Stedman had been brought up in the ruthless school of the city, and it had succeeded only in tempering his strength.

THE OFFICE telephone rang loudly, and Watkins reached for it. Jim Watkins was the mechanic of the Stedman taxi fleet, a squarely built, rugged jawed man with keen gray eyes and wiry black hair shot with threads of silver. His skin had the swarthy hue common to men who associate with motors. He wore oil stained brown overalls and his hands were black with the grime of the shop.

After listening a moment to the excited voice which came through the receiver, he handed the instrument to Stedman.

"It's Kelly," he said. "Knows all about Joe. He wants you."

Stedman took the phone.

"Is Joe there?" Kelly demanded insistently. "For God's sake tell me if he is. I been off my nut looking for him."

"He's here. What happened?"

"I'll be right around to tell you. Wait for me. G'by!"

The receiver clicked and was silent.

The two men glanced at each other. Watkins nodded his head in reflection.

"Hm! Two of the boys in on it. One broken jaw. Brass knuckles. I wonder—"

Eric tapped a cigaret on his thumbnail.

"Wonder what?"

"I wonder," said Watkins, "if Jake Levin has come to Yorkville."

"Jake Levin!" breathed Eric. "And Silky Gannon."

The cigaret broke in his fingers and spilled flakes of golden tobacco over the floor.

In those far off days—to use a literary expression which evades the delicate obligation of being specific about events that are a matter of record, and about persons more discreetly left unidentified—the public hack business in New York was in a state of piratical chaos. The tariff rates ran from thirty to seventy cents a mile, and a complicated system of color markings on taxi meters, devised to inform the public the precise rate charged by any particular cab, only served further to confuse patrons.

The taxicabs operating on the highest legal rate, seventy cents the first mile and sixty each mile thereafter, with a black meter and white flag, met strong competition from the cabs operating at lower tariffs. In order to assure themselves of sufficient business, they often found it expedient to use strategy. The simplest method was for a number of high rate hacks to band together and crowd a profitable cab line so that the lower rate taxis would be discouraged from plying there. Some lines, however, moved so quickly and were so enticing that discouragement was not enough. It was necessary to use intimidation.

Among the operators of exorbitant rate cabs one Jake Levin was very prominent. Jake Levin was an individual possessed of cunning and shrewdness; and a year in Sing Sing for forgery in his youth had sharpened his wits without abating in the least his determination to make money in the most direct and exciting way possible. He had been a small time fight promoter, a sideshow barker, a dope peddler and a racing tipster, and his entry into the hacking business was in direct line with those shadowy pursuits. He bought a fleet of second hand cabs from an operator facing bankruptcy, painted them an inconspicuous but smart looking black, and sent them on the streets with high rate meters in the custody of the hardest lot of drivers he could find.

The Levin cabs proceeded to take possession of the richest among the public lines about the city. The Levin drivers were polite to their patrons in an oily, professional manner, and they slipped portions of their tips to doormen and flunkies; but to competing cab drivers they were brutally exclusive. A strange driver crashing a Levin line was accorded a warning. If he showed his face again his tires were deftly slashed to ribbons. If he made a third appearance he was treated to a beating that took him to the hospital, even though it was necessary for three of them to spend the greater part of a day trailing his cab in order to get him alone.

In addition, Levin employed one Silky Gannon for the preservation of his mon-

opolies. Silky had been in and out of Sing Sing intermittently for a dozen years, though never for serious convictions. He had risen to fame as leader of a lower West Side gang which terrorized even the local police. He enjoyed an immunity as mysterious as it was potent. He had evaded the law until a certain police captain threw exact justice to the winds, invaded his neighborhood in force, kidnapped him, interested the papers in the case and sent Silky up the river on a framed charge.

Thereafter they were able to destroy his leaderless gang. But the police captain was soon transferred to an undesirable precinct in far Staten Island, and he retained the same rank to the end of his days in the Department. He never talked, and his fate remained as mysterious as Silky Gannon's power.

Silky was at large again now, and until he could decide what form of depredation was most attractive, Levin offered congenial employment. Silky's work was not hard. It consisted of visits to street corners and hack stands where Levin men desired to work, where he made known to any one interested both his identity and his association with Levin's fleet. All other drivers soon fled at sight of him, for he had a cruel reputation. It was a reputation not in the least exaggerated.

The Bellevue ambulance and a taxicab driven by a wide eyed young redhead arrived at Eric Stedman's garage at the same moment.

Kelly, the excited redhead, was forced to wait while the surgeon diagnosed Cardoni's injuries and delivered his report to Stedman. The young Italian would have to be removed to the hospital immediately. He seemed to be seriously injured, and a more careful examination would be made later.

With his assistant, the surgeon carried the still unconscious driver to the ambulance, and that vehicle of mercy in an instant went its clamorous way. Then Stedman pounced on young Kelly.

"Come in here," he ordered, leading the way into the office. "Now, what's the dope? Who did it?"

"Silky Gannon did it. The Levin gang has crowded us all off the Lexington stand. Joe and me got stubborn and stuck. Silky and a couple of Levin drivers took Joe for a ride, and I suppose hauled him out of his seat and gave it to him."

"Did you see any of it?"

"No. They sat on me while they took Joe away. Then they came back and let me lam away from there." At the recollection he cursed with passionate indignation.

ERIC STEDMAN strode the length of the office and back again. There was more than mere street fighting to this. He and his none too securely financed Stedman Taxi Company faced a crisis. With heavy notes on the expanding fleet of cabs constantly to be met, a business feud could easily wipe him out.

In addition, a war with the Levin forces meant violence and bloodshed. Perhaps, even, it meant death. Their methods were ruthless. And Eric had no illusions regarding the dubious refuge of the law. The law was as slow and ponderous as Silky Gannon was stealthy and swift.

Yet an ambulance was racing to Bellevue Hospital with Joe Cardoni bleeding and unconscious on a pallet. Eric could not forget the sight of the youngster's broken body lying on the office table. He drew his chair up to the desk and sat down.

"Go ahead," he told the redhead. "Let's have the whole story."

And Kelly related his story . . .

Now, the legal hack line at a certain important intersection on Lexington Avenue, after the fashion of most uptown stands, was the base of operations of a group of local hackmen. The Stedman fleet "worked" the stand in amiable cooperation with other low rate cabs. There was business enough for all.

A goodly share of the Stedman revenue came from that site for, in addition to the

street business, an arrangement with a corner cigar store enabled Eric to work up a lucrative telephone trade. Residents of the neighborhood were familiar with the green and white colors of the Stedman taxis, and felt safe in patronizing them. The cigar man, for a small bonus, relayed all telephoned orders to the drivers at the curb. To lose the stand entirely would be to suffer a blow that the company could ill endure.

Early that morning a group of Levin cabs, heretofore but casual visitors in the neighborhood, filtered into the stand, eventually occupying all four corners of the busy intersection, two cabs to a corner as legally ordained by the city fathers. Other Levin cabs lurked close by, so as to fill in as the stands emptied. The regular attendants, returning from calls, found the lines full, and though they drove past the site in constant patrol, never was there a chance to edge their taxis into place. The Levin gang had seized the stand in force.

Only a few Stedman drivers felt impelled to take up the gage of battle with the formidable Levin men. One of these was Joe Cardoni. A second was Red Kelly. They had remained in the vicinity until a rush of business had exhausted the overwhelming supply of Levin cabs, and then had filled in the vacant places as any cab was licensed to do. A couple of the Levin drivers who still remained left their posts, walked to the two Stedman taxis and ordered the pair off the stand. Cardoni and Kelly refused to leave.

The Levin drivers merely smiled in an unpleasant manner and departed. Cardoni looked back to his partner Kelly in the cab to the rear and grinned in excited satisfaction. Kelly, not at all reassured, watched the withdrawing enemy. He trusted them not at all, for he had heard a great deal about Levin methods.

Lexington Avenue, even at that early hour, was crowded with vehicles and the sidewalks were thronged with people on the way to work. In the shops along the thoroughfare clerks were busy dressing windows, changing signs and preparing for the day's activity. The cigar store on the corner was doing a rushing business as streams of men purchased their day's supply of tobacco. It was a commonplace scene, and not a soul who passed guessed that drama was unfolding there before them.

It came soon.

A man strolled with elaborate nonchalance up to Joe Cardoni's cab and leaned with one foot on the running board to talk to him. Kelly, keeping a vigilant eye on his own cab in case an attempt was planned to do it damage, approached the other machine. He had an idea who this well dressed, casual man might be. His idea was correct. It was Silky Gannon—Silky in person.

Silky was chewing a toothpick and watching the growing discomfiture of Joe Cardoni with a sardonic, malignant smile. He had a gnarled, thick browed face on top of a heavy neck; and his violet eyes were capable of a very penetrating, baleful stare. He was not a tall man, but he was powerful in breadth. In earlier years he had fought in the ring, and he might possibly have made a name for himself had he not been barred for repeated, vicious fouling. His hands were heavy boned and his wrists were thick, yet they looked exceedingly dextrous.

This sunlit morning Silky was garbed for business in a light gray suit of fanciful cut and he wore a derby cocked on one side of his head. He had the complete self-possession of an experienced actor playing a well suited part, the part of Silky Gannon, leader of the underworld and minister of terror.

"You know who I am, friend," he told Cardoni with his steady smile. "Silky Gannon. I guess you heard of Silky Gannon. I'm going to do you a good turn. I'm going to tell you to get the hell out of here before something happens to you! Understand?"

"No, I don't," said Joe Cardoni. He was speaking with white lips. "I been hacking off this corner since I got my

license and I'm going to stay here."

"No, you ain't, friend. You're going to get, and in a hurry, and if you win a ticket for speeding on the way I'll fix it with the Department myself."

Kelly sidled closer.

"What's the matter, Joe?" he asked his partner. "What's this guy want?"

Kelly knew the answers to his questions, but a reckless loyalty bade him demonstrate to the gang leader that his victim was not alone.

"He says we got to slide out of here," said Joe.

"Oh, yeah?" returned Kelly. To Silky he said, "What for, mister?"

Silky surveyed Kelly with an interest almost scientific.

"Huh! Another of those smart guys, eh? Smart and playing stupid, eh? When you call me 'mister', friend, put Gannon on the end of it, see? Mister Silky Gannon. Get it?"

"Yeah. I get it so far. What else?"

"I just been telling your pal here how bright he'd be to pick up this traveling ash can and take it somewheres else. I'll tip you off to the same thing."

Kelly turned to Cardoni.

"You sticking, kid?"

"Till I get a call," said the Italian.

"O.K."

Kelly turned his back on the powerful Silky Gannon and returned to his own taxicab, where he leaned against the door with one foot on the running board in an attitude of defiance.

SILKY'S glance swept the four corners. The eyes of all the Levin men were focused on him. He made no perceptible signal, but they abandoned all business and, leaving their cabs, gathered about him. They simply drifted toward a common center, so that a passer-by could not possibly guess their purpose, had he even noticed their concerted movement.

Kelly and Cardoni were aware of what was toward. They were entertaining a desperate hope that their bluff would baffle the Levin forces. It would seem that they were mistaken. They glanced about the busy streets for aid. There was none. Not a policeman was in sight.

When the approaching men had formed a vague sort of cordon about the two cabs, Silky Gannon jerked open the door of Cardoni's cab and entered.

"Move, you muzzler," he ordered. "Up the block. I'll tell you where we're going."

Joe Cardoni gazed into the eyes of the silent men ringed about him. He glanced back at Kelly. The redhead sat gripping the wheel and shift lever tensely, all set to dart into speed. He flashed a look of grim encouragement at Cardoni. The Italian smiled in pallid fashion and his knuckles whitened on the wheel.

"Get going, wop, or I'll let you have what's in this rod," Silky was saying within the cab. His voice was low, and as harsh as grinding emery. "Move this load of junk fast or you'll never move another."

Joe looked inside the cab and beheld Silky sitting forward on the seat, fingers drumming on one knee and an automatic pistol balanced on the other. His lips were drawn back thinly, and his violet eyes glowed with feline passion. Joe gently slid the lever into first speed and set the cab in motion. Two Levin drivers jumped on the running board and clung there as the taxi jolted over the Lexington Avenue car tracks.

Kelly, as the cab ahead snorted and moved, snapped his own shift lever into second. He had no intention of becoming separated from Cardoni. But his intentions were granted small consideration. A Levin man, a hard faced fellow with pale eyebrows, leaped on the running board and jerked the lever out of speed. He snapped off the ignition switch, and flipped the heavy steel jack handle from its resting place at the side of the driver's seat.

"You'll stay right where you are, bozo," said the Levin man. He brandished the steel bar. "A crack out of you and you get the works right here."

And Kelly, helpless, sat immobile

while his partner's cab sped up to Park Avenue, turned the corner, and was gone, with a Levin taxi after it in pursuit to provide return transportation for the gang.

What happened to Joe Cardoni after that is already known. He was taken to a quiet side street not far off. There the Levin drivers pulled him bodily from the seat. And there Silky Gannon donned brass knuckles and cursed him and proceeded to give him what he was informed would be a lesson to all the smart guys in Yorkville, particularly those of the Stedman fleet.

Joe fought back, sobbing with futile rage. He could not run had he wanted, for the three barred all passage. When Silky had administered what he considered a sufficient foretaste, he took precise aim on the slender Italian struggling in the grasp of the other two, and swung on him with all the brute power he could put into the blow. It connected with Joe's chin and flung him headlong ten feet through the air into the gutter. There he rolled over once and lay still. They picked him up, tossed him inside his own cab and slammed the door. Then they all climbed aboard the Levin taxi and returned to Lexington Avenue.

KELLY was held prisoner until Silky Gannon arrived on the scene again. Silky was breathing a bit faster, and his eyes were narrowed as he stared for a moment at Kelly.

"Well, how about it?" he demanded. "You ready to travel now?"

Kelly could read a man by his eyes, especially such a man as Silky Gannon. There was nothing he could do.

"All right," he said. "I'll travel."

He threw the switch, stepped on the starter and, the Levin drivers moving from his way, he got slowly into motion. A few feet, and he slapped his foot down on the accelerator. The taxi leaped into speed and Kelly raced toward Park Avenue, dreading to find poor Cardoni.

Nor did he find him. He coursed the side streets of the neighborhood and caught no sight of the green and white of a Stedman cab. Joe was gone. Kelly abandoned the hunt finally and put in a telephone call for the garage. And with that he located his partner, and thus he came to know what the broad, hard fists of Silky Gannon had wrought in those eternal minutes while he sat helpless at his wheel in the power of the Levin gang.

Eric Stedman heard Red Kelly's narrative through without interruption. And, as Kelly talked, one aspect of the affair faded little by little. At base the causes that gave rise to it were purely economic. But Eric was forced to forget that dollars and cents were involved, to forget the hard realism of gaining a livelihood, to forget the administrative efforts and financial maneuvers by which he had built up his business. He could stand reverses and take them grinning. He still held his hacking license, and was able at any minute to return to the old grind.

But now a single thought remained in his mind like a burning brand. One of his men, one of the boys who had helped him and without envy cheered him on his way, lay on a hospital cot with a mauled and broken body. He had received those injuries in Eric's service, choosing rather to accept the unfair challenge of the Levin gang than to retire discreetly as half the hackmen in the city had been content to do. He was the victim of a vicious and brutal attack, he had gone down fighting, game to the last, as his bruised knuckles testified. Joe Cardoni, one of the best of a fine lot of boys!

"God!" said Eric suddenly, striking the desk with his fist. "I'd like to break that outfit for this."

"You'd have a job on your hands if you tried, boss," said Red.

"Well, dammit, they're not running this town, are they?"

"They're doing something mighty close to it. How do you think Silky Gannon gets away with the rough stuff?"

"I wish I knew. I'd like to try his method for awhile. I've known plenty

of crooks and grafters in this town, but I never saw one like him."

"There ain't any more," said Red. "The cops themselves are scared of him. Look at Captain Harrison, shoved away out in the sticks on Staten Island after sending Silky up the river. Who done that? Silky's got a drag with the lads who run this town, and I'll bet you even the Old Man himself shies when his name is mentioned."

Eric reflected a moment.

"Red," he said, "no man is big enough to lick this town permanently, no matter what his racket is. It may be a fact that the Old Man and the whole crowd down below have taken the count from Silky Gannon, but Silky's going to get his some day. I don't know that I can do it, and I don't especially care to take on the job, but something's got to be done. I've got to get back the Lexington line. If Gannon's in the way I'll have to fight him. And if I fight him it's going to be to a finish."

Red Kelly's eyes narrowed with appreciation.

"You mean that, boss? On the up and up?"

Eric snapped—

"I certainly do."

"O. K, then," said Kelly. "Count me in. I'll be with you all the way. I've got a score to settle too."

Eric Stedman shot a glance at the driver. Then he smiled and took out a cigaret.

"Leave that to me, kid. You steer clear. You got a living to make, and you might get hurt."

"There'll be lots more room in Bellevue, and the grub is good," said the redhead dryly. "Still, I don't intend to share any of it without an argument. Don't you forget that if you need help any time, I get first crack at the job."

"All right."

Eric took down his brown felt hat from a nail on the wall.

"Start your motor. We're going to pay Mister Jake Levin just a little social call."

STEDMAN rode as a passenger in his own cab, and Kelly drove him west through Central Park to the other side of the town, where Levin and Gannon had their headquarters. It was a different neighborhood from that in which the Stedman garage was located. Broadway was not far away, and the street leading to Levin's garage was in a manner of speaking Broadway's back yard. A huge warehouse ran half the length of the block; tenements with neglected, dark entrances faced it across the way; and the automobiles which patronized the dozen small garages on the street had left a permanent greasy veneer over everything. It was one of the many sordid, unlovely spots which the city, turning its face away, prefers not to notice.

Kelly drew up shortly before the red brick front of the Levin garage and snapped open the taxi door for his employer. Eric emerged and studied the building and the street.

"You stay here," he told Kelly. "Keep your motor running. Nothing's going to happen, but maybe I'll want to fade without delay, anyway. And no matter what does turn up, don't you start anything."

"All right. You go on in. I can use my bean."

Eric entered the garage. It was relalatively dark inside, but a light glowed in an office close by, and there he made his way. Nothing was visible through the frosted glass in the door. Without knocking, Eric thrust the door open and walked in.

A railed partition divided the office. Beyond the rail an office assistant worked on a ledger at a table to one side. Farther, at a desk close to the street window, sat a portly, youngish man in a dapper blue suit with a pin stripe, smoking a cigar, his feet comfortable on the desk. With him in desultory conversation was a man with a heavy face and big grin, wearing a cap.

The youngish man in the blue suit was perhaps thirty, perhaps five years more or five less. His face was soft and swarthy and shrewd, and his black eyes lighted

with a gleam like the glitter on a pool of ink as he turned to survey the intruder.

Eric pushed open the gate in the railing and walked toward the man at the desk.

"You're Jake Levin, aren't you?" he said.

"Yeah. I'm Jake Levin," admitted the man. He puffed slowly on the cigar. The man in the cap remained silent, and watched.

"Do you know me?" Eric inquired.

"No. Why should I? Are you somebody?"

"Yes, you bet I am. To you, anyway."

The man took the cigar out of his mouth.

"I ain't impressed. That gate opens both ways. Don't slam it on your way out."

Eric's eyes narrowed and little spots of red rose to his cheeks.

"My name is Eric Stedman, Levin. One of my drivers was taken to the hospital this morning. He was beaten up by Silky Gannon and two of your men."

Levin achieved a look of incredulity.

"Well, now! I'm surprised to hear that. He must have done something to make them mad. Did you get the names of my men? I'll discharge them. And imagine Silky Gannon doing a thing like that! I'd have such a guy arrested if I were you."

"No cracks, Levin," said Eric. "Things are bad enough. You can't take me for any sleigh rides. I'm giving you the office —you keep off the Lexington Avenue stand! You belong downtown where the suckers will ride in your cabs, not at a neighborhood line."

Darkly Jake Levin's eyes glittered through the cigar smoke.

"Oh, yeah?" he said. "Ain't satisfied, eh? You want to fight, that it?" He cursed with sibilant softness. "Damn you and your lousy schoolboy outfit, Stedman! If you think you didn't like what happened this morning, you'll get something that'll really make you whine."

Levin dropped his feet to the floor and stood up. He was not very tall. He was like a vicious small animal.

"I'm out for what I can get, and I'll take what I want. Your gang of gasoline cowboys won't stop me, nor you neither."

"I'll certainly try."

"Go ahead and try, brother. Go ahead and try. If one driver in the hospital can't learn you, maybe twenty will."

"Levin," Eric raged, "if anybody lays a hand on any of my men again I'll come here and break your neck. Personally, get me? I'll crack you in two."

The lounger in the cap was abruptly on his feet and interposing himself between them.

"None of that, big boy. Somebody else will get cracked too."

Eric breathed hard as he stared into the snarling face of the "gorilla." The fellow was big, powerful. Eric felt no fear of him. But even were he to dispose of the man, others would be at hand to succeed him. He was a bodyguard, no doubt, and always close by. A man like Levin learned early in life to hire others to do his fighting.

Levin backed away, sat down and continued to puff vigorously on the cigar.

"You better run along, Stedman. You don't belong on the West Side. There's some tough lads over here. Stick close to home and keep out of trouble. And tell your boys I said they can play the Lexington line any time after midnight."

"Listen, Levin," Eric said quietly. "I'm asking you for the last time, are you going to force this to a fight? Are you going to make that a corporation line without a break for anybody else?"

Jake Levin waved his hand in bored fashion.

"Run along, for cripe's sake, will you? You pikers give me a pain in the neck. I'm sick and tired of arguing."

Eric nodded and smiled an unpleasant smile.

"All right, I'll run along. I gave you a chance and you turned it down. All I got left to say is, watch out that this piker don't give you a pain in the neck that will be permanent."

He turned about and strode to the door. Jerking it open, he faced a man standing

on the other side, hands in pockets, cigaret dangling from lips pursed in an ironic grin. It was Silky Gannon. Obviously he had been listening to the conversation through the door.

Silky stepped into the office casually, as if Stedman had opened the door for him and was now holding it for his passage. He fixed on Eric a steady, amused gaze as he sauntered by, and continued to smile over his shoulder as he entered the railing gate.

Eric walked through the door and slammed it so that the frosted glass shivered in its frame. Some one on the other side laughed.

Outside, Kelly was eager.

"Did you brace him, boss? What did he have to say?"

Eric entered the cab.

"Told me to go fly a kite."

"Did you sweat him?"

Wrath burned in Eric's eyes.

"You couldn't get under that guy's skin with a cleaver. Let's go. Back to the barn. I've got things to do."

The gears meshed with a click, and the taxi rolled away from the curb.

THROUGH the long still hours of that night the desk light in Stedman's office remained undimmed. Eric sat in the swivel chair. He dozed fitfully. Not two blocks away the bed in his comfortable furnished room awaited his coming, with counterpane turned down by the gentle old mistress of the house who mothered him with doting fondness. It would await him in vain tonight.

On the table against the wall Kelly was stretched out in slumber. He rested like a cat, coming awake instantly each time Eric stirred and reached for the telephone.

Eric called the same number on each occasion. The question he asked each time was the same. Only the replies that came over the wire varied.

Down at Bellevue Joe Cardoni lay flat on his back in a bed of agony. Somewhere inside him his life's blood was slowly seeping from its ordained channels. On the card at the foot of his bed, under the heading "Diagnosis", there were several entries written in a professional hand. Among them was the sinister statement: "Internal hemorrhage."

At a desk in the reception office a sleepy clerk tried to keep the boredom from his voice as he answered the repeated inquiries regarding a patient named Joseph Cardoni. At first he had delivered a perfunctory report, "The patient is resting easily now." Later he received other advices, and he answered, "Complications have developed, but the patient is doing as well as could be expected." And toward morning he spoke into the transmitter in a softened voice and said:

"I am sorry to say that the patient is very low. We will notify you if there is any change in his condition."

Joe Cardoni was dying. Silky Gannon had wrought better than he thought.

With early daylight the first of the day men began drifting in. Eric stirred and went outside to assist in checking them out and serving them with fuel and supplies. Kelly remained by the telephone. Watkins was on the job early, and heard the latest report on the young Italian with gray, impassive face.

By eight o'clock the last man was on the street and quiet again came to the garage. Four cabs were left idle; one, Kelly's, was outside at the curb, and three others stood in the shop at the rear for repairs.

Eric, red eyed but tirelessly active, entered the office. Young Kelly sat at the desk with the telephone in his hand and his face averted.

"How is he now?" Eric asked.

The redhead did not answer. Eric looked at him sharply. Kelly's shoulders moved. Eric turned away and lighted a cigaret slowly.

"Damn them!" Kelly exploded in a choked voice. "Oh, damn them, damn them! The kid's dying. God, he's dying down there! They killed him!"

"Easy, Red," Eric said softly.

Kelly flung the phone from him and came to his feet.

"Give me a gun, Stedman. I'll square the kid. I'll get that gorilla. Give me a gun!"

Eric strode to the young redhead and gripped his shoulders.

"Snap out of it, Kelly. You hear me?"

Red Kelly was in a frenzy of grief.

"You tell me to snap out of it? With the kid dying in Bellevue? Snap out of it? So help me, I'll snap out of it when I see that guy dying too! At my feet. Give me a gun, damn it, Stedman!"

"You fool!" said Eric. He shook Kelly violently. "Get some sense. Don't you think this tears me apart too? I'll square the kid. Sit down there and shut up!"

He shoved the redhead into the chair. Kelly struggled for a moment and then collapsed, head on his arms, on the desk. He sobbed without restraint, cursing over and over to himself, heedless of who might witness his grief.

Eric righted the telephone. He looked at Kelly for a moment, then snapped the cigaret to the floor and went out of the office.

Eric Stedman sought no rest that long day. He sent Kelly home, and in the redhead's cab he went hacking again. But he did no business. Instead, he cruised the entire city and kept his eyes open. He sought to view for himself the results of Jake Levin's invasion of the hack stands.

Even he was surprised at what he found. The black cabs of the Levin fleet were few in comparison to the vast number in the city, but that few were in evidence wherever the real money was to be made. Certain hack lines, experiencing a rush of business, were occasionally left empty; and though idle low rate taxis cruised by, not one pulled in where the Levin monopoly prevailed. Levin had the choice sites of the town to himself, and the unorganized taxi world took the defeat without a single audible protest.

Eric came to know the magnitude of the problem facing him during that ride. As a business competitor, Levin was so securely intrenched that warfare with him might possibly be ruinous. Eric felt the urgings of expediency. Better half a loaf than none. Wiser to accept the loss of the business he had built up in his home neighborhood than to strive for the dubious satisfaction of salving an outraged pride and sense of justice.

But there came again to his mind's eye the pale face of young Joe Cardoni lying before him on the office table. A bitter desire for vengeance swept over Eric and carried away the saner promptings of wisdom. It was not humanly possible for Eric Stedman to accept a blow without striking back. No matter how reckless, it was necessary for him to do something in retaliation.

AT NOONTIME he headed uptown again. He drove directly to a restaurant on Third Avenue, the Brauhaus, famous in that section for two generations. Parking the cab outside, Eric entered and looked about. The place was warm and shadowy and filled with savory odors. The walls and ceilings were finished in brown stained wood in imitation of walnut. Gayly colored beer steins and pictures of convivial scenes decorated the room, and the tables were covered with bright red checked cloths.

The portly head waiter, an amiable Bavarian, approached.

"Ho, Mr. Stedman! I am glad to see you after a long time. How you been, eh?"

"Pretty fair, Otto. Is Bergman here?"

"Mr. Gus Bergman? You bet. You go in the back room you find him there. Always he eats there."

"Fine. I'll go on back."

Eric walked through the busy restaurant to the rear addition. In a booth against a side wall two men were eating. One of them was a fat man with a red face and a long brown mustache. He was conversing with his inconspicuous smaller companion and gesticulating with his fork.

Eric dropped into the seat alongside the

smaller man, giving him a perfunctory nod of greeting.

"Hello, Gus," he said to the man across the table.

"Well, well, Eric," exclaimed the stout man, laying down his fork and extending an enthusiastic hand in welcome. "Haven't seen you in quite a while. How's everything? How's the taxi business these days?"

"Not so hot."

"No?" The fat man was concerned. "Now, I'm sorry to hear that. What's the matter?"

Eric leaned closer.

"I came here looking for you, Gus. You're alderman from this district, and you can help me down below. I voted for you, and I guess so did most of the boys. Now you can return the favor."

A look of reserve flitted over Gus Bergman's mobile face. He nodded and resumed eating.

"Maybe you know what's happened up on Lexington Avenue," said Eric. "Jake Levin's arrived in the neighborhood, and he's chasing all the other cabs off that stand. He took one of my drivers to a side street yesterday and beat him up so thoroughly that the kid's in Bellevue now, I believe dying."

"Levin?" said Bergman. "Who did the job?"

"His chief gorilla, Silky Gannon, and two of his drivers."

"Good Lord!" said Bergman, as if to himself. He did not look at Eric, but continued to eat his food slowly.

"I called on Levin himself yesterday afternoon," Eric went on. "He told me plainly to go to hell. He meant it too. You know I'm not going to take it, Gus. You know me well enough to judge what I mean in saying so. There's going to be trouble in this district unless Levin is called off. I hacked that stand myself five years ago when I drove a cab. My boys have been playing it since I started in business. I've got a phone in the cigar store on that corner. I'm known in this part of town; I've been giving the squarest service you'll find in the city; and I deserve a break. I've come to you to see that I get it."

Bergman remained silent for a moment.

"Well," he said, "I don't know. I'll look into it."

Eric pounded the table for emphasis.

"No, that's not enough. Gus, if you rate two cents down below you can do something for me."

"But—Silky Gannon and Jake Levin!" The stout man looked scared and seemed to plead that Eric remember of whom he spoke.

"What about them?" demanded Eric. "Do they own New York? You're in touch with a few strings that can be pulled down below, and those boys could squash Gannon and Levin like a couple of bugs. Why can't you brace the Old Man? Are you an orphan down there?"

"Eric, you don't understand. You can't possibly realize."

Eric's eyes bored into Bergman's.

"Gus, you're letting me down the first time I ever came to you. I think you're yellow."

"But, Eric," the stout man remonstrated, "I'm telling you you don't know what it means, what I'm up against. I'll see what I can do. Honest, I'll do everything I can."

Eric came to his feet. He was too angry at the unexpected apathy of the politician to practise discretion.

"Aw, horse feathers! There's a kid dying in Bellevue, and you talk about 'what you're up against'! Silky Gannon has another killing to his credit, and you'll 'see what you can do'! Well, don't blame me for what happens in your district now. I came to you and you let me down flat. So long!"

He strode from the restaurant, leaving a pale and worried stout man to stare at a suddenly unappetizing meal.

ERIC lunched elsewhere. He chose a white tile lunch room, which was right off the disputed hack stand. He sat in a window seat and while eating observed the complete dominance of the Levin

element at that busy intersection. His cab was parked farther down the block out of the zone of danger.

Eric's anger against the portly Gus Bergman soon dissipated. The alderman probably meant exactly what he said. Gannon and Levin possessed some manner of power that was secret and unassailable, and no doubt Bergman, being a discreet politician, knew the exact measure of it.

Yet it was galling to a man to sit idly by while his very living was stolen from under his nose, no matter who the thieves might be. Influence, which Stedman had never bothered to cultivate, had failed him. Well, then, there were other measures.

During the latter part of Eric's meal, one or two places on the four stands at this crossing were vacant. He hurried through his food and departed. Starting the taxi, he moved it quickly to one of the corners where a Levin cab was just pulling out. He was now the sole occupant of the corner. He drew out a cigaret and lighted it slowly. He could afford to assume nonchalance, for he knew he would not have long to wait.

Presently a Levin cab pulled in behind him. The driver came out on the sidewalk, glanced at his fellows on the other corners and walked up beside Eric. He studied him a moment, while Eric returned the scrutiny. He was a dark visaged man of solid, compact body.

"You inviting trouble, bud?" he asked pleasantly.

"No. I'm too busy hacking," said Eric.

"Well, sometimes trouble comes without being invited, at that. This line's being hacked by Levin cabs only."

"I noticed that," assured Eric. "It must be a good corner with so many of you guys playing it."

"You bet it is—for Levin cabs only. Take a friendly word for it and roll your hoop."

Eric settled more comfortably into the seat.

"I'm rolling when I get a call. Thanks just the same for the friendly word."

The fellow cocked his head to one side.

"Are you kidding me, brother?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, do you by any chance think I'm kidding you?"

"Not necessarily. It wouldn't matter if you were."

"Wouldn't it?" inquired the driver, losing his pleasant air. "Let me tell you, stick around here awhile and you'll get the bowl beat off you. There'll be no kidding to that."

"Oh, go take a flying jump at the moon," requested Eric with weary impatience. "You Levin guys got the biggest case of swellhead I ever met. This is a public stand and I'd like to see anybody keep me off it."

"O. K, brother," said the Levin man with sudden acquiescence. There was a glitter in his eyes. "Have it your way. Play the line as long as you can."

He went off across the street to confer with his fellows.

Soon Eric was taken away by a passenger, for a short ride across town. After discharging the passenger, Eric returned to the line and was able a second time to join it. Another Levin man promptly ordered him off, and again Eric described in flat terms his determination to remain right where he was.

There was purpose in Eric's defiance. He was forewarned, and could take steps to prevent the occurrence of anything like yesterday's tragedy. He wanted to draw out Levin's ire and measure his strength, even at considerable risk. Eric felt competent to take care of himself under most circumstances.

In the middle of the afternoon, on Eric's fourth trip back to the Lexington Avenue stand, he found a reception prepared for him. There were plenty of glistening black Levin cabs in the vicinity at this dull hour, but one space stood invitingly vacant. Eric, rolling slowly along the street, sized up the situation. He was glad it had come. He cut the wheel and sent the cab exactly into place against the curb behind a single Levin taxi.

In a moment a familiar figure sauntered

over the sidewalk toward him. Silky Gannon was on the scene again, Silky the trouble shooter, summoned for the settling of this brash interloper. His eyes flickered with recognition as he stared at Eric.

"So? It's you, is it? I wondered who the chiseler was."

"Yeah," said Eric. "It's me. What about it?"

Silky beamed appreciatively.

"I think it's swell. Maybe you guys will begin to believe we mean business when we've convinced the boss himself."

Eric came out from the seat.

"You're pretty tough, Silky," he said, "and I'm not underestimating you one bit. But you and Jake Levin have bitten off more than you can safely chew this time. Get this straight. I'm sticking here and you can't chase me. Now what do you expect to do about it?"

A scattering of Levin men had drifted close. But not too close. A citizen, proceeding about his business, saw two men engaged in commonplace, if antagonistic conversation, with idle cab drivers standing about. There was no inkling of the the fact that here stood a professional gorilla and his victim.

Eric, studying the man, sensing his supreme self-confidence, assaying the callous, brutish soul Silky's face revealed, wondered again at the mystery of his inviolability. This was no master mind, skilled at staving off the law. Rather, Silky was a creature of cunning who reposed greatest confidence in his hands and in the keenness of his eyes behind a gun. Somewhere back of him, protecting him, a great power was being put to a grossly perverted and unnatural purpose.

Silky thrust his face forward and peered at Eric beneath gathering brows. His mouth grew ugly and his violet eyes were wrathy. He cursed with evil fluency.

"You Second Avenue rat! You big shot from the East Side! You're the guy I'm going to get, and get for a finish."

"Like hell you will, you scum!"

Silky's violet eyes flamed, and he moved, with lightning quickness. Eric jerked back as if on springs and evaded a vicious blow that grazed his chin. He caught the glint of metal on the fist. Silky was armed with his bone crushing brass knuckles.

Silky had a better man to deal with than he had faced in years. But Silky was not at all unequal to the task. He possessed a fighter's uncanny speed of body and a slugger's power of blow. He charged on Eric, head shifting, shoulders lifted, his great back muscles set for the single, man killing punch he needed.

Eric, too, wished for but a single blow. Silky was no ring fighter in the pink. He was a terrible brawler, but there would be no endurance in his attack.

They slithered with dancing steps across the sidewalk, while pedestrians scattered. The Levin men pressed about them in a ring, and idlers from all four corners came running to view the fray. Silky managed to land in glancing fashion a number of quick jolts, but Eric grinned through set lips and taunted him with the most searing expressions at his command.

Eric felt exultation rise hotly in his heart. He was meeting the mighty Silky and making a fool of him. Merely to stand up to him was contrary to all precedent, but Eric was doing more. He was administering a sound beating to the slugger. Silky had become enmeshed in the disorganizing coils of berserk anger. He was defending himself from blows such as he had not taken since his "prelim" days. He was taking them, too, heedlessly, plunging into the punishing fists of the cab owner. Eric himself was receiving cruel treatment, on guard only that the terrible brass knuckles should not reach his face or upper arms.

Then, successively, each landed a blow on the other that set senses spinning. Blood was on Silky's face, and Eric's breath came in agonized gasps. They drew apart, groggy on their feet.

Silky spat crimson on the sidewalk and came on again. Eric set himself, gathering his scattered senses, resolved to end the fight on the instant. He was gambling on the suspicion that Silky's faculties were

returning less swiftly than his own. If so, Silky was done for.

He moved, swinging to meet the charge. His hard fist started on its devastating path. Silky apparently failed to perceive it. He did not shift. Silky was licked.

And then the skies collapsed thunderously on Eric's head, and a black eclipse took possession of his brain.

IN A SILENCE filled with foreboding the second of Silky Gannon's victims was laid out on a table in the office of the Stedman garage. Watkins, his dour lips drawn grimly, made a pillow of a telephone book and towel for Eric's head. Kelly straightened his feet and placed the limp arms at his sides. Blood from the ugly scalp wound began to stain the whiteness of the towel.

In the doorway a scared young driver watched, hat in hand, in unaccustomed awe. Watkins was swiftly procuring warm water, clean cloths, antiseptics from the first aid cabinet. Kelly turned to the driver in the door.

"Silky Gannon do this?"

"No," said the driver. His voice was uncertain, but he plunged into narrative. "Silky didn't give him the head. But they were fighting when it happened. I saw it myself. I was driving along the avenue and saw the crowd and stopped. Then I made out the two fighting and I couldn't move. It was the boss and Silky on the corner, with a whole gang around them."

"Any cops in sight?"

"Hell, no! I haven't seen a cop on that corner in two days. Silky and the boss were surrounded with Levin drivers. And I swear the boss was beating him. Silky's face was bleeding and he was groggy on his feet. The boss was set to knock Silky for a loop when somebody socked him over the head with a jack handle. He went down cold."

Kelly almost snarled the question.

"And what did you do?"

"Me? What the hell could I do? I was still on the seat, and the crowd was swarming over the two of them, when Silky staggered out and spotted me. He ran over and hauled me out of the cab. I grabbed my own jack handle, but he didn't want me. He told me to get the boss away from there. So I did. They dumped him inside my rig and I didn't stop to ask any questions. I brought him straight here."

Kelly turned to help Watkins, asking a final question.

"Where's Silky now?"

"I don't know. I think I saw him getting into a Levin cab and beating it."

"All right," said Kelly. "You hop a cab, any cab, and go bring back the boss's rig from that corner." Kelly relieved his feelings with lurid profanity. "Damn you anyway, Stedman!" he addressed his unconscious employer. "Why in hell didn't you let me know you were going to buck that line?"

Gently he lifted the wounded head while Watkins bathed the broken scalp and inspected the damage.

By extreme good fortune, the wound was not severe. A steel jack handle of the taxicab type, administered with enthusiasm, is perfectly capable of crushing the hardest skull. It is a solid heavy rod, unlike the comparatively light implement carried by the average motorist. In this case, the handle had glanced off Eric's head. It had lacerated the scalp even through the driver's cap he wore, and knocked him out; but because of the tangent at which it struck, it did not harm the brain inside the bony sheath.

Eric groaned and stirred. His eyes opened. Fear clouded his gaze, and he came alive with a violent upheaval of the body.

"Hold it, Eric, my boy. Hold it!" Watkins, with Kelly's aid, restrained him.

"What happened?" Eric demanded. "How did I get here?"

"You were clipped with a jack handle," said Watkins. "Lay still or you'll have blood over everything."

Stedman lay still. He was now aware of the throbbing of his head, and of the fact that he had narrowly escaped a fate

that might have been death itself. He remembered the details of the fight, saw Silky coming at him again in that crucial instant, and there memory failed him.

"They hit me from behind," he said. With soft fervor he added, "They had to. I had Silky licked."

But Kelly was not impressed.

"Is that so?" he demanded. "When did Silky Gannon ever take a licking. There ain't a man alive ever beat him. Alive—get me? You're in a jam now."

A smile flickered over Eric's face. He closed his eyes.

"Am I?"

Presently Eric was able to sit up on the table. A swath of white bandaging encircled his head. The movement brought a new throbbing, but in a moment it was gone. By remaining quiet Eric was able to feel pretty much himself again. He walked to the desk and sat down in the swivel chair.

Jim Watkins cleared up the scattered first aid material and restored it to the cabinet. He worked with an air of grim preoccupation, more silent even than was his wont. Eric watched him. Kelly was at the street window, lighting a cigaret.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" Eric asked. He was convinced of something unusual in Watkins' mood.

Watkins halted, a bottle of antiseptic in his hand. He did not lift his eyes from the object.

"Out with it," said Eric.

Kelly turned from the window.

Watkins placed the bottle on a shelf of the medical cabinet. He closed the mirrored door.

"I was here alone before Kelly came in," he said. "A telephone call came through —from Bellevue."

"Yes?" breathed Red Kelly.

"Joe Cardoni passed away this morning at eleven o'clock."

Eric said nothing, staring at the mechanic with a face suddenly carved of granite. Kelly's features trembled and his eyes were gleaming widely.

"Joe dead?" he whispered.

The stark silence in the office quivered as though from the passing of the wings of the terrible dark angel.

STEDMAN and Kelly next day went on a grim and dangerous errand. Kelly drove his cab, and Eric rode again as his passenger. They started in early morning and roved the streets of the city. And everywhere they went they watched with searching eyes for two men, two faces out of the city's millions.

Their pursuit of the pair was not as quixotic as it may sound. They sought the Levin drivers who assisted Silky Gannon two days ago when he had wreaked his murderous fury on Joe Cardoni. Since Kelly possessed an indelible recollection of their faces, and since the Levin men were conveniently grouped together at divers points about the city, the likelihood of finding the pair was extremely good. All else was abandoned before this—the Lexington stand, the day's business, everything but the fulfilment of one immediate purpose.

There had been no witnesses to that affair on the quiet side street forty-eight hours before. This they knew. To be sure, some resident of that peaceful block might have glimpsed four men in combat on the street from the vantage of an apartment window; but that sort of testimony was not worth the trouble of unearthing. Not with Silky Gannon as the accused. Eric knew well the tangled barriers of the law and how they had served Silky in the past. The ordinary witness's identification of the men would be uncertain at best, and a case built upon it would be ripped to pieces in a few minutes by a cunning counsel. It would be difficult, indeed, to persuade the average man to testify at all after Silky's aids had made a telephone call and a visit or two on the unlucky witness. Silky, it will be remembered, had ridden to power on the crest of a wave of intimidation and terror.

Yet two witnesses there were who could positively identify the killer of young Cardoni. Two men who knew him well and could offer incontrovertible testi-

mony in a courtroom. To be sure, they of all people were the least likely to volunteer such testimony. But it remained to be seen whether pressure could not be applied to overcome their reluctance.

It was in front of the great Hotel Colorado that their search was rewarded, early that afternoon. Levin cabs were lined up before the entrance of the hotel, for here prosperity dwelt. Cruising past the stand, Kelly suddenly cried out, his voice audible only to Eric in the sounds of traffic:

"Stedman! Third out on the line. The dark guy reading the paper in the seat."

Eric shot a swift look, and then the cab raced onward and drew up at the curb in the next block.

"I'd know that guy any time, anywhere," Kelly told Eric. "He's got a complexion like burned leather and a busted beak that sticks out like a monument. There's no mistake. He was one of them."

Eric considered, studying the distant line of cabs from the sidewalk.

"You better wait here, Red. I'm going in the side entrance of the hotel. I'll watch through the door until he's first out, and then I'll exit and get in his rig."

"Then what?"

"Nothing, yet. I only want to find out his name and anything else I can pick up. You trail me and watch for signals, if any. I don't think there'll be any. Any bozo as tough as that will need more persuasion than a cab ride to get him talking."

Kelly smiled, with a baring of hard, white teeth.

"He'll talk. When the time comes, I'll see to that."

"All right. I don't think this lad will know me at all. The bandage doesn't show, does it?"

Kelly examined the small corner of gauze and adhesive tape visible below the rear of Stedman's felt hat.

"No. You're O.K," he pronounced.

"O. K. it is. See you later."

He set out for the side entrance of the hotel.

Twenty-five minutes later Eric was standing on an upper Broadway corner watching a sleek Levin cab depart downtown. Half a block off a green and white taxi came on slowly, waiting discreetly for the other to be out of sight. It shot forward.

"What did you get out of him, boss?" Kelly demanded the instant he stopped. "Did he talk?"

Eric bore a look of satisfaction.

"He talked a little. A very little. But it was enough. Did you ever hear of Nigger Benson?"

Kelly hesitated the merest fraction of a second.

"Nigger Benson? Wasn't he mixed up in a killing a couple of years ago? The Nick Oppenheimer murder?"

"That's the guy. He's one of Silky's old time guns. He's pretty well known around Hell's Kitchen. I sat on the forward seat all the way uptown and chatted with him through the window. I was just an innocent country boy in town with a load of hay, and he gave me the lowdown on the big city. He was very impressive."

"And well he might be," said Kelly with grim humor. "I'd hate to ride in his cab on a real dark night. Well, what next?"

"Down to Police Headquarters. I want to talk to the cops about this, and there's no use going to any of the precincts. We'll go direct to Dalton of Homicide and get what we want from the main guy."

The cab shot forward, and they were off again, headed downtown.

They drove swiftly. Through the crowded midtown they pressed, and into the narrow streets of lower New York. They bore east to Center Street. Soon they were at their destination. Together they entered the forbidding edifice that houses the nerve center of the city's police.

"INSPECTOR DALTON," Eric told the officer at the information desk.

After some preliminaries over the telephone Inspector Dalton agreed to give them audience.

"Homicide Squad room," instructed the officer. "Walk right in."

They found the room, and entered a place of desks and tables where big, hard-eyed men were casually busy. One of them jerked a thumb at a side door in response to inquiry, and they passed through the open portal. At a large desk in the center of the small office a grizzled, mustached man of powerful frame sat smoking a cigar and writing. He looked up.

"Mr. Stedman?" he said. "Take a chair. Be right with you."

In a moment he was listening while Eric related his story. Eric narrated the simple facts of the beating of Joe Cardoni, and said little about the business war that caused it. That was now a secondary issue. The official's eyes, registering absorbed interest at the outset, grew suddenly cold and reserved at the mention of Silky Gannon's name.

"I'm going to talk very frankly to you," he said. "If you are running a string of hacks, you must know something about this town. There's lots that goes on that never shows on the surface. There's things you can't meddle with; things the Department itself can't touch. One of those things is Silky Gannon."

"Why?" inquired Eric.

"Leave well enough alone," said the inspector, "and don't ask. You won't learn, anyway."

"Look here, Inspector," Kelly spoke up. "Silky Gannon is guilty of manslaughter at least, and if you went after him you could get him dead to rights. Now, what's stopping you?"

"You listen to me, me lad," said the official patiently. "I've been on the force for twenty years, and it's my job to catch murderers. And there's been scarcely a day of the twenty years that I haven't laid eyes on one man or another walking the streets who should be taken to the chair. Do you think I spend my time doing favors to them? I can arrest them, sure. But that ain't convicting them in the criminal courts. And each man arrested and set free is an enemy of mine and a black eye to the Department. I'm telling you that you haven't a case, and if you had you'd likely be bumped off yourselves before it came to trial."

Eric nodded.

"I suppose you're right, Inspector. But I've got an idea that may work. I think we can take care of the matter ourselves after all."

The official shot a glance at him.

"What do you mean, take care of it? I hope you ain't going to make matters worse by a little private murdering of your own."

Kelly spoke before Eric could reply. He leaned forward in his chair.

"All right. We're not talking to no juries. Get this, then. If you guys can't do the job, you can bet your last red somebody's going to do it."

"Shut up, Red," said Eric.

"Like hell I will! It's my turn to talk." Kelly's voice was quiet, but it was not calm. "My buddy is dead. I want something done about it. Silky's job is to drive us off the streets, and he knows the quickest way to do it. Nothing he ever done was quicker and easier than the murder of Joe Cardoni. Is he going to stop there? He is not. You, Stedman, you licked him yesterday, brass knuckles and all. You're due next. I'm standing with you to the last ditch. I'm due, too." He turned to the official. "Well, you can take your Police Department and courts and juries and put them on ice till this is over. If something don't happen to that guy soon I'm bumping him myself. I'm telling you and you can try and stop me."

The inspector made a wry expression.

"You're just the sort of damn' fool," he said, "who does get sent up the river to the chair for killing people. The fellows who make a business of it don't come here and talk the way you just did."

"Listen to me, Kelly," said Eric. "I haven't got a reputation for being particularly dumb, have I?"

Kelly did not reply.

"You know I haven't," Eric went on. "Well, will you leave some of this for me to handle?"

"Oh—all right. I don't want to butt in. Only do something, that's all."

Eric smiled.

"Well, I guess we understand each other then. I am doing something. I think it will satisfy both of you. Inspector, how would you like to have the goods on Silky Gannon cold, without a chance of a comeback?"

"If that was possible, I'd give all I have in the bank for it. It'd be a bargain."

"O. K, then. Here's what I want. Give me everything you have on Nigger Benson. You pinched him once for the Oppenheimer murder, didn't you?"

"I did. Him and his pal, Mike Dominico. And turned them both loose on a court order next day."

"Were they guilty?"

"Guilty as hell."

"Fine. Where is Dominico now?"

"He's quit the racket," said the inspector. "I could lay hands on him in an hour, but beyond watching him, I don't interfere. He's got a new wife and he owns a garage out on Long Island."

"Who else knows where he is?"

"His family and me. And that's all."

"Perfect," said Eric. "It clicks exactly. Now if you'll let me have a memorandum of all the dope on the Oppenheimer case I'll be all set."

"How?" The official was beginning to be interested.

"Leave it to me. I'm going to put Silky Gannon on the hot seat with it."

"Well," said Inspector Dalton, elevating his eyebrows skeptically, "it's as clear as mud to me, but I suppose it's all right. Anything is worth trying, if that's your intention. I wish you luck—and a nice funeral if you fail."

He reached to one side of the desk and pressed a button.

WHEN they left Police Headquarters, Eric carried with him a typewritten report of fact and conjecture on Nigger Benson's part in the killing of the gambling king, Nick Oppenheimer, dead these two years, victim of an unsolved murder. In the cab, Eric read it through carefully while Kelly drove uptown with what speed the late afternoon traffic permitted. They went straight to the Stedman garage.

Their stay was brief. Eric, thrusting the folded pages of the police report into his pocket, ran inside and unlocked a drawer of his desk. A large blue steel police revolver lay there. This he slid down his waist belt where it was concealed by his vest. Then they were off again.

"Step on it, Red," Eric ordered through the cab window. "It's late now. We don't want to lose that guy if we can help it."

Red stepped on it. He ignored traffic lights and broke half a dozen ordinances in the city traffic code. He pressed his finger repeatedly on the button which gave voice to the siren under the motor hood, and slower vehicles scurried from his path. Never was such a trip made in better time. They maintained the pace until they were a block from the Hotel Colorado.

Now they proceeded at a crawl. It was approaching the hour when the vast migration homeward of the city's toilers began, and the hack line was moving quickly.

"There he is," said Kelly suddenly. "He's second out. He's standing by the rig with his back turned."

Nigger Benson was there.

"We'll wait down the block," instructed Eric. "When he gets a call, we'll trail him."

"O. K," said Kelly.

They waited, and presently Nigger Benson was called into service. He set out northward on the avenue, with an elderly couple in his cab. Kelly sped after him.

Benson led the way up and across the town. They entered the Park at 59th Street, and rolled along its smooth boulevards to the gate at 72nd and Fifth Avenue. A few minutes after that the Levin cab drew up at a brownstone private residence halfway along a stately, quiet street.

Kelly waited at the corner while the

elderly couple emerged from the taxi. As the man was paying the fare, the Stedman cab crept into motion. The couple climbed the steps of the house and disappeared. Benson, placing the money leisurely in his pocket, lingered an instant. And just as his hand went to the shift lever, the Stedman taxi halted alongside and he was staring into the grim faces of Kelly and his employer.

Eric had the door open, and one foot on the running board. The blue steel revolver was in his hand.

"Slide out of there, Nigger," he said. "You're coming for a ride with us."

The swarthy face of Nigger Benson, who was no negro at all, but a white man of dusky pigmentation, took on a deeper hue. Fear and wrath moved in his breast as he recognized Stedman.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"You'll learn. Come on in here."

There was no choice. The bleak muzzle of the blue gun was too ominous, and the face above was earnest. Benson, like one hypnotized, came from his seat and entered the green and white taxi.

Eric kept the revolver trained on his prisoner.

"Let's go, Red," he ordered. To Benson, silent in a corner of the cab, he said, "One crack out of you on the way, guy, and you get everything in this cannon in your belly. That plain?"

Benson stared at the pistol and made no reply.

THE CELLAR of the Stedman garage was the setting for a grim ceremony that night. In the center of the bare concrete floor was a chair. Above it a great white drop light cast a hot cone of illumination over the spot. In the chair sat Nigger Benson. He sat there for hours.

Beyond the fringe of the circle of light eyes gleamed in the shadows and voices spoke. No sound from the outer world penetrated the buried room. The still air was redolent of dust and lifelessness.

Insistently and ceaselessly they plied Nigger Benson with cold words of accusation. Subtly they strove to break down his resistance. He confronted them with a defiant hatred as adamant as a wall of granite.

"Nigger, you were the trigger man in the Oppenheimer murder. We've got you ranked for that job." Eric stared straight into the man's burning eyes as he spoke.

"No."

"Nigger, you're going to burn for shooting Nick Oppenheimer two years ago."

"I am not."

"You're going to burn, Nigger."

No answer.

"Where's Dominico, Nigger?"

The swarthy driver gave a start. But he uttered no word.

"You don't know, do you?" Eric continued. "But we do."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"A lot, Nigger. A lot. It means the State has a witness."

"That's a lie!"

"You'll find out when you listen to Mike Dominico on the stand telling how Oppenheimer was killed. You'll find out, Nigger."

"Dominico won't squeal."

"Yes, he will. Dominico has reformed. He's got a garage and a home out in a certain small town on Long Island. He wants to be let alone, Nigger, to be let keep his garage and his home. You know what kind of a bargain the cops make with guys like that."

No answer.

"They swap a life for a life, Nigger. Yours for his. A lifeline for him and a rap for murder for you."

"That's a damn' lie! Why ain't the cops lagged me then?"

"Ah, now you're beginning to think! That's what I want you to do, Nigger. Think hard. The cops haven't arrested you because they don't know about Dominico's little garage out in that certain town on Long Island. Not yet. But I do!"

"Yeah? Then what?"

Eric took a breath and continued.

"I've got you where I want. But I'm

not deeply interested in the Oppenheimer job. I'd just as soon leave Dominico to his garage and his home, and you to your hacking. This is no detective squad room. I have another killing in mind."

Benson's eyes probed Stedman like those of an animal in a trap.

"We can put you in the death house for another murder," Eric said. "We've got witnesses to that, too. They were easy to find. The name of the guy you bumped is Joe Cardoni."

Benson displayed no recognition of the name.

"The kid you and Silky beat up the other day—remember, Nigger? He died since."

"Died?" Astonished fear was in the word.

"Yes, he died of the injuries he sustained. And you won't get away with a manslaughter indictment on that job. That was murder, Nigger, and I think you'll burn for it."

"I will not!"

"You will, and your pal Silky Gannon will ditch you like a dog when we turn you over to the cops. He'll try to get you with a bullet before the trial to shut your mouth. You know Silky, Nigger."

Benson clutched the sides of his chair with straining hands.

"What the hell do you want? What have you got me here for?"

"To talk," said Eric. "To save yourself. A life for a life. You're going to beat Silky to it!"

Beads of moisture glittered like tiny jewels in the hot brilliance that beat on Nigger Benson's forehead.

"I don't squeal," he said hoarsely. "I can't squeal."

Another face loomed out of the darkness, a face cruel and eager.

"You rat," said Kelly, "you'll not only squeal, you'll scream for mercy before I get done with you. You killed my pal, Nigger." To Eric he said, "Will you let me have him now, boss?"

"Wait a minute, Red," said Eric. This, which had been planned and rehearsed, took on a semblance of reality so grim as to make his vitals shrink from what was coming. "Nigger—your last chance. Will you talk?"

"Damn you!" whispered Benson. "Damn you!"

"All right, Red," said Eric. "Go ahead."

Kelly pounced on the gangster. He bore a light Manila line. He took a hitch about one of Benson's wrists, passed the rope under the chair, and jerked it tightly as he bound the other wrist also. Then he proceeded to lash his victim tightly to the chair.

"What are you going to do to me?" asked Nigger Benson. His eyes rolled in apprehension.

"You'll learn," promised Kelly.

Eric spoke out of the darkness. His words bore reluctance and pity, but they were steeled with inflexible purpose.

"That light over you comes from a thousand candlepower bulb, Nigger. You're going to be tied with your head drawn back, and that light will shine in your face. We'll drop it down within a couple of inches from your eyes. You'll stay there for the next ten hours, Nigger."

"The light chair!" cried the gangster suddenly. This most subtly cruel of police methods with recalcitrant criminals is legendary in the underworld.

"You know about the light chair, do you?" snarled Kelly. "Well, remember all you ever heard. Remember the guys that tried to kill themselves rather than sit on the chair; remember the guys whose permanent uniform today is a straitjacket after a session with the light."

"No!" moaned the gangster. "Don't give me the light!"

"You asked for it, you rat, and you're getting it."

Kelly grasped Benson's head by the hair and snapped it back so that he faced upward, straight into the brain searing beam from the lamp. Kelly passed a hitch of the Manila line about Benson's throat.

"Don't!" cried Benson. "I'll talk. Oh, my God, I'll talk!"

Eric Stedman jerked a chair up beside

the terrified man. He had a fountain pen and a pad of white paper ready.

"Give it to us. Spill it, Nigger. I want the whole story of the beating of Joe Cardoni."

"I'll give it to you. Take the light away."

Kelly released Benson's head and held the lamp aside. Eric sat forward on his chair and gazed into the man's dusky face.

Nigger Benson talked, and held nothing back . . .

AT THE Stedman garage next morning all the customary routine of shift time was maintained. Stedman himself checked out each driver on the time sheet, inspected the cabs, disposed of several requests for new equipment and superintended the fuel distribution. Jim Watkins adjusted a couple of stubborn carbureters, replaced a missing fan belt, condemned a cab with faulty wheel alignment to a session in the shop, and ran an expert eye over every machine that rolled across the floor. Of Eric Stedman's immediate henchmen only Kelly was absent. Red, during this hour, was sitting on the lowest step of the cellar stairs with a gun in his hand. He was watching a sleeping form stretched out on a couple of automobile seat cushions in one corner. Nigger Benson slept.

Eric Stedman, when the last driver had gone his way, called Red upstairs. Watkins permitted a dim smile to cross his face as the redhead appeared, wearing the blue steel revolver thrust down his belt in open view.

"You're a pretty tough looking bozo yourself this morning, Red," he remarked.

"You ain't the only one who knows it either, Jim," said Kelly.

"No," Eric added wryly. "It's beginning to penetrate elsewhere." He issued instructions to the mechanic. "Keep an eye on that cellar door. It's the only way Benson can get out. Shove him a meal when he gets hungry. And you might rig up a skid chain on the door so he can't open it all the way if he tries to rush you. Tell him you'll quiet him with a monkey wrench if he makes any noise."

"It won't matter if he does, Eric. Nothing will come through this concrete floor."

"Fine. Red and I will be gone for some time, I expect, unless we have luck. Sit tight and wait for us."

"Where to now?"

"We're going to see if Nigger's partner, Bat Henkel, is still at large. The other guy who helped beat up Joe. If we get him our case is clinched."

Watkins had a regard almost paternal for his employer. He nodded slowly.

"Eric, there's beginning to be some talk around town. I had a glass of beer in a speakeasy in Harlem last night, and some of it came to my ears. It wasn't very secret. They're saying you're due to take a ride with Silky Gannon and you won't come back."

"Yeah?"

"You'll keep your eyes open, won't you?"

"I guess we will."

"O.K, then. Good luck!"

And he turned and went back to his shop, a sturdy, sober and reliant figure of a man.

ERIC and Red that morning visited every Levin line they knew, exactly as they had the day before. They bought a dozen cups of coffee in a dozen different corner lunch rooms frequented by hackmen. They cruised the main traffic arteries with eyes vigilant for a face unforgettable in Kelly's memory. They were meeting with no success, but they persevered.

Back at the garage Jim Watkins emerged from beneath a cab chassis when he noticed the presence of visitors in the garage doorway. There were four men in the party, and they strolled inside out of the noonday sun. The foremost of the quartet was a stocky, muscular man with a hard, thick browed face and eyes of a cold violet hue. Watkins wiped his hands

on a bit of cotton waste and came to meet them.

"Stedman here?" inquired the man with the violet eyes.

"No, he's not."

"Hm," mused the man. "Where'll I find him?"

"I can't say," replied Watkins. "He left me in charge. Anything I can do?"

The man with the violet eyes shot a glance at his companions.

"Maybe," he said. "Suppose you tell us where you've got Nigger Benson."

Watkins' face remained expressionless, but he knew now the identity of the man with the violet eyes.

"Who?" he asked.

"Nigger Benson. Know him? No? Too bad. That makes it kind of tough on you."

The three henchmen of Silky Gannon grinned. Silky spoke with sudden authority.

"Turn the Nigger over to us, big boy. Come on, snap out of it!"

"Who are you?" Watkins asked.

"Silky Gannon."

Jim Watkins felt a queer, cold sensation travel up his spine.

"I don't know."

"Listen," Silky interrupted. "Nigger never reported in last night. His cab was found empty early this morning off 64th Street and Madison Avenue with a cold motor. I'm here to get him, and if not him I'll sure get somebody else. Where has Stedman put him?"

Watkins made a vague gesture with his grimy hands.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. Stedman didn't tell me a thing about it. If he's hiding him out he's got your man somewhere else."

Silky estimated the truth of the statement, studying Watkins' face.

"I think you're lying, you louse!" He approached close to the mechanic. "I know you're lying." He slapped Watkins across the face, forcing the older man to retreat. Watkins' cheeks grew red and his eyes burned. He shook his head in silent denial.

"You won't talk at all, eh?" said Silky. "All right. Take it!"

His broad shoulders swung swiftly, and his right fist struck Watkins on the side of the jaw. The mechanic began a movement to ward off the blow, but never finished it. He went down in an outflung heap as might one struck with a loaded club, and stretched out on the greasy floor in grotesque unconsciousness.

Silky Gannon turned quickly about.

"All right, boys. Get busy. I don't think the Nigger's here. They wouldn't leave him alone with this sap. Do your stuff and let's go."

The trio set to the doing of their stuff with alacrity. One produced a heavy bladed knife from a sheath under his armpit, and advanced with relish on the tire racks. He sank the blade into the first tire and the compressed air escaped with explosive force. Then he hacked at the fabric until the tire was completely ruined. He advanced on the next.

A second strode to the oil barrels against one wall. There were three steel drums on racks, with taps in their heads. The taps were turned and the oil promptly flowed in viscid streams to the floor, where it formed a rivulet leading to a drain in the center of the concrete paving. The third searched the shop and secured the heaviest hammer he could find. With this he lustily began to pound everything breakable in sight.

Silky Gannon entered the office. The safe in one corner was closed. He tried the handle, but it was securely locked. He assuaged his disappointment by jerking out the desk drawers and scattering their contents over the floor.

It was an old familiar game, this visitation of wanton destruction on the business quarters of an enemy.

However, unknown to them, certain measures of defense were afoot. Early in the foregoing series of events a Stedman cab had come rolling placidly down the block, homeward bound to procure a new spare tire to replace the punctured shoe on the rear rack. The driver, while yet some distance away, observed a car draw

up to the curb near the garage and discharge four men. The four looked familiar in type if not in feature, and the driver was suspicious. He halted the cab on the spot to reconnoiter before advancing farther. When the four men entered the garage his suspicions became certainties.

He drove past the garage, saw the four engaged in conversation with Watkins, perceived that the mechanic was alone, and forthwith pressed the accelerator to the floor and sent the cab flying. He raced along the avenue, tore with squawking horn through a side street, and in a few minutes came to a slashing halt before a restaurant on Lexington Avenue in the vicinity of the disputed hack stand. A number of green and white taxis were parked outside. The Stedman drivers were wont to gather there at noon for lunch and a bit of gossip.

Into the restaurant the driver plunged.

"Hey, gang! Drop everything and get your rigs. There's four Levin guys at the barn and Jim Watkins is alone!"

A chorus of alarmed inquiries rose from the crowded table near the front door. But the messenger was already gone. One fellow with a level head caught the ominous significance of the words and jumped to his feet. He jerked his cap on his head and was through the door at a run. Half of the others had failed to hear the shouted summons clearly, but they waited not to discover more. Something was up, something of deep concern to Stedman men. They bolted out of the restaurant with no regard for the protesting cashier's demands for payment.

Into the cab seats they leaped, and the avenue echoed with the sound of hastily started motors roaring and backfiring. Gears clashed, and like a fantastic cavalry the dozen taxis moved away from the curb and charged headlong up Lexington Avenue. Into a side street they spun on two wheels and eastward they raced, over the car tracks of Third Avenue and the cobbles of Second, while the local citizenry gaped and stared and wondered at this wild flight of peaceful taxicabs.

Silky and his henchmen were in the midst of their task when the curious and remarkable sound of many automobiles racing in a pack up the street came to their ears. They halted simultaneously and listened, looking at one another. Silky came out of the office and started for the door. Then he stopped and whirled in his tracks.

"Bunch up!" he ordered the three. "Get together."

The trio came running. It was too late to take to their heels and escape to their car, for the street outside was filled with taxicabs. The drivers of the taxis, each firmly gripping a jack handle, were abandoning their cabs in the street, and were now advancing on the garage entrance. Silky closed in with his three and they backed against the side wall.

For a long minute the two parties faced each other in the doorway, Silky and his men silent, narrow eyed, waiting, the Stedman drivers uncertain, belligerent, dangerous.

"Jees, look what they done to the joint!" exclaimed a driver. He edged into the garage, suspicious but determined. A couple of others followed. They discovered Watkins lying on the floor, observed the wreckage strewn over the place, and turned on the Levin quartet.

"They bumped Jim Watkins!" a driver cried hoarsely. "Let them have it!"

Silky Gannon made a swift motion. He faced them with a snarl on his unlovely face and an automatic in his hand.

"Back, you scum!" he ordered. "Keep off, or you get a load of lead!"

They faced him, and did not move. They cursed him, but dared not take up the challenge of the gangsters' guns. Silky, speaking over his shoulder, ordered his men to edge out. They moved in concert, backs to the wall, weapons ready. And unhindered, they passed through the doorway to their car and were gone.

IT WAS about five after one when Red Kelly cut the wheel and turned his cab off the avenue into the home block. Eric Stedman was alone in the rear. Their search had failed, and as the morning hours passed, they became more and more certain that it was hopeless. Bat Henkel was not on the streets today. It was not hard to understand why. Following Joe Cardoni's death and Nigger Benson's disappearance he was in danger both from the vengeance of Stedman and the uneasiness of Silky Gannon, who would have few scruples about silencing a murder witness with a stealthy bullet. Henkel was probably riding now in a fast train for points West.

At the sight of the street jammed with Stedman taxicabs, apprehension smote both Eric and Kelly. Red increased the speed and pulled to a stop near the garage with jammed brakes. They were out of the cab together and running to the door.

"What's happened?" Eric demanded of the first man he met.

"Silky Gannon's been here," said the driver, ruefully swinging his jack handle. "Wait till you see what he's done inside."

The other men gathered, but Eric pressed through them. He went straight to Watkins, who lay on the floor with a folded coat under his head. The first report of his condition was erroneous. He was far from dead. He was arguing now with an excited driver who pressed his shoulders to the floor with injunctions not to stir.

"Dammit, I'm all right," said Watkins. "He knocked me out and my jaw hurts like hell, but let me up, will you?"

"Leave him alone," Eric ordered. "What happened, Jim? You hurt?"

"No. Silky paid you a visit, that's all. He was looking for Benson. Beyond that I don't know what happened. Ask the boys. When I came to, the place was jam full of them and Silky was gone."

He sat up and came to his feet, shaken but sound. On the left side of his jaw a discoloration and swelling had commenced.

Eric heard the story from a dozen volunteers. Their accounts, and the evidence scattered about the disordered garage, made quite plain what had happened. Several of the men busied themselves setting things to rights, and Eric took Watkins into the office. He turned the gun over to Kelly, and instructed him to make certain that Nigger Benson was still incarcerated below. In a moment Kelly returned with assurance of his presence.

"Listen, you two," said Eric. "I'm changing my plans. This makes it necessary. I was going to locate Nigger's sidekick some way or other, but there won't be time. I think he's gone in hiding, anyway. And Silky will probably raid this place again, and come with a carload of gunmen. I've got to chance it on Nigger's story alone. I'm going to charge Silky with the murder of Joe Cardoni and arrest him myself."

"What?" exclaimed Watkins.

"Silky's going to be in the Tombs tonight!"

Kelly smiled with narrowing eyes, but Watkins was appalled.

"Eric, you can't do that. You can't buck Silky."

"Can't I?" returned Eric. "It's no longer a question of whether I can or not. I've got to."

"But don't you see that on his own grounds he can do anything he wants and claim self-defense? He could shoot you down, and once you're a goner there'll be no chance to explain why you went there."

Kelly put in an emphatic word.

"There'll be no shooting down, Jim. Not while this baby's on hand."

"What will you do?" inquired Watkins.

"I'll be heeled myself. And ready."

"Listen to me, you redhead," said Eric. "I'm going heeled, all right, but you're not. Get me? There's to be no shooting."

"What the hell you going to do with your gat? Pick your teeth with it?" Kelly was slightly exasperated.

"No," Eric assured, grinning. "Let's call it a persuader. That's all we'll need. And that's orders."

"Oh, sure!" said Kelly. "Have it your way. Go ahead. Get bumped. I should

worry." He slouched off to the window in indignation.

"Kelly and I are going over to Levin's at the close of shift time, Jim," Eric resumed. "You stand by at the phone here till you hear from me."

Red Kelly suddenly decided to take his departure.

"Where to, Red?" Eric asked.

"Out for some grub," Kelly explained from the doorway.

"All right. Bring in some sandwiches for me."

"O. K."

"And now," said Eric, "you and I better see how much damage they did outside, Jim. I'd better find out if I'm still in business or not."

For the next hour they conducted an inventory of destroyed material. In comparison to what it might have been the loss was slight. Silky had been too quickly interrupted to do a thorough job.

And it was only at the end of the hour that Red Kelly returned, to offer Eric a few wilted sandwiches and no explanation at all of his prolonged absence.

Eric and Kelly, wearing ordinary street clothes, boarded a strange taxicab on Avenue A at half past five o'clock. They gave the driver the address of the Levin garage, and rode in silence through the peaceful streets, the quiet Park, fragrant with spring lilac, and the turbulent West Side.

IT WAS a momentous ride to Eric Stedman. At its conclusion lay events of the gravest consequence. All he had ever been, all he had ever done in his life, seemed to lead up to this, and all that might ever happen again would be profoundly influenced by it. He had fought before, but never with such relentless determination to see the battle through to its conclusion. He had fought for sheer love of combat and conquest, he had fought to defend himself against attack, but such times seemed only moments of preparation for this climax.

He had set out primarily to avenge a comrade, and his aim had acquired a deeper significance. In Silky Gannon was personified all that normal, decent men despised and would destroy had they the power. Eric knew that his strong hands and trained muscles were but puny things to support him in this undertaking. Had he to depend on them alone, defeat would await him. But he had the will of a great city sound at heart to draw on. Momentarily it was paralyzed, but it would be with him in the Levin garage. The grief of those whose dead should still be living, the pain of those whom Silky Gannon had outraged, the tarnished honor of a community—all would lend him strength for the achievement of his purpose.

The taxicab arrived at its destination. Eric requested the driver to wait; but two steps from the cab he halted and returned. With an apologetic smile, he paid the man the sum on the meter and a generous tip in addition.

"Stick around, bud. A couple of minutes, anyway. We may be right out, and then again we may not. Wait and see."

"Sure," said the driver. "I'll wait." He grinned agreeably.

Eric and Kelly entered the Levin garage.

The interior was well lighted on this occasion. A haze of exhaust fumes dimmed the brilliant electric lights slightly, and created a diffused blue luminescence. The air trembled with the roaring of many motors, and the voices of men rose in shouts above the din. One or two of the attendants glanced curiously at the pair as they walked across the floor to the office, but they were not recognized and no one intercepted them.

LEVIN'S office, shut off from the main floor, was comparatively quiet. The air here was threaded with a wispy haze of cigar smoke. There were half a dozen men behind the rail partition. All conversation ceased abruptly as the newcomers closed the door behind them.

Eric walked to the railing gate and entered. Kelly followed close at his heels. Eric held a cigaret in one hand and a

match in the other; both were high and free. Kelly's hands were out of sight in his coat pockets, and his blue eyes were agleam with watchfulness.

"Evening, gentlemen," said Eric.

Silky Gannon rose slowly out of a chair that was across the desk from his employer. Levin looked on, uncertain whether to be scared or arrogant. Silky was neither. He wore a scant smile of anticipation and his voice was soft.

"Look who we have here, will you?" he requested. "Stedman and his battling redhead."

The remaining men of the group eased out of the foreground. They were silent, watching with excitement mounting in their eyes.

"We're calling on you," said Eric, "because it was necessary to see you. We might have missed you if we had waited. Why didn't you come around to my place at this time of day, Silky? You'd have found me there."

"I go calling at my own convenience, Stedman," said Gannon.

"Yeah," Kelly observed pointedly, "I've noticed that your idea of convenience is usually about four guys against one."

Silky surveyed Kelly from head to foot, an amused grin on his mouth.

"I'll see you alone sometime, Red. Some dark night up an alley. That satisfy you?"

Kelly smiled skeptically.

"I'd give up sleeping if there was any chance of finding you alone any night."

"All right, Red," said Eric. "Can it! This is no public debate."

Levin interposed himself here, coming easily to his feet, assurance having asserted itself within his breast.

"No?" he queried. "How interesting? Would you be so kind as to tell us what it is then?"

Eric gathered his breath. His eyes altered and were hard.

"I'm here on an errand not easy to perform. You're not going to like it, but I suggest that you accept the proposal I am about to make. If you're wise you will."

Levin's face was a mask. Silky listened with reserve.

"Yes?" said Levin. "What is this errand?"

"Just a minute. You know what happened to my driver, the fellow you slugged the other day. He's dead and buried now. He died of the beating you gave him. You didn't mean to kill him, I suppose, but you have no say about that now. There's only one person has that say, and that's the foreman of a criminal courts jury."

Levin stared in mock incredulity.

"Well, now, why should we be interested? Why come here and tell us about your troubles?"

"Simply because you're involved in them," said Eric. "You, Levin, are indictable under the same charge. Gannon acted in your employ and under your orders. You are equally responsible."

"Say," Levin said with sibilant anger, "what are you trying to put over here, eh? You think you're going to frame somebody?"

Eric laughed.

"Frame somebody? No indeed. I don't have to."

"I should be responsible for what a guy like Silky Gannon does," Levin said wrathily. "What he does, he does himself. I got nothing to do with it."

"Shut up, kike," said Silky. "You're tied to me with fishhooks, and don't you forget it."

Levin stared at the gunman. His swart face paled, and he seemed for the first time to realize what manner of bear he was holding by the tail.

"As for you, guy," Silky barked at Eric, "I got something to settle with you. In good time it's going to be settled, too. Right now I'll just hand you some good advice. If you got Nigger Benson hid out, turn him loose. If you got any ideas of handing me a rap for anything, get over them quick. You can't do it."

"I'm afraid I can, Gannon." Eric's voice was steady. "I've got Nigger Benson to the point where he will talk. He has told his story before witnesses, and

signed a confession. He makes it sound mighty like murder."

"Nobody's ever going to live long enough to tell a story like that on the stand."

"Maybe. We'll see. I came here to suggest that you come along with me to police headquarters and surrender. If you get a break, the jury may make it manslaughter, since you gave yourself up. If the cops have to go hunting for you they're going to do their damnedest to get you for murder. And I'll raise such a stink about the case in this town that they'll have to!"

Silky was in the grip of mounting fury. Levin, about to whisper to him to follow the suggestion, since he would surely be sprung from the hands of the police by morning, hesitated and said nothing. Kelly stood by, only his eyes moving, darting from one to the other. The others breathed deeply and continued to watch in the grip of suspense.

"I'll get you, Stedman," said Silky. "I'm going to get you and plant you six feet under, you and Nigger both. There ain't a man in this town can touch me and there never will be."

He came close to Eric. His fists were closed and his shoulders trembled with rage. Passions which had never known a leash whipped him. He cursed Stedman in terms as old as the pyramids and viler than the deepest pit.

Eric reddened and strove to contain himself.

"Lay off, Silky. You won't help yourself that way. Lay off, I tell you!"

Silky replied with a shove in the chest, which staggered Eric.

"I'll lay off when you're planted, you—"

Silky jerked his head back barely in time, and Eric's impulsive, enraged blow hit with but half its force. At that, Eric's fist struck the gangster's jaw hard enough to send Silky crashing into a stack of filing cabinets. Silky sprang from the cabinets with silent intentness, and the two met with smashing impact in the center of the floor.

KELLY scurried outside the railing and turned the key in the lock of the office door. No one from the crowded floor outside would interfere now.

There were no brass knuckles in this battle. There was no dancing retreat and attack over the floor. The space was too limited. The spectators raised their hands when the combatants veered close, and thrust them into the center of the floor. It was a stand up match of slugging, battering conflict.

Kelly took a position on the far side of the railing. Levin retreated behind his chair and gripped it till his knuckles showed white. The others pressed against the walls and watched, their faces livid with the lust of battle. They made no attempt to interfere. This was Silky's fight, in a place where Stedman was at their mercy anyway. It was up to Silky to win it for himself.

But Silky was doing no such thing. Eric grinned with set jaw as he fought, for he had known ever since their last encounter that he was the slugger's master. Silky also was beginning to perceive the fact. He breathed harshly, snarling with bared teeth, as he exercised all the skill he had ever known. It was considerable. But it was of little avail against one who might have aspired to ring honors himself.

Eric concentrated his attack on the gangster's face. He had landed with his first blow. He kept his left before him as a shield of dazzling quickness to stand between his body and the crushing blows Silky aimed at his ribs. And feinting, dodging, watching, he snapped his fist in a quick arc toward Silky's face at every chance. At the end his mark would be left there for all to see.

They fell apart under the force of their blows at one instant. Silky stood with back to the filing cabinets, hands at his sides. Blood spattered his face, and one eye was bloodshot and swollen. Eric was at the rail, breathing deeply, hands pressed to his aching body, gaze fixed on the gangster.

"Come on, you gutter rat!" Eric panted. "Come and get it! Come and take your finish!"

And he sprang from the rail.

Silky came to meet him. He took Eric's punch on an upflung arm and jabbed viciously to the body. Eric closed, and delivered three paralyzing blows at the base of Silky's neck. Silky threw himself backward and away.

Eric followed him with a left that clipped the gangster's jaw and clouded his eyes. Automatically Silky plunged in, both arms going in blind piston action. He plunged, and met a right that seemed to rise from infinite depths and crash with stunning power on the very point of his chin. Silky, clinging to consciousness almost by sheer force of the hatred that boiled in his soul, lost all sense of contact with solid earth. He was, in fact, completely off the earth during the instant it took for him to finish his flight from the center of the floor to a piled up heap that struck the foot of Levin's desk with such quaking impact as to splinter a panel of hardwood.

Silky lay there, the room dancing in his vision. He lay there, the unconquerable Silky, while his henchmen looked on and while the object of his deepest hatred and scorn stood over him in conquest. He lay shorn of his might, downed in the first defeat of his career.

A red mist through which all was strangely and sharply visible filled Silky's eyes. Insane passion burst its bonds in his pounding heart.

Eric had retired to the railing, waiting, his chest rising and falling mightily. Kelly drew back from the rail, eyes fastened on the other spectators. They remained mute and frozen, as though the fall of their champion had left them stunned.

Then Kelly's eyes shifted, lightning fashion.

"Duck!" he shouted. "Silky—"

The room seemed to crack open with shattering sound.

Silky Gannon half rose to his feet. Something dropped from his hand to the floor with a clatter. It was a small, blunt nosed automatic. Silky's body strained with superhuman effort and his eyes bulged whitely in an unseeing stare. Too great was the impalpable weight crushing Silky to earth. He collapsed like a half emptied sack of grain. A queer sound came from his throat. He moved no more.

Eric was examining a curious jagged tear in his coat sleeve where none had been an instant before. A thin, slow trickle of blood crept out on his wrist from under the cuff. He glanced at Kelly. The redhead leaned over the rail partition and in his extended hand was a shiny, nickel plated revolver. It was trained on those across the room. A faintest wisp of smoke exuded from the muzzle.

"None of you gents move or this goes off again," Kelly was saying. "One crack and you get smoked."

No one moved. No one, that is, except Jake Levin, and his move was unseen. Fright blanched his face, and terror, desperate and reckless, provided the impulse that sent his foot three inches over the floor to a button imbedded in the side of his desk. The foot applied pressure to the button. Somewhere outside a gong instantly set up a rapid, heart freezing clamor.

"What's that?" Kelly demanded. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Easy, Red," urged Eric.

His chest still moved in deep, heaving breaths. His senses were numbed by the stunning climax before him, by the sight of that sprawling lifelessness on the floor. It seemed he had heard but one shot. Yet two guns were out; a thin rivulet of blood escaped painlessly down Eric's arm, and on the side of Silky's head the hair was wet and matted and Silky was dead.

And outside somewhere a gong petrified the soul with its clamor.

"Easy," Eric repeated in a husky whisper. "We're in a jam. We're in a jam, Red."

"If we're in a jam," said Red Kelly, "I can end it. Damn you!" he shouted at the

silent group across the room. "What does that bell mean?"

The chair was trembling in Levin's frozen grasp.

"It means we got you!" he cried. His voice was strange; he spoke in a hoarse, high key. "It means the police will be here in a second to answer the alarm. It means you burn, both together. It means you came here and shot down Silky Gannon deliberately, with premeditation, in first degree murder, and five witnesses saw you. Damn you, you burn for this, both of you!"

Kelly cursed, with snarling lips; and the revolver's shiny muzzle moved till it bore on the man behind the chair.

Eric obeyed an impulse and reached out to divert the gun. He was curiously astonished to find himself using the arm of the thin crimson stain without undue effort or consciousness of pain.

"Wait, Red," he said. "Let the cops come. We'll face it."

A grimace of unnatural mirth twisted Levin's face.

"You bet you'll face it. And I'll celebrate with fireworks the night they march you to the hot seat up the river!"

Eric drew from his waist his own blue revolver.

"All right, we'll face it. And meantime, don't one of you move."

For a time, for a very brief time, they held the upper hand. Not for long. There was in Levin's vengeful words too grim an element of probability.

Some one was beating at the door. Voices were shouting alarmed inquiries. Eric and Kelly listened, and Levin's eyes were fastened on the translucent glass panel where a pantomime of moving shadows danced. No one stirred.

Then the gong ceased, and a vacuum of silence replaced its clamor. A new voice was behind the door, and the others died to silence. Kelly sidled to the end of the railing and reached out a hand to the key. It turned, and Kelly stepped back and drew open the door.

A POLICEMAN with drawn revolver stood in the opening, his gaze going instantly to the body crumpled against the desk.

"Drop the guns!" he barked. "Quick!"

Eric and Kelly let fall the revolvers, and their hands rose to their shoulders.

The office and the garage floor outside became a bedlam in the succeeding moments. A crush of men tried to gain entrance to the small room, and the officer was compelled to force them out and lock the door. Levin and his henchmen were vociferous with accusation. Eric and Kelly said not a word. The policeman found no other weapons on them, and permitted them to stand with hands at their sides against the wall.

"Shut up, you!" he ordered Levin. "Get back where you were. You all look alike to me, and you'll talk when I tell you."

The officer found Silky dead beyond possibility of doubt. A bullet remained buried somewhere in his brain. Leaving further examination for the coroner, the policeman put in a telephone call to his superiors, sat down at the table and, with his notebook open before him, began his preliminary report. As he wrote he asked questions.

Eric smiled with irony at the completeness of the case against them. The five across the room left no loopholes. They established the fact that Stedman was a business rival, that he had previously fought with Gannon, and that the presence of the two in the office was a deliberate and unsought invasion. And they came bearing lethal weapons. The officer was startled and interested on learning the identity of the victim. But he felt no regret. Instead, a keen professional satisfaction filled his heart at the prospect of a speedy conviction on the first case of murder to come under his jurisdiction in his brief career.

"Do you admit shooting this man with intent to kill?" he asked Kelly.

"I sure do," declared Kelly. "Gannon pulled his own gat, and it's right there for you to see."

"It's a plant!" cried Levin. "It's a frameup!"

"I told you to shut up, didn't I?" barked the cop.

Levin shut up.

"Do you admit accompanying this man here?" the officer asked of Stedman.

"I do."

"With intentions of shooting the victim?"

"I do not," said Eric evenly.

"Hm," murmured the cop. "Just dropped in for fun, eh? With a couple of gats, eh?"

There was no reply.

Eric clung with inward desperation to a slender hope. He had talked of his errand to Jim Watkins. Jim, in court, could testify that his employer had undertaken what any citizen is empowered to do—arrest a felon. But Kelly had disobeyed in arming himself for the visit. His disobedience had possessed greater wisdom than Eric's order, but it might have disastrous effect on their case. And they stood together now. Together, with the slenderest of hopes to support them. The testimony of one man against five before a jury whose vindictive righteousness would be passionately aroused by a prosecutor eloquent in his plea.

One slender hope, and beyond that the little green door in the death house at Sing Sing! No confession of Nigger Benson's, no amount of guilt in Gannon's past, would save them if Levin could fasten on them the motive of premeditation.

The office door knob rattled, and some one knocked with authority. The policeman rose and opened the door, and then came to a salute as he admitted the newcomer. He was a grizzled, mustached man of powerful frame with a cigar between his teeth. Behind him two other men entered, and Eric and Kelly stared in mingled dismay and hope.

Inspector Dalton of Homicide had arrived, and with him were Jim Watkins and Alderman Gus Bergman.

Watkins glanced at the pair with unfathomable significance. The stout politician breathed heavily with the force of deeply stirred emotions, and his red face bore minute drops of perspiration.

"What's this, Officer?" asked the inspector. "Homicide?"

"Yes, sir. These two are accused of shooting that guy. It's Silky Gannon, and he's dead as a doornail."

The official glanced quickly at the body. He studied the crumpled form with a speculative interest that concealed well whatever emotions the sight aroused.

The politician exercised no such restraint. His eyes were wide and strange things were in their depths.

"Silky Gannon!" he breathed, advancing with morbid fascination. "Silky got his at last. My God!"

Dalton gazed sidewise at the stout man.

"Hit you hard, Bergman?"

"No!" The portly head shook instant denial. "No! But what about—down below. The Old Man. What'll he say?"

"Better tell him and find out."

The two men studied each other. That is to say, the official studied the alderman, and the alderman stared at the official and seemed not to see him, seemed to be estimating something of appalling potentialities.

Then the stout man turned and approached the telephone. He called a number. While he waited for his connection the very breathing of those who watched was audible. And every one watched and felt the creeping progress of suspense. Only these two men knew what was occurring, and they did not explain.

"Hello?" said Bergman. "This is. . . . Recognize the voice? No? This is Gus. . . . Yes, Gus. Never mind the full name over this wire. Get the Old Man for me. He'll know who Gus is. . . . You do as I say. I got to speak to the Old Man, and you'll be spread-eagled if you don't get him on here." There followed a wait of several minutes, while Bergman drummed with nervous fingers on the desk top. "Hello? . . . Yeah, this is Gus; you know who. . . . That's right." He continued with deference and uneasiness. "I got some bad news. Something's happened. Something terrible. It's about—

Silky Gannon . . . No, not that. It's him, this time. . . . Yeah, he's dead. He got bumped—shot—in Levin's garage. I'm there now." He listened for a time intently. Then he looked up.

"Who did it? You, Eric?"

"No," snapped Kelly. "I did. Kelly's my name."

"It was a Stedman driver named Kelly," said Bergman into the instrument. "Stedman was with him; they came together. . . . Yeah, the patrolman off the beat is here. So is—you know—Dalton?"

Immediately Bergman put down the telephone.

"You, Inspector. Wants to talk to you."

Dalton picked up the instrument. He spoke as one sure of his position, but equally aware of the position of the man he addressed.

"Hello, Chief. . . . That's right; it's me. . . . Yes, exactly as Gus told you. I guess it was coming. . . . Silky had his own gun out, so I suppose—" He listened now, listened for some time, while a faint, faraway and indistinguishable voice floated into the silence of the room from the instrument receiver. It had a dry, emotionless quality, and it was explicit in its message. The inspector nodded. "All right, Chief. Yes, I see. . . . I'll handle it personally. . . . No, not a word, not a single word." He closed with a degree of gentleness. "And—I'm mighty sorry, Chief."

And then he hung up.

The eyes of the nine men were fastened on the inspector as he faced them. His features were set in an inscrutable expression. He walked to the table and picked up the patrolman's notebook. He read the notations through, rolling the cigar in his mouth. Then he ripped the page from the binding and handed the book to the policeman. Slowly he folded the bit of paper and tore it to small bits.

"Silky Gannon," he said, "dropped dead unexpectedly of heart disease. Change your report, Officer."

"Yes, sir," said the patrolman. He allowed no disappointment at the loss of a murder conviction to be revealed in his voice.

"What?" said Levin. "You think you're going to get away with that?"

Inspector Dalton ignored him.

"Stedman, you and Kelly beat it. Go home and stay there. Keep your mouths shut. So long as you do that, you'll hear no more of this. Don't ask any questions either, because you'll get no answers. Turn Nigger Benson loose and tell him I want to see him. I'll put the fear of God in him! This case is closed."

"The hell it is!" cried Levin.

The inspector bent his attention on the taxi operator.

"As for you, Levin!" His gaze bored chillingly into the swarthy little man. "As for you, you have forty-eight hours to get out of town. And you'll take these lads of yours with you. Your racket is finished."

"Finished?"

"That's what I said. If you don't know who I was talking to, and why, you better take a good guess right away. Those are his orders, not mine, but I'm here to carry them out. It's beat it, or stick around till we fix up a nice little rap for murder I've got in mind."

Levin sat down. His face was gray.

"All right," said Dalton. "Let's break it up now. You, Officer, hang around a while. I'll stay with you till the medical examiner comes."

Gus Bergman was at Eric's side, plucking at his sleeve. Eric followed the stout alderman, walking in a daze of speechless wonder.

THEY rode through the Park, the four of them, Eric and Red and Watkins and Bergman, in the same cab that had carried the first two along those winding drives such a short time before. Eric was returning with no more than a scratch in the flesh of his left forearm. The city's great breathing space was like a pool of darkness in the glaring brilliance of the Man-

hattan of early night. A soft breeze carried the fragrance of lilac and magnolia and dogwood through the open windows. Peace was over the city, a soft, kindly mantle of comfort and respite. They rode in silence with their thoughts.

Red Kelly began to stir in the dark.

"Jees," he exploded, "will somebody give me a match and a cigaret? I'm all thumbs here!"

Eric presented the redhead a cigaret and a match. His own hands were shaking.

"Red," he said, "I don't know whether to kiss you or give you a terrific kick in the appropriate place."

"Just leave me alone, Stedman," said Kelly. "Just leave me alone while I go away to a nice quiet place like the middle of the Sahara or something and sit down and figure it all out. I'll be cutting paper dolls for myself if somebody don't give me a hand quick and tell me what happened!"

"Dalton was pretty plain about asking questions," reminded Eric.

"All right. They can't stop me from thinking out loud, can they? Now, let's see? The Old Man. That was Santy Claus. I got it all figured out. I'm Robinson Crusoe and you're my man Friday. The late, unlamented Silky Gannon was a desert island, otherwise known as the Woolworth Building." He repeated darkly, "I've got it all figured out."

Bergman's face was visible for an instant in the light cast by a passing lamp post. He was staring in the redhead's direction with open mouth. But then from the darkness that effaced his corner again there came a sudden chuckle of laughter. It touched something taut and quivering inside Eric that instantly snapped, and he was laughing too, freely, weakly, with mirth that was an infinite surcease of strain. Watkins, in a flashing beam of illumination, was sitting with a broad, contented smile on his face. It was over, finished, ended, and they could be themselves again.

"Let me help you," Gus Bergman volunteered. "I know you won't ask questions, and I'm not going to tell you everything. But in all fairness to myself, since I was accused of turning you down, there ought to be some explanation."

"All right," said Kelly. "Tell me first —how in hell did you show up there all of a sudden at such a time?"

"Ask Jim Watkins," suggested Bergman. "He came and got me."

"Apparently," Eric commented dryly, "my orders carry about as much weight around here as the contents of a gas balloon."

"Eric, Eric," sighed Jim Watkins, "you're a nice young lad, but you're a fool for rushing into things. I didn't pay any attention to what you told me. I didn't try to stop you from going to Levin's, because I knew that would be useless. I simply went and got Bergman, and he hit the ceiling and phoned Inspector Dalton right away. Dalton hopped a police car and picked us up and tore like the hammers of hell for the West Side. That's how we happened to walk in."

"I see," said Eric. He turned to Kelly. "And you, Kelly, where'd you get that gat you had?"

"On Chambers Street," replied the unabashed redhead. "When I went out for lunch I grabbed a subway and shot downtown where a friend of mine sells them. I made the mistake of buying the sandwiches before I started. But I got the gun."

"Clearer and clearer," remarked Eric. "I'm glad the cop kept it. I'll have that less to worry about. Now, Gus, how much more of this can you unravel?"

Bergman was silent a moment.

"Do you know Silky Gannon's real name?" he asked earnestly.

Nobody knew.

"Well, I'm not going to mention it. Maybe you can guess when I'm through, though it's better forgotten. Now, in this town there are just four men who can do anything and have anything they want. If you know any inside dope on politics and the underworld, you'll know who the four are. They are respected, and they're as straight as is convenient for men who run the biggest city in the world to be.

"There are too many strings attached to their positions for them to be above board and clean handed about everything. Among the things that never have and probably never will see the light of day is the secret of Silky Gannon's real name. He was the nephew of one of those four men."

Eric whistled as a great light dawned on him. The Old Man! That inscrutable, powerful personage who was rarely in the papers, yet whose name was constantly on the tongue of every one who had anything to do with the city's affairs. A nephew, his own blood kin. One to protect as far as possible, yet one whose passing probably brought greater relief than grieving. A gangster who clung to the security of his father's brother's power and influence, and who no doubt used the name he bore as a club to threaten his older relative. No wonder then that Silky Gannon "dropped dead unexpectedly of heart disease!" A big city is a place of many strange and secret events.

"I've known the inside on that for years," Bergman continued. "Not many did, though. Silky Gannon hardly ever came into my district, and I never let him worry me. But when you came to me, Eric, and told me that he was operating on Lexington Avenue, I was licked at the start. I couldn't do a thing. The cops hated Silky, but they were scared to touch him. Silky had a tight grip on this certain man, because he could quite possibly ruin him by spilling everything to one of the opposition papers, which already knew about it, of course, but didn't dare ever try printing it without full corroboration. It was a case of everybody practically blackmailing everybody else, and Silky was the only one to benefit. I don't think this certain man is sorry that Silky's gone."

"But how would it hurt your certain man so badly if it got out that there was a black sheep in the family?" Watkins asked. "Most families have one or two."

"Now you're asking questions!" reproved the alderman. "Let's say Silky had worked for his uncle at some time or other, or that he knew too much about how he got his start in life. Those things are best left alone. Let's leave them so."

For a time they rode in silence. The cab emerged from Central Park at 79th Street, and proceeded up Fifth Avenue past the stately magnificence of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Then Bergman spoke again, musingly.

"I've got an idea, Eric. Levin has to sell out and get out of town. He won't fight: he can't, after this. Why shouldn't we get together and buy up his fleet of cabs and operate them? I put up the money, and you manage them? How does it sound?"

Eric caught his breath and calculated swiftly. It was not only a possibility; it was a splendid opportunity.

"Sounds swell to me, Gus. That's an idea! We could keep Levin's lease and operate from both garages. We'd cover the town."

"Fine!" Bergman reached into his pocket for a cigar and bit off the end. "You come with me tomorrow and we'll see Jake Levin. He'll be glad to get cash for railroad fare out of town."

Red Kelly also had an idea.

"How about this too, boss? I'm no hand at taking orders, I guess. You'll have to do something about me, and you can't fire me. How about putting me where I can give orders and keep out of trouble. You make me manager of the West Side garage and I'll give those tough bozos orders enough to keep them busy till the cabs wear out on them."

Without hesitation Red Kelly got the job.

"That's O. K, too," said Eric. "And since I'll have to be general superintendent over both places, Jim Watkins will be manager of the old garage. Suit you, Jim?"

"Down to the ground, Eric. Only one thing."

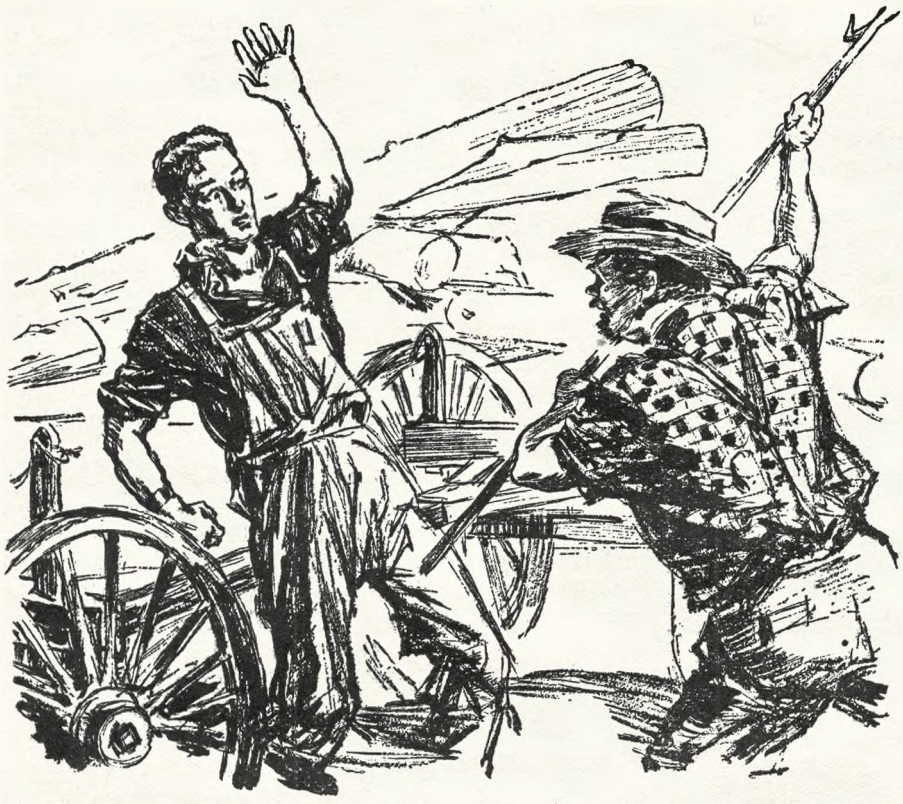
"What's that?"

"If any more taxi wars start, I resign. That's part of the contract, final and absolute."

They shook hands on it.

The SUPERMAN

By HOWARD ELLIS DAVIS



A Story of the Alabama Sawmills

THE LOG dray was piled high and the driver, Roy Bently, slouching carelessly on his saddle mule, was whistling blithely as he cracked his long whip and swung the team of four on to the log ramp.

The owner of the little mill, a grizzled man, soft spoken, uncle of the young driver, said approvingly—

"That's a good load, son."

Roy cocked his hat to a more rakish angle and smiled down at his boss.

"Yep. Couldn't another driver in Alabama have come up from under that hill with sich a load; but I taken advantage of the ground an' driv' right out."

Swinging lightly to the ground, he began knocking out the chocks that held the logs in place, in order that he might roll them from the dray.

Zac Holder, the log turner, short and squat, a week's stubble of beard on his face, which was red and bloated from an over-indulgence in corn whisky the previous night, approached truculently,

canthook in hand. It was part of his duty to keep the logs on the ramp rolled down, so that one always would be next to the carriage.

"Unload them logs straight," he commanded, "so's I won't be workin' my head off gittin' 'em in line."

"All right, Zacky," Roy replied amiably.

Swinging the weight of his lithe young body on the end of the five-foot handle of his canthook, he turned the key log, and the load cascaded down.

All of the logs fell straight except one; upending on the others, it rolled away, entirely off the ramp.

"Look atcher!" Zac shouted. "You damn' fool! Didn't I tell you to keep them logs straight?"

His ragged nerves had broken and Zac was dancing about like a crazy man, thumping the ground with the handle of his canthook.

"It got away from me, Zacky," Roy said, smiling tolerantly. "Don't git so mad. I'll—"

"Cut them leads loose an' snake it back, 'fo' I knock you in the head."

Now that is just what Roy had been going to do; but the other man's ill humor had aroused in him a certain perversity. The mill had stopped while the sawyer filed his saw, and the mill crew were looking on, grinning.

"You go to hell!" he said, a flush mounting to his tanned cheeks.

Swinging his canthook on high, Zac suddenly rushed at him. He had the tool by the end of the handle. It tapered upward to the heavy end, to which the metal hook was fastened. It was a dangerous weapon.

Thinking only of escape, Roy dropped his own canthook and retreated backward, his arm held out in front of him. He thought the attack on the part of the other man was only a bluff, a gesture, and he sought to placate him.

"All right, Zacky—" grinning—"I'll snake yo' darned old log for you. Ain't no use in beatin' me up 'bout it."

As he continued to retreat, he was brought suddenly up against his dray, in the space between the front wheel and the coupling pole. When he could go no farther, and as Zac continued to advance upon him, he looked sharply at the man and, seeing the light of madness in his eyes, realized that this sudden rage had bereft him of all his senses. He knew, then, that Zac intended to strike him with the canthook. It would break his arm, crush in his head, kill him.

For a moment he was terrified. There was no time to vault over the coupling pole, or to dart beneath it and escape. Already Zac was straining backward in order to bring down his murderous weapon with added force.

Almost instinctively, as a cornered dog will turn to snap, his right fist shot out in a straight jab to the man's chin, his body behind the blow. Caught in an unsteady position on his feet, as he swung his weapon on high, Zac staggered rapidly backward, his pace accelerated as he sought to regain his equilibrium. Then he fell, straight over on his back, and his head struck the corner of the log that had rolled from the ramp.

Roy had never lost his temper, and in the sudden relief a grin had overspread his young face. But when Zac fell and his head struck the log, there was something in the sound of it, and in the way the man twitched for a moment, then lay still, huddled on his side, that brought a pallor to his cheeks as he went forward and knelt beside him.

The mill hands gathered around. Kin Wall, the mill owner, whose attention had been directed elsewhere, now thrust himself among them.

"What's the matter here?" he asked.

"Roy an' Zac was fightin'. Roy hit him," some one volunteered.

"Great Scott!" Kin exclaimed as he knelt and turned up the face of the fallen man. "What'd you hit him with, Roy, yo' canthook?"

Roy was too dazed with fright to reply; but one of the mill hands answered for him:

"No; Roy only hit him with his fist.

He didn't have nothin' in his hand. Zac had pinned him up agin the dray an' was 'bout to maul him over the head with his canthook, when Roy hit him on the chin—jest one lick. Zac struck his head as he fell."

This statement was verified by nods and murmurs of assent from the others.

"I b'lieve you've killed him," Kin said as he examined the wound in the back of the head. "He's most dead now. One of you boys hop in my car an' go for the doctor."

Leaping to his feet, Roy sped for the little car, which was standing not far from the mill. There was a sort of numbness about him, and a lightness, too, and he moved as if his limbs were set on springs. Scrambling into the car, he drove at breakneck speed out along the road that led from the mill. Swinging into the country road that led to town, he barely missed colliding with another car that was passing.

HIS SPEED was limited only by the capacity of the car. Around curves, over rough stretches, along corduroy causeways laid through swamps he swept, the little car jumping and pitching. Returning with the doctor, he flung off a rear tire in making a sharp turn, but did not pause. He drove into camp with the accelerator pressed to the floor, the rear end of the car kicking into the air as it struck bumps and holes, like a frightened horse that, breaking loose, will kick aimlessly at a bit of dangling harness.

They had to help the nerve shaken old doctor from the rear seat. But his trip had been for nothing. Coming from the door of the house where they had taken Zac, Kin met them. Sadly he shook his head.

"He's dead," he said. "Passed out jest after we got him here."

Though he must have been half expecting this, the announcement was a shock to Roy. For only a moment he lingered. Then, going to his own shack, he began hastily gathering his things. They were pitiably few, these wordly possessions of his, and he packed them all in a paper suitcase, dented and frayed by its trips from camp to camp as he followed the little mill to each new location.

With no definite plan, he wanted to run away, to leave, to escape before a hue and cry was raised for his arrest. The suitcase packed, he was just turning toward the back door when the front door was shoved open and Kin entered.

"What are you doin', Roy?"

"I—I got to git away," he replied in a whisper, looking furtively about him. Then, feeling that his uncle would shield him, "Where can I go, Uncle Kin? What place can I hide out where they won't find me?" At a sudden thought, "Could you let me have some money so—so's I can git plum' out the country?"

"You're not goin' to run off, son."

Taking the battered suitcase from Roy's hand, he tossed it into a corner.

"But, Uncle Kin, I—I—"

"You're goin' with me to the sheriff an' give yo'self up."

"No, no, Uncle Kin! You got to hide me. You got to hide me out where they won't find me. The sheriff would send me to the chair like—like they done Jake Roberts when he shot Sam Tod. Oh!" he moaned, beginning to tremble all over, his teeth chattering. "I didn't go to do it. I hardly knowed I hit him. You *got* to hide me. You got to git me away from here an' hide me where they won't find me!"

Completely unstrung, now, he was on his knees, hugging Kin's legs, clawing at his clothing.

"Oh! My God, my God, my God!"

Gripping the thick hair of his nephew, Kin shook him roughly.

"Shet up an' listen to me. Turn my legs loose. Stand up on yo' feet. Now listen. The whole mill crew was there to witness that you didn't have nothin' in yo' hand an' that you struck Zac only to keep him from killin' you with the canthook. It was plain self-defense, an' they can't do nothin' with you for that. But

you got to give yo'self up, anyway. It'll make it simpler ef you do."

"I can't, Uncle Kin. I—I jest can't!"

"Well, you're goin' to, whether you can or not."

"Will you go with me?"

"Of course I'm goin' with you."

"An' can ma go, too? I want to see ma. I want to see my ma. Oh, Lordy, Lordy! I want to see my ma. She'll know I didn't do it a-purpose."

Going ten miles out of their way as they drove to the county seat, they called for Roy's mother, a widow, Kin's sister. Leaving Roy in the car, Kin went in and told her of what had happened. When she came out with her brother, she had no words for Roy. Putting her arms about his neck, she kissed him. He made her get into the seat with him and Kin, so that he would have them comfortingly on either side.

The matter was very simply arranged. Zac, a drifter who had come seeking a job, had no friends or relatives to press a suit, and he was buried by the mill hands who took up a collection for the purpose. There were half a dozen eye witnesses to prove that Roy had acted in self-defense; and Doctor Bates was there to testify that death had been caused by the man's head striking the corner of the log when he fell. On the second day Roy was back at his old job, and things about the little mill had resumed their usual tranquillity.

AT FIRST he was very thankful and very humble. He had been a carefree youth, always boasting of what he had done or could do. This was more in fun than vanity, and his companions were constantly joking him, challenging him to prove good his words. But now, in his meekness of spirit, he had settled into a sort of quiet reserve.

His old companions, young fellows like himself, who worked in the woods or about the mill, treated him with a new deference. At first he thought it was sympathy because of the sad outcome of his fight with Zac. But one evening after work hours as he was engaged with a new man in a bit of horseplay in front of his shack, he learned the true meaning of this attitude toward him.

"You better let Roy alone," one of them said. "He won't do to fool with."

"Why won't he?" the new man asked scornfully.

" 'Cause he can kill a man with one lick of his fist. He done it not long ago."

"You don't say!" And the new man sank down on the step of the shack, gaping up at Roy.

"Yep," another chimed in proudly. "You'll hear 'bout it 'fo' you've been 'round here long. The feller was makin' at Roy with a canthook. Roy didn't have nothin'. But he hit this here feller with his fist, jest one lick, an' killed him deader'n a hammer."

Roy had a sudden tingling sensation. Unconsciously, he stood erect, throwing back his shoulders. He tensed the muscles of his right arm, from which the sleeve of his denim shirt had been rolled to the elbow.

"Come on," he said to the young man on the step, who still sat gazing at him with a new respect, "you ain't knocked my hat off yet."

"No—an' ain't liable to." And he laughed. "With his fist! Golly!"

Roy began to realize now why, when he spoke, the other boys gave such instant heed; why, at the common table in the mess shack, they always passed food to him before helping themselves; why, in the woods, they were always so eagerly ready to lend a helping hand in loading his dray.

In the days that followed he began to pose, to strike attitudes, to break things that were breakable, just to show the strength of that great right arm that had killed a man. One evening, returning to his sleeping quarters with his shack mates, instead of unfastening the flimsy door, he struck it a blow with his fist and when it crashed from its hinges, he walked in and took his seat, while the lesser ones lighted the lamp and, lifting the door, screwed the hinges back into

place, murmuring in hushed tones of this new feat. He did not tell them that before leaving in the morning he had noticed how near the door already was to collapsing from its own weight.

He had hurt his hand when he struck the door, and for several days covertly nursed several badly bruised knuckles. But he listened to the others bragging about what he had done, until he himself began to believe that it was the superhuman strength of his great right arm that had enabled him to crash in with one blow the entrance to their dwelling.

He began to depend so largely upon help in loading his dray in the woods that he would loaf about until some one was available to assist him; and his daily average of logs brought in to the mill fell far below the other drivers. Several times Kin spoke to him about the matter, but he paid small attention. In fact, he was beginning to adopt a patronizing attitude toward his uncle and treated him with a half humorous contempt. At last, one day, Kin said to him:

"Roy, you've got so you ain't worth a tinker's dam no mo' as a driver. You turn yo' team over to John McCauley in the mornin'. I reckon I ought to fire you, but I'll give you somethin' to do 'bout the mill."

"Suits me," Roy replied, shrugging his shoulders. "I'll tail the edger."

Only one-inch boards were edged and the work was light. It was the duty of the tailer to throw aside the strips as the board passed through the edger, then place the finished plank on the roller bed, where it was shoved along to the man at the trim-saw. But sometimes the lumber came through with discouraging regularity and, awkward at his new job, Roy would get behind. At such times, he would call sharply to the trimmer, or another of the hands, who would come promptly to his assistance. Then, usually, when together they had cleared the jam, Roy would leave the other man at the edger while he himself smoked a cigaret.

Kin reprimanded him for his shiftlessness; but Roy only shrugged and winked at one of the other men.

ONE SATURDAY night there was a dance given over at the settlement of Brown's Store. Roy, with several of the other boys, borrowed Kin's car and drove over to the entertainment. During the evening the whisper suddenly went about in the room where they were dancing that a fight was about to take place on the outside. Roy, who had become very much smitten with pretty little May Arnold, had just finished dancing and, seated on the bench beside her, was fanning her vigorously. Immediately he excused himself.

Beyond the front gate of the home where the dance was being given two young men faced each other. Behind each were his backers, the small crowd constantly augmented by those who had been drawn by the excitement. Both of the belligerents had been drinking to excess, and they were occupied at the present in abusing each other, each daring the other to start something. One of them was from the mill and had come with Roy; the other was Rowley Sneed, a notorious bully. Rowley was larger than the other youth, and to his abuse his opponent replied only half heartedly.

From Rowley's backers came the constant prompting:

"Hit him, Rowley. Knock the daylight outen him!"

From the camp of the mill man:

"Don't be skeered of the big stiff. Show him you ain't skeered of him!"

Roy was afraid of Rowley Sneed. Several times he had seen Rowley beat up other men. Not for anything would he have resented almost any insult Rowley might have directed toward him. He had come out merely as a spectator, and when he saw it was Rowley his drink emboldened friend had antagonized, he tried to make himself inconspicuous among the others.

But he was recognized, and his arrival created something of a sensation.

"It's Roy Bently!" a man cried sharply.

And one of Rowley's backers said to another—

"Here comes Roy Bently to mix into this."

And promptly both of them sneaked away, followed by Rowley's other friends so that the man stood deserted.

The crowd fell away from in front of Roy, leaving him free to act, to take the part they knew he would. And Roy was afraid, so afraid that he felt his knees knocking together.

He heard one man say to another in an undertone:

"We ought not to let Roy git mixed up in this. You know he killed that feller with jest one lick of his fist."

But the other replied:

"I ain't goin' to fool with him. I got a wife an' kids at home."

But this did not help Roy's fear. It only made it worse; for it impressed on him what these others expected.

The belligerents, dropping their guards, had turned toward him. One of the men from the mill called derisively to Rowley—

"What you got to say now, you big stiff?"

Evidently Rowley had nothing to say. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that he stood alone. Uneasily, he shifted about on his feet. Then the murmuring ceased. They all grew silent, waiting for Roy to speak—the champion from Wall's mill, who had killed a man with one blow of his fist.

And the champion stood there so shaken with fear that he could not find speech. Then, as if the expectant silence itself squeezed the words from him, he murmured—

"What you doin'?"

The words were meaningless. It was apparent to all what everybody was doing. In fact, Roy scarcely knew that he had spoken. The sound of his voice seemed to come from afar, as if it belonged to somebody else. It was dull and lifeless and choked with fear.

But the bully of three counties at once applied them to himself.

"I—I ain't doin' nothin', Roy. I was jest goin' on with Jack, here. Tell you the truth, I was jest fixin' to go home."

And, turning suddenly, he walked rapidly away.

So great was Roy's relief that, in the reaction, a sense of weakening nausea swept over him. But he was seized by the arms, jostled, crowded around.

"Have a cigaret, Roy?"

"How 'bout a nip of somethin' a little stronger than spring water?"

"Hell, no! Roy's sparkin' a gal back at the house, an' May don't stand for the smell of licker on a man's breath."

And from others, who did not share the honor of being his intimates:

"Lordy, I was skeered! Did you see how he was tremblin'?" "An' how he jest stood there an' looked at Rowley?" "An' how his voice sounded when he spoke?" "Ef he was to git that mad at me, I'd naturally die in my tracks." "Well, it skeered Rowley all right—an' him an' his gang comin' here all teaed up with licker, threatenin' to break up the dance!"

Slowly, proudly, in all the glory of his victory, Roy sauntered back to the house. Modestly, he lingered in the darkness of the front gallery, smoking, while the story of his prowess spread among those at the dance. Later, little May Arnold, her eyes sparkling, flatteringly told him as she squeezed his arm—

"Oo, Roy, sometimes I'm almost skeered of you!"

AT EVERY frolic throughout the countryside Roy became a familiar figure. He liked to hear the hushed murmur that greeted his first entrance into a room. He never drank or boasted now; but at the deference accorded him, he swelled and strutted and preened himself, accepting the homage as a matter of course and beginning to think himself as great a man as they all acknowledged him to be.

Little May Arnold's place as his best girl had been taken by Sally Lassiter, a tall, dark, brown eyed beauty, bold and dashing. Heretofore, Roy had always

looked on Sally from a distance with a kind of awe; but now it was Sally who made the advances. On the evening when Sally had first usurped his attentions, he had later found May in one corner of the darkened front gallery, crying bitterly. And she had told him that she had the toothache. Genuinely touched by her distress, he tried to console her and wanted to seek out Jim Fincher, at whose house the dance was being given, and get such remedies as Jim might have to offer; but she forbade him to do so. Then Sally came looking for him and led him away.

Sally had been brought to the dance by another man, and ordinarily it would have meant a fight with her escort to absorb her attentions as Roy was doing. But this fellow only grinned at the chaffing of his companions and frankly told them—

"Well, I ain't seekin' no sudden death by crossin' Roy Bently."

And after that, with Sally as Roy's acknowledged girl, no man at any dance dared lead her on to the floor unless, by leading out some other girl, Roy first signified that she was free.

As a mill hand, he was growing more useless. He performed his work in a careless manner, and whenever he felt like it he would call some one else to tail the edger, and saunter off and remain as long as he pleased. Kin spoke to him sharply, threatened to fire him; but Roy, sure of his mother's brother, only laughed at him.

The mill was cutting lumber for the Tri-State Construction Company, who were building a big dam down the river. The main road into the job was that which passed not far from the mill. Along this road each payday passed the three automobiles that brought in the payroll. In one of them was carried the money, the theory being that no one could tell in which car it was. Roy had been told that sometimes as much as a hundred thousand dollars whizzed by on this road at fifty miles an hour, the armed guards slouching comfortably in their seats. The sight had always held a fascination for him, and one day, about the time for them to appear, he left his work in the mill and went over to the edge of the road to await their passing.

It was just such bold spirits as he, he reflected, that demanded a living of the world without having to slave for it at two dollars and a half a day, as he was doing. If he had a hundred thousand dollars in his possession he—he and Sally—would have the world at their feet. Not that he would ever dream of doing such a thing, of course, but just suppose he were to hold up those automobiles and get possession of the money they convoyed, wouldn't he have dozens of friends in that part of the country who would lie for him and shield him and help him to hide out until the matter had blown over? And even if they found out who had robbed the payroll, would that branch of organized society, as he knew it, which maintained the law—a sheriff and two deputies down at the county seat—dare to come after a man of his reputation?

Upon such thoughts he reflected, until he had worked himself into a sort of ecstasy. And when the three cars zipped by he ran out into the road and stood looking after them, choking in the dust.

There Kin found him, and he called to him sharply:

"What're you doin' out here? Git back to that mill an' git to yo' work!"

Brought suddenly back to earth, Roy turned on this man whom, in other days, he had loved and striven to please and of whom he had stood a little in awe,

"Look-a-here, I'm tired of yo' doggin' my steps everywhere I go. You let me alone."

"Why—why, Roy! Ain't I payin' you for a day's work?"

But Roy only shrugged and walked off. That night, he took out a .45 Colt, recently purchased from a negro. He had never possessed any cartridges for the pistol, and he wondered where he could buy some.

The next Saturday night Kin gave a big frolic at the mill. The dancing took place

in the mess hall, cleared for the occasion. Kin's infrequent entertainments were famous and, from miles around, a big crowd gathered. On his own home ground, and as one of the hosts, Roy Bently was in his glory.

The weather was warm and, like most of the other men, he was in his shirt sleeves. But, unlike the others, he had his sleeves rolled to the shoulder. It was one of his poses to expose to public view that mighty right arm. Many stories now were being circulated about his past achievements. It was said, for instance, that once he had killed a mule outright with one blow of his fist; that he had been set upon in town by a gang of drunken rowdies who did not know him and that, afraid to hit them with his fist, he had merely slapped them down with his open hand, one after the other, as they attacked him, until seven lay on the ground scattered about him; that a great fight promoter, hearing of the awful wallop which that mighty right arm carried, had written to Roy and begged to sign him on for some fights, with purses of fabulous amounts, but that Roy had written him frankly that he was afraid to enter into such a contract, as he might lose control of himself in a fight and hit a man harder than he should, with dire consequences.

Though Roy did not start these tales, he did not contradict them; and some of them were repeated so often in his presence that he began almost to believe them.

AT KIN'S party, the older people, married couples who did not dance, sat on benches around the sides of the mess hall. Between dances, the young folk strolled about in pairs, or gathered in groups, chatting and laughing and having a good time generally. Some of them, inclined to spoon, would sit out on the front steps in the moonlight, or patronize the keg of lemonade, provided by Kin, which sat on one end of the back gallery. Occasionally, two or three of the men would slip off to partake of a more potent beverage which they had brought themselves.

Sally Lassiter was there, and May Arnold, and a score of other pretty girls. The music was provided by three negroes who played a fiddle and two banjos and who could play either square or round dances. As became a man of his prestige, Roy stood aloof, mostly silent, his bare arms folded across his chest. He danced only part of the time. To his satellites, a group of whom usually stood gathered about him on such public occasions, he vouchsafed only curt remarks. No one danced with Sally, his acknowledged girl, unless he had first led out some one else, when there was a general rush in her direction. If he did not care to dance, he usually said to one of his cronies, spreading the honor impartially among them:

"Take Sally out for this. Tell her I sent you."

Kin had invited several of his friends from among the forces of the Tri-State Construction Company at work on the dam. Among them was a slender young fellow in a palm beach suit, Guy Meadows, who checked lumber on the storage yard. About the middle of the evening, without waiting to see whether Roy desired the dance for himself, Guy led Sally out. It was a round dance, and as he stood with his arm about the girl, but before he got started, one of the other men, knowing him to be a stranger, caught him by the arm and whispered:

"That's Roy Bently's gal. You know who he is, I reckon?"

"Yes, I know who he is. What of it?"

"Why, he's the feller what killed a man with one lick of his fist!"

"I know that, too," Guy replied, smiling. "But if Miss Lassiter wants to dance with me, I reckon it's all right." And with that he danced away.

Roy, though he stood scowling, watching every turn of the couple, chose to take no further notice of the matter. After the dance, Guy took his partner out to the lemonade barrel on the back gallery. And Sally, perhaps enjoying the situation, giggled and hugged his arm.

When the music started again, they were still together, and Guy again led Sally out on the floor. But Roy stepped out and caught his arm.

"Reckon I'll dance this myself," he said.

"I've already asked Miss Lassiter," Guy replied, refusing to release her.

He started to dance; but Roy, again catching his arm, flung him to one side.

"You git out of here, an' make it snappy!" he bellowed, beside himself with rage that any one so insignificant looking as this Guy Meadows should have dared to cross him.

Guy was half a head shorter than Roy and perhaps thirty pounds lighter; but he stood coolly looking Roy over. The young mill hand towered above him, scowling, his fist doubled—that mighty fist that had killed a man with one blow.

The music stopped. Sally retired to the side of the room, giggling consciously. Two or three of the older men, leaving their spouses, ran for Kin, who was replenishing the lemonade keg, and dragged him into the room, his sleeves rolled up, his hands sticky with lemon juice.

"For God's sake, Kin," they begged, "git this here little feller 'way 'fo' Roy kills him!"

But Kin, always a champion of fair play, demanded to know why they were quarreling. When the reason was told to him, he said:

"Then I'll not stop them from fightin'." Taking charge of the situation, he directed, "You fellers stand back an' give 'em room. I'll do the refereein' an' I'll see that there's fair play an' no killin'." From where it served to prop open a window, he took a heavy stick. "An' the first one that fouls an' don't let up when I says to will git mauled over the head."

His fist doubled, bending and unbending that mighty right arm, as if to limber it up for its most deadly work, Roy was making his fiercest gestures. Threateningly, he took a step forward. Some of the women screamed. Most of them hid their faces.

But Guy, instead of slinking off, as Roy had expected him to do, calmly drew off his Palm Beach coat and tossed it into a corner. In his shirt sleeves, he looked even more slender than before. And suddenly the champion rushed at him.

Guy sidestepped and as the larger man lunged past caught him a stunning blow on the ear, which made that side of Roy's head ring like a thousand church bells.

Bringing up in his rush, Roy turned and danced toward Guy. Then he swung wide, his arm and fist describing a great arc. Again his opponent was not there, and the impetus carried him all the way around. As he again came face to face with the lumber checker, a hard, straight jab caught him on the chin. His head jerked back and he bit his tongue. Baffled, confused, he stood still. Then, stepping forward, right, left, the small, hard fists of the young lumber checker struck him first on the nose, then on the eye.

Half blinded, dazed by the repeated blows to his face, the young mill man rushed about, seeking with flail-like blows to annihilate his slender opponent; time and again, arms wide spread, fingers clutching, he tried to seize him. Without seeming to retreat, Guy sidestepped, dodged, and each time one or both fists shot out.

Once, reeling, turning in a new direction, Roy mistakenly pursued Old Man Bitts, who had edged too close; and, striking him between the shoulders, he knocked him into the lap of Mrs. Sampy Mullins. That good lady, perhaps inflamed by the spirit of combat, caught Mr. Bitts in the hair with one hand and, with the other, was slapping him with such resounding whacks that Kin ran to his rescue and laughingly threatened Mrs. Mullins with his stick.

In fact, they were all laughing now, laughing and cheering the underdog, who was biting so viciously.

ROY STOOD in the middle of the floor, swaying. The lights had gone dim. He was breathing hard and he was dizzy. He was so weak that he scarcely could hold his guard. Perhaps it was pitiless; but it is

the knockout blow that counts. Stepping up to him, Guy crouched, struck hard to Roy's chin, and the young mill man, trembling like a stricken ox, sank slowly to his knees, then sprawled forward on his face. Goliath had met his David.

A dipperful of cold water in his face revived him, and he found his head supported by Kin; and that coolly smiling young lumber checker, whom not once had he been able to touch, was bathing his face with a large white handkerchief. They helped him to his feet, and he stood blinking. A shrill, girlish laugh, and Sally's voice—

"My goodness, Roy, yo' face looks like you'd been in a yellowjackets' nest."

Turning, he reeled drunkenly from the room, followed by laughter, chaffing, catcalls. No one accompanied him. Alone, the fallen champion stumbled toward his shack, crying softly to himself.

Halfway there, a little hand was slipped into his.

"Roy, darlin', it was awful; it was shameful! I tried to stop it; but they held me."

It was little May Arnold who, out of all the throng of his former admirers, had followed to comfort him.

When she had made him lie down on his bunk, she again bathed his face, then left him, returning with raw beef she had filched from the ice box standing just outside the kitchen at the mess hall. With this she poulticed his face.

All the next day, which was Sunday, Roy lay with his face to the wall. His shack mates brought him food; but he ate little. They tried to question him about the fight, to tease him; but he refused to talk.

Appearing at work early Monday morning, he was stiff and sore. His face, still swollen, had assumed many colors. He felt glum and morose. When the lumber coming through the edger began to crowd him, from long habit he called the trimmer to come and help. The man only grinned at him and told him to help himself.

The next time he called to the log turner, a former satellite and willing flunky of the champion of Wall's mill; but with his finger at his nose, the boy made an insulting gesture.

Thoughtfully, Roy applied himself to his work with such good effect that, with little trouble, he kept the lumber clear. But about the middle of the forenoon, feeling an insistent urge to smoke a cigaret, he looked about him. He would not again risk a rebuff from any of those in the mill; but there was a half grown negro boy doodling sawdust from the side of the mill in a wheelbarrow. Instead of shouting at him as formerly he would have done, Roy left his work for the moment and went over to him.

"Say, how 'bout tailin' for me a few minutes while I take a smoke?"

In other days this negro boy had jumped to his bidding with alacrity, and had deemed it a privilege to wait on him. Now, he only shook his head and murmured, applying his shovel industriously:

"Can't leave dis huh dust, boss. Hit mought git piled up 'fo' I got back."

If little black Mose had refused to do the bidding of any other white man about the mill— But he would not have refused. Nothing could have impressed on Roy more forcibly the loss of his prestige. Returning silently to his work, he felt that he was the lowest of the low, a pariah there among his fellow mill men. So humble was he that he scarcely dared lift his eyes to one of them.

Kin Wall was having Sunday night supper with his sister, a custom of long standing. When they had left the table and adjourned to the front gallery and he had lighted his pipe, he asked:

"Sary, have you noticed any change in Roy? He spent the day with you, didn't he?"

"You know he did, Kin, seein' it was yo' car he come in. He an' May Arnold come over an' taken me to church. They stayed to dinner. He has spoke her, Kin. They're engaged to be married."

"Golly, that's good news! But did you notice any difference in—in the way Roy acts?"

"Yes, I did, Kin. An' I'm afraid the boy's not well, he's so quiet-like."

Kin chuckled.

"I reckon he's weller than he's been for many a day."

"What do you mean, Kin?"

"Waal, for some time past, Roy had been puffin' himself up into a balloon which didn't have nothin' to it but the skin. An' the funny part was he had 'most everybody believin' he was what he thought he was. But all he needed was prickin'. You hearn of the fight he had at my dance?"

"Yes, I did; an' I'm surprised at you, Kin Wall, for allowin' it."

"You needn't be surprised at anything I do."

"I'm not."

"With nothin' a-tall to base it on, except the repitation that he had killed a man with one lick of his fist, which you know wasn't so, he was paradin' an' struttin' till he was makin' a plumb monkey show of himself. He was the big nigger at every frolic, lordin' it over the other boys. He was shiftless an' no 'count at his work. I'd have fired him a hundred different times ef I hadn't knowed we'd have lost him complete. But that there young lumber checker from the dam, Guy Meadows, plumb punctured his balloon. It brought him down so far below the level of the other boys at the mill that he couldn't strut no mo'. It done me good all over to see it."

"Kin Wall," his sister began severely, "do you mean to tell me—"

But he held up his hand for silence.

"The part that done me good was that he et his humble pie like a man; an' he give himself to his work like he hadn't done for a long time. Then one day he come to me an', with downcast eyes an' kickin' the dirt with the toe of his shoe, he said to me, 'Uncle Kin, I've been a fool. I'm goin' to ask you to forgit some things I've said an' did an' let me take out my old team again.'

" 'Take 'em out in the mornin',' I said, sort of offhand, but feelin' like I wanted to sound a jubilee.

"He did, an' he brought in mo' logs than any of the others. An' Saturday evenin' as he come in with his last load, a big one, he was whistlin' like he used to in the old days. Think I'll give another frolic."

"You'll do no sich thing, Kin Wall, unless that fightin'— What are you laughin' at?"

"Why, Sary, when I give Guy Meadows his invite to my dance, I explained the circumstances to him an' made him promise that, there in the ballroom, befo' everybody, he'd give Roy the beatin' of his life. I knowed he could do it, because I had seen him handle himself in the ring one night down at the dam."

By ROY De S. HORN

ASH CANS FOR BRISTOL BILL

A Story of the U. S. Destroyers

IN EVERY detail and specification, the destroyers *Ashton* and *Byers* were sister ships. They had grown up side by side in the Black River yards; they had slid into the water side by side at a twin launching. Rivet for rivet and inch for inch they matched each other. And since they were sister ships, one might have thought that they would be bosom friends, fast partners and close allies through every bond of sympathy and understanding.

They were not. The *Ashton* and the *Byers* detested each other from the first bow plate to the last rudder rivet. To the natural rivalry of ships in the same class, they added a personal dislike that was nothing less than a feud. Any athletic contest between the two ships' crews was foredoomed to turn into a brawl, and sending the two liberty parties ashore at the same time was equivalent to instigating a full riot.

The third time the crews mixed, to the

considerable detriment of the Navy yard, the yard commandant sent for the division commander and spoke forcefully and to the point.

"I'll not have my Navy yard torn to pieces by two bunches of wild destroyer men out to keep practised up on mayhem and murder," he announced. "Either stop the *Ashton* and *Byers* from fighting, or make 'em do their fighting elsewhere."

The division commander could not stop the fighting, but he could transfer it outside the yard gates. He ordered that henceforth the liberty parties of the *Ashton* and the *Byers* be sent ashore at least fifteen minutes apart, and that they be marched outside the yard gates by a commissioned officer before being turned loose.

The destroyer officers, being young and sport loving, generally stayed around afterward and bet one another on the fight.

Had the fights only been decisive, the feud might have taken care of itself. But they were drawn battles; the strategy of Gunner's Mate Akely of the *Ashton* too evenly matched that of Boatswain's Mate Brooks of the *Byers*.

The enmity between the *Ashton* and the *Byers* was but a child's quarrel compared to the twenty-year feud of Gunner's Mate Akely and Boatswain's Mate Brooks. Gunner's Mate Akely and Boatswain's Mate Brooks had been rivals since the days of the old Armored Cruiser Squadron, and beyond.

For six years, Akely and Brooks had held the squadron heavyweight championship between them. For six successive years they had alternately won and lost that championship to each other, and never by more than the barest edge of decision. The question as to who was the better man was still unsettled that morning when they met in the yard to put the *Ashton* and the *Byers* in commission. They met on the dock between, and for a full minute stood glaring at each other; two stocky, near grizzled seamen of vast knowledge and experience.

Gunner's Mate Akely of the *Ashton* spoke first.

"Ah-h-h, so it's you, is it—you bum!" he snarled. "An' what the hell are you doing here?"

"Me?" Boatswain's Mate Brooks scowled. "Why, I'm here to put in commission that crackerjack of a destroyer, the *Byers*, right behind you. An' what the hell's it to you, anyway—huh?"

"The *Byers!* You goin' boatswain of *her?*" Gunner's Mate Akely was dazed for a second. Then he remembered himself, and snorted scornfully. "Oh, *that* rat trap. Why don't you try to get yourself a real ship for once, huh? But, o' course, they ain't picking an apple knocker like you for a *regular* destroyer."

"Is that so?" retorted the insulted Brooks. "An' just what would you call a regular destroyer, now?"

"My own boat—the *Ashton*—right behind you. There's a real boat for you."

Boatswain's Mate Brooks laughed jeeringly.

"The *Ashton* a real boat? G'wan! She's built outer nothin' but the leftovers from the *Byers* and the last ten boats they built in the Black River yards. Why, I'll bet she's got wooden rivets in her in places, where they run outer old iron. She'll open up on you like paper, first time she gets wet."

"Don't you worry about our troubles," retorted Gunner's Mate Akely. "What we're going to do to your old *Byers* at target practise and engineering 'll give you plenty troubles of your own. I bet you ten dollars the *Ashton* outscores you!"

"You're on," accepted Boatswain's Mate Brooks of the *Byers* promptly. "Why, you old apple knocker, we ain't only going to beat your old *Ashton*; we're going to win the flotilla meat ball with the *Byers!*"

By meat ball, Boatswain's Mate Brooks meant the Battle Efficiency Pennant, which is an annual award made by the Department with the idea of increasing the Navy's efficiency by instigating ship rivalry and competition in the important branches of gunnery and engineering.

The idea itself was good enough, except that the Department had not reckoned

sufficiently on the rivalry already natural to such keen boats as the destroyers.

Because while competition in gunnery is easily enough settled by simply counting the number of hits at target practise and then checking them against a time ratio, the relative efficiency of a ship in engineering is not nearly so easily computed. Engines can not be fired like guns, and the ensuing hits counted. Engineering efficiency must be calculated on a ship's performance over a long time—trial runs, speed tests, total mileage—the whole idea being to get the greatest amount of work accomplished with the least expenditure of fuel and lubricating oil and such.

And that is where the destroyer flotilla took up the Department's idea with an enthusiasm and result the Department had never anticipated.

In the competition, every ton of fuel, every pint of lubricant issued to a Naval ship is carefully checked as it is issued, and it is on this issued amount that the ship's performance is estimated. It never occurred to the Department that there are other ways of obtaining such supplies than through official issue.

That was where the destroyers really began to compete. The first principle of war is to conserve your own resources and live off the enemy as much as possible. And the destroyers set out to do just that. What they could beg, borrow or steal, in the way of supplies, was nobody's business—unless it could be proved. And where was the competition umpire who could spend all his days and nights watching oil barges and machine shops and yard rigging lofts, for instance?

IT EARLY became a question as to which was the better forager, the *Ashton* or the *Byers*. Gunner's Mate Akely of the *Ashton* had come from the West Coast boats with the reputation of being the cleverest forager that ever kidnapped a speed ring from a rival's torpedo room. On his part, Boatswain's Mate Brooks had engineered oil embezzlements and paint peculations that had been the talk and inspiration of the whole Atlantic flotilla.

It was Boatswain's Mate Brooks, however, who drew first blood. On his way to the yard gates, bound for an evening's liberty, he came across a broken down Navy yard truck. On the truck were several barrels of fine 600-W engine oil, and it was consigned to Boatswain Brooks' pet enemy, the destroyer *Ashton*. The truck had stripped her gears, and the truckman, secure in the knowledge that no ordinary thief can put a truck load of oil barrels in his pocket and walk away, had left truck and cargo where they stood until he could come back next morning with some new gears.

But destroyer sailors are not ordinary thieves. Boatswain's Mate Brooks took one look at that unguarded oil, and forthwith abandoned all ideas of such unimportant things as liberty. He galloped back at his best speed for the *Byers*.

When he returned, it was in the dark of the moon, and furtively. With him were half a dozen men of the *Byers*' crew. Also a dolly—a thing of low wheels and sturdy frame, ordinarily used in transferring torpedoes from one part of the *Byers* to another.

Long before daylight, the whole load of oil for the *Ashton* was securely hidden away in the dark internals of the *Byers*.

With work time, came an amazed truck driver, galloping down to the dock to inquire of Gunner's Mate Akely, who happened to have the deck watch on the *Ashton*, if they had gone up and brought their oil down themselves.

"Oil?" ejaculated the *Ashton's* gunner's mate amazedly. "We haven't seen it. What would we be doing the yard's work for 'em for? You go bring us our oil."

"But—but it's gone!" gasped the truck driver. "Somebody's stole it!"

"Stole it?" Gunner's Mate Akely opened his eyes wide. Then all at once he glimpsed Boatswain's Mate Brooks grinning at him from the *Byers*, in easy earshot across the dock.

Gunner's Mate Akely snarled.

"Well, if there's any stealing going on,

I'll bet I can name the fellow that's doing it. It's getting to be a damn' shame, the crooks they're letting into this outfit now."

Boatswain's Mate Brooks, across the dock, grinned some more.

"Ain't it?" he agreed cheerfully. "It's getting to be a regular Sing Sing. What's the matter this time, Akely? Some low crook been stealing something off the *Ashton*, huh?"

"You go to hell!" bellowed back the *Ashton's* gunner, refusing to be drawn out. "We'll get even with you, you low-life burglars!"

As a matter of fact, the *Ashton* was not out anything. They could prove they had not got the oil. It was the yard that suffered; they had to cough up five barrels from their own supplies and turn it over to make good the loss.

And it was the *Byers* that gained. They had picked up five barrels of grade-A lubricant to expend over and above the amount they were officially charged with, and they figured to make those five barrels count heavily in the competition.

The *Ashton* thirsted for revenge. There was no oil to be stolen from the *Byers*—not just then, anyway—but Gunner's Mate Akely, poking around up in the yard, did run on to something. He ran on to two fuel pumps and a motor-generator which the *Byers* had sent up to the yard shops for overhaul. The machinery had been repaired and was now securely stowed under cover inside a shed, awaiting a truck to take it back to the ship whence it came.

But the yard authorities had learned a lesson. There was a stout wire fence all around the shed, with padlocked gates, and a Marine sentry patrolling his beat in the near vicinity.

Gunner's Mate Akely leaned against the fence and eyed the machinery yearningly. It was so near, and yet so far. He could actually reach through the fence and touch it; could touch the attached cards bearing the boldly penciled name, U.S.S. *Byers*.

The Marine sentry came over, scowling suspiciously.

"What d'yer want?" he growled.

"Nothin'—just lookin'," explained Gunner's Mate Akely glibly. "We got some stuff up here somewhere."

"All right. Look as much as you like," rasped the sentry. "But you try to get inside that wire and I'll tickle you with a bayonet."

He turned away, stalking toward the opposite end of his beat. And the moment his back was turned, Gunner's Mate Akely yanked out a stubby pencil, reached through the fence, rubbed out the name *Byers* on each and every card, and wrote in instead the word *Ashton*.

That afternoon the Navy yard with its own hands delivered two fuel pumps and a motor-generator to the gleeful *Ashton*—and then spent the next six months wondering what in the devil had become of the *Byers'* machinery.

But though the honors were even, the professional advantages were not. Those five barrels of 600-W bade fair to make all the difference. In gunnery the two boats were almost on a par. In engineering, it appeared, the *Byers* was leading slightly. Final decision waited only on the annual meeting of the umpires.

In the division itself, the conclusion was admitted—by all but the *Ashton*. The *Ashton* was grim but hopeful to the last. The *Byers* was openly triumphant.

"When are you goin' to pay me that ten dollars?" demanded Boatswain's Mate Brooks of Gunner's Mate Akely, tauntingly. "Might as well pay me now as later."

"I ain't never goin' to pay you, you big crook!" snorted the *Ashton's* gunner defiantly. "Wait till the board meets."

BUT THERE was no meeting of the board of umpires that year. A little war blew out of Potsdam, and by the time the board ordinarily would have met, both the *Ashton* and the *Byers* were overseas, engaged in a battle efficiency competition of a sterner, far more deadly sort. U-boats were substituted for painted targets, and races through stormy seas to a sinking

ship's rescue took the place of mere speed runs over a measured mile.

Even in this, however, the *Ashton* and the *Byers* carried on their fierce rivalry. They strove as to which should be the first to sea, the last one back to port in the long hard patrols. And on the dock at Queenstown the two crews met and argued and fought tooth and nail, until even the iron jawed British admiral in the Admiralty House cast questioning glances toward them.

But the American division commander shook his head.

"Leave 'em alone," he advised. "That's their way. And aren't they doing the work of two ships, each of 'em?"

So the *Ashton* and the *Byers* continued to fight. And when they were at sea, where they could not fight, they poached on each other's preserves.

For though they docked and overhauled together at Queenstown, they covered quite distinctive sectors on patrol. Outside Queenstown was the U-boats' favorite hunting ground, for there the incoming convoys split up and the outgoing convoys converged. The *Byers* usually hounded the waters south and west of Queenstown, as a result, past Kinsale Head and beyond Cape Clear. The *Ashton* patrolled south and east of Queenstown, from St. George's Channel down toward Bristol way.

These were their usual patrols. But the *Ashton* would have given both engines for a chance to snipe "Queenstown Kelly" from under the *Byers'* nose, and the *Byers* would have given its whole forecastle to have sunk "Bristol Bill" in the *Ashton's* own waters.

Royal game were those two, Queenstown Kelly and Bristol Bill.

Queenstown Kelly and Bristol Bill were not the real names of those redoubtable U-boat commanders; their real names were German and unpronounceable to the average American bluejacket. Hence the American destroyers had conferred the nicknames out of respect for two daring foemen as well as to identify them.

Queenstown Kelly specialized on convoys and single ships off the south Irish coast, whose main ports were Queenstown and the northwest English cities. Bristol Bill made his killings principally from the ships bound in and out of south of England ports, from Milford Haven right around and up the Channel. Hence the *Byers* regarded Queenstown Kelly as its own special game, while the *Ashton* claimed Bristol Bill for its most exclusive foe.

Not that either destroyer had much luck to brag about in its own waters. Queenstown Kelly would bag his brace of ships out of a convoy and be off before the *Byers* could even get to the scene. And generally the first the *Ashton* heard of Bristol Bill would be when some stricken ship radioed in that she was being attacked, and would everybody around look out, please, for lifeboats?

But to hear the crews of the two destroyers talking in port, one would have thought that the *Byers* and the *Ashton* were directly responsible for the U-boats' successes.

"Huh! So old Queenstown Kelly got three more out of that last convoy, did he?" Gunner's Mate Akely of the *Ashton* would taunt Boatswain's Mate Brooks of the *Byers*. "Were you all asleep—or just playing ring-around-the-rosy with yourselves?"

"Asleep?" would snort the *Byers'* boatswain. "We were picking up a torpedoed collier a dozen miles away, that's what we were doing. But what about you? Where were you last week when Bristol Bill got those two empties off Lundy Island, huh?"

"We were off Milford Haven, that's where," Gunner Akely would retort. "Bristol Bill is a wise guy—he wouldn't take any chances with a crack boat like the *Ashton* anywhere around. He knew we were plumb on the opposite side of Bristol Channel."

"Yah!" Boatswain Brooks would scoff. "What you need up there is a wide awake boat like the *Byers*."

"Wide awake, hell!" Akely would deride. "Whyn't you do something

about old Queenstown Kelly, then? He sinks plenty ships down your way every month."

"Because old Queenstown Kelly is the trickiest U-boat cap'n that ever blew a tank. If he was campaigning off Bristol, instead of your no-'count Bristol Bill, he'd have the whole south of England blockaded tight."

"Is that so?" Gunner's Mate Akely would grunt. "All right; some of these days, we'll bring the *Ashton* down there and show up this Queenstown Kelly you're bragging about. *We'll* drop an ash can on him for the American Navy."

"Come ahead," would be Boatswain Brooks' invitation. "And while Queenstown Kelly is making a fool out of the *Ashton*, we'll slide over to Bristol with the *Byers* and put Bristol Bill under for good."

What is more, each ship carried out its threat, or tried to. Coming and going from her regular patrol station, the *Byers* would swing around in a wide arc, sneaking over into the *Ashton's* territory as much as she dared, hoping to get a crack at Bristol Bill.

The *Ashton* did the same thing, sneaking over for a sweep at Queenstown Kelly's home ground whenever possible. And it was just the *Ashton's* luck to make a chance contact one day.

It was just off the Old Head of Kinsale, she caught a glimpse of something suspicious out at sea. It was something that most people would have taken for a fence post drifting out to sea, but Gunner's Mate Akely knew that it was not.

"Submarine ahoy!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Dead ahead!"

"What? Where?" The lieutenant officer of the deck did not wait for Akely's answer; he jerked the engine room telegraphs for full speed, and at the same time set off the general alarm.

"Dead ahead she was! Less'n a thousand yards away!" shouted back Akely, already scrambling down the bridge ladder for his station aft at the Y-gun and the bomb rack.

THE *ASHTON* streaked it over to the spot indicated in less time than she had ever covered a like distance. There was no sign of the U-boat on the surface when she got there, but there was a heavy swirl of disturbed water. As the *Ashton* swept over the spot, Gunner's Mate Akely rolled two depth bombs off the rack, and fired the Y-gun. A few seconds later he let go a couple more bombs, centering the U-boat in almost a perfect diamond.

Then the *Ashton* whirled about, guns swung out and torpedo tubes manned. For a minute or two there was nothing to be seen even by the keen eyes searching every foot of the surface. Then Akely set up a shout.

"Oil! Oil! Broad off the port beam, not a hundred yards away!"

Instantly the *Ashton* swung around, over the film of oil, and dropped a few more depth bombs.

But though she waited a half hour, nothing else showed. Not even a bit of splintered wood, or wreckage. Nothing but that gradually thinning film of oil.

Up dashed the *Byers*, racing in answer to the *Ashton's* first wireless that she was in contact. On the *Byers'* deck Boatswain's Mate Brooks glared across the intervening hundred feet of water at Gunner's Mate Akely.

"What the hell you think you're doing over here?" he demanded. "Why'n't you over looking out for Bristol Bill?"

"Because we come over here to show you how to get Queenstown Kelly," retorted the *Ashton's* gunner. "And we got him! See that oil?"

"Oil? That little splotch or two?" Boatswain's Mate Brooks laughed incredulously. "It prob'ly come from your own dirty depth bombs. You never got in a mile of Queenstown Kelly."

"We did get him. That oil is from Queenstown Kelly's busted ribs," declared Gunner's Mate Akely emphatically. "You wait and see."

They did wait, both the *Ashton* and the *Byers*, for several hours longer. But nothing else showed after that one first

promising oil slick. For the next ten days the *Byers* derided the *Ashton* unmercifully for mistaking a few drops of sardine oil for a sunken sub.

Then the tables turned overnight. A crippled U-boat had hobbled into a Spanish port, leaking like a sieve and with all its pistons running bowlegged. She had had to intern herself, and her captain had reported he had been crippled in an encounter off Kinsale Head with an American destroyer that could have been only the *Ashton*. Only it was not Queenstown Kelly, but a previously unheard of German.

As the U-boat was permanently *hors de combat*, the *Ashton* was officially credited with one submarine. The *Ashton's* crew were commended, and she received the proud privilege of wearing a gold star on her stack.

After that, life for the *Byers* was almost unbearable. Their only consolation was that the *Ashton's* victim had not been Queenstown Kelly.

"It was just some young beginner—some amateur, like Bristol Bill," Boatswain's Mate Brooks argued with a sniff. "If you'd 'a' been up against the real thing like Queenstown Kelly, it'd 'a' been different."

"It'd 'a' been just the same," boasted Gunner's Mate Akely. "Ash cans don't play no favorites, if you just drop 'em right. Queenstown Kelly was just lucky that it wasn't him. But don't worry—we'll drop over again some time, and get him for you too."

There would have been a finish fight then and there if the British admiral had not inopportunely come along.

But back on the *Byers*, Boatswain's Mate Brooks wailed in desperation.

"We gotter do something! We just gotter do something! If we don't, we won't be able to live with that *Ashton* bunch much longer. *We gotter get Bristol Bill!*"

That was likewise the opinion of all the rest of the *Byers'* personnel, not excepting the captain.

But getting Bristol Bill was a lot different from merely planning to get Bristol Bill. Herr Bristol Bill was not in the submarine business for suicidal purposes. He was even more cagey than Herr Queenstown Kelly, if that were possible.

The *Byers* hunted Bristol Bill assiduously, whenever they found an opportunity to sneak over into his territory. They did not see anything of Bristol Bill, but they did see a great deal of the detested *Ashton*. The *Ashton* would come rocking and swaggering up close to the *Byers*, flaunt her gold star of conquest, and wonder audibly what brought the *Byers* so far from home. One has to wonder through a megaphone to be audible across a hundred yards of heaving sea.

What was the matter—had Queenstown Kelly chased the *Byers* away over here? Or had the *Byers* given him up as a bad job and come over to beg the *Ashton* for expert assistance and advice? That was it, probably. That *must* be it.

And the *Byers* would turn on her heel as much as a destroyer can turn on her heel, and go off with her nose in the air, saying nothing. At least nothing that could be deemed in the nature of comradely conversation.

But from bridge and forecastle, from behind guns and torpedo tubes, there went up swearing and cursing and the gnashing of infuriated teeth.

The crew of the *Byers* were rapidly becoming men to avoid.

THEN came a Sunday. It was the *Byers'* Sunday in port—the one day of recreation and rest in a month of thirty hard working days. Most destroyers would have looked forward to that Sunday, planned its festivities and sprees for weeks ahead.

But not the *Byers*. She did not stay in port. There would be no rest, mental or physical, for the *Byers* as long as the detested *Ashton* was a whole submarine ahead of them.

The *Byers* fueled up, and sneaked out hunting.

Over on the far side of St. George's Channel, almost to Carmathen Bay, they hunted. They did not find any floating

lifeboats or sinking ships or any of the other usual signs of Bristol Bill. But they did see their old affliction, the *Ashton*. And apparently the *Ashton* saw them.

From her steady twenty-knot tramp up and down on her patrol station, the *Ashton* coughed up a jet of smoke and a spurt of speed. An extra bit of a bone jumped into her teeth; she swung flippantly about and came rollicking along over toward the *Byers*.

"Now, dammit, we gotter listen to some more of their guff, I bet," swore Boatswain's Mate Brooks peevishly. "Some o' these days they'll regret it. I can be pushed just so far. I'm goin' up to that gun swabber of an Akely, an' I'm—Name o' Moses, what's happened?"

Something odd had happened, seemingly, to the *Ashton*. She had suddenly taken on the same wild harum-scarum actions as a dog with a flee in its ear. She jerked around almost at right angles; she slowed, then shot ahead. All indications pointed to her steering gear or engines, or both, having suddenly gone crazy.

Then something else happened, just as unusual. The sea just at the *Ashton's* stern changed itself into a volcano and erupted in a most spectacular manner. A fountain of water shot up a hundred feet in air, turned into a mushroom, and then came cascading down in a smother of brine. It fell on top of the *Ashton*, blotting it out as far forward as the bridge. A dull jarring boom came rolling across the intervening mile.

And then the curtain of water vanished, leaving only a grayish white cloud above and the *Ashton* below. But the *Ashton* that Boatswain's Mate Brooks saw now did not look anything at all like the proud *Ashton* of a moment before.

Gone was her swagger, gone was her dash and rollicking way; gone even was the slim sleek figure of which she had been so proud. She lay dead in the water, crazily askew, her funnels tipsy and her mainmast gone. But most remarkable was the change in her, aft. She was down by the stern, and from her rear funnel aft was just a smear of twisted steel, crumpled ribs and stove-in plates.

"Torpedoed!" gasped Boatswain's Mate Brooks with dazed comprehension.

He had no time to say anything else, for just then the *Byers'* general alarm gongs broke into a wild clamor. Voices shouted, men ran; all the orderly disorder of a crew called to quarters. Boatswain's Mate Brooks legged it swiftly for his station on the bridge, near the destroyer commander.

"He's around somewhere, close by! He hasn't had time to get away! Keep a good lookout all sides! Ten dollars to the man that sights him!" The *Byers'* commanding officer bellowed out the words even above the scurry and rush. He was standing tense against the bridge weather cloth, leaning forward, fingers tightly gripped on his binoculars. "Fire at anything you see!"

"Fire at anything you see!" bellowed the destroyer's gunnery officer, repeating the order down the voice tubes for the benefit of the various gun crews.

Meantime the *Byers* had leaped from a cruising speed into her full thirty-three knots. She shot toward the wounded *Ashton*, shaking and reeling with the thrust of her straining screws.

Past the *Ashton*, not a hundred feet away, she shot, whirled and circled. The *Byers'* commander, leaning out over the bridge wing as he passed, bellowed two questions.

"Are you sinking? Do you need help?"

On the *Ashton's* deck, aft where the wreckage began, an arm waved, a voice bellowed reply.

"We're good for a half hour, anyway! But watch out for yourself—he's close around."

"Where?"

The *Ashton's* officer pointed.

"Torpedo came from port. We saw it, but couldn't dodge. Go get him. To hell with us!"

"See you later!" With the bellowed assurance, the *Byers'* captain jumped back toward the wheel. "Left full rudder! All hands keep a sharp lookout!"

Suddenly Boatswain's Mate Brooks himself let out a yell. He grabbed the officer's arm frantically, pointed.

"Torpedo! To starboard—two points for'rd the beam! See! Torpedo!"

The *Byers*' commander looked, burst out into an uproar of furious orders.

"Right rudder! Hard right! Full speed ahead, port! Full astern, starboard!"

The helmsman was panting as he spun the wheel; the engine room telegraphs clanked as the levers were crashed hard over. Boatswain's Mate Brooks had never taken his eyes off that moving streak of white to starboard, out there just forward of the beam—a spurting streak of white that traveled over the surface with incredible speed, apparently headed directly for him.

Boatswain's Mate Brooks was not the only one who watched, with staring eyes, that nearing streak; every man above deck was watching it.

The *Byers* seemed almost about to capsize, she swung so abruptly under that hard-over helm and reversed engine. She shook and shuddered all over; she groaned with the racking of her vitals. She came around more and more toward that feather of swift death.

Not ten yards in front of the *Byers*' bow shot the deadly missile. Brooks saw it leap clear of the water as it passed, "porpoising" and showing the full length of its gray glistening body, blunt head and blur of propellers. Then it dived into the sea again and passed on, the air bubbles hissing up in its wake as if in disappointed fury.

The *Byers*' crew came out of its trance with a gasp and gulp of relief. Relief and vengeful anger.

"Left full rudder—meet her!" snarled the commanding officer. "Full speed ahead, both engines. He's down there at the end of that streak—we'll run him down."

DOWN the white lane of the torpedo path, the *Byers* tore. A premonition seized Brooks; he stood at the forward weather cloth and clung to it, tense, his eyes glued ahead. He saw for a second a swirl ahead—a movement of something black. He cried out, then a crash came.

Not merely a crash, but two crashes. The first, a jarring metallic crunch as the *Byers*' bow tore and ripped over and through something that lay helpless in its way. The second, a thundering, cataclysmic crash—an earthquake, a tidal wave, a dynamiting of the universe, all in one. Brooks was blinded, deafened, swept from his feet; a thunderbolt exploded in his face, and the ocean upended and toppled on his head. Acrid fumes filled his lungs; he choked and sputtered with them and the salt brine in his throat and lungs.

And then amazingly he came out of it, and found himself still alive. Every one else on the bridge was alive, too. But forward of the bridge, the *Byers* was a shambles, worse even than the *Ashton;* she was nothing but a tangle of twisted steel through which the sea washed with a grating, clanging sound.

"Torpedoed—she torpedoed us too," was Brooks' amazed thought.

But the *Byers*' commander beside him rasped a denial.

"No, she didn't torpedo us. She was trying to turn, to get out of the way. I saw her. We struck her abaft the conning tower—and we struck something that exploded. She must have carried mines as well, and we exploded one of those inside her."

"Then anyway she's gone," grunted Brooks hopefully, looking astern where a large film of oil was slicking out on the surface, boiling, swirling, ever growing—an oil film in which floated convincing bits of wreckage.

The officers were busy shouting orders, getting the watertight doors closed, finding out just what was the damage that was done. In the work Brooks found himself amply busy for a time. When he returned to the bridge, the *Byers* was strangely enough moving. Not ahead, but astern. Under both engines she was steadily crawling astern, down toward the crippled *Ashton*, dragging the wreck of her forecastle after her.

"We're all right; bulkheads'll hold us

up for days," said the *Byers*' captain tersely. "But the *Ashton* may not be so lucky, with her engine room flooded like that. We've got to go down and stand by."

The *Ashton* was still afloat when they stopped their crab's progress not a hundred yards away. The *Byers* had wirelessed an SOS, and already tugs and destroyers were on the way. The *Ashton* reported they could stay up until help came—might even make it in.

"Lose many men?" inquired the *Byers*' captain anxiously, as he gazed at the wreckage of the *Ashton's* stern.

"Five in the engine room, and Ensign Childreth, on watch," came the reply sadly. "And Gunner's Mate Akely, too, I'm afraid. He ran aft to try to dump the depth bombs before the torpedo struck, and he hasn't been seen since."

"Gunner's Mate Akely!" The name thundered in Brooks' ears, blasted into his brain. Gunner's Mate Akely gone? His old rival—his pet enemy—the man he had quarreled and scrapped with for twenty years! Gone—wiped out, just like that.

Boatswain's Mate Brooks turned away from the *Ashton*, looked out with blue bewildered eyes at the ugly heaving sea.

All at once he let out a wild cry and went over the rail, hitting the chill waters in an awkward splashing dive.

The water was cold; devilish cold. And neither the *Ashton* nor the *Byers* was in any condition to break records lowering a boat. Gunner's Mate Akely, smashed and bleeding and barely able to cling to the bit of grating that kept his nose above water, was all but unconscious, just on the point of losing his hold, when Boatswain's Mate Brooks grabbed him. And Brooks was almost as far gone when they picked them both up.

Brooks was unhurt, however; he was out in a day or two. But Gunner's Mate Akely hung on in the base hospital for weary weeks, fighting the danger and delirium of double pneumonia. He never knew that Boatswain's Mate Brooks came tramping up the hill every day to ask about him.

The first he knew of that was when, convalescing, he glanced through the open door just in time to glimpse the retreating shoulders and back of the *Byers*' boatswain.

"What the hell's that apple knocker doing 'round here?" demanded Gunner's Mate Akely of the hospital apprentice peevishly. "Go git him. I want to see him."

Boatswain's Mate Brooks entered, looking very guilty and foolish.

"Sit down," snapped Gunner's Mate Akely.

The *Byers*' boatswain eased himself gingerly down.

"What d'yer want?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I been hearing things," responded the *Ashton's* gunner gruffly. "I want to know why the hell you jumped in after me."

"Huh? Me?" Boatswain's Mate Brooks stared, blinked, and then grinned slowly. "I pulled you out 'cause I remembered you still owed me ten dollars. Don't think I'd stand by and see ten dollars get away from me like that, do you?"

"You're a damn' liar," said Gunner Akely tersely. "You always was a liar."

"Huh? Then you'll be claimin' next that you don't owe me no ten dollars, I reckon." The *Byers*' boatswain glared indignantly.

"'Course I don't owe you no ten dollars. The *Byers* ain't won any meat ball, I ever heard of," retorted the *Ashton's* gunner.

"Ain't, huh? You'll even be tryin' to deny we never blew up Bristol Bill, either, huh?"

"Sure, you never blew up Bristol Bill. Bristol Bill blew hisself up, hopin' to take you with him—the reckless fool."

"Well I'll be damned!" Boatswain's Mate Brooks sat back limply.

Gunner's Mate Akely, however, was looking very perked up.

"G'wan," he demanded. "Continue. Your jokes are doin' me good. What other news you got?"

The *Byers'* boatswain grunted and took a long breath.

"Well, for one thing, they got the *Ashton* and the *Byers* both back to port. But the *Ashton* ain't got no stern left, and the *Byers'* bow is blowed plumb to hell. So them slick naval constructors are fastening the *Ashton's* bow to the *Byers'* stern, makin' one ship outer it, an' they're goin' to call it the *Ashby.*"

"What?" Gunner's Mate Akely sat up in amazement.

"That's right," responded Boatswain's Mate Brooks earnestly. "An' that ain't all. I'm goin' to be boatswain's mate on this new *Ashby*—I already got my orders. An' they told me soon as you come outer hospital, you're goin' to be sent gunner's mate on her."

"No!" ejaculated Gunner Akely dazedly.

"It's a fact. Sure is one hell of a note, ain't it?"

Gunner's Mate Akely leaned back on his pillows and stared incredulously out of the window.

"My Gawd! Makin' one ship outer the *Ashton* and the *Byers!* You'll have one hell of a boatswain's job, keepin' the bow from goin' one way and the stern the other."

"No worse'n you'll have keepin' them twin torpedo tubes from shootin' cross-eyed," responded Boatswain's Mate Brooks.

"It ain't natural."

"It ain't right."

"An' puttin' me an' you on the same ship." Gunner's Mate Akely snorted aggrievedly. "What have I done to have to be shipmates with a lowdown oil thieving crook like you?"

"An' what have I done to be put on the same boat with a sneakin' pump stealer like you?" complained Boatswain's Mate Brooks.

There was silence for a minute. Then Gunner's Mate Akely grunted.

"Well, anyway, this new boat'll have two stars on her stacks—more'n any other boat's got."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Boatswain's Mate Brooks. "One for the sub the *Ashton* got, and one for Bristol Bill."

"Uh-huh. An' with us working together, we oughter just about be able to keep the boat supplied from stuff we can pick up around the base and off'n other boats."

"That's right." Boatswain's Mate Brooks scraped his feet impatiently. "You hurry up an' get well, an' I'll take you out an' show you some real high grade stealing—you low crook!"

"Huh. I'll show you more about getting away with pumps and such than you ever dreamed of—you low sneak-thief!"

The hospital apprentice, passing just then, wondered what in blazes two old long-time sailors could be talking about, to make them grin like that.

The DEVIL'S COMPANY

A Tale of Death Valley

By R. E. HAMILTON

ON THE seventh day after the shooting, John Ryder reached the dead city of Rhyolite. Rows of deserted houses lay under a blasting June sun. There was no flicker of life anywhere, only a stretch of pebbles and mesquite and empty tin cans that radiated heat, like coals.

"This town isn't only dead," said Ryder. "It's cremated."

Painfully he walked the length of the street, seeking cover. The empty houses grinned back at him. He tried doors, one by one, but found them locked, the windows barred by boards. Through the bars he could see furnishings, dusty clothes still hanging to nails, pots and pans—everything abandoned and forgotten since that day another strike had been made and the town of Rhyolite had risen in a body and rushed the new goldfields.

"Locked out." Ryder pushed in vain against a nailed door. "Even the ghosts won't have me. " He laughed through cracked lips.

Could he force an entrance? This meant

ripping down boards, tearing out nails, and he was exhausted. Besides, to leave traces behind was the last thing he desired, and to this end he had even bundled the feet of his rawhide boots with sacking so that where he walked he left no footsteps, only a faint blur in the dirt.

He braced himself.

"I can't go on today; I'll have to rest somewhere."

The sweat poured down his drawn face. Standing in the scant oblong of shade thrown by the lintel of the door, he stared out into the heat and desolation, and his glance fell upon two buzzards. They were neither circling in the death watch nor poised motionless. They moved leisurely but definitely eastward.

"Traveling," said Ryder to himself. "Don't often see buzzards traveling. Sure, I forgot. It's moving day over in the Valley—June first. Well, like me they're traveling light.

He took a drink from his canteen, wiped his lips on a sleeve that was stiff with dried blood and looked back over the way he had come. Near the rusted railroad tracks and the abandoned station of Rhyolite stood ghostly buildings that comprised the one time business section. Here doors, windows and even walls were open wide—too wide. Concealment was almost impossible. Nevertheless one house was taller than the rest and its upper floor commanded the surrounding hills. If he hid there no one could approach without being seen.

Shouldering his pack, he toiled back to this tall building. Apparently it had been a hotel, for the interior was a honeycomb of rooms. Everywhere lay a litter—smashed glass, bleached boards, fallen plaster. A ghost of a stairway faltered up three flights to the top floor. It swayed precariously under his feet; the last flight was little more than a stepladder. In the attic, broken windows afforded a lookout and admitted a faint breeze. After making certain again that no one approached over the barren, deserted country, he peeled off his bloodstained shirt and, rolling it into a pillow, lay down. Despite his best intentions he was instantly asleep.

He did not wake until it was nearly dark and the open windows showed glimpses of a rising moon. The room was full of shadows. He raised himself to an elbow and listened. There was a faint rustle in one corner; the largest shadow stirred and coughed.

Ryder, half awake and a jangle of nerves, dropped his wounded right arm to the automatic at his side. He fired wildly, from the hip.

"Hey!" protested the shadow sharply, and surged forward.

"If I die it's here and now," warned Ryder hoarsely. "And not in Vegas, at the end of no rope. You can believe that."

Without time to be surprised that no bullets answered his, he fired again.

At once the shadow materialized into a man.

"Hey! *Desisto.* I'm no posse. Damn' good thing it's dark—you've only blew off the toe of my boot. *Jesu Maria Sanctissima!* Great guns!"

He seized Ryder by the arm that held the automatic and twisted it. With a cry Ryder dropped the gun and it crashed into a pile of broken glass.

"Too bad," said the stranger, "that was your wounded arm. But one hole in my apparel is plenty for today. Next time you might have drilled me in a more painful locality. *Caramba!*"

Ryder's nerves still shook.

"Who the hell are you?"

Seizing the man by his shirt, he pulled him toward the window.

Abruptly the stranger changed his tone. He wrenched away.

"Keep your hands off of me," he said angrily, and backed into his corner where he became a shadow once more.

No action could have reassured Ryder more completely. He understood at once that the shadow was afraid of the light. He, too, knew the comfort of the dark.

"What are you, then?" he said less belligerently, and peered into the gloom. "A ghost? They ain't no people in a dead city except ghosts."

"No," said the shadow, considering, "not yet. I'm only half dead."

"Me too, brother. I'm wore to a backbone and I've lost a pint of blood." Ryder laughed. "Since we're both half dead, can't we get together?"

"You'll be totally dead," replied the stranger dryly, "if you don't *vamos*. They was here, lookin' for you."

"Here?" Ryder leaped. Then, guardedly, "Who was?"

"You know damn' well who," said the shadow. "The posse, that's who. They've gone back to Beatty for the night, but they'll be here in the morning. They *sabe* you're in this vicinity. They found your dead horse near Beatty."

"If they was here, why didn't they find me?"

"Because," said the shadow, "I kicked the staircase over."

"The staircase?"

"The staircase to the attic. It required a real slight kick, and I considered it was the best means of savin' you, buddy. I sure felt sorry for you. I watched you tryin' all them doors and windows for a place to hide."

"You saw them coming."

"The posse? Sure I did, a long ways off. They searched the other shacks and then they come here. They looked through all the floors. 'Well,' they says, 'he can't be in the attic because the stairs have fell away and he couldn't get up there.' So they rode away."

"Did they see you?"

"Sure they saw me." He paused. "I went out and talked to them."

Ryder sensed that for some reason this had cost a heroic effort.

"I told them I hadn't seen any one, but that I'd stay here tonight and let 'em know in the morning if any one come. So now, friend, you'd better *departo pronto*."

"If you did all that for me," said Ryder slowly, "you sure saved me from a hanging. I don't know why you did it or why you stay there in the dark, but whether you're a ghost or a nigger or what, I'd like to shake hands with you."

"Oh, hell," said the shadow in embarrassment, though without moving, "that was easy. I know what it feels like to play a lone hand. I—aw—aw!" After an explosive "*Dios*" he mumbled into silence.

"And I tried to shoot you," said Ryder, shocked. "Say, would you like to kick me or something?"

"That's sure a rash invitation to let fall," said the shadow. "But since you've ripped off my toe and made it difficult to accept, we'll let it pass. No, just reward me by letting me sit and gaze on a real live desperado. I ain't seen one in *tres años*—that means three years."

"If you're meaning me," said Ryder, "I'm no desperado. I ain't even a middling bad man."

"No, of course not," the shadow mocked him. "The posse is just goin' through a rehearsal. A sort of fire drill. Don't kid me, buddy. The sheriff told me all about you. What for did you want to kill that man in Vegas?"

"Oh, hell!" said Ryder in despair, and sank down on a pile of rubbish. He began to swear fluently.

The stranger listened intently. Presently he interrupted.

"You're repeating," he said. "That's the trouble with English, there ain't but four or five curses in the whole language, and only three ways to arrange them. But Spanish! There's a language where you can keep swearing away for hours— But why this indignation?"

"I didn't shoot that man," said Ryder. "Listen and don't laugh. It was the alibi gun game. Some one put their arm around me and shot from under my arm pit. Twenty men on twenty Bibles would swear I did it myself."

"Yeah?" said the shadow with interest. "I've seen that worked. There was a man in Goldfield who used to— However, the sheriff said this happened at a shuffle-up of solo in the Purple Paradise. That was sure a tough dump for you to be cavortin' in."

"So tough," agreed Ryder, "that I had a gun out, on the bench beside me—like a fool. I sure made it easy for Texas Pelatto."

"Who was he?"

"He sat on the other side of me, in the game, on the same bench. We was both losin' but I knew it was on the level. Suddenly he reached behind me, took my own gun and shot the dealer through the heart."

"*Diablo!*"

"The dealer was K. O. Magoon—they ain't a better liked man in Vegas than he was. Everybody jumped on me, but some one dropped a gun on the floor. My bullets fitted it. I grabbed it, shot out the lights and got away, one bullet searin' my forearm. Outside at the rail I spotted one horse that had a pack and canteen in the saddle. I picked that one and beat it for the desert, fast. I filled up with water at Carrara and Beatty; that's why I'm still alive."

"What are you going to do now?" said the shadow. "The news of your sashay has gone up to Tonopah and Goldfield and south all along the U.P. They'll be layin' for you everywhere."

THE ROOM had grown quite dark. He addressed the shadow with a hint of asperity.

"Anyway, this place gives me the creeps. Outside, the moon is rising. Either come out and show yourself, or goodby. I'll be on my way."

The shadow stirred uneasily.

"Going?"

"So even ghosts like company," said Ryder. "Yes, I'm going. But I'm grateful for all you've done." He groped to the replaced stairs, lighted matches and descended. Behind he heard the man following, reluctantly but quietly, as if he knew the way in the dark.

"You're sure familiar with this place," said Ryder.

"I ought to be," said the shadow, treading at his heels. "I've lived in Rhyolite for three years."

"Three years!" Ryder turned to stare but could see nothing in the dark. "Three years in a dead city. Well, maybe people come here—sightseers."

"When sightseers come," said the stranger quietly, "I hide. You didn't see me, did you? Well, no one else does, either."

Ryder was outside in the moonlight now. The single citizen of Rhyolite lurked behind in the dark doorway.

"What did you do?" said Ryder. "You needn't be afraid of me. Who do you think I'm going to tell? If you've been here three years, you're hiding."

"I didn't do anything," said the stranger.

Abruptly he emerged into the moonlight, lifting his face. The light shown down on him, pitilessly revealing. One arm was normal, the other was paralyzed; one half of his face was pleasing, the other was drawn into a strange, frozen grin.

"Bullet did that," said the stranger. "Roughhouse in a joint—just like your little party at the Purple Paradise. Hit me in the back four years ago—paralyzed me." He spoke rapidly, getting the story over with. "Gave me a kind of stroke. Doctors said it might get better in time, but it hasn't. I got sick of people staring at me—drawing aside—kids laughing . . . Say, once a kid screamed when it saw me." He was even paler than the moonlight made him. "Damn' sick of it all. That's why I'm here. I'll stay here too until I die. That's why I like the dark. Everybody's the same in the dark."

"Look here," said Ryder, aghast. "You're face isn't as bad as that."

"Could you look at it?" The man clutched Ryder's shoulder. "Listen, could you look at it every day?"

"Why, sure," said Ryder, dazed.

"If you could, I'd go with you," said the stranger wildly.

His hands at Ryder's shoulders were shaking. The jargon of Spanish, real and faked, had been forgotten.

"Say, you think it's hard to be alone for seven days. How'd you like to go three years without speakin'—except to the storekeeper at Beatty when your supplies run low? Try it sometime if you want to go crazy. If you can stand it to look at my face, if you're goin' where no one will see us, I'll go anywhere with you—to hell!"

"But it would be hell," said Ryder, bewildered. "If you stick with me you'll die. You told me it was useless—they were watching from Vegas to Tonopah and down along the U.P." He gestured helplessly, north, east and south. "Everything in front is blocked—"

"You can back up."

"Yes," said Ryder bitterly. "Behind us. The Grapevines where we could hide for a week, maybe. After that, the Valley."

"Sure, the Valley." The stranger was unshaken. "*Porque no?* Why not? There's the place where you'll be safe as in your own bed. Not even a posse would go into Death Valley in the summertime.

"Not even an animal would stay in it," said Ryder. "I know something about this neck of the woods. Even the snakes crawl out of the Valley in June."

"It's that or nowheres," said the stranger. "Listen, buddy, I've been there. I know the water holes. There are creeks, besides. There are caves, where we can sleep durin' the day, and we'll only go out at night. One of these here ghost shacks is my *casa.* I have supplies cached that will last us three months. We'll take them. A man can't die if he has water and food and keeps out of the sun. When our supplies run low we can cross out on the California side. By that time things will have quieted down. How about it?" He waited.

Ryder stood, irresolute. Even the buzzards had fled out of that furnace . . . The stranger watched him. Then, with a note of intolerable pain:

"All right," he said. "I was afraid you couldn't stand the company."

"Shut up, you fool," said Ryder roughly. "Of course I can stand the company." He hit his palm with his fist and turned on the stranger. "All right, here—" He picked up his canteen, unscrewed and filled with water the two cups that formed the cap. One he handed to the stranger, the other he lifted. "Though this ain't usually considered the fittin' beverage for a ceremony, in our circumstances it's above the price of champagne and Bourbon whisky. Man, what's your name?"

"Varney."

"Varney is too damn' dignified. I'll call you Spanish. Spanish, here's to our safe descent to hell." He drank the water.

"To hell," echoed Spanish. His eyes began to twinkle suddenly, under the moon. He seemed recharged with life. He laughed and emptied the tin cup. "A safe descent to hell—and back. I'll see you through, buddy."

WITHIN an hour they were on their way, staggering under heavy packs. The stranger had cleaned out his cache—a pile of tinned goods, bacon, corn meal. His energy was feverish.

"West," he kept repeating. "West-southwest, buddy. Don't waver."

His load was twice the size of Ryder's, but he moved swiftly. The dead city disappeared behind them; they advanced into a wilderness strewn with rocks and bristling with yucca. They chose a route north of Daylight Pass, far from the beaten trail. The moonlight on the clay floor of the desert made it light as day.

"It's cooler," said Ryder.

"Sure," said Spanish. "But that won't last long. In the Valley nights are hot as day. How's your arm?"

"Better," said Ryder. "It will be all right. I've kept it washed and cool, but I sure did hate to use up the water."

"Weak?"

"No. Can we make those mountains by morning?"

The Grapevines stood out prominently in the west—a twisted tangle of volcanic hills. Distance was deceptive.

"Sure. Move along, buddy. Remember that posse is on horse and we're on foot. Those long legs of yourn ought to go faster than that. When we get into the Valley we'll have plenty of time to rest. Nothin' but time, in fact."

Ryder picked a precarious way between the niggerheads.

"Two months in hell. What'll we do for amusement?"

"We can prospect, if you got any optimism. Or, let's see. I'll teach you Spanish. *Compra usted el español?* No? Well you will quickly *learno* the *lingo.*"

Ryder burst out laughing.

"Where'd you pick up that kind of talk? It don't sound like nothing on earth."

Spanish grinned and pulled a red book from the front of his shirt.

"After a year in that ghost city," he confessed, "I begun to hanker desperate for something to read. I searched every empty house from roof to cellar looking for lit'rature, and when I finished I come to the conclusion the town library consisted of one volume. This here is it. Gaze, buddy, on the only book in Rhyolite. I may not pronounce it good, but I can repeat it by heart from cover to cover."

The book was a Spanish grammar.

Ryder wanted to laugh, but could not.

"Man," he said, "it sure must have been lonesome for you."

"Lonesome?" repeated Spanish. "Lonesome?" He drew a deep breath and stood still. His pack had fallen to the ground. "Listen. At night I used to go to sleep and dream—the same dream. I used to dream I was in a room full of people. The lights was lit, there was music, noise, laughing. Some one would come up and put his hand on my shoulder and say, 'Stranger, ease over and meet the gang. Have a drink.'" His voice shook. "Say, buddy, you'll have to get used to me hollering in my sleep. I've sort of got the habit. Lonesome . . ."

By midnight the packs became unbearable. They dragged upon the ground. By two o'clock Ryder, in a weary daze, had abandoned his three times, and three times, remembering, gone back and picked it up. Spanish plodded steadily toward the southwest without a complaint, though Ryder knew the muscles of his good arm and his back must be hot bands of pain. The earth was so stiff with alkali that frequently it formed a crust through which the men broke painfully, and which cut gashes in their boots.

Despite this torture it was morning at last and they found themselves in the comparative shelter of the Grapevines.

"Do you hear a horse whinny?" said Ryder suddenly.

"Wind rising," explained Spanish wearily. And then, "Look out! Rockslide!"

They were at the bottom of a draw. They had intended to camp there, but as Spanish yelled a small boulder, followed by a shower of stones, skimmed down the incline and crashed ten feet from where they stood.

"Let's move out of here," said Ryder. "Strata's too shaky. I don't like this place, makes me think of a trap."

"Makes me think of a mantrap," said Spanish. He looked up. "Funny that boulder should roll down just then. And yet I don't see nobody."

A hundred yards farther and they fell exhausted into a lava coulee, a less precarious shelter. They breakfasted out of tin cans, then tied their shirts together into an awning and slept like the dead. Once Spanish cried out in a lonely nightmare, but Ryder let his arm fall on the sleeper's shoulder and he grew still.

Ryder wakened first. It was late afternoon and a furnace wind was blowing, throwing dust over Spanish and himself. Lying among the rocks, one color with their surroundings, he reflected idly that both men resembled crawling creatures of the desert rather than humans.

"Spanish—he's a horned toad," he decided. He stretched his own long legs. "And me, I'm a spider. Only toads and spiders and such live in hell, and that's where we're going. Now all that's lacking to complete our company is a snake, or a bat or two, or—"

He wriggled upright in amazement. He stared.

OUT of the west, from the hot regions of Death Valley, as if Ryder had conjured it up, a bat actually came—a human bat. His black clothes flapped in the burning wind. He hurried over the ground, stumbling uncertainly, turning, retracing, wavering—exactly like a bat blinded by daylight. Ryder's first im-

pulse was to duck, to hide; but watching the creature stagger over the gullies and fall at last, he realized that here was a man crazed by thirst; and snatching up the canteen, he hurried forward.

He lifted the prostrate head and poured water down the inflamed throat. The man opened his eyes, saw the canteen and drank in wild, terrible gulps. After awhile he spoke thickly.

"Off—off the t'lail."

"You got off the trail?" repeated Ryder. "Where was you goin'?"

"Out."

The man drank again. Finally Ryder said:

"That's enough for now. We ain't got too much of this here beverage. You say you were gettin' out of the Valley?"

"Yes. Don't go away." The newcomer clutched him. "Don't go."

"I won't," Ryder reassured. He thought, "This is sure a lonesome country. Everybody's scairt to be left behind."

He sank down on his heels, cowboy fashion, and waited for the other to recover.

The bat-like man was old—older than Ryder or Spanish. He had dried up and shriveled away inside his black clothes. Ryder looked at the ancient mud caked on the heavy boots, at the callouses on the horny hands, the broken nails. Here was a prospector, a desert rat, a chaser of the butte of gold.

"Where's your location?" he said.

"In the Valley." The prospector sat up slowly. "She's more than a location—she's payin' gold."

"Telluride?"

"Quartz lode. Pretty ore as I ever see. But if she was the Gunsight Lead she could rot there for all of me."

"Heat got you?"

"No, it ain't that." The prospector paused.

"What was it?"

"Heat's bad enough, but it's something else—" He looked at Ryder. "They's nothin' alive there any more. Funny. One day they's rats, coyotes, kangaroo mice, lizards. Snakes, too. The next day, *whish!*—there ain't nothin'. They've melted—gone. Even my burros died. Last month there was flowers there, purty as a picture. All of a sudden they shrivels up, disappears. I was a-workin' in the tunnel when like a flash it come over me to get out of there—and out I got. Like I was pursued. Picked up my water cans and a few tinned goods and beat it. Should of gone south and turned through Daylight Pass, but that way was so damned long. I cut across the Grapevines and lost my way. Then, last night when I was sleepin' above a shale slide, something stole my water cans."

"Stole your water cans? You're crazy. They's no one in miles of us. Maybe you lost them on the way."

"Lost them hell!" said the prospector. "I ain't lived on the desert for thirty years to go lose my water cans. I tell you I wakes up in the morning and they ain't there, that's all."

A cautious hail sounded. Spanish was awake.

"What you got there, bud?" he called hesitantly.

Ryder whispered swiftly to the prospector, warning him.

"Don't notice this man's face—he's paralyzed, sensitive. Understand?" Then he beckoned. "Come here, Spanish. We got company."

Spanish picked his way across the gullies. He listened to the prospector's story with averted, shaded face, but presently, seeing that the old man paid no attention to him, he took his hand away from his distorted mouth and spoke.

"*Hombre*," he said, "it ain't a pleasant picture you paints of that furnace, but we're goin' down there *con todo*—all the same."

"You're goin' down into the Valley? Now?" The desert rat was suddenly attention. "How long you calculate to remain?"

"Till our grubstake runs out," said Ryder. Swiftly he sized up the old man, then went on, "Had a little disagreement with them worthy gentlemen, the officers of the law."

"I got no interest in the law," said the prospector. "Neither pro nor con. Not since the Democrats has been out of office. I'm a Henshaw, and from down Kentucky way where my family comes from we got our preferences. Vested authority means nothin' to me if it's a Republican under the vest. On the contrary, I hopes you fool 'em, son."

The men laughed, but the prospector went on:

"However, that ain't here nor there. What I want to know is, are you sure goin' down into that hell hole?"

"Certain sure," said Spanish. "Why not?"

The prospector looked reflectively toward the west and the infernal regions from which he had escaped.

"Quartz veinstone," he repeated, "and showin' silver with the gold, just like the Comstock Lode did. I've followed her twenty feet from the outcrop. Apt to be bonanzas big as . . . Say, if you was goin' down there and was willin' to camp in my tunnel, I believe I'd go back with you. If there's company, I don't care if she rises to 150° and my ears fry. I'll go back and work the pay dirt out of that hill. How about it? My grubstake will last the three of us all summer."

Ryder and Spanish looked at each other.

"Is he crazy?" signaled Ryder.

"Looks sane to me," from Spanish. Aloud he said, "Where is this claim? Don't be afraid. We couldn't tell a bonanza from a chunk of coal. I want to know where we're headin' for, that's all. I got no desire to lose my bearin's in this dead man's country."

"Quartzite Hill," said the prospector slowly.

"East of Lost Wagons, on a water hole?"

"That's the place."

"Then I know the way. Its' all right with me."

"With me," echoed Ryder.

"Another swig of water," said the prospector, "and two, three hours rest. Then I'll be able to move on."

IT WAS sunset when they went ahead. The loads distributed among three were less oppressive, and behind the *lomas* of the Grapevines, Ryder felt more secure from pursuit.

"Three of us," he repeated. "All a-goin' down to hell." His spirits rose. He improvised a marching song.

> "The Grapevines to the Panamints
> And after that the Coast,
> But in between there lays the land
> The devil loves the most."

"That's right," cackled Henshaw. "She sure is the devil's land. Sing some more. It's right pleasin' to hear a man's voice again."

"You express my sentiments," said Spanish, "exactly."

> "The bat, the toad, the spider,
> Went marching down to hell;
> They drilled before the devil
> And presented arms as well—"

"So that's us," observed Spanish. "The devil's company. Well, there ain't going to be no taps blown for us."

They traveled all night, and when morning came they stood on a high escarpment with the long sink of Death Valley spread before them.

"Inferno is right," said Ryder. He halted, transfixed.

Backed by the dark barrier of the Panamints and the black alluvial fans that swept down from their cañons, the Valley ran north and south. It was flat, mysterious, empty. Streams of water seemed to cut it—to run together into lakes that lapped the base of the mountains with white waves.

"Devil water," said the prospector. "Salt marshes. Dried beds that mark where water's been and gone and left behind blisterin' acres of potash and borax. Lured many a poor son of a gun to glory hallelujah by pretendin' to be *aqua pura* a-shimmerin' there in the sun. Let's have a drink. Very thought of it makes me thirsty."

Ryder poured the drink, but Spanish's attention was elsewhere. The point on which they now stood commanded a view

backward, as well as forward, and the eyes of the paralytic swept the country.

The prospector seated himself comfortably in the shade of a lava boulder.

"No use descendin' into hell in the daytime," he said. "Moonlight's still strong enough for our trek across the Valley floor. I say pitch camp."

"We move now!" Spanish spoke sharply. "Immediate and *pronto* and no foolin'. And not in the middle of the sink, but along the edge, in the shelter of these here scarps."

Ryder and the prospector stared.

"What's the big rush?"

"Men on horseback three miles behind us. May have followed our trail, but they ain't seen us yet. It's the posse. Trek!"

The prospector raised his spare frame erect and peered.

"Sure is," he said. "Republicans. Damned Yankees. I can tell it from here. I can almost smell 'em. Come on."

The heat rushed up to meet them like a blast from a furnace. They descended into the Valley and turned sharply north, following the base of the mountains. Their clothes were immediately soaked with sweat. They hurried, and the packs slipped and knocked against their knees. The prospector gave out first.

"Can't carry this damned thing no farther," he said. "Go on and leave me—I'll follow."

"Don't be a fool," said Spanish. "Nobody's going to be left behind, even if I have to carry him. Here—" a creosote bush masked a hollow—"drop the packs here," he went on. "We'll come back for them another day. Take the water and come on."

They were ten miles from Lost Wagons, more than ten from the prospector's well. An hour across burning gravel flats, glittering with the tinsel of desert holly. They skirted the western base of the Grapevines. Mesquite, borax, heat; heat, greasewood, hell. Another hour.

"My insides seem like they was melted," said Ryder, "and turned to glue. Don't reckon my vitals'll ever function again. I'm baked from cover to cover."

The mountains reeled. Another hour, and then they saw above them, upon their right, a natural platform in the hills; and above the platform, half hidden by a pile of waste rock, a round hole. Below the platform the ground was ringed with a dark circle.

"A well," said Ryder. "Water hole."

"We're home," said the prospector. "You'll have to carry me, boys."

Using their last strength, they clambered up to the platform, dragging the old man behind. They entered the tunnel. Water dripped. The cool and shade were like heaven. On niches cut in the rock their sun seared eyes made out supplies, tins, flour. On the floor were shovels, a miner's pan, a pickax, an old smooth-bore rifle, even a wheelbarrow. Outside the sun continued to bake the desolate Valley, but they were safe. The horsemen in the Grapevines had never reappeared.

THE DAYS that followed were a fantastic dream. At first the heat so racked them that they remained in the tunnel in the dark. Henshaw resumed his pick, worked deeper into the vein, loosening and drilling, handpicking the ore. Now and then the other two helped him.

"Lookahere," he would say. "Prettiest crystal formation I ever see. Gold stickin' out like fungus. Well, it ain't goin' to be a large vein, I can see that, but when she peters out we three go share alike on the ore."

"You're crazy," Ryder said. "It's your strike. We wouldn't touch it."

"*Loco*," agreed Spanish. "It's all yours. Come on, Ryder, let's dig. We'll see this galoot a millionaire before we leave here."

A week after they had gained the mine Spanish and Henshaw set out by night to work quietly back across the borax beds and recover the abandoned supplies. After a day and a night of waiting on the shale platform, Ryder watched them return, empty handed.

"*Ninguna cosa*," said Spanish, spreading out his hands. "Nothin' there, not even an empty tin can."

"They're gone?"

"There grew the creosote bush—nothin' behind it. There lay the hole, empty."

"Either the posse found 'em," said Henshaw, "or the devil ate 'em. Well, never mind. We can make out without 'em."

"But who did it?" Ryder stared across the Valley. "It must have been the posse, and yet— Well, I don't begrudge it so long as they've gone back. Spanish, aren't you of the opinion they've returned to Vegas? Otherwise we'd have seen them."

"Sure," said Spanish. "*Certamente*. And another thing, they've had to go back for a fugitive warrant. State line runs through the Grapevines. We're over into California."

They resumed excavations in the tunnel. They rested. They tried to forget the heat. At night they lay on the platform under the white stars or explored the desert floor. Frequently the hot winds, sweeping through the cañons of the Panamints, robbed them of sleep.

"Devil's winds," said Henshaw. "They come from the Coast, wet and cool, but every desert they go through takes out moisture. Time they reach us they ain't nothing but furnace blasts."

"I hear more than the wind," said Ryder. "You men ever feel there's somethin' prowlin' around here? Or is it my imagination?"

"You're loco, now," said Henshaw. "Heat's addled your brain. That's happened frequent enough in this Valley."

"There does feel like something's around here," objected Spanish. "*Guardate el diablo*—look out for the devil. Last night there was sure something movin' in the desert below us. I heard gravel slide, but I didn't see nothing."

"A rattlesnake," scoffed Henshaw.

At times the heat was like an iron cap pressing down on their foreheads. It frayed their nerves to shreds, but through some peculiar psychology it never set the men against one another. On the contrary, the desolation drew them together, mustered them into a little company of three that battled the heat and loneliness.

A month passed, two months. The pile of ore increased. Then one night, as Spanish tossed sleepless and perspiring on the shale ledge, trying to rid his mind of the everpresent feeling that some unseen thing watched, he distinctly heard gravel move on the desert floor below. He peered over the rock platform. The form of a man, back turned, naked to the waist, was retracing his way toward the salt beds in the south.

Ryder and Henshaw were asleep. Spanish picked up Ryder's automatic, slid to the sink level and, walking on the balls of his feet, stalked the half naked man for nearly a mile. The black mouth of a cañon opened on their left. The unknown man made a feint of turning in, then whirled suddenly and, leaning on the rocks, faced Spanish, who was ten yards behind.

"Look here!" Spanish, taken aback by his sudden discovery, held out his empty hands. "I ain't wanting to harm you. I'm just curious—"

He sensed something malevolent in the stranger's attitude. He dodged. A heavy rock flew by his head and crashed on the desert floor.

"What—" he began indignantly.

The stranger laughed. There was cruelty in the laugh, but something else, some familiar thing that made Spanish pause.

The unknown's face, behind a two months' beard, was scarcely distinguishable, but suddenly he drew his mouth into a one sided, frozen grin. One arm fell limp and grotesque at his side. He was imitating Spanish, mocking him. Then he laughed, and in a flash had disappeared into the shadows.

"Sneakshot Perez!"

The blood flew to Spanish's face, congested it. His teeth ground. His good hand went to his belt, drew out the automatic. He fired twice into the darkness. There was no answer. Presently, some distance off, he heard the clatter of hoofs.

The next morning he reported this episode to Ryder and Henshaw.

"Was he the devil, he wouldn't leave no footprints," said Henshaw. He pointed to the marks of feet across the sink. "They approach thisaway, then they go back. Took a drink of water from our well, he did. Moreover, I smell something funny. It's Yankee."

"He wasn't the devil—you're right about that," said Spanish. "He was a man. I've met him before and I sure hope I meet him again. He's the man who shot me in the back in Goldfield, four years ago."

He turned abruptly away and disappeared inside the tunnel.

Ryder had been sitting before the breakfast fire anxiously listening to this recital. He held a biscuit in one hand and a tin cup of water in the other. Now, as he was in the act of raising the cup to his lips, Henshaw swooped upon him and dashed the drink from his hands.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "but that wan't no time for manners. I got a hunch."

He scrambled down the incline. Ryder heard water splash, heard him yell—

"Come here!"

With a branch of mesquite he had stirred the depths of the well, brought to the surface a thing of horror.

"What—" Ryder held his nose, shuddered.

The thing was carrion—a rabbit in an advanced stage of putrefaction, kangaroo mice, rats—bound together and weighted with a stone to make them sink.

"Poisoned!" Henshaw rose and faced the long sink. He shook his fist. "Whoever done that *was* devils. Here in the salt beds and the chokin' lime dust, with the sun hangin' like a red hot meat ax over our heads, they poisons our well!"

THE HEAT grew devastating.

"When are we gettin' out of here?" Ryder gasped at last. "Can't stand it many more days. It must be one hundred and fifty degrees."

"Wait until the first of September," pleaded Spanish. "Longer you cool their heels the more apt they are to think you've slipped out their fingers."

"I'm willing to go *now*." Ryder mopped his forehead. "If it wasn't that you and Henshaw had other reasons to keep you here, I'd get out tomorrow—give myself up. Hang, even."

Spanish shook him by the shoulder.

"Look here, it's almost time to leave. At this point in the game, don't begin goin' crazy."

However, instead of the spider, it was the horned toad who eventually appeared to be going crazy. They had cleaned out the well, but for safety's sake boiled all their water now, and in this pan of drinking water one morning Spanish had caught a glimpse of his own reflection. He stood perfectly still.

"Likely he ain't seen himself in a mirror for three years," Ryder thought.

Spanish stared at the image, fingering his cheek. He was silent for several hours. Two days later he tied a handkerchief across the lower part of his face, beneath his nose, and no amount of persuasion could make him remove it.

"You look all right, you poor fool," said Ryder. "They ain't no one here but me and Henshaw, and your face suits us. In fact," he said optimistically, "I believe it's gettin' better."

But the bandage remained.

Henshaw, too, began to behave in a peculiar manner. His fingers grew slack around the pick handle. He worked only in fits and starts. Often he lay a whole day on the rock platform, looking toward the west, his horny hands idle.

"How do you expect to be a millionaire," jeered Spanish, "layin' around thataway?"

"That's right."

The prospector would jump to his feet and begin to dig. But once, when Ryder emptied a load of ore on to the platform, he burst into a fit of cackling laughter.

So Ryder also began to look toward the west, the Panamints, the avenue of escape. Soon, now, he could go. The Valley would be inhabited again. People would

come back. Already there were signs of life. A buzzard had appeared in the east, had hovered over a canon in the Grapevines.

At last he filled his canteen and set out to scout north of the pass at Emigrant Wash and pick out a path to follow when the time came.

"*Valgame Dios*," cried Spanish, awakening the third night after this sortie. "What's happened? Are you killed?" Reaching out his hand he dragged Ryder to the platform beside him. "*Demonio!*"

Ryder crawled to the tunnel entrance and sank down. He was exhausted, his feet were cut from running over the salt beds. He had lost his canteen.

"We've waited too long, Spanish," he said bitterly. "Vested authority is comin' down through the Panamints."

"In the west!" Spanish's heart sank. The west, their last chance.

"Out of California? Then they got a fugitive warrant for you, buddy," Henshaw spoke up soberly. "Are you sure they wasn't a mirage?"

"Wish they was," said Ryder. "It was past sunset when they spotted me, but I got away in the dark. They know I can't be far. When it's light you'll see them comin' across the Valley on my trail. It'll be easy to follow across the salt beds. I had to drop the canteen, but I kept my gun. I'll use it. Here—" he had got his breath—"you and Henshaw get out. There's time, see? It's my showdown. You've done all you could. No man in the world would do so much. Clear out, for God's sake. There are five of them and they are armed."

"Shut up," said Spanish. "Forget it. Lay down and rest. Maybe they'll pass us by."

They waited in the tunnel entrance and watched anxiously for dawn. It was not long coming. Pink streaks above the Grapevines—a pink haze over the Funerals.

"They're crawling down the scarp," said Spanish. "Single file. Five of them. I can see the sun on their rifles. *Caramba!* This is sure goin' to be a good fight."

"Once more," Ryder pleaded hoarsely, "will you go on? Why should you mix up in this. You can't do no good. We've only got my automatic and the old smooth bore. Henshaw—" he appealed to the prospector—"will you persuade Spanish that you and him should hit the trail?"

"Not for no damned Yankees, I won't," said the old man. He was already oiling the rifle. "Cease arguin', buddy. The devil's company has marched in step up to now. What for should we break ranks at this point? Brace up and move the rocks out to the platform edge. We'll shoot behind them."

The officers advanced. There was no doubt that they were following Ryder's trail over the salt beds. Across the sink, across the gravel flats, they came, straight toward the tunnel. At one hundred yards they paused, consulted. Then they disappeared behind a sand hill on the eastern barrier of the Valley.

"Goin' to use that as a breastwork," said Spanish. "Well, two can play at that game. Look, here comes one *hombre* out to palaver."

A MAN emerged from behind the sand hill, carrying a white handkerchief. He approached the mine, staring fixedly at the mouth of the tunnel.

"Talk to him, Henshaw," Spanish suggested. He grinned. "Tell him we ain't to home."

"What do you-all want around here?" Henshaw stepped out on the platform and accosted the silent man. "They ain't no one here but me. I'm a lone prospector."

The newcomer laughed. He was a trim little man with gray hair, a gray clipped mustache.

"I sure sympathize with your loneliness," he said, "but justice compels I should decrease your company by one more man. Deliver up the gazebo you're a-hidin' and we'll leave you in peace, to tunnel away the whole range, if you're a mind to."

"To what man do you-all refer?" countered Henshaw.

"A fair description would be the one we fired on last evenin'," said the newcomer. "Look him over and you'll find he's missin' one swell, new fangled water canteen."

"Ain't no such animal around these diggin's."

"Willin' to let us search?"

"Not inside my dugout." Henshaw assumed asperity. "No strangers allowed. There's pay dirt inside of here."

"Then you'll have to take the consequences, old boy. Impedin' the course of justice will rate you a bunch of holes, drilled cleaner and neater than any you performed in your minin' operations." He showed his warrant. "Let us search in the name of the law. No? Too bad."

He walked back to the sand hill with such assurance that the men in the tunnel knew his retreat was well covered.

Two men presently withdrew from the south side of the sand hill and disappeared into the Grapevines.

"Goin' to make a flank attack," reported Spanish. "Sure wish we could watch those boys. But we can't be everywhere."

A shot rang out from the sand hill. A jet of dirt flew up from the pile of waste rock on the platform.

"They've begun," said Henshaw. "Well, here's where the old smooth bore proves she's a implement of warfare." He fired and the mesquite at the top of the sand hill shook and was still.

"No bull's-eye yet," reported Spanish.

The men behind the sand hill returned a fusillade. Splinters of shale flew from the edge of the platform. The solitude of the desert became bedlam. A startled buzzard soared from a cañon of the Grapevines and vanished in the east.

"It's a draw," observed Spanish. "A draw until some one runs out of ammunition."

"That'll be us," said Henshaw grimly, dodging the splinters of shale.

He emptied the smooth bore, reloaded and fired again.

Ryder threw a clip into his gun—the little automatic that he had salvaged from the fight at the Purple Paradise. It beat a clean tattoo but there was still "no bull's-eye".

"Save that for closer range," advised Spanish. "Let me have a crack at the old smooth bore."

"But you can't—" Henshaw began.

He had started to say that no man with a paralyzed arm could shoot a rifle. He changed his mind. Lying there at the tunnel mouth, sighting with ease and accuracy, Spanish moved both his arms with as little effort as any normal man.

He fired. The answer came back—only two shots this time.

"One down," said Spanish jubilantly. "*Sangre Dios!* I nicked some one, I—"

He rolled over on his back and lay perfectly still. The rifle fell from his grasp. It slid over the edge of the platform, clattered down the slope and fell with a splash into the well.

"In the heart," said Henshaw slowly. "There's the bullet hole in his shirt. They got him through the heart."

"So quick!" Ryder stared stupidly. "Can a man die so quick? And he ain't bleeding much." Anguish seized him. "Well, somebody gets drilled for that. He died for me. Drag him inside. He—"

Something catapulted on him, rolled him over, gripped his arms in a vise. He heard a cry from Henshaw. He tried in vain to straighten his arm—bring the automatic into play. He was powerless. The thing that had fallen on him had knocked the wind and the strength from him.

He could see one man covering the prospector. He realized that it was a man that was kneeling on his own chest. These must be the two who had withdrawn to make the flank attack. They had approached from the back, climbed the west slope of Quartzite Hill and dropped down on to the platform. The noise of their approach had been covered by the firing. From the tail of his eye Ryder could see the other three men emerge from the shelter of the sand hill.

One man, hit with Spanish's last bullet, was limping a little.

"Get that automatic," said some one. Ryder's gun was jerked away.

The sheriff looked down.

"It's John Ryder," he announced. "So we was right about their bein' together. Well, you're sure in bad company, John. Now where's the other one?" He looked at Henshaw. "Never seen this bird in black before." He tore the handkerchief from the face of Spanish. "This ain't him, either."

"Let that man alone," said Ryder savagely. "He can't hurt you now. He's dead."

"Who's dead? Him?" The sheriff laughed. "He ain't dead, he's comin' to. But where's the other one?"

"Of course he's dead." Ryder struggled furiously. "Why, even his face is straightened out. It used to be all twisted up—paralyzed, when he was alive."

THE CORPSE of Spanish sighed and sat up. He clapped his hand to his heart.

"I've sure been dead," he said. "I'd swear it. My heart stopped beatin'."

He tore open his shirt. His chest was black and blue. A bullet fell tinkling to the rock platform. Inside his shirt, drilled cleanly from cover to cover, was an old red Spanish grammar.

"*Valgame Dios*," said Spanish. "Who's the guy that said the pen was mightier than the sword? Why, it's mightier even than a bullet. Spanish is sure a wonderful language."

Ryder was inarticulate but Henshaw spoke.

"Your face—what's happened to it? You look smooth enough now to be a preacher."

"Nothin's happened to it, recent," said Spanish, grinning. "Some weeks ago I got a accidental reflection of it in a pan of water. I saw right away it was gettin' better. Then I tried to work my hand—found I could wiggle my fingers a little, too. Don't know what brung about the improvement unless it was bakin' myself in this here furnace for three months. That ought to thaw the veins of a froze elephant."

He turned to the sheriff.

"I don't suppose you'll listen to reason, but I'm tellin' you this here kid is as innocent as a newborn calf. It wasn't him who shot Magoon. Why, that hidden gun play is as old as—"

The sheriff's men emerged from the tunnel.

"No one there, Chief," they reported.

The man with the clipped mustache swore bitterly.

"He's got away. I told you to watch the back. Come on, Ryder, out with it. Where's Texas Pelatto?"

"Texas— For Gawd's sakes, how should I know? In Vegas, ain't he?" There was no mistaking the look of dumb amazement on Ryder's face.

"But—but you've even got his gun," protested the sheriff.

He examined the automatic.

"That's a gun I found on the floor of the Purple Paradise, the night of the shootin'," said Ryder. "I've had it ever since."

The man whom Spanish's bullet had scratched interrupted.

"Don't let him fool you, Jud. We know Pelatto's here. We seen him last night; we followed his trail. This here is his canteen.

"It was me you saw last night and followed. It was my canteen," said Ryder. "Rather, it's a canteen that was on the saddle of the horse I borrowed, to get away from Vegas last June. And now, havin' explained that, I'll ask you to elucidate what you want with Texas Pelatto. Did he confess to the shootin'? Do you mean to tell me that it was over him we been indulgin' in this siege of warfare? I'm tellin' you I ain't seen that hound since the night he shot Magoon in the Purple Paradise, and framed me with fancy gunplay and my own gun."

"Say, wait a minute, will you?" The sheriff waved his arms about his head. "You swear you ain't seen Pelatto—or any one from Vegas?"

"I'll swear it for him," said Spanish. "None of us has."

"I ain't asking you. However—that night in the Purple Paradise, Magoon fell over, dead, and it sure looked like you done it, John. You shot out the lights and got away. Then, in the dark, I hears a squeak and some one says, 'Pelatto, it was Pelatto,' and there's a kind of scuffling'. I lights a match and here Pelatto is about to kill a little miner—Goldfield Jim McCabe. I separates them and Pelatto gets away. In a few minutes the lights goes on and little Jim explains that he's sure he seen Pelatto do the shootin' under your arm, with your own gun. He says in Goldfield they still talk about a man who used to pull that trick, but they never could prove it on him. It took a real gunman to do it. Naturally, by the time he makes this statement Pelatto's on a horse and out into the desert. We followed him, traced him. At Beatty we found his dead horse. He got into the Valley and there we lost him. But since you and your horse disappeared the same time, we figgered that likely you and him had been teamed up together after all and was both hiding here in the Valley."

"Listen," said Ryder. "I may be hanged some day, but it won't be for a shootin' I didn't do. Is it any wonder I lit out of Vegas when the whole town jumped on me with a necktie party on its mind? Is is any wonder I'm puttin' up a fight? Is it any wonder my friends here is helping me?"

"I begin to see light," said Spanish. "Ryder took Pelatto's horse and there was nothin' for Pelatto but take Ryder's. But Pelatto got away. It was Ryder you followed to Beatty before you lost the trail." He chuckled.

THE SHERIFF pursed his lips reflectively.

"Then Pelatto's got away. But it's sure funny. He must have gone into the Valley, and there's been no report of him comin' out, either on the Nevada nor the California side. And he wasn't a man that could escape notice easy."

"What did he look like?" said Henshaw, condescending for the first time to converse with a Republican sheriff.

"Tall and spare framed, like John, here," said the sheriff. "But black hair. He was quarter Injun. And tough—they don't make 'em any meaner than that rat eater."

"Say," said Spanish suddenly. "Any peculiarity in his actions?"

"Why, I dunno." The sheriff scratched his head. "Let's see—he'd inherited several Piute tricks from his war whoopin' kin. He used to go half naked in hot weather and he was always killin' things—rats and rabbits—by chuckin' rocks at them."

"Huh?" said Spanish. "Then you needn't search far. He came down in the Valley to hide, all right. He's campin' on a water hole somewheres. He poisoned our well not long ago. He has another name, too. In Goldfield they call him Sneakshot Perez."

"It was Sneakshot Perez that Goldfield Jim McCabe spoke of," said the sheriff. "Jim had never seen Perez, but if you could identify him as Texas Pelatto it would sure clinch who done the shootin' in the Purple Paradise."

"I'd clinch it all right," said Spanish savagely. "I got old scores to settle with that crawler. I was gettin' wise to some of his dirty games in Goldfield, and to pay me out he shot me—in the spine."

"Look here," said Ryder. "Pelatto must have cut across from Vegas and entered the Valley from the south. He never went through Rhyolite. That's why he got here before us. He—"

" 'Twas him who stole my water cans," snorted Henshaw. "Left me to die."

"It was him who tried to roll that boulder down on us," said Ryder to Spanish. "Remember I heard a horse whinny? It was my own horse that Pelatto was ridin', and it knew me. Pelatto hoped to kill us and get our supplies."

"He got them eventually." Spanish

laughed. "We cached them for him neat enough, behind that creosote bush. Likely he was watchin' us all the time."

"I dast to say," said Henshaw, "he thought he could likewise use the grubstake we had in the tunnel. Moreover, some of these here pieces of pretty ore may have took his fancy and he reckoned he'd like to own a gold mine. So he went up into the Panamints and killed them rat critters with rocks, then let 'em rot to poison our well and get rid of us. But why didn't he use a gun?"

"Didn't have any," said the sheriff. "John here had picked it up in the scrimmage at the Purple Paradise and lit out with it. But what I want to know is, where's Pelatto now?"

Henshaw spoke.

"There's one way to locate a man in this place," he said. "It's been done time 'n' ag'in." He turned toward the east. "For three days now I've been wonderin'—"

They followed his gaze. The Valley had resumed its silence since the echoes of shots had died away. As they looked, a buzzard floated gently out of the east, hovered, and came to rest in a canon that ran down to the Valley floor.

"You notice," said the prospector, "that fowl didn't circle. It went right down. Well, if you brave Yankees will take a sashay over where it lit, I dast to say you-all will find the body of Texas Pelatto, alias Sneakshot Perez. Spanish, that's the canon where you surprised him. You drilled him after all. Shootin' honors goes to you. He could kill a man without sightin' his gun, but you could shoot one in the dark."

"I shot him?" said Spanish. "But I heard him ride away."

"You heard his horse. It ran away when you fired," said Henshaw. "Ryder's horse. Likely he'll find it on his doorstep in Vegas—or hangin' around a water hole somewheres."

The devil's company looked at one another.

"I said they wouldn't blow no taps for us," reminded Spanish. "Well, they've sure blowed for him. Now we can go."

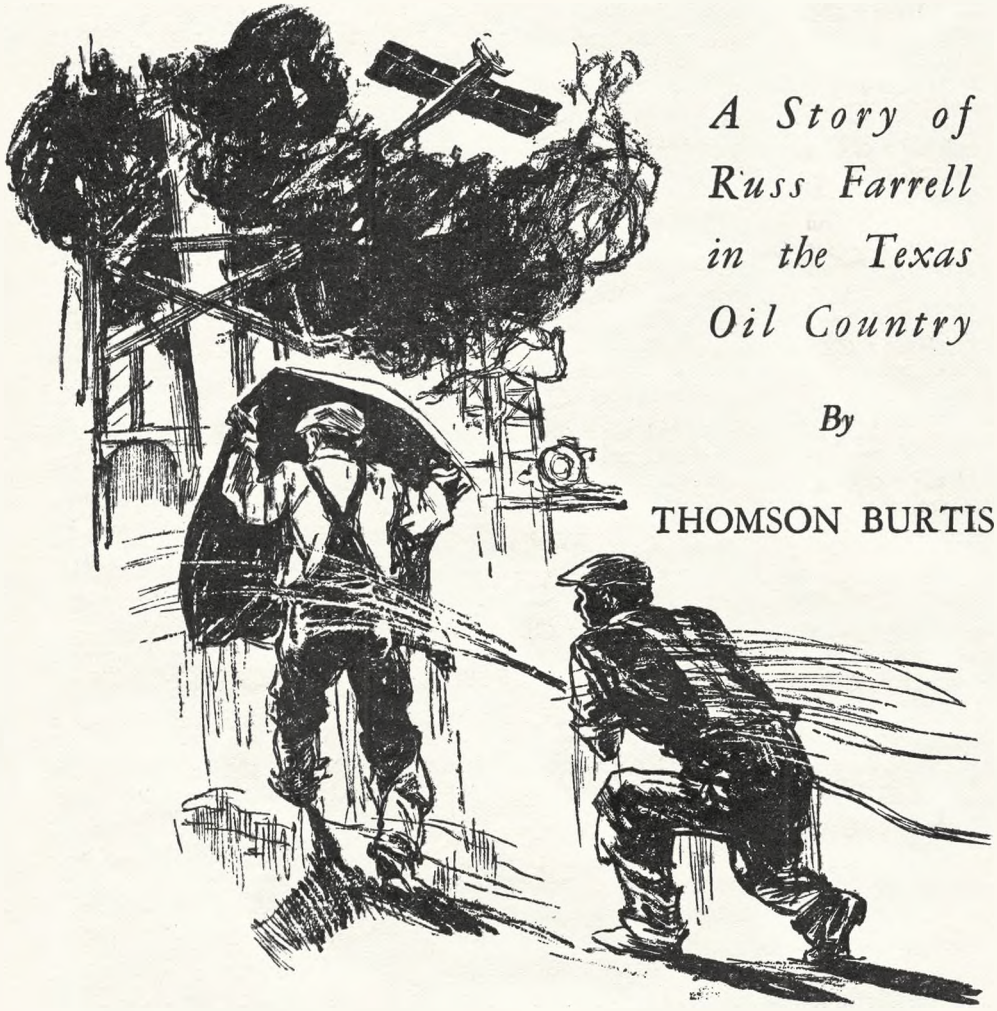
"But the mine," began Ryder. "The vein—"

Henshaw laughed.

"We'll go share alike on the ore, but the vein run out a month ago. I didn't tell you. I knew you'd urge to go and it wasn't healthy for you to leave so soon. Also—" a faint blush struggled into his battered face—"I figgered we'd ought to stick together." Suddenly he slapped his knee and pointed to Spanish. "And I dast to say that's the same reason he tied his face up in a handkerchief. He wanted you to stay here with him, where it was safe. He didn't want you to know he was gettin' well and could go back and display his swell features to his fellow men." His cackling laughter filled the tunnel.

"This is gettin' me nowheres." The sheriff dropped his gun in his holster. "Come on, we'll go investigate if it's Pelatto's remains that's under that buzzard. After which—" he turned to the devil's company, to Henshaw who happened to be nearest—"fill up your canteen and we'll all get out of here."

"Say—" Henshaw swung around with belligerence—"who are you to give orders? No Republican sheriff tells me when to move." He sat down defiantly on a rock. "Get out of hell yourself. Maybe we like it down here."



A Story of Russ Farrell in the Texas Oil Country

By

THOMSON BURTIS

GETAWAY

AS RUSS FARRELL spiraled his ton and a half De Haviland down over the small flying field near Gayland, Texas, his eyes were sweeping the ground anxiously. A car was stopping in front of the canvas hangar at the western end of the converted pasture lot. As three people climbed out of it, the red headed pilot nodded with satisfaction.

"That's Garry—big Stetson and all," he told himself.

Within a few minutes he would know the reason for that mysterious wire in his pocket. "If it's humanly possible, fly here to Gayland this afternoon," was what it said. And Garry Thomas was one of the few men in the world for whom the big Army pilot would have made the long and weary trip up from the Border. He felt stale and overwrought, somehow. The duties of an Army Air Service Border Patrolman were never easy, and of late the Rio Grande country

had been seething with illegal activity.

Handling the big bomber with the automatic skill which only a thousand hours in the air can give, Russ allowed himself to survey the majestically ugly scene spread out below him. West and north of the tiny Texas town which had been converted almost over night into a city of fifteen thousand people, stretched the famous Gayland pool. A forest of gaunt, oil blackened derricks extended almost as far as the eye could see. Pipe lines crisscrossed the ground and tortuous rutted trails ran here and there.

Vehicles of all kinds were toiling along, while on a hundred derrick floors rough-necked crews bent to their work under the rays of the boiling Texas sun. Here and there great oil sumps held lakes of the burnished black gold and, toward the outskirts of the field, were tremendous circular storage tanks containing oil which was so plentiful that the pipe lines could not handle it all.

As he circled back south of the field for his landing, Russ straightened his broad shoulders and felt a thrill chase itself up and down his spine. There was something that called to him in the scene of mammoth industry where men fought hand to hand with nature. Suddenly he was glad he was there.

He cut the twelve-cylinder Liberty to idling speed and dropped the ship over the fence in a slow stall landing. As he taxied to the line alongside the two sturdy Sparrow planes which he knew Garry Thomas owned, that young gentleman lounged out from behind the hangar to meet him with a huge white Stetson cocked on one side of his head and oil stained overalls tucked into cowboy boots. Behind him a girl and a man advanced a few steps and then stood silently, their eyes on Russ, as he cut off the gas and vaulted to the ground.

"Hello, Garry," the big flyer called, his blue eyes shining with the pleasure of the meeting. "How's tricks?"

"Not so bad, Redhead," grunted Thomas with a grin.

For three years during Garry's days as an Army pilot Russ had been close friends with a tall, dark haired man who had a hawk-like face with a curious satirical twist to it. His smile was lop-sided and there often seemed to be a mocking gleam in his sloping black eyes.

"You made me fly three hundred miles. What's it all about?" demanded Russ; but the expression on his freckled face belied the bruskness of his words.

"Tell you in a minute," Garry told him. "Miss Foster, may I present Lieutenant Russ Farrell? You've heard enough about him. You ought to know him by this time. Even oilmen do, don't they, Frank? Frank Jackson, Russ Farrell."

"I'll say we ought to," rumbled Jackson in a deep bass voice. "You certainly keep yourself in the papers enough, Farrell."

The quick tempered Farrell stiffened, and suddenly his blue eyes held a hot blaze in them.

"What do you mean—keep myself in the papers?" he said quickly, and his mouth was a tight line.

The short, stocky Jackson raised his eyes deliberately as though looking at a new specimen of humanity. His square, somewhat battered face did not change expression as he drawled:

"Just what I said. Ain't gettin' sore, are you? Every other week you make some funny flight—"

"When they don't assign one to Russ, he'll find something himself," Garry slid in smoothly. He recognized the trouble signals flying in Farrell's eyes.

"Breaking that altitude record must have been a perfectly thrilling experience," said the girl.

RUSS glanced at her briefly and then literally forced himself to relax. Jackson had touched him on a tender spot. It was not his fault that a good many unusual things had happened to him in the line of duty during the last three months, and there was nothing which could arouse his resentment more quickly than to be accused of being a publicity hound.

The girl's smile was infectious, and he found himself grinning back at her. She looked like a slim and very much alive young boy, in a man's flannel shirt, riding breeches and boots. Her reddish bobbed hair clung close to her head, and the Texas sun had tanned her skin to a golden bronze. There was something frank and competent about her, as though, young as she was, she had met emergencies and conquered them.

"Listen, Russ," Garry said as he lighted a cigaret. "You made some money in the Verona field awhile back, didn't you?"

Russ nodded as he removed his helmet and ran his hand through his red hair.

"Yes, a bunch of the boys threw in and came out on top," he agreed. "We hocked our pay three months in advance and I made about fifteen thousand."

"Still got it?" Garry demanded quizzically. When he smiled his teeth made an almost startling white line across his tanned face.

"Yes. Why?"

As Russ asked that question he observed Jackson's face. The oilman had been looking at the flyer with ill concealed resentment ever since Miss Foster's remark about the breaking of the altitude record.

"Let's sit down, and I'll tell you," Garry said easily. He pointed to some boxes at the door of the hangar. "In the first place, all this Gayland field that's been proved up is west and north of the town."

"So I noticed." Russ nodded.

"Awhile back Natalie's father here and me and Frank—Frank's a driller—decided there were good prospects in the territory about ten miles over east here. We put in all our *dinero* and sunk a wildcat over there."

"How did she turn out?" Russ inquired.

"If we knew that, do you suppose you'd be here?" drawled Jackson.

"Now, Frank, don't be disagreeable just because you're tired," laughingly advised the girl. She patted one of his huge hands.

Jackson's snub nosed, dogged looking face lightened amazingly with a wide smile.

"I'm sorry," he grunted.

"He certainly doesn't think much of her!" thought Russ to himself.

As his gaze shifted to his friend he surprised that ordinarily nonchalant young man before Thomas looked away from the other two. His dark reckless face was serious and there was a peculiar look in his eyes which Russ had never seen there before.

"I believe they're both in love with her!" Russ chuckled. "Well, they've got an excuse, all right."

"No, the facts are these," Garry went on, taking his eyes from the girl as if it were an effort to do so. "We've had all the tough luck in the world drilling the damn' thing—couldn't get supplies, rigging went bad, and whatnot, but we expect to be able to take a core tomorrow afternoon. You know what a core is, don't you? A sample of the soil down at about the spot where oil should be, if any. If the chemical analysis shows oil, or it even smells of it, we're pretty sure to have a well."

"I learned about that in the Verona field," Russ told him. "Proceed, Mr. Thomas."

"Natalie's father got sick and had to go to San Antone for an operation," Garry went on. "He won't be out for a couple of months anyway. Which leaves the whole proposition up to Frank and me."

"Did you drill the hardluck well?" Russ asked Jackson.

The latter nodded, his gray eyes boring into Farrell's as though to find some reflection on himself in the flyer's words. Russ was aware of a growing animosity between them. He did not care so much for the granite faced young driller and it was plain that Jackson was not exactly an admirer of the pilot.

"Now, here's where you come in," Garry resumed. "As I said, I've put in all the dough I made out of these airplanes—did pretty well carrying oilmen

into San Antone and Dallas fast when the boom was just working up and acreage could be bought. Frank put in his rig and crew. Mr. Foster put in money, too. In addition to the fifty acres in our tract we took options on about four hundred acres offset from our tract."

"Figuring to take 'em up if you had a well," put in Russ.

"Sure," Garry agreed. "That's unproven territory, see, and the geologists, most of them, didn't think there was oil there. Well, we got options to buy at anywhere from forty to a hundred dollars an acre, figuring that if the well came in, we could sell the options at a big profit, see? We also arranged so we can renew the options for one month at a fifty per cent. advance. We were working it so we could operate without any money to speak of, see?"

"When do they run out?" Russ asked.

"Tomorrow night at midnight," grunted Jackson.

The girl's eyes were on the ground, as though hearing a summary of their position had saddened her.

"Her father's in the hospital and the family fortune's invested in a wildcat well. That isn't so pleasant," Russ thought.

"Now, listen, Russ," Garry said, pulling his Stetson low over his eyes. "We can renew those options, as I said, any time before midnight tomorrow. By tomorrow afternoon we don't expect to bring the well in, if there is a well, but we do expect to have a core. If that core shows any oil, we want to take up those options and take 'em up quick. We got to, because a bird around here named Young—he's one of the biggest and most powerful operators in the field—has gone and tied up the man that owns that five hundred acres in an agreement to sell him, Young, the options at more than double what our agreement calls for. So, you see, this fellow—Pettijohn, his name is—in San Antonio, hopes to God we won't be able to renew our options by tomorrow night."

"Young must think there's oil there then," said Farrell, leaning back on his elbows against the car.

"More or less," agreed Garry. "But, you see, we've got a well almost completed to prove up the territory without a cent of expense to him, and if we haven't got a well, he hasn't lost much. If we have, he's made a fortune without risking more than chicken feed as far as the oil game is concerned."

"I see," said Farrell. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stick around, and if the core shows anything, fly to San Antonio and put up the mazuma for another month's option on five hundred acres for twenty dollars an acre, option to buy at one hundred and fifty," Garry said tersely. "For your ten thousand you get a one-quarter share in all profits—"

"Look who's here," interrupted Jackson. "Porpoise Peters, as sure as you're alive!"

A BATTERED but powerful looking tool pusher was rolling into the field. At the wheel was a stout man of fifty.

"That's Young's right hand man—Porpoise Peters," Garry said quickly to Russ. "He's bucked the oil game from Persia to Venezuela and they don't come tougher and they don't come more crooked."

The tool pusher, a dozen huge chain wrenches rattling in its rear, came to a stop and Peters got out without a word. His barrel-like body was encased in oil stained khaki trousers and a shirt which looked as though it had been soaked in tar. Below his stained felt hat, his fleshy face was harsh and strong. Cold light gray eyes darted from face to face as he strode toward them.

"Hello, boys," he said. He glanced toward the big De Haviland and then at Russ. "Where did the Army come from?" he inquired.

Some impulse, perhaps a sixth sense, made Russ determined not to show his full hand.

"Just dropped in for gas," he stated, "and found that I'd once known Thomas here in the Army."

"I see," Peters grunted. He removed his hat, showing a totally bald head. "Well, Garry, I got a break for the bankrupt Foster-Thomas Oil Company."

"Yeah? What?"

"The boss found out that Bill Wright—he's tool dresser on Young No. 5 and the Dunning wells for Young—is a flyer. The old man does so much traveling and is so damn' busy he wants to do it by plane and I'm offering you for him right now exactly what your ships cost you new."

For a minute there was silence. Russ's eyes, glinting suddenly as he smelled a trap, swept the little group quickly. The girl was wide eyed and astonished, and Jackson's rugged face was a study. His eyes rested unwaveringly upon the paunchy Peters and one big hand slowly stroked his wiry blond hair.

"That," Thomas said deliberately, "would be twenty-two thousand dollars, and we could use the money, but I'm turning it down."

"Good Lord, Garry!" Jackson exploded. "Think twice, boy! Why—"

"I'm turning it down."

"Jackson's right. You'd better think twice," snapped Peters, his cold eyes staring into the lounging Thomas's. "You'd better take that and be thankful."

"Why?" snapped Garry.

Suddenly Russ was tense. There seemed to be sparks flying between his outwardly composed friend and the beefy Peters.

"What the boss wants he usually gets in this part of the country," stated Peters, his unwinking eyes never leaving Garry's, "and he wants those ships."

"But he isn't going to get them," Garry said, and suddenly he was on his feet. "By the way, why does he want to keep us from any chance of taking up those options?"

For a moment Peters did not answer.

"Ask him yourself," he said finally, his hard voice clipping off the words impatiently. "But my advice is to take that offer. Do you get me?"

Suddenly Garry's face was cold and cruel. Russ found himself on his feet, too, every muscle tense.

"Haven't even got the guts to come out in the open with threats, eh?" Thomas spat. "Well, you go back and tell your crooked boss that I know all about him. He's made me sure now that he really thinks there's oil over in that country, and I suspect how far he'll go to keep me from those options if I find I've got something. But you tell him I'm on my guard, see? And you and your whole crew can lay to this: Any time you call on us with monkey business in mind, you'd better come shooting, understand?"

"Yeah."

For a moment Peters stood there eyeing Thomas balefully.

"*Adios*," he grunted, and without further word got into the tool pusher and drove off.

"Good Lord, Garry! You acted like a damn' fool," Jackson told him, and the driller's eyes were glowering. "Here my men ain't been paid for weeks; we ain't got a cent—"

"I'm running this, Frank," Thomas snapped. "Don't you know if Young wants these planes there's some reason for it?"

"Of course there is," the girl put in eagerly. "But—"

"You got the famous Farrell and his airplane here, ain't you?" Jackson went on doggedly. A slight flush was mounting to his temples. "You should've taken that twenty-two thousand—"

"And put all our eggs in one basket?" Thomas interrupted incisively. "Something goes wrong with Russ's plane, or he can't stay, or something like that, and we have a well—where are we? No train'll do after noon tomorrow, you know that. We should throw away a possible fortune for twenty-two thousand dollars—"

"And if Young's on the level in wanting the planes," Russ put in, "he'd buy them just as quick day after tomorrow as he would today."

"I'm saying you should've taken it," Jackson insisted stubbornly. "And I ain't no damn' fool either."

His Texas drawl was slower now. As Russ looked at him, an idea came which made him turn away with his head bent in thought.

"Well, let's go," Thomas said sharply. "There comes Bill Terry's car now. He ll guard the planes, Russ. Come ahead."

As they climbed into the car Jackson's resentment fairly poisoned the atmosphere. The girl stole glances at him from the front seat where she was riding with Garry, and her face was troubled.

SCARCELY a word was spoken as the car moved slowly through the rutted streets of Gayland as one of an almost solid mass of vehicles. Wide open saloons, gambling houses and dance halls lined the sidewalks where roughnecks rubbed shoulders with big company scouts, and lease hounds with dance hall girls. Drunks were everywhere. There was a wild surge of primeval vitality in the teeming city of shacks and tents, and by the time they had succeeded in getting to the small, white Foster house Russ felt aglow with the spirit of it, although not even the surging boom town could take his thoughts entirely away from the possibilities Jackson's actions suggested.

"You're going right on out to the well, of course?" Thomas asked the lowering Jackson, and the driller nodded.

"It's bad enough to have to work night and day without having to lick your starving roughnecks to keep 'em at work," he growled, as he stepped over into the front of the car and drove off.

In deference to the troubled girl, Russ said nothing until he and Thomas were alone in the latter's room at the Foster's.

"Listen, Garry," he said then, swiftly, "how does the log of your well look? What's Jackson said about it?"

"To be honest with you, just fair. Formation holds up in spots, and in others it don't."

"You know what he was doing out there, don't you?" Russ went on rapidly. "Advising you to take a chance and play right into Young's hands, that's what he was doing. Did it ever occur to you—"

"Just what do you mean, Russ?" Thomas said slowly. He had removed his hat from his closely clipped hair, black like an Indian's.

"I mean that maybe Jackson's in cahoots with Young. Suppose he's been lying to you about the log all the while, and it really looks good and he's told Young that? Suppose Young knows you're going to get a good core and wants to see to it that you don't get the options? Who is this Jackson?"

"Mr. Foster just knew him casually in the Smackover field," Garry said thoughtfully, "and he seemed like a good egg. But he could ruin the well easy—"

"But don't you see he wouldn't want to do that?" Russ interrupted. "You've had bad luck enough so that you'll just get in under the wire, haven't you, and maybe won't get in at all? Besides, ruining it might cause suspicion. If I'm right it's plain as day to me—"

"You mean that Jackson's deliberately slowed down the drilling, has told me that the well doesn't look so good, and told Young the real truth, that the formation is holding up perfectly, and that now he's working hand and glove with Young to hold us off from those options," Thomas summed up. He was walking up and down with long strides. "It's possible, but I'd hate to think it."

"He didn't seem so tickled that I was here, either," Russ pointed out.

"By Harry, you're right," Thomas said with emotion. "He wasn't in favor of calling on you at all, as a matter of fact. But I laid that to his jealousy over Natalie. She was all keyed up at the idea of meeting you."

"I don't want to seem inquisitive, Garry, but it strikes me as though you thought quite a lot of that young lady yourself."

Thomas grinned ruefully.

"I'm afraid," he said slowly, "that I

do. Well, now about this Jackson thing," he went on, as though the subject of Natalie Foster embarrassed him. "There's a chance you're right, although Frank seemed like such a good egg. Let's see."

They talked for an hour and as the result of it Russ and Garry went out to the well and stayed close to the derrick floor until two in the morning, when the weary Jackson and his day crew knocked off work.

After only four hours' sleep on cots in the roughnecks' shack the haggard oilmen were at work again in the cold gray light of dawn. By three o'clock in the afternoon Jackson and his crew were sending two thousand feet of drill stem, coupled fourble by fourble, down into the hole with the hollow core tube at the bottom of it.

"We'll have it out by six," he told Russ and Garry, his eyes gleaming in his dirt splotched face.

Russ drew in his breath excitedly. The precision and speed of Jackson's crew had fascinated him as they handled their cumbersome machinery with what seemed to him matchless skill. The suspicion that the battered driller was cheating had gradually been forced from his mind, and the impulsive red headed flyer came close to blurting an apology for unspoken thoughts as he held out his hand and said:

"You've got a crew, Jackson, and your're a driller! I'm going to get the ship, Garry. I can land in that field over there." He pointed to a little valley near by.

Inasmuch as six o'clock was the earliest hour at which any definite news could be expected, Russ seized the opportunity of taking a two hour nap in Garry's room in preparation for a possible two hundred mile flight that evening. At a quarter to six he lifted his big De Haviland off the Thomas flying field and headed toward the well, ten miles away.

As he dropped into the valley he had picked close to the well, he saw that the crew were standing around the derrick floor as if there were nothing to do. There was no activity whatever and suddenly a wave of foreboding came over him.

He cut the switches and walked rapidly toward the well. Garry Thomas strode out to meet him, and Russ saw the young oilman's face was black with rage.

"What happened?" Russ demanded.

"Frank Jackson dropped an iron bar down the hole," Thomas said slowly as if the words choked him. "When we were about halfway out with the core. I guess you were right!"

Farrell was wise enough in the oil business to know that dropping a tool down the hole meant any further drilling was impossible unless the obstruction nearly two thousand feet down in the ground could be fished out—and that would be a miracle in a nine-inch hole, tapering as it went down, to about five.

They were silent as they walked toward the well. Natalie was there by the driller and, although she tried to smile, her face was woe begone. Jackson's jaw was set, and he seemed to be daring the world to say anything.

"It doesn't seem as though it could have been an accident," Thomas said harshly just before he reached the girl and Jackson. "It means we're sunk, I guess. I can't ask you to risk that money without knowing anything about how she looks."

Farrell looked from his friend to the girl and suddenly found himself literally quivering with rage. His blue eyes blazed into Jackson's as he said hotly:

"So you did spoil the well, did you? I didn't like your attitude yesterday, and—"

WITHOUT a word of warning the driller hurled himself forward as if his stocky body had been shot from a catapult. Russ sidestepped and as his fist crashed to the oil man's ear, toppling him, he was vaguely aware of a low roar which seemed to be coming from the hole. As Jackson bounded to his feet, Russ leaped into the fray with tigerish joy in the combat.

But Jackson warded off Russ's right to the jaw as though in a daze and froze into immobility.

"By damn, she's coming in!" he suddenly shouted. "Run, everybody!"

Garry Thomas's voice rang through the air in a choked yell as roughnecks and spectators ran for their lives. The roar had now grown so loud that it could be heard for miles. The huge iron valve had been set on the derrick floor, with the drill stem locked in it, and by some miracle it held. The force of the gas did not blow the drill pipe out of the hole, but Russ, looking backward over his shoulder as he ran, saw a crowbar hurtle out of the mouth of the well and smash through the one hundred and twelve foot derrick above it.

Rocks and sand were in the stream of gas and oil, and it seemed a miracle that the gang of roughnecks survived the deadly shower. The flow was soon spurting over the crown block of the derrick. Thomas was gasping something inarticulate, and Natalie, white faced and bright eyed, was shedding tears of happiness as the four most interested in the well stopped to look at it.

Before Russ could collect himself there came a fearful change in the sight before him. As though by magic the top of the column of oil became a seething, red-shot black cloud.

The well was afire!

He knew enough about oil fields to realize that a spark, caused by a rock hitting against metal, had ignited the gas. The fire started fifteen or sixteen feet in the air after the gas had an opportunity to expand and become inflammable.

Every one ran again as the oil being consumed in the crimson cloud high in the air gave off a heat which was withering. Russ's heart was pounding and it seemed that his throat was so tight he could not speak. The greatest emergency of the oil fields faced his friend, for every hour that that fire went on meant the loss of hundreds of dollars worth of oil. The well was a gusher and a big one, easily between five hundred and a thousand barrels of oil an hour.

"Thought I was a crook, did you?"

Jackson, ahead with Natalie, suddenly stopped and shouted above the roar of the well. His face was contorted like a maniac's and it seemed to be sheer madness that gleamed out of his eyes.

"Well, I'll show the whole damn' bunch of you!"

Natalie tried to hold him back and said something pleadingly which Russ could not hear as Jackson shouted orders to his men. In a moment Farrell saw the roughnecks tying two lengths of hose to the water pipe line which had fed the boiler. One length was twice as long as the other. Jackson had rushed over, careless of the heat, and salvaged a piece of rusted tin which had been lying on the ground almost under the edge of the pillar of fire. Thomas shouted into the flyer's ear.

"The shock of that dropped crowbar brought the well in," he was saying. "Good Lord, what do you suppose Jackson's up to? He drilled in Mexico and Smackover. He's got something in mind."

And Jackson had. The roughneck at the shortest length of hose was ready. The water spurted from its nozzle. A slim youth dragged the longer length of hose behind him as he walked forward toward the well under Jackson's bellowed orders. As he came within that radius of blasting heat the first roughneck started playing his hose over him. Soaked from head to foot under a continuous stream of water, the young fellow walked steadily forward until he had his own hose stretched to the limit. There he turned and started playing the water on Jackson, as the latter walked forward, the sheet of tin in his hand.

"Good Lord!" It was like a prayer from Thomas.

"What's he up to?" Russ demanded.

"There's some story," Thomas said slowly, "about a bird in Mexico that put out a fire that way. The theory is that close to the well it's cooler on account of the gas rushing up, and all that."

The sky now seemed covered from horizon to horizon with rolling black smoke which glowed with an evil crimson. Steadily Jackson walked forward. When he was but twenty feet from the well the water was barely reaching him. It seemed to evaporate as soon as it hit him. He was holding the sheet of tin over his head now . . .

"If he can shut off the valve the unburnt oil will come down in a red hot shower," Thomas said, and there was horror in his voice.

Natalie hid her eyes with her arm but Russ watched, fascinated, as Jackson walked through that inferno of heat which was almost unbearable a hundred and fifty yards from the well. He saw Jackson leap forward like a shot. Not a word was spoken—there was only the roar of the well until Thomas shouted—

"I do believe it's cooler in there!"

The two roughnecks at the hose were running for their lives. Russ felt unable to think or move as he watched Jackson turn the wheel of the valve and close the heavy steel plates which would control the flow. Suddenly, as if by magic, every trace of flame in the black smoke, which was like a canopy over the earth, disappeared, and he saw the driller pick up his sheet of tin like a flash and hold it over his head as he ran. He could not turn his eyes away as he helplessly watched what was happening. A shower of unconsumed oil boiling hot was falling. The tin protected Jackson's head but before their very eyes the exposed portions of his hands were being scalded by hundreds of drops of oil.

But Frank Jackson got through. As he staggered toward them Thomas rushed for the first aid while Natalie ran to meet him and threw her arms about him.

There were hot tears in Farrell's eyes as he said chokingly—

"There's nothing I can say, Jackson, except that I'd be glad to kiss your foot at high noon on the plaza."

The oilman grinned a crooked smile, as Natalie sobbed over his burned hands. It seemed as if the ordeal had burned away all pettiness and he stammered through pain twisted lips:

"It's all right. Good Lord, look there!"

The drone of an airplane motor came dimly to Russ's ears. Over toward the Thomas field one of the Sparrows was circling upward.

"Young's stealing a ship to get to San Antonio," Russ found himself shouting, "but he knows we've got one, too!"

"I'll bet he figured on putting your ship and my other one out of commission," came Thomas's gasping voice as he ran up with the first aid kit. "He didn't figure you'd have your ship over here."

"And as long as he got out there with his flyer, he decided to go through with it on the chance that we wouldn't make it somehow," Russ finished for him. "So long, and see you later!"

HE MADE for his ship with kangaroo-like leaps. He pushed the self-starter and, without waiting to warm up the four hundred and fifty horse power Liberty, he took off. The De Haviland was faster by at least twenty miles an hour than the Thomas ship, but it wasn't a matter of beating it so much as beating the sun. He had plenty of time to get to San Antonio hours before the options were up but darkness would fall within an hour and a half and he had almost two hundred miles to go.

He took time, however, to swoop over the Thomas field. Down on the ground the figure of a man was gesturing crazily. It was Terry, the guard. He pointed at the other Thomas ship and from five hundred feet Russ could see that the elevators had been stove in so that the plane was useless.

"They work fast and rough in the oil fields," Russ told himself grimly. "So Young's powerful enough around here to think he can get away with that!"

The red headed young Army pilot settled down to fly a bee line to San Antonio ahead of the darkness. The railroad stretched straight as a string ahead of him. Ten miles westward the

Thomas plane was a growing speck in the sky, as the more powerful De Haviland slowly overtook it.

Russ had the throttle of the Liberty all the way forward and the tachometer ahead of him showed close to one thousand seven hundred revolutions a minute. The De Haviland hurtled through the air, fifteen hundred feet high, at one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Below him there were many open fields, but on ahead, rough mesquite country would make a forced landing a matter to worry about. For the present, however, he flew automatically, his mind busy with the events of the day.

His face flushed hotly with shame as he thought of Jackson. Once again his impulsiveness had caused him to do an inexcusable injustice. Then, as he thought of the scene he had left, his mouth twisted in a grin below his goggles.

"It looked to me as though Jackson had got himself the girl at that," he reflected. "I guess Garry's out of luck. Well, he's not exactly the marrying kind anyway."

The evening air was calm and smooth. Looking down upon the mesquite which was now unrolling beneath him, he was conscious of a real joy in flying for the first time in a month. Suddenly it was good to be alive, and the fact that victory was not yet a certainty added spice to the situation. A forced landing, he remembered suddenly, would ruin everything, leaving him stranded in sparsely settled country without a chance to make San Antonio in time.

A hundred miles had been reeled off by the roaring De Haviland by the time it had caught the slower commercial plane. Russ, his eyes glowing, watched the ship which was but a hundred yards ahead of him and enjoyed imagining the thoughts of the two helmeted men who constantly looked over their shoulders.

He was five hundred feet higher than they were and he could not resist the temptation to dive down close to them. The sun was sinking in a red blaze of glory, and within a half or three-quarters of an hour the quick Texas twilight would probably make a night landing on Kelly Field necessary. Every minute was precious but the boyish Farrell ignored that as he sent the bomber downward at two hundred miles an hour in a power dive. In a few seconds he had come close to the Sparrow, diving on its tail. He would pass as close as he dared and wave to them . . .

He was looking over the side of the cockpit and there could be no mistake about what happened. As plainly as though he had been in the Thomas ship himself, he saw the man in the rear cockpit produce a gun. Before he had a chance to duck behind the shielding motor, the Colt spat fire.

Russ was taut as a bow string as he zoomed upward and out of danger. Then in a flash of comprehension, he realized what must have been their object. Surely they were not trying to kill him—they were trying to pump bullets into his radiator.

Whether that had been their real object or not, two minutes sufficed to tell him that that was what they had done. Slowly the thermometer on the dashboard crept upward from 80° Centigrade to 90°. The boiling water was leaking out of the radiator and he had but five minutes more in the air at best.

A thousand conflicting emotions and thoughts rushed through his chaotic mind. He cursed himself savagely as he realized that his own foolishness had lost himself and the others a fortune. He was licked. That was, unless—

It was not a normal Russ Farrell who made a lightning-like decision at that moment, but a white faced, tight lipped pilot who had forgotten all fear in his determination to make up for what he had done.

"Ten to one they didn't know I had an all-metal prop—and figured on breaking that!" he told himself grimly.

In a second he had a wrench out of the tool kit and had throttled the De Haviland to thirteen hundred revolutions a minute. He circled back of the Thomas plane, at about the same height. Then,

the wrench ready at his side, he started to fly with every bit of the skill he had. Handling the throttle with infinite delicacy, he eased the De Haviland up toward the Sparrow.

He was but five feet higher than the other ship, and his blazing eyes never left his enemies as he came over closer. Russ felt that their game was not to try to kill him.

His motor was boiling madly. It was a matter of minutes, perhaps even seconds, before it died. A quick glance below had assured him that there was a field large enough to land in.

His right lower wing was creeping up across the cockpit of the Sparrow. The men in it did not attempt to get away but were staring at him in puzzled wonder. They realized, probably, that the slower ship could not pass the De Haviland in any event. Russ dared not risk shots from his machine gun, for that would almost certainly kill the others. Had they been murderously inclined themselves, they could shoot him easily, for the ships were traveling at the same speed.

So they flew ahead, straight and level. His right wing had crept up now until it was overlapped on their own upper left wing. He felt almost as though he could lean over and touch them. Tense and strained and realizing that the slightest mistake would mean a collision, the young pilot gathered himself. An air bump now might be disastrous and telescope the two ships. His wing was right over the whirling propeller of the Sparrow and a second later it was in sight.

His right hand left the throttle and his fingers closed around the handle of the wrench. He measured the distance, scarcely ten feet, and a moment later the wrench left his hand as he hurled it squarely into the eight-foot circle of the propeller. As he zoomed upward, he threw back his head and gave vent to an unheard shout of exultation. The roar of the two motors was suddenly lost in an anguished scream as the wooden propeller of the Thomas ship burst in a thousand pieces, and the racing motor seemed bound to shake itself loose from the ship. A second later the helpless Sparrow was spiraling downward, and behind it a grinning, exultant De Haviland pilot followed its course to the ground.

It was not easy to climb out of his cockpit and walk toward them. He was unarmed, and there was no telling how desperate they might now be. But murder, it seemed, was far from their minds. There was no gun in sight as he came up to them. His eyes held those of the wiry little pilot steadily. His companion, a lank, melancholy looking man with a drooping mustache, seemed frightened.

"Make one more move to hold me up," Russ said savagely, "and you're going to be in jail for life. Garry Thomas and the whole bunch back in Gayland there know what it's all about and you haven't got a prayer, even if you shoot me. Give me that gun."

Without a word, the man with the mustache pulled the Colt from the cockpit and handed it over.

"Now get to work," Russ commanded, "and help me put that prop of mine on your ship."

They had shot their bolt and knew it. There was scarcely a word exchanged as the young pilot and Russ quickly transferred the metal propeller from the De Haviland to the Sparrow. It was too heavy a stick for the latter, but the trial must be made. Russ was white and drawn as he sent the Sparrow hurtling across the ground. He drew a long breath of relief when it staggered into the air.

The oversize propeller made the ship vibrate terrifically, but he must chance it. Without waiting to circle for altitude, he pointed the plane westward for San Antonio. Darkness was falling and the exhaust pipes were spitting flame as the ship fairly shook itself through the air. The struts were jumping in their sockets and the instrument needles ahead of him were vibrating crazily as the ship fought its logy course toward its goal.

It was the longest three-quarters of an hour that he had ever spent. At any second it seemed to him that a gas line must break, an oil line spring a leak, or the propeller fly off the crank shaft. Not until the lights of San Antonio, gleaming like a fairy city below him, were left behind and the mile-long row of hangar lights on Kelly Field were underneath him did he relax. As he cut the motor, he sank back limply in his seat.

"O. K," he whispered to himself.

His money was in a San Antonio bank and his check was good. Thomas would have phoned Pettijohn before now, and the battle was over.

At 12:30 that night he was informing Mr. Garry Thomas of that fact.

"So we're set," he completed.

"And the well looks like at least ten thousand barrels," came Thomas's voice over the wire, "which means that acreage is worth damn' close to half a million."

Russ did not tell Garry that he could not accept anywhere near his full one-quarter share now. The well had come in before he had risked a nickel, but he knew that Garry would argue with him, so all he said was:

"Say, when I left you it looked as though Jackson had beat you out, young fellow. How about it?"

"With Natalie, you mean?" Russ heard a faint chuckle over the wire as Garry went on. "You're right. I've been trying to figure out how I felt ever since. Not that I don't feel pretty bad, in a way, but at that, I don't see how I could have hopped to Venezuela and taken a flyer in the fields down there like I've had in mind, if I was married!"

Russ grinned as he hung up the receiver. It was not strange that, knowing Garry as he did, he should think to himself:

"I guess both Garry and Natalie got a good break, at that. To say nothing of Jackson!"

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of *Adventure* published twice a month at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1929. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared B. C. DUNKLIN, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Secretary of THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, publisher of *Adventure*, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City, Editor, ANTHONY M. RUD, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City. Managing Editor, ALBERT A. PROCTOR, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City. Business Managers, None. 2. That the owner is: THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, a corporation, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City, whose stockholder is: THE BUTTERICK COMPANY, a corporation, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City, whose stockholders are: JOHN P. BOYLE, c/o MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, New York City, CLARK CHILDS & Co., 165 Broadway, New York City, ENGEL & Co., 25 Broad Street, New York City, WILLIAM FREIDAY, 50 Broadway, New York City, F. B. KEECH & Co., 52 Broadway, New York City, STANLEY R. LATSHAW, Butterick Building, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York City, LUKE BANKS & WEEKS, 14 Wall Street, New York City, MERRICK & Co., c/o Customers Securities Departments, THE NEW YORK TRUST Co., 100 Broadway, New York City, Jos. A. MOORE, 300 Park Avenue, New York City, MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, New York City, JAS. H. OLIPHANT & Co., 61 Broadway, New York City, PARKER MCELROY & Co.,120 Broadway, New York City, E. A. PIERCE & Co., 11 Wall Street, New York City, POST & FLAGG, 49 Broad Street, New York City. JOHN W. TINKLER, c/o MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, New York City, WARWICK CORPORATION, 224 So. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. 3. That the known bondholders mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: DIME SAVINGS BANK, De Kalb Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such a trustee is acting, is given: also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation, has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. B. C. DUNKLIN, Secretary. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1929. Chappell Cory, Jr., Notary Public, New York County; County Clerk's No. 474 Reg. No. 0-586; Kings Co. Clerk's No. 205 Reg. No. 461. (My Commission expires March 30, 1930.) [*Seal*] —Form 3526.—Ed. 1924.

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

The Dueling Oaks

COURTNEY McCURDY offers the following note about his dueling sonnet on page 49. There were some mighty toney duels in the Old South, but probably nowhere were there smarter and more graceful affairs of honor than those of the New Orleans of a century ago.

The oaks referred to are still standing in City Park, New Orleans, and are sometimes called "*Chenes d'Allard,*" (Louis Allard the poet once owned the property on which they are located), sometimes "The Metaire Oaks," but generally "The Dueling Oaks." Literally hundreds of duels were fought under their shade between 1830 and 1850. It seems that prior to that time the favorite dueling ground was on the Fortin property, which later became the New Orleans Fair Grounds. New Orleans was, in those years, a regular happy hunting ground for masters of arms, professional swordsmen and soldiers of fortune.

Two of the most famous duelists of the day were Mr. Hughes Pedesclaux and Mr. Donatien Augustin, the latter of whom became a prominent judge and general of the Louisiana Region. Although the two were close friends, they met—with sabers—and Augustin cut Pedesclaux through the sword arm. The wound did not turn out to be serious, and they soon made up their differences. But other hotbloods who faced them later were not so lucky.

In a duel on horseback, broad swords being the weapons, Pedesclaux killed a French cavalry officer, and Augustin ran a sword through the lung of one Alexander Grailhe.

Now for the unusual denouement of this latter in-

cident: An abscess formed on Grailhe's lung where Augustin's blade had pierced it, and the surgeons of the day declared this abscess was inaccessible to their knives. Grailhe recovered just sufficiently to walk about, but he was bent and drawn, and the doctors agreed that the internal secretions of poison would kill him in a short while. His temper was evidently unimpaired, however, for very soon after he was able to get up he quarreled with a Colonel de Marigny. They met—under the same dueling oaks —with pistols, at fifteen paces. Two shots each were to be fired at the word, and then the combatants were allowed to move up five paces each and fire at will.

It was evident they meant business, as that last maneuver would have put them just five paces apart. Grailhe fell at the first exchange of shots and begged Marigny to shoot again and end his misery. Marigny refused to pot shot a fallen foe. It was found that his bullet had followed the course of the old sword wound that Augustin had given Grailhe some time before, and—*Mirabile dictu!*—had cut open the abscess and let out all the accumulation of poison. Grailhe completely recovered his former strength. Marigny with his pistol had saved a life the surgeons had given up.

Thanks for the copies of *Adventure* you have sent me. I buy it regularly, but when I happen to have a little verse in it—aw, well, you know!

I enjoyed that editorial on World Law in issue of August 1st. If a fellow craves excitement he doesn't have to hide away in some trans-Atlantic plane or Zep, or even grab a handful of blinds; he can just step out the front gate and start walking down the big road and he'll find plenty—or else he won't find at the world's end. At least that's my idea of it.

—COURTNEY MCCURDY

Ash Cans for Bristol Bill

ROY DE S. HORN'S narrative in this issue brings forth from him the following remarks for Camp-Fire:

Two German U-boat commanders actually were nicknamed by American destroyers, because of their usual hunting grounds—and both had the reputation of being good sports. One was "Queenstown Kelly" as here described; the other, instead of being "Bristol Bill", was nicknamed "Penmarch Pete" because his favorite hunting grounds were off the Pointe of Penmarch, the western extension of France —he specialized on boats for Brest and St. Nazaire.

The circumstance of combining two smashed destroyers into one new boat is also a fact. The British had two destroyers, the *Nubian* and the *Zulu*, which were smashed up, the one forward and the other aft. The combined new ship was called the *Zulian*, being formed of parts of the *Zulu* and the *Nubian*.

—R. W. HORN,
Lieut., U. S. N., Retired.

JUDGES

A flood came down from the mountainside
On its plunging way to the far-off tide;
It swept the plains that lay between.
The boulders gray and woods of green
Were torn and flung from the water's way
Like pebbles thrown by a child at play.
A judge who dwelt in the water's path
Looked up at the plunging, swirling wrath
And said, "Consider yourself annulled!"
Then he went to bed—for the flood was lulled.
But alas, the waters had read no law
And the cot of the judge in their swirling maw
Was crushed and battered; Then came the dawn,
And the flood had passed—but the judge was gone!

Creation spoke to the wind one morn
And a hurricane of the wind was born;
And straight to the place it had been sent
That hurricane, in a hurry, went.
A judge, observing the hurricane,
Said, "This won't do. That much is plain!
You are enjoined," the judge decreed.
"The law forbids that you proceed!"
Then having forbidden the hurricane,
The judge sat down by his hearth again.
But hurricanes only seem to know
That they have a definite place to go;
So that ignorant hurricane hurried on,
And after it passed the judge was gone.

The world one morning had to cough,
So it blew the top of a mountain off;
Some years were born and passed away
While cold and silent that crater lay.
Then came a judge, in his puny pride,
And pitched his tent on the mountainside.
And to the crater above, he said,
"You are annulled!" Then he went to bed.
But craters, to legal learning dulled,
Sometimes forget they have been annulled—
And over the edge of that crater crept
A molten flood, while his honor slept.
The world belched just once and quit;
But the camp of the judge, O where was it?

A moral goes with this tale of mine,
Concerning the laws that men design;
Whereas, to wit and things like these
Don't count for much when the world would sneeze.
The judge may speak with a firm intent,
But the juice of the grape will still ferment,
And men and maids for love will mate
In the least eugenic sort of state.
The laws of men will never purge
The outlaw heart of the cosmic urge.
The judge may smile, the judge may frown,
But the sun comes up and the sun goes down;
The world revolves and life goes on
And love remains—when the judge is gone.

—SEVEN ANDERTON

Shanghai

RANDOM notes by a comrade at present on the staff of a Shanghai newspaper:

Shanghai is interesting. Life flows along easily and living is cheap. For the past several months I have been doing police and the Provisional Court. The latter is interesting. All kinds, varieties and classes of cases. The most frequent are divorces wherein the children have been married in youth by their parents to grow up and find other sweethearts. But the families must sue each other or lose "face," and that is everything out here. The other day a Chinese standing on a busy corner had his wallet picked. He thought it over, purchased another wallet and returned to the place where the first was lost. Several moments later he felt a hand, grabbed it, yelled for a Sikh policeman and sure enough the thief had the first wallet on him. Is any other nation capable of that? I doubt it.

A few weeks ago I went to Sunkiang to the shrine of General Frederick Townsend Ward, "The Ever Victorious Army." Admiral Bristol blew off and it all was very interesting. Tomorrow I go to Hangchow to see the famed Hangchow Bore. A wall of water some ten feet high that rushes up river on certain lunar changes during the year. Also interesting and a fine view of the Chinese countryside.

Coming down from Tsinan on the train one day a general got to hanging outside the door of my compartment a little too much. I got peeved when I caught him watching me shaving, and inquired what he wanted. I learned that he was watching me so closely because he had never before seen a man with red hair. He couldn't understand it. Yet he had 75,000 men under him and is the No. 2 man up north.

These Chinese are wonderful people. I have seen about everything in this part of the country and plan to get out in January to push on I don't know where. Possibly to Singapore.

Not the least interesting features of Shanghai are the kidnappers. Considering that half the generals got their start that way, it is not to be wondered at. They stop at nothing. The ransoms are usually paid because the family fears torture and have little faith in the police forces. And such ransoms. One was paid a few weeks ago $100,000M, an ex-taipan of Shansi province. They held him for three weeks right here in the French Concession. Subsequently the gang was arrested and the leader Liau Siau Mau (the Old Small Cat) confessed in court that he had made a half million in five years. He was the most feared kidnapper in eastern China but they executed him by strangulation along with several others. He went out with a smile. They have absolutely no fear of death. I saw the whole affair and wondered at the man's coolness. It was very interesting and very terrible. As he was dying the many spectators expelled their breaths with considerable noise so his spirit would not enter their bodies.

Another was cornered in a house and the police took 22 hours to kill him. They called out half the Norfolk Regiment, every available policeman, the Shanghai Amateur Pistol and Rifle Club, Sikhs, Annamites and Chinese policemen.

They used 349 rounds of pistol ammunition, three machine guns, a Thompson gun up from the floor underneath until the floor on which he stood looked like a sieve, tear bombs, gas bombs, and when they got him he had 26 wounds. Some boy.

Another phase of interesting life are the ladies. God bless 'em maybe. Black, white and yellow, brown, every kind, every color, they do a huge business. Very interesting. There are several leading men who have taken the ladies out of "the trenches" and usually they make excellent wives.

I have a young Chinese friend, 26, who was the concubine of a Chinese minister abroad a few years ago, went there with him and speaks excellent Spanish. Thoroughly cultured, beautiful, but still a "conc" and can not get married to a leading Chinese as I think she deserves. That of course is a Chinese custom and there are few Chinese here who haven't them. Don't confuse them with singsong girls. The latter have a strict code of morality and are seldom "concs"—that is a step down.

Another interesting phase of Shanghai are the Russians. Whites. We have one a cartoonist, a former colonel in the crack Alexandrovitch Guards and his decorations are my envy. Working now for little or nothing. A stenog for an import house was a lady in waiting to the Czarina. They are all over and one is surprised on learning who they are. There is a Colonel Gubonoff who was a former No. 1 of the Czar's bodyguard and every Russian in Shanghai salutes him when they pass. He is a chucker out in the best cabaret. But when they have the funerals—then I get goofy. Some insignificant bird who looked like nothing at all is buried with full military honors, his sword, medals, and photograph. And the Russian service is most impressive. Fine people.

I hope the enclosed pictures are of some interest. I believe they are "different" at least. I have many others. Mostly the Red outbreak in Canton, also *lin chee*, the death of a thousand cuts, and one rare one of the old stunt where a man was tied to the ground, his stomach bared, a rat placed on it, a wire net over the rat and a burning stick is thrust at the rat. The only escape for him is to go down, through the stomach, and usually he does. Meanwhile the man lies helpless and watches it all.

One lady here employed a pleasant innovation to kill her husband. She had a lover, a fireman, honest, she held the husband's head, the lover his feet, a hired killer straddled him and stabbed him to death with a half a pair of shears. They were all killed. She was uncovered at her execution merely to humiliate her. The Chinese are very strict about that. The women will not reveal the slightest bit of flesh. Nor can one kiss them.

But it is an interesting country. Wonderfully.

Adios. I hope you find something readable in this badly collected letter. —ALFRED BATSON.

Try This On Your Alphabet

ARED WHITE has written a series of these cipher mysteries of the war. They are arranged to offer a reader heightening difficulties, as he proceeds from one to another. Of course the first two were easy enough to work—Comrade Budlong thinks entirely too easy.

When, in reading my copies of *Adventure* for the last ten years or so, I have noticed criticisms of minor details of stories by readers, my reaction has usually been, "Why quibble over such matters; the story is a good one, and who cares if the author did slip up a little?" In commenting on Mr. Ared White's series of spy stories, therefore, I hope that both you and Mr. White will understand that I am only commenting; I have no desire whatever to criticise. I like his yarns, and think they are bully.

The comment concerns itself with the examples of ciphers that Mr. White has used in both his stories so far. They are both of the most elementary form (the ciphers, not the stories) and I don't believe would enter into any real spy incidents for two reasons: First, I doubt very much if the Germans or any one else during the late war (in their spy networks) would have dared to use such transparent means of communicating important information; and second, it is absolutely certain that the messages shown would not have puzzled the intelligence officers of either the French or American departments as Mr. White has them puzzled.

The reversed-alphabet substitution cipher used in his "Cipher Trail" is the most elementary form of cipher there is. There isn't anything simpler. And to make it the very simplest of the simple, Mr. White has his spies leaving the words blocked out in their original letter-groups—something that certainly would not be done even with more complicated forms of ciphers. The message would either be all run together or (as is the usual practice) broken up into small groups of equal numbers of letters.

If the American intelligence officer stewed over that cipher for many hours, as the story has him, he certainly had never studied one word about ciphers, and had no place in the Intelligence Department. And if, after getting one letter in the cipher, he painstakingly "fished" for the others individually, he would be just as bad. On getting one letter he would have immediately applied the reversed alphabet as a test.

As a matter of fact, it is probable that when first getting the thing he would have applied a mechanical test known as "completing the sequence" for the first dozen or so letters, and his message would have stared him in the face, completely solved, without any brain work at all. Not that any skilled cipher-analyst would have expected such a simple device as this cipher to be used, but simply that it would have been one of the first routine tests applied to it in order to deduce the system employed.

Incidentally, the reversed alphabet cipher could have been used with the cipher "a" starting under some other letter of the alphabet besides "z" and it wouldn't have added any appreciable amount of time to the cipher expert's analysis of it. Offhand, I should say the total time required for the solution of any message employing this system would have been about five minutes—perhaps less. Whether in German, English or French, it hardly could have been the despair of the French for days, nor have caused our hero to ponder long hours over its solution.

It is doubtful if any substitution cipher would take more than a day to unravel. This statement applies even to the complicated substitution ciphers in which four or five different alphabets are used, together with a code word, so that each successive letter in the message has a different enciphering alphabet. And each of these alphabets might be of the "reversed" type used in the story without adding much time to the solution.

It takes more material to break down such a cipher of course. Cipher experts aren't wizards. A single short message enciphered with a poly-alphabet substitution cipher using mixed alphabets, would probably defy solution. But it would have to be short, four or five words at most. If the message were fairly long, or if a number of short messages (all enciphered with the same system) were collected together, the expert would soon unsnarl them.

Hope Mr. White won't mind this comment. It hasn't anything at all to do with the enjoyment I get from his yarns. I shall continue to look forward to them. And if the time comes that I ever write anything myself, I shall be happy if the only thing some reader can pick on is something equally unimportant.

—A. L. BUDLONG, 195 Collins Street, Hartford, Conn.

But Brigadier-General White, specialist in cryptographs, has a word to speak in his own defense—and a new brain-wrinkler to offer.

Headquarters
Eighty-Second Infantry Brigade
Office of the Brigade Commander

You are right in your statement that the ciphers used in my *Adventure* yarns are elementary cipher. To anyone expert in cryptanalysis, it is no grave matter to break a substitution cipher, given time.

However, I am forced to take into consideration the fact that the average reader knows nothing of cipher; and if the cipher is made too intricate, it would fail entirely to register with the average reader, perhaps, as well as detracting from the interest of the story. Although, in later stories, I've used a slightly more intricate cipher, I've taken pains to keep them from being too complicated.

Ordinary substitution cipher was used for espionage purposes during the war, where the operative

receiving same worked abroad under circumstances that prevented the use of a code book. The ciphers had to be simple, since the field operative had to carry the key in his memory. Simple as those ciphers might appear to the expert, there were exceedingly few experts during the war period—and to a person not an expert, the simplest cipher remains inscrutable.

I heartily appreciate having your letter, although I believe that the breaking of even a substitution cipher is a long process sometimes, even when you have access to the high-frequency tables, and a knowledge of the game. Here's one in which there is no code word and no break in alphabetical sequence. Note that the letters are not run in, nor blocked off in groups of five (a practice when the ciphers are to be telegraphed). If you are so disposed, you might try deciphering it within the hour limit. If you find any difficulty with it, which you probably will not, I'll be glad to furnish you the key.

LPEQETKO ETKN JRBOHMBA CUDTIXDRBZBR
LUKMBZCX DUGP AMBXKVBAIRLRKTICCY

—ARED WHITE

Fishing By Hand

CONFIRMING the several accounts we have had of guddling, or snatching fish with the bare hands, Comrade Howard offers his notes on the blond-tails.

If Dr. Robertson's description of "hand fishing" appears rather tall to some skeptic, the writer, for one, has had occasion to prove it can be done. At a cost, to be sure, but it's done.

Some time during the winter of 1906, having nothing better to do, I joined forces with the skipper of the *Minerva*, a mail boat plying between Cayo Romano and Nuevitas, Cuba. A full thirty feet of it, a flat bottomed, center-boarded sort of scow, leaking at every other seam and capable of making almost 6 knots—with a half-gale dead astern—but able to float on three inches of water, a very important feature in such waters, or I should say, lack-of-waters.

There is a sort of passage through the Key called, if I remember aright, "a pasa del Ingles" (the Englishman's pass) and about the middle of it there is a shelf-like projection of mangroves just about low water level. Well, this rogue of a skipper had told me that fish could be caught there with the bare hands, by merely reaching under the shelf and grabbing, but as he was one of the most accomplished liars it has been my privilege to meet, I jokingly suggested that we go overboard—waist deep—and secure some fish for lunch. To my surprise he readily agreed, bidding me fetch a sack and follow him.

Yes, he caught them all right; about eight "*rabirubias*" (blond-tails). I haven't seen anything that looked like them in this country; neither have I ever tasted any fish as luscious as those hand-caught blond-tails.

On the return trip I tried my hand at it, with equal success, only my hands being by far less rugged than his, they surely got punished. Plenty. Thereafter I caught my fish on a hook.—ROBERT ALDEN HOWARD.

P.S. By the way, I have been a member of the Camp-Fire—a silent one so far—for the past fifteen years.

Cum Laude

A NEWCOMER minstrel to the Camp-Fire—Lowe W. Wren—has had his poem "The Call" (*Adventure*, August 15th) reprinted by the Kansas City *Star* and by the *Literary Digest.*

158° Fahrenheit!

SHADES OF YUMA! Perhaps Georges Surdez, whose letter just has reached us from Colomb Bechar, where he is tramping the Sahara with the French Foreign Legion, has some idea such a temperature is fun. As I write these words, here in New York, the steam is sizzling in the pipes; outdoors the thick white frost still clings to the rooftops, though it is ten o'clock in the morning. Sometimes there are compensations, even for the sedentary civilian . . .

DID PROOFS between two trips. Left broken letters to you. All right? This is merely unofficial note to my friends at Butterick. Been knocking around three or four months; my wife was down with pernicious malaria, which she contracted in the Sahara last July, so have not had time to do much work. Was down while she was convalescing, had a fine time with Meharistes, Legion, artillerymen, armored cars—they have lots of nice toys to play with down below. Am due in Algiers the end of the month, then scheduled for a long trip in the Moroccan Desert, seeing the other side of Tafilalet from the one I saw in July and August. Hope to get full authorization, as they're beginning to understand that I know where and when to place my head—safety is not always absolutely certain around the south, the Atchana Goum got cleaned out a few weeks ago, days ago, rather, dropped 32 dead and 10 wounded out of 50. Moreover, you must have read about the affair at Ait Yacoub. 110 dead, including a section of Legion.

Met a few Americans in the Legion, and gave

Adventure as an address to locate me through when they are discharged. They're interesting fellows; so, if by any chance I was not back when they arrive, treat them nicely—I vouched for you all as a hot bunch of warm hearted followers of the open trails, fond of adventurers at large.

For those interested in my personal appearance (eh? eh?) enclosing snaps. One shows Mr. Surdez before the Bechar redoubt. His distinction brings credit upon his editors; his breeding is obvious. Squirmish mamas would trust him with only daughters on desert islands. Legionnaire second from right, with his arm braced against phone booth affair, is a Californian, nice little guy. Other picture, taken six weeks later, reveals Mr. Surdez, noted Saharan character, in a typical scene with American national bird. Note the pride of the little camel at being photographed with an *Adventure* scribe. I promised him that when he was a big, grown up *mehari*, I'd let him carry Mr. Rud. At that, he turned on me and tried to cover me with a lot of greenish cud he held ready. I feel that the trusting angle at which he keeps his tail is conclusive proof that rumors which may have reached New York of my exploits are much exaggerated, and that in spite of close association with Spahis and Legionnaires, I am still mentally alert, morally sound, like a Boy Scout. Like my *boubou*, *seroual* and *nayels*? Some stylish stouts, brethren, what? Also, view entitled: Miles without a speakeasy. Great country for ambushing your fellow man, eh? No water for 150 miles, which is a long walk when the thermometer shows 158°. Wonder they need a security service around the dump! —SURDEZ

Where Richard Rode

JUST a card, bearing two Turkish stamps, from our old comrade, Harold Lamb.

Been trailing the crusaders, and found it a long trail. Venice, Rome, Brindisi, across the Adriatic, down Dalmatian coast, through Saloniki, into Constantinople, Asia Minor. Then back to Rome for a breathing spell, and now through Greece, across to Rhodes and Cypress, and here, near the site of Tarsis. Going down through Syria and Damascus into interior. —HAROLD LAMB

And may the eagles of complete success perch on your lance!

A New Calendar

LET'S SPRING ONE on the world! Of late there has been widespread agitation for a revision of our present Gregorian calendar. Various proposals have been put forward; but to date what seems most sensible is as follows:

1. Divide the year into 13 months each of 28 days.
2. Each year have one spare day—perhaps to come at New Year's, or just before.
3. Each four years add a *second* spare day, as now we add the 29th of February.

If this were done every man could memorize the calendar, and could forecast infallibly what day of the week it would be on any given date of the month; the first would be Monday, the seventh Sunday, and so forth.

Of course the new calendar would work some hardships; but also it would have further advantages beyond the one stated. Workers paid on the weekly basis would stand four-square *every* month with men paid by the day, the month or the year. And there are other features, some abstract and of a psychological nature; some concrete. Space will be given to them in future issues.

Just as a game which looks like good sport—for of course *Adventure* can not impose its will upon the world—suppose *we* go ahead and name this new month? Suppose we name the extra day which occurs each year? Suppose we name the second extra day, occurring once every four years?

Contest

1. Begins immediately.
2. Closes March 1st, 1930.
3. Offers four prizes, each of $100.00.
   - A. For the best name for a new month.
   - B. For the best name for the yearly extra day.
   - C. For the best name for the extra day which comes each four years.
   - D. For the best further suggestion regarding calendar revision.

The editors of *Adventure* will be the judges. Any one except employees of the Butterick Publishing Company may compete.

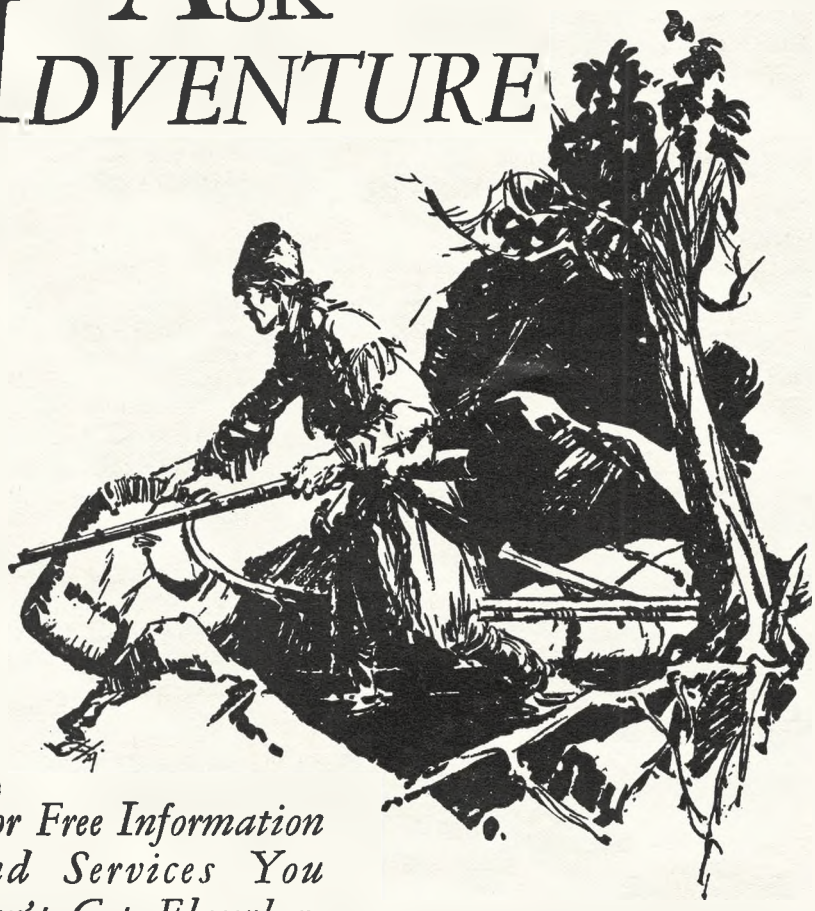
Each letter should be marked plainly, Calendar Contest Editor, *Adventure*, 161 Sixth Avenue, New York.

No letters will be returned.

Come one, come all!

—ANTHONY M. RUD

ASK ADVENTURE



For Free Information and Services You Can't Get Elsewhere

Rainproofing

IN CENTRAL AMERICA, the nearest rubber tree provides the material; but a drug store will do just as well.

Request:—"I have heard that natives of Central America can make waterproofing fluid out of rubber sap. How do they do it?"

—EUGENE SCHIFFEL, Arthur, Nev.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—The natives use a brush and paint the juice of the rubber tree on the cloth, just like any other paint, and then slowly smoke it. This result is a waterproof cloth, called or pronounced as if spelled *oo-lee*.

The very best waterproofing is a solution of aluminum stearate in carbon tetrachloride, as it makes the best job and does not dissolve out.

Another preparation is made up of sugar of lead, 1 pound; alum, 1 pound; tepid water, 1 gallon. Soak your tent in the solution and hang up so as to get it thoroughly dry. This makes the canvas nearly waterproof, mildewproof, and almost fireproof.

Be sure and wash your hands thoroughly before touching food, as the sugar of lead is poison.

Anchor

A CURIOUS method of swinging a ship about, used on old-time men-of-war.

Request:—"I have read many times in stories, and so forth that ships in the old days anchored 'with springs on their cables.'

Will you please let me know what the purpose was of anchoring in this way, and how the same was rigged?

Any information that you wish to give me on the subject will be received with appreciation."

—H. L. GREENE, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Captain Dingle:—Anchoring with a spring meant that when the anchor was let go, a hawser or other line was bent either to the anchor ring or to some part of the main cable, the inboard end being led to some part of the after end of the ship. The object being to enable the ship to be swung into any position aside from the one she would naturally take in swinging to tide or wind.

Men of war used the plan when preparing to bombard a fort. In this case two springs were used, one on either side of the ship, so that either broadside might be presented to the enemy by simply hauling in on the spring on that side.

Sonora

THE southern part of this Mexican state still offers a frontier to the prospector.

Request:—"Three of us are planning a prospecting trip to Sonora, Mexico, We intend to start from Nacozari, Sonora, and hit toward the Sierra Madre Mountains.

Is there any country in that direction that has not been prospected or placer mined to any extent?

What are the laws relative to placer mining, staking claims and prospecting down there?

How much of our outfit can we buy down there and how much shall we bring with us?

How is Sonora for hunting and fishing and water holes?

What are the laws regarding firearms, passports and health?

If you know of a place down there that has not been penetrated very much if at all and is wild, and better for placer mining, let us know. We plan to go by the first of October when it's not too hot."

—MILAN RACICH, Oakland, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. J. W. Whiteaker:—Most of the northern part of Sonora has been prospected over and many of the rich mines in this section were discovered hundreds of years ago. This section of the country is very rich in minerals, but most of it is already taken up.

The laws on mining and other of the new laws that have been put into effect during the past year are changing from time to time. Write to Mr. Suastegui, Commercial Attache of the Mexican Embassy, 16th St., Washington, D. C., about the exploitation of lands of the National Domain of Mexico and you can get the latest information on mining.

You can get most if not all of your outfit down there, which will save you quite a bit of money on your outfit.

In the mountains of Sonora there are all kinds of animals and in the streams that flow from the mountains there are many kinds of fish. In some sections of Sonora the water holes are few and far apart, while in the mountains one could find springs occasionally, and there are the streams.

You will not be permitted to enter that country with firearms without having a permit from the district military commander. If you are found with firearms in the interior of the country without having a permit you are liable to confinement or being shot for a bandit. You will have to have a passport, identification card, vaccination certificate and pay a registration fee on your car if you drive one over there.

In the southern part of Sonora near the border of Chihuahua and Sinaloa on the Mayo and the Fuerta Rivers there is a new mineral field opened up and it is claimed to be very rich in gold. This has not been prospected very much.

Marines

A FORCE so competent that it is the usual thing to report, "The Marines have landed and the situation is well in hand."

Request:—"Would it be possible for you to give me the following information?

(a) Recruiting age for Marines.

(b) Is there a school for Marines, such as West Point for the Army and Annapolis for the Navy?

(c) How did the following saying originate: 'The Marines have landed and the situation is well in hand'?

(d) Could you give me the words and title of the song which has these words '—to the shores of Tripoli'?

(e) How long must you be in the Service before you are sent on foreign duty?"

—ALEXANDER ROSS, Philadelphia, Pa.

Reply, by Capt. F. W. Hopkins:—(a) Recruiting age 21 to 35. From 18 to 21 must have parents' consent on forms provided by recruiting officer, as well as birth certificate or affidavit of birth.

(b) No regular school. Men enlisting go either to Quantico, Va., or San Diego, Cal., to be trained as Marines. Some of the graduates of the Naval Academy (Annapolis) are commissioned in the Corps, some enlisted men are sent there for school to be trained, and certain N.C.O.'s each year are sent to an officers' school to study for commissions.

(c) From the usual telegraphic report sent home from some South American country after a rebellion when Marines have been landed to protect American property. It exemplifies the Marines' usual competent way of doing a job.

(d) The song is "The Marines Hymn." You may hear the words by going to a music dealer and asking him to play the selection. He should have it, by the the U. S. Marine Band.

"From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli,
We have fought our Country's battles
On the land as on the sea.
First to fight for right or freedom
Or to keep our banners clean,
We are proud to bear the title
Of United States Marines.
If the Army or the Navy ever look on Heaven's scenes
They will find the streets are guarded by
United States Marines.

(e) Any Marine is eligible for foreign duty after about 3 months in the Corps Foreign tours are usually, for at most, two years.

I would suggest that you call upon the recruiting officer at the Marine Barracks, Philadelphia Navy Yard, look at the Marines there, and get some first hand and direct information. You will be interested.

Japan

SOME pointers for the man who wishes to cruise the Inland Sea in comfort.

Request:—"I am planning to take a trip to Japan in May of next year and would like some information regarding the Inland Sea.

I plan to charter a small boat or sampan and cruise from Kobe to Moji, touching at all the ports and places of interest. I have had some experience handling small boats, but would take the owner or a man to handle the boat if necessary.

The following information I would like particularly:

1. Cost to charter a small boat?
2. What passports or other papers would be necessary?
3. What would you estimate three months' expenses would amount to?
4. Do you think the trip practical?

Any information you can give me regarding this will be greatly appreciated."

—J. W. LANDOLT, Los Angeles, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Sidney Herschel Small:—The Kobe-Moji trip calls for the owner of the boat, especially if you do not speak Japanese and since I don't imagine you intend making the return journey. If you've had experience—real experience—handling small craft in various weathers, and if you plan taking your time and stopping often, I believe you'd have a fine time, barring rains. Now as to the specific queries:

1. Cost to charter a boat. Depends absolutely on the type of craft, on the length of time you plan to make the trip, and on how good a bargainer you are. One man can do it for a hundred yen or less. It might cost another double. And the third a half of the first sum. When you land, visit the Japan Tourist Bureau, Japan Gov't Railways, Central Railway Bldg., Tokyo, and grab whatever help they give. They'll direct you to some one in Kobe to help you, and be glad—and polite—in doing so.

2. Apply to the Bureau of Citizenship, State Department, Washington, for your passport, and you've got to have one. An emergency passport, good for six months, is all you need. The regular issuance takes too much time before you receive the document. On a trip such as yours, passing, as you will, areas in which foreigners are not permitted to go or permitted to stop, a passport is an absolute necessity.

3. What the expenses will be all depends on yourself. I can't tell you. Will you, for example, sleep in the boat? (Which I wouldn't, but others would!) Will you use Japanese inns? (And I should, avoiding those who promise foreign cooking like the plague) First class inns will charge between Y1.50 and Y4 for supper, bed—on the matting—and breakfast. Y2.50 is about right. The higher rates for fancier quarters. I can only guess, but I should say you can do it for less than $250. How much less depends, as I've said, entirely on how you manage.

4. That, also, depends on you. Personally, I can't see why you won't have a great time. Here are a few warnings: Good raincoat, tarps, oiled paper for camera (and don't use it when you're told not to!), cigarets in tins. Don't drink anything, anywhere, anytime, except bottled or boiled water or beer, which is not only good, but cheap. No salads. No raw vegetables. By going in May you miss the typhoons, which are worst in autumn. Laugh at it if you want, but many of us aren't ashamed to wear a cholera-band—strip of flannel 12 inches wide and bound about your middle. You can buy 'em in Japan, readymade. You might get a copy of Terry's "Guide to the Japanese Empire"; forget the advice to tourists, but there's a lot of good stuff in it, including maps, storm-signals—where found and all that sort of thing.

Take more money than you plan to need. Take it in A.B.A. checks. Not in letter of credit. If you want specific information, won't you write for it? Good luck, and a fine trip if you decide to go.

Beaver

HE IS a capricious animal in captivity, and the prospects of raising him for profit are not particularly promising.

Request:—"I am considering the establishment of a beaver farm somewhere in the New England States, preferably Maine, and would appreciate any information which you may be able to furnish me on this subject." —E. L. GARY, New York, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Fred L. Bowden:—Personally I don't believe that I would consider the farming of beaver if I were you. In the first place, the beaver is rigidly protected in most of the States of the Union, and there are so many laws hedging in the animals that you would be bothered all the time. Another thing I consider the beaver the hardest of the fur bearers to raise in captivity. He is notional and finicky and nervous in captivity.

It is hard to procure food for him in sufficient quantities. People who have tried to breed them have encountered all kinds of difficulty in making them breed. The beaver is essentially an animal of the far wilds, and he never becomes partly tame as do many of our fur bearers in captivity, but is always shy and nervous in the presence of man.

Sorry not to be more encouraging, but I suggest that you decide on some other animal, with which you would have more chance of success than the beaver. Try muskrats, mink, foxes, skunk, or raccoon, any one of which are being successfully raised on fur farms in commercial numbers.

Carrion Flower

IT blooms like a lighted candle, but its perfume is attractive in inverse ratio to its beauty.

Request:—"In a recent magazine article there appeared the following description of a plant:

' . . . On a mountain top near Port Moresby, I saw in a creek bed what appeared to be rows of candles burning on the rocks near the water. The month was August . . . I found it to be strange flowers. They were about 10 inches in length. The spathe, thick and soft as Morocco leather, was folded about a pistil as big as a banana, and both vividly yellow. The flowers stood upright, set stiffly among large leaves upon their long green ropes of stem.'

If some one will look to locate such plant and gather a few seed therefrom for me, I shall not only be greatly obliged but shall compensate him for his trouble."—CARL FREEMAN. Willowbrook, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. L. P. B. Armit:—I take it the strange flower you refer to is the thing we people here call the "decayed meat bloom"—a name that accurately explains the perfume given off by this plant when in bloom. It grows in the forest country, flowers about August or September, and is always covered, when flowering, by myriads of ants and flies which apparently suck the sticky juice that exudes from the opening flowers. It looks not unlike a candle, the leaves being not unlike those of a papaya.

The root, when prepared by much grating and soaking for weeks in running water, provides a food not unlike manioca or cassava. Personally I do not know if the flower produces seeds; I have seen thousands of them but never noticed any seed. The natives tell me it is only possible to grow it from the corn or root; and as it is a flower that is absolutely sickening to be within smell of, I do not think you would care to have it in your garden.

Moreover, it is nothing to look at, as the flowers are stiff and not unlike a cigar that has come unwrapped. and the odor . . .! It is like the scent of a glue factory or a dead whale. At long range, when you see a mass of these yellow blooms they appear all right, but close quarters is not nice.

Sorry to have to dash your hopes like this.

Red Messiah

A READER makes a few personal observations on the Ghost Dance, recently discussed in these columns.

"I see some one asks for information regarding the Messiah craze in 1890-91. I was in a position to know about as much as any one regarding the ceremonies and outcome, but as for where the Messiah first was supposed to have appeared is very problematic.

At the time I was doing business on the Pine Ridge Reservation and it was reported there that the Messiah first appeared among the Shoshones in the Rocky Mountains, and the sum and substance of the preachings were that there would be some kind of destroyer appear that would destroy all excepting designated spots where the Indians were to assemble. In the Sioux country it was preached there would be a shower of dirt that would cover the earth to sufficient thickness to bury everything, but the designated spots would receive no dirt. The place designated for the Sioux of our section was Battle Mountain between Buffalo Gap and Hot Springs, S. D., and there were spots designated for every strong tribe and smaller ones affiliated were to mingle together at the favored spots, which were always elevated positions. Some thought the destroyer would be Dirt and others Water, and still others Fire. The Ghost Dance was nothing more or less than the old time War Dance, but with the Ghost Shirt on. This shirt was supposed to turn bullets or any war weapon, wielded by an enemy. The Shirt was made of the cheapest white material, usually as it was the easiest obtainable, but the fiber of the material had nothing to do with its effectiveness; but it must be white, and must be covered with all kinds of war and chase hieroglyphics, as in olden times they decorated their buffalo robes.

I was quite a favorite among the Ogalallas of Pine Ridge—Agoy—and they adopted me into that tribe and I was notified I was to meet with them on Battle Mountain, and the exact date would be given me later.

THERE is no question in my mind but there was some kind of a faker such as a ventriloquist, who, through a hoax of a monstrous dummy, preached to the assembly that answered the call to the Rocky Mountains; for there was indeed an assembly. One went from Pine Ridge, and the Messiah was supposed to have preached to audiences in many sections of the South and Southwest at designated spots, and it seemed they sent warnings to all isolated tribes in the U. S. and they were all to join in the overthrow of the whites, when the plains would again be teeming with buffalo and all other usual Indian game.

I see in the assertions of Cody that the surrender of the Indians marked the end of Indian fighting in the U. S. But as I understood it the

Indians did not surrender but came in under a compromise of more rations and exoneration from all killings during the uprising, for there was never an Indian punished for participation in any killings during the uprising. Several civilians besides many soldiers were killed, and of course about 200 Indians at the Wounded Knee Battle where the Ghost Shirt was proven a fake, for the Indians were mowed down with all kinds of weapons.

I saw many educated boys who took part in the Ghost Dances just for the sport and excitement, and laughed to me about it afterward. I don't think there was ever any great excitement anywhere but in the Sioux country, but all would have joined willingly if there had been just one success, for they were ready to believe on the smallest pretext, and it is my opinion if the Wounded Knee Battle had not taken place and destroyed all faith in the Ghost Shirt, the Messiah would have been believed in for some time." —G. E. LEMMON.

Model T

RUNNING this type of Ford motor on natural gas is quite possible by altering the cylinder head.

Request:—"Will you please tell me what should be done to a Ford T motor to make it run on natural gas, besides changing the carburetor?"

—DR. H. M. PLATT, Richmond, Texas.

Reply, by Mr. Edmund B. Neil:—Any engine such as the Ford Model T will operate on natural gas provided, as you suggest, that it is equipped with a gas mixing valve in place of the conventional carburetor.

Due to the lower heat content of natural gas as compared with liquid fuels, the power output would be somewhat less unless the compression ratio of the engine were changed. This with the Ford Model T could be accomplished by altering the cylinder head. However, I believe that the difference in power output between the two fuels would not be material unless you wish to obtain all that might be obtained from an engine of this kind.

You should be careful, of course, to use only gas which is comparatively free from dust and preferably low in sulphur, although possibly the kind of gas you intend using is quite clean. With gasoline a minimum sulphur content is ordinarily maintained in refining the fuel, this being necessary to avoid troubles with engine operation.

If you would care to let me know the purpose for which the engine is to be used, together with horsepower load and analysis of gas, I might be able to tell you more specifically what could be expected of the engine.

Mary Celeste

A LITTLE true story of the sea as strange as fiction.

Request:—"What happened to the crew of the sailing vessel, *Mary Celeste;* lost in the 1870's? By whom and on what ocean was she found? Of what was her cargo composed and what disposition was finally made of her?"

—THOMAS P. JORDAN, Scranton, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Harry E. Rieseberg:—This vessel, on its last voyage, cleared from Boston, Mass., for Port au Prince, Haiti, ostensibly with a cargo of valuable general merchandise, valued and insured for $30,000.00. When within a few miles of its destination it went ashore near Miragoane and became a total wreck. The captain, one Parker, promptly sold the cargo, sight unseen, to American Consul Mitchell for the sum of $500.00. Mitchell saved it at some trouble, but lived to wish he hadn't.

When the underwriters' agent arrived on the scene to investigate, he found several peculiar things about the cargo; one case shipped as cutlery and insured for $1,000.00 contained dog collars worth about $50.00; barrels supposed to contain expensive liquors were full of worthless dregs, a consignment of salt fish insured for $5,000.00 was rotten, and other articles mentioned in the bill of lading proved to be in keeping.

Consul Mitchell, not only duped, but outlawed, stood not on order of his going, but cleared out immediately for parts unknown. The captain of the brig was tried in the United States district court in Boston, convicted and sentenced to a long term in prison, where he died three months later.

Her dimensions were as follows: Gross tonnage 282.28, net tonnage 268.17; length 103.0, breadth 25.7, depth 16.2; built in 1861 of wood at Parrsborough, Nova Scotia. Formerly named *Amazon* while under British registry, and later transferred to American registry and named the *Mary Celeste.*

New Guinea

FOR pioneering in this far island one should have a strong body, the ability to stand hardships—and a bit of capital.

Request:—"As a reader of *Adventure* I am writing to you as that magazine's authority on New Guinea. I am a civil engineer four years out of college and am desirous of spending a few years in your part of the world. Understand I am not asking you for a position or the like. I can find that myself. But I would like to know what kind of construction work, if any, is going on on the island.

I have had experience in highway and railroad work, but could tackle anything. I should also like to know where the majority of the work goes—to English, Australian or foreign contractors, or does the government do its own construction work? Is there any special knowledge a young fellow should have in New Guinea? I am a good rifle shot, speak French and Spanish, can drive anything on two or four wheels and have numerous other minor accomplishments.

Is there any special subject or the like which I could brush up in while obtaining a position which might give me a better break.

Thanking you for any trouble to which you may be put."

—STEPHEN C. DAVIS, Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. L. P. B. Armit:—Very pleased to hear from you. At present there is only one railroad in all New Guinea, the 6 miles of 3′ 6″ gage which connects the copper mines near Port Moresby with Bootless Inlet, which is a small harbor 9 miles east of where I live. This line is closed at present owing to the mines being shut down. Over in the neighboring Territory of New Guinea (former German New Guinea) a survey is being made of a projected railroad which is to link up the Edie Creek Goldfields with Salamoa, the goldfield's port in Huon Gulf. I hear the construction of this line is to commence at an early date. The goldfield is some fifty miles from Salamoa, the route being through very rough mountainous country; the goldfield end will be some five thousand to seven thousand feet above the sea.

The development of the lodes and alluvial beds, some of which have proved to be exceedingly rich, has attracted a lot of English and Australian capital to this field. Recently a company with a capital of over five million pounds sterling was formed to take over most of the existing mines, and it is this new company that is surveying the route for the proposed railroad.

While the line is being built transport by aerial services is keeping the miners supplied with food, etc., and it is anticipated that when the line is open for traffic in some three years' time, several million tons of ore will have been opened up for milling. The company is doing its own survey and construction work; English and Australian engineers, etc., are doing the work, the labor being New Guinea natives under European overseers.

I DO not know of any special subjects that you need to brush up; I take it, as a layman, that civil engineering is much the same in America as it is anywhere else. As the population of both the Territory of Papua and the Territory of New Guinea is practically all British, your knowledge of French and Spanish will not help you any, as the people all speak English.

The greatest qualification you should have is a strong body and the facility to stand hardships and the other discomforts that are inseparable from pioneering in a tropical territory. If you know how to pilot an airplane—at present there are no roads suitable for wheeled traffic behind Salamoa—it would, perhaps, be useful. I attach a slip with the names and address of the principal merchants, etc., which may be useful to you.

Route from America to New Guinea is from either San Francisco or Vancouver to Sydney, Australia, thence to Salamoa by Burns Philp Line. I would not advise you to come to New Guinea unless you have sufficient capital to keep you going for a few months until you click with a job. Write again if I can help you with any more information.

Our Experts—They have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

1. **Service**—It is free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached*, are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.

2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. DO NOT send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.

4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

A Complete list of the "Ask Adventure" experts appears in the issue of the fifteenth of each month

THE TRAIL AHEAD—THE NEXT ISSUE OF ADVENTURE, DECEMBER 15th

MAVERICKS

BEGINNING an exciting mystery novel of the West, by *Adventure's* most popular author. Which, of course, means a new story of *Hashknife Hartley* and *Sleepy Stevens*. You will find them on their very best behavior in "Mavericks."

By W. C. TUTTLE

Also

A COMPLETE NOVEL

MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON gives us a story of the American troops in Red Siberia, during the turbulent days that followed in the wake of the War. It is dramatically called "The Song of Death."

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MYSTERY LAKE, a novelette that will keep you guessing, by ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON; THE TOWER OF THE RAVENS, a story of the Crusades, by HAROLD LAMB; RED GIANTS, a story of the Amazon jungle, by ARTHUR O. FRIEL; TAMED, a story of young Tiger Eye, by B. M. BOWER; A LICENSE TO DRIVE, a tale of the Metropolis, by WILLIAM CORCORAN; FLEET ACTION, a story of modern sea warfare, by FRANK WEAD; and NORTH WATER, castaways in the Arctic ice fields, by CAPTAIN H. H. ELKINTON.

"The same advice I gave your Dad . . . Listerine, *often"*

Do you remember—

When the good old family doctor came into the house, how your heart began to thump? You didn't know but what you had cholera morbus or something equally dreadful. You saw yourself dying in no time.

Then his firm gentle hands poked you here and there. His bright kind eyes looked down your gullet. And, oh, what a load left your mind when you learned that your trouble was only a badly inflamed throat and that Listerine would take care of it?

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It is regularly prescribed by the bright, busy young physicians of this day, just as it was by those old timers—bless their souls—who mixed friendship and wisdom with their medicines.

Used full strength, Listerine kills in 15 seconds even the virulent Staphylococcus Aureus (pus) and Bacillus Typhosus (typhoid) germs in counts ranging to 200,000,000. We could not make this statement unless we were prepared to prove it to the entire satisfaction of the medical profession and the U. S. Government. Three well-known bacteriological laboratories have demonstrated this amazing germ-killing power of Listerine. Yet it is so safe it may be used full strength in any body cavity.

Make a habit of gargling systematically with full strength Listerine during nasty weather. It aids in preventing the outbreak of colds and sore throat. And often remedies them when they have developed. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

It checks

SORE THROAT

KILLS 200,000,000 GERMS IN 15 SECONDS

This is the new matched Three-piece Balanced Set, including Golf and Handbag Pencil. For Men, $18.00; for Ladies, $16.50. Others lower.

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Through this Christmas and every coming Christmas, a Lifetime° pen serves on; it is guaranteed to perform like new for the owner's lifetime. Longest-lived, most useful, is this velvet-boxed set, tapered gracefully and Balanced for swift, easy writing. Within this chest are three matched Sheaffer Balanced writing instruments, one of them the new writing companion for golf and handbag. It's a complete pencil with extra leads and eraser, fashioned for a firm grip and so compact that it clips to a watch-chain or carries unnoticed in vanity bag, knickers or dinner coat. Flanked by the pen and pencil that outsell all others in America—what a gift!

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