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A. A. Proctor
EDITOR

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A Story of the Central American Banana Farms

AS THE two men sat down to dinner, Long wished he had invented some reason for not entertaining Harry Keetson. Ordinarily he was overjoyed at the prospect of a guest for a few days. Even the infrequent contacts with the limited personnel of the fruit company—neighbors scattered over some fifty miles of banana plantation—became, through the years, as monotonous as the vast verdant sea of bananas was to the eye. A new face was a treat—even a pasty face like Harry Keetson's, whose features gave the impression of having been molded with a putty knife and whose black eyebrows seemed to have been stuck on hurriedly as an afterthought. But Long felt strangely disturbed as he looked at Keetson across the table.

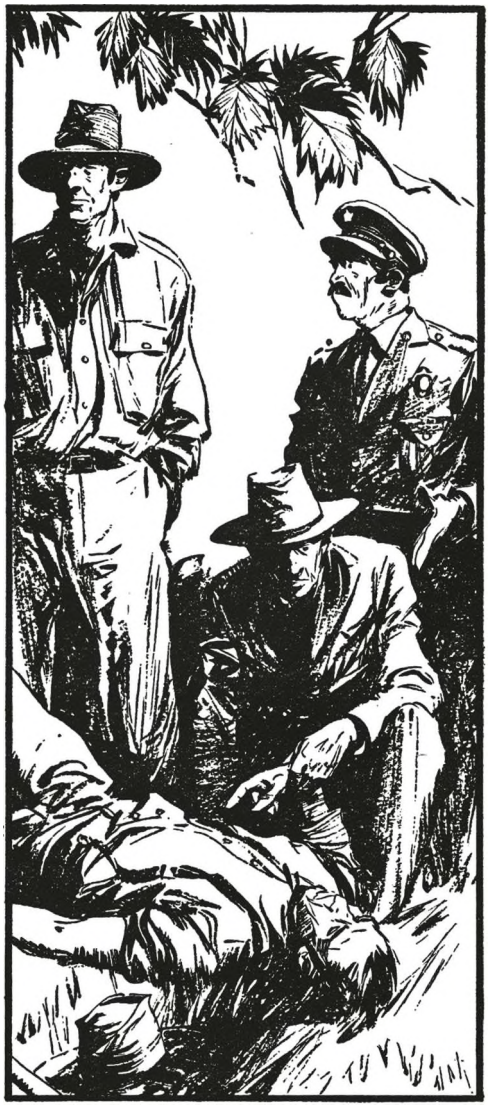
Keetson had not changed much in the three years since Long had last seen him. There was still the noisy self-assertion about him that had prevented Long from accepting him as a true friend before, although the two men had never been enemies. There was still a sly, intangible undercurrent of insincerity that seemed ever present beneath Keetson's boisterous exterior.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Keetson, picking up his spoon. "Black bean soup and pigs' tails! Getting promoted to district superintendent hasn't changed you a bit. You have the same tastes as when I was growing bananas on the next farm to you. I'll bet you've even got the same cook you had when I quit the fruit company."

Long nodded.

"Same cook," he said. "And she has the same scar on her cheek to remind her of you—and the time you hit her with a bottle."

Keetson burst into a loud and grating laugh. The sound affected Long's spine as painfully as the screech of a file drawn sharply across a metal edge. Yet no sign of displeasure crossed his



RIVER PICK-UP

By

L G. BLOCHMAN

tanned, square cut face—a mature, virile face.

"I guess I always was a cut-up when I had a few drinks in me," roared Keetson. "I'll bet that cook wishes she'd put arsenic in my soup when she sees who's eating dinner with you tonight." Keetson guffawed again. "But I guess there's plenty of people around this district that wouldn't mind poisoning old Harry Keetson. Remember that *caporal* I threw off the launch that time? What was his name, now?"

"Gaetano. He still furnishes labor for us."

"That's it—Gaetano. He thought he was a tough *hombre,* but he was sure scared of the 'gators when I knocked him in the river."

Keetson chuckled at the memory. Suddenly he pointed his soup spoon at a third plate at the end of the table.

"Who else is going to eat with us?" he asked.

"My clerk," said Long. "He lives in the bungalow with me—young chap by the name of Schulbacher."

"Schulbacher?" Keetson's woolen eyebrows lifted slightly.

"You don't know him," said Long. "He's been here only a few months. His name's Juan Maximo Schulbacher. He comes from one of these German coffee families that try so hard to Latinize themselves. They sent him to Europe to school, but when the coffee market went bad he came back to the Caribbean to make his own way. He will, too. He's a smart chap. Speaks English with a Spanish accent and Spanish with a German accent—"

"Is he the fellow that owns that whole drugstore full of bottles in the bathroom?"

Long smiled under his trim brown mustache.

"Schulbacher is a bit of a health crank," he said. "He's always gargling or spraying himself. And he uses such

strong germicidal soap that whenever he washes himself the bathroom smells exactly like a hospital— Here he comes now."

A screen door slammed on the veranda and Schulbacher made his appearance.

He was a frail, blue eyed youth—one of those fair skinned, tow headed men who seem as much at home in the tropics as a well groomed Maltese on a back fence. Long imagined that the youth's transparent cheeks turned even a shade paler as, pulling out his chair to sit down, he looked at Keetson.

"Schulbacher, meet Harry Keetson," said the superintendent.

Schulbacher remained standing, clutching the back of his chair as tightly as if he were afraid of falling. He stared at Keetson with his mouth open. His jaws closed with a snap. He nodded curtly and sat down clumsily, knocking against the table as if drunk, spilling soup on the tablecloth.

"What was that name again?" asked Keetson, with a note of mockery in his voice.

He extended his hand across the table with exaggerated heartiness.

"Schulbacher," said the youth through tight, colorless lips. He shook hands briefly.

"Of course, of course. Schulbacher. How could I forget it? We *have* met before, haven't we, Mr. Schulbacher?"

"I—possibly," faltered Schulbacher. "I don't recall—"

"Now let me see," pondered Keetson. His sallow forehead was wrinkled in deep thought, but a sneer hovered about the corners of his mouth. "Maybe my memory is better than yours. I wonder where it was we could have met?"

"I've been pretty much all over the Caribbean. I was born in these parts, you know," said Schulbacher, with an obvious effort to be casual.

He started eating his soup. Long noticed that his hand trembled as it conveyed his spoon to his mouth.

"MR. KEETSON used to be overseer at Zoltec Farm," Long broke in.

"Are you once more back with the fruit company, Mr. Keetson?" Schulbacher inquired.

"I should say not," Keetson replied. "I'm on my way to New York, but my steamer stops at Puerto Justo for two days to load bananas. Well, the sight of those red fruit cars on the pier made me homesick for the old life. And what's a man to do with two days in Puerto Justo, anyhow? So I dropped in to see if any of my old sidekicks were still in the division—and here I am."

"You'll find a few old-timers around," said Long. "Bender is overseer at Zoltec now."

"Nervous Ned Bender, that long legged old son of a gun? I'll run over and see him tomorrow."

"And I suppose you remember Don Carlos Vida—"

"I'll say I remember Carlos Vida. And I'll bet he remembers me. He's another guy that'd probably like to see me kick off."

"Strangely enough, he bears you not the slightest grudge," said Long. "Don Carlos is a gentleman—and a philosopher."

"Well, of course it wasn't altogether my fault that he got in that mess. The evidence sure was against him." Keetson turned to Schulbacher. "This man Vida was my timekeeper when somebody robbed a commissary car and killed the Jamaican clerk. It sure looked like Vida did it—"

"Investigation cleared Don Carlos completely," said Long. "He's growing his own bananas now on an independent's contract with the company . . ."

"On that land of his across the river?" asked Keetson.

"He's made a damned good *finca* of it," Long replied. "He's giving us fine fruit—plenty of nines*."

"It seems like yesterday that I took Carlos out on his first river pick-up from

*A banana stem with nine "hands" or clusters.

Zoltec," mused Keetson. "Say, are you still picking up fruit along the river?"

Long nodded.

"We have a pick-up in the morning," he said.

"Say, I'd like to go along, just for old times' sake. Mind if I ride the launch, maybe stop off and eat *fritos* with the foreman of the upriver labor camp?"

"If you like," said Long. "The launches still start at 3:00 A.M, you know."

"I have a little alarm clock," said Keetson. "Will you have one of the launches stop back of the bungalow for me?"

While the houseboy was carrying out the soup plates and bringing in a platter of boiled beef, Long got up, twisted the crank on the phone to ring the *campo marino*. He gave orders for Keetson to be picked up.

After the meal Keetson pulled a handful of long, shapely cigars from his pocket.

"Have a *magnifico*?" he offered. "Or can you stand a real cigar after your steady diet of *puros* and King Bees?"

Long accepted the cigar, peeling off the red-and-gold band.

Schulbacher refused.

"No, thanks. I—I rarely smoke," he said.

"What's the matter, young fellow? You're looking kind of peaked."

"I'm not feeling well," said Schulbacher, getting up from the table. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight."

"Better take some quinine," Long suggested.

"I'll be turning in early myself, if I'm going to get up at three," said Keetson, lighting his cigar. "But first I'm going to smoke, directly in the path of whatever trade winds you can furnish tonight, Long, old boy."

As he walked toward the veranda Keetson presented a picture of untidy elegance. His silk suit was rumpled, his silk shirt was soiled at the collar, his black bow tie was knotted almost under one ear.

In distinct contrast was the neat fit of Long's whites to his compact, well muscled form. There was something quietly British about Long, something that suggested the sea, strength in old traditions, a long career in far places. He was the only man in the division who could wear a sun helmet and get away with it. His American colleagues, addicted to felts and Stetsons, regarded sun helmets as "Limey swank". But they accepted one on Long, since he gave the impression of having probably been born with a sun helmet on his head, a pipe in his mouth, and a knowledge of India, the tea gardens of Ceylon, and the tin fields of Malaya in his infant experience.

Long had a hard time going to sleep after saying good night to Keetson. The presence of Keetson under his roof stimulated his mind to resurrect in perturbed vividness the half forgotten details of Keetson and Don Carlos Vida and the commissary car robbery.

Don Carlos was a Guatemalteco, one of the few among his educated countrymen willing to forsake the pictuesque highlands to work in the coastal plains that Americans have reclaimed from jungle and miasmic swamps. He had shocked his family by refusing to embrace a political career and by using his birthright to acquire banana lands. In order to learn the rudiments of banana culture, Don Carlos had engaged himself to work as timekeeper on a fruit company farm for a year or two before starting to farm for himself.

During his first year occurred the robbery of the commissary car, which had been marooned by floods about half a mile from Zoltec Farm. The same floods had made it impossible for the armored pay car to make its usual rounds over the company's narrow gage railway lines, and a considerable amount of cash had been stored in the safe of the rolling commissary overnight, pending an adjustment of payrolls. That same night the Jamaican commissary clerk was killed and the safe robbed.

Keetson, one of the first called to the scene, found Don Carlos' revolver in the car, and promptly turned his timekeeper over to the authorities.

Don Carlos had an airtight alibi. Witnesses established the time of the crime by the sound of the shot. Don Carlos could prove that he was three miles away with Ned Bender, a fellow timekeeper, at that moment. The mystery was never solved.

There was some indignation among the banana farmers at the readiness with which Keetson had accused Don Carlos, but Carlos himself, an easy going chap, had never held it against Keetson.

"Keetson is an Anglo-Saxon," he used to say, with a good natured shrug. "He was born with that impartial sense of duty peculiar to his race. It is different from our illogical, elastic Latin loyalties, but I quite understood it."

It was quite possible, Long reflected, that Keetson was telling the truth when he said that his presence now was purely accidental, due to his ship's calling at Puerto Justo for fruit. It was also possible that his request to go along on the river pick-up had nothing to do with the fact that one of the launches would be collecting some two hundred and fifty stems of bananas from Don Carlos' farm during the morning. Still . . .

Long got out of bed. The night was unusually sultry. He went to the window. Not a breath of breeze rustled the banana leaves in the darkness beyond the little district office building that adjoined the bungalow. Heat lightning flickered faintly behind the hills piled along the Honduranian border. Long found a glass of water, then came back to bed. He fell asleep, wishing for a good thunderstorm to clear the atmosphere.

He was awakened by the idea that he had heard a bell ringing. The sensation of sound had persisted for some time before he roused himself to full consciousness. He sat up, filled with a vague sense of apprehension he did not understand. The ringing of a telephone at night was nothing unusual, since there were perhaps twenty phones on the district line. But he had the definite impression of having heard his own signal —one long ring and two short. He listened. He heard a muttering that swelled to a rumble and exploded in an earth-shaking thunder clap. He heard rain beating down with deafening monotony, rolling a gigantic tattoo on the vast kettledrum that was ten thousand acres of broad banana leaves. Then he heard the phone—one long ring and two short.

He swung his feet to the floor and started for the phone. As he opened the door to the hall he was surprised for a moment to find an oil lamp burning there. Then he remembered he had left the light for Keetson's early morning rising, since the district power plant ceased to function at 10:00 P.M. The bag of sandwiches and the thermos bottle of coffee which he had told the cook to make for Keetson were gone from beside the lamp. He looked at the clock over the phone. It was nearly 3:30. The phone rang again—one long, two short. Long lifted the receiver.

A series of scratching, sputtering line noises sounded in his ear. The electric storm was harassing the company's phone system. He said—

"Hello."

"Hello. Long?" asked a voice, barely audible through the humming and ripping of the wires.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Harry Keetson there?"

"Keetson's gone out on the river pick-up," said Long.

The reply, in an excited voice that caused the diaphragm of the receiver to vibrate unpleasantly in Long's ear, was half lost in the whir of line noises. Long heard snatches:

"Keetson . . . Good God, follow . . . Keetson's heading . . . follow him . . ."

"Who's speaking?" demanded the district superintendent.

Only a buzzing answered him.

"Who is this?" he repeated. Still the line noises; no voice. He moved the hook, calling hello. The connection was broken.

LONG hung up and sat staring at the instrument a moment. Because of the bad connection he had not recognized the voice of the man who called him. He lifted the receiver again and rang the central operator at fruit company headquarters at Platanera.

"This is the district superintendent at Dos Rios," said Long. "Did you call me within the last five minutes?"

The Jamaican operator said he had not.

"Did you put through a call to me from Puerto Justo or Lobos district?"

No, the operator had not handled any calls whatever for the past hour.

Again Long hung up. The call had evidently come from some one on his own line. He ran over in his mind the names of the score of persons who might have called. Suddenly he turned the crank of the phone. He was not going through the lengthy process of trying to trace the call. The voice had been earnest in its excitement and determined in its purpose. It merely strengthened the premonitions which Long himself had been trying to put aside. He would follow the advice it was obviously trying to give. He turned the handle again. He was ringing the *campo marino* . . .

After several minutes a sleepy voice answered. Long spoke in Spanish:

"Hello. I want a launch immediately . . . I want . . . What's the matter with the *Embustero?* . . . Why isn't it? . . . It's in the water, isn't it? . . . All right then, tell the mechanic to do the best he can. Get the crew out and have the engine running . . . No, don't come for me. It will be quicker for me to come up to the *campo* by motor . . . In five minutes."

He hung up. Throwing a slicker over his shoulders, he ran down the veranda steps. In the center of the lawn a large bell was mounted on a post. Long rang the bell as a signal for his motorboy. The clangor resounded in the night for a full minute.

When he reentered the bungalow he was met by Schulbacher, rubbing his eyes.

"What's happening?" demanded Schulbacher in sleepy alarm.

"Nothing. I've got to go down to the *campo marino,* that's all."

"Did Mr. Keetson get off all right?"

It suddenly occurred to Long that he was not even certain that Keetson had left. He glanced across the hall to the two doors, one leading to Schulbacher's room, the other to Keetson's. Keetson's door was ajar. Long stepped over, threw it open. The bed was empty.

"Apparently he's gone," said Long.

Schulbacher mumbled something about a headache and went back to bed.

Long put his clothes on. After a moment's hesitation he slipped an automatic into his pocket.

The motor had been rolled out of the shed and stood on the rails in front of the bungalow. The motorboy said he had already called the dispatcher and got his *via.* Long climbed on the car, switched on the ignition and hooked his forefinger around the throttle. The motorboy pushed the car until the engine coughed into action, then he jumped on.

The rain had stopped and the air was cooler. The motor rapidly gained speed as it sputtered down a straight stretch of track between dark overhanging cliffs of banana plants. Tiny winged insects beat against Long's face. The car rushed through the night, the flanged wheels rattling and screaming against the rails.

Rounding a curve, approaching Zoltec Farm, Long was puzzled to see a light in the overseer's bungalow. Bender usually sent Smith, his timekeeper, on the river pick-up. He rarely went himself. Bender had known Harry Keetson. Bender had furnished Don Carlos with an alibi, three years ago. Perhaps

Bender was the one who had telephoned.

Long pulled the brake lever toward him, sprang off the car and ran between hibiscus hedges to Bender's bungalow.

A mantle lamp stood on a table, flooding the veranda with a greenish glow. Long called. No one answered. He went in, looked into all the rooms. Neither Smith nor Bender was there. Bender must have gone out on the pick-up after all.

Long went back to the motor, sped along a Y, at the base of which was the *campo marino*.

As soon as Long stepped aboard the *Embustero* the lights in the launch winked out. The craft nosed away from the shore, swung upstream. The captain, a Guatemalteco, navigated best in the dark, feeling his way among the shifting shoals and snags of the tropical river by watching the reflection of the vague light of the sky on the dull gleam of the current.

The sky, overcast, was of a uniform lead color except for darker patches on the somber bellies of rain clouds. Scraps of jungle along the banks stamped out weird black silhouettes, with ceiba trees raising imperious, monarchial heads above the confused shadows of tangled growth. Inside the launch a single point of light glowed above the engine—the mechanic smoking an odorous stogy.

The launch chugged steadily forward against the current. On one bank a stretch of banana plantation pointed skyward with the black outlines of numberless curved, crossed blades, like the sabers of spectral troops of dragoons.

These bananas belonged to Don Carlos Vida. His house was half a mile farther upstream. Long debated with himself over going ashore here. He decided he had better continue his pursuit of the other two launches, which would ordinarily stop at Don Carlos Vida's only on the trip back, after they had picked up the lighters spotted upstream.

The captain steered with uncanny accuracy. The shadow of a ruffle on the surface of the river sent him swerving away from an unseen sandbar. Now he would skim so close to the dark bank that he brushed the overhanging growth. Leaves and branches swished drops of water into the launch, which would then dart into midstream, now to the opposite bank.

Rounding a bend, they caught their first sight of the other two launches. The other craft were far ahead, mere dark blurs with gray tails of exhaust vapor.

A few seconds later the engine of the *Embustero* coughed and died. Long swore one of his rare and restrained oaths. The launch drifted backward downstream. The captain swung it into the bank. A boy jumped out to make fast a line about a clump of *caña brava*.

The mechanic explained to Long that he had been overhauling the engine the day before, that he had not finished properly, and that he had merely thrown in the last few bolts hurriedly when Long had phoned that he would need the launch. He thought he could fix it fairly quickly.

Long lighted a *puro* and smoked while he waited. The trees and the objects on the bank began to take on a little anemic color. The mechanic tinkered with the engine. In forty minutes he had it running again.

It was now broad daylight. The river was no longer a pale reflection, but a wide, swift, coffee colored torrent. Parrots screamed, flying overhead in pairs.

ROUNDING a bend ahead, one of the other launches hove into sight. She was carrying her two lighters, one tied to each side, and had the awkward, squat appearance of a mother duck trying to spread protective wings over two overgrown ducklings. The launch with its lighters came about, swung into the bank heading upstream and tied up. Peons laid planks over the lighters and made contact with the shore.

Long came alongside and hailed a

figure he saw lying prone in the stern. The figure sat up, adjusting its Stetson and rubbing its eyes. It was Smith, curly headed timekeeper from Zoltec.

"Did you pick up a man named Keetson back of my house this morning?" asked Long. "Or did the other launch take him?"

"We picked him up, all right," said Smith in a Southern drawl.

"Where is he then?"

"Why, he asked to be put ashore at Don Carlos Vida's *finca,*" drawled Smith. "He said he was a friend of Don Carlos and wanted to see him."

"Did he go to Don Carlos' house?"

"I reckon so," said Smith. "Gaetano walked a piece with him to show him how to get there. He told Gaetano we should pick him up when we came by again later in the morning."

Long glanced toward the bank where Gaetano stood, a wiry figure in black trousers and a shirt brown with banana sap. In his left hand gleamed the nickel of a tabulating machine. He clicked up the number of stems of green bananas passing him on the backs of peons, who walked up the planks into the lighters. In his right hand he dangled a long, murderous looking machete. Gaetano ignored the district superintendent's presence.

"By the way, Smith," said Long suddenly, "how did Bender happen to come along on the pick-up today?"

"He didn't, sir."

"You're sure he isn't in the other launch?"

"Quite sure. I know he was at the house when we started out, because I phoned him there from the *campo marino.* I'd forgot to tell him about an errand I wanted him to do for me this morning."

"Did you tell him you were picking up Keetson?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I mentioned the matter."

"Thanks. See you later, Smith."

Cold with apprehension, the district superintendent gave an order. His launch drifted away from the lighters, the engine started, and he was headed back downstream.

Ten minutes later he put in at a break in the thick growth along the bank. Half of a banana leaf, trimmed like a flag, was stuck upright in the silt of the cleared bank as a signal to the launches that fruit was to be picked up here.

Hurrying to the house, Long found Don Carlos Vida sitting down to breakfast alone. Don Carlos was still young, but he had begun to grow portly. He was given to leather puttees, bright pink shirts and stiff brimmed Stetsons. He always wore one of his many ornate pistols; also a small, silky mustache.

"*Buenos dias, amigo mío,*" he greeted Long, immediately switching to breezy English. "How the hell are you?"

The district superintendent lost no time in formalities.

"Where's Harry Keetson?" he inquired without further ado.

Don Carlos cocked his head to one side.

"Keetson? Didn't you tell me last year he was in Colombia? Or was it Brazil?"

"Keetson's on your *finca,* Don Carlos," said Long. "He came along on the river pick-up and the launch put him ashore here less than an hour ago. Do you mean you haven't seen him?"

Don Carlos made an extravagant gesture of protest.

"But I have been up and dressed scarcely ten minutes, my friend," he said. "I have just this minute sat down to eat my *desayuno.*"

"Then Keetson hasn't been in your bungalow?"

"He may be wandering around among the bananas," said Don Carlos. "You know it is not so easy to find this house, for a man who has never been here before."

"Then I'll have a look round," said Long.

He left Don Carlos' house immediately and headed toward the river. He

hoped to find Keetson's footprints on the bank and trace their direction. He expected difficulty, since the ground among the banana plants was covered knee-deep with grass and rank growth.

Halfway to the river he stopped. Off the main path he noticed that the high grass had been flattened out in a considerable swath, as if a man or animal had been floundering about in it. Some ten feet away he saw a shovel on the ground. About twenty feet farther, at the end of the depression in the grass, he saw Keetson.

Keetson was lying on his back, staring at the sky with stark and bulging eyes. His usually sallow face was dark with congestion. The fingers of one hand were twisted into the breast of his silk shirt. In the fingers of the other, stretched away from him, was a half smoked cigar that had been extinguished by the wet grass.

It took Long but a few seconds to satisfy himself that Keetson was dead.

Two minutes later he was at the riverside.

"Cross to the Zoltec labor camp," he told the captain of the launch. "Tell the foreman to phone the *comandancia* that there is a dead man at Don Carlos Vida's. Then have him phone Dr. Paz at the company hospital, tell him the same thing, and have him come at once. Wait for them and bring them both across the river."

On his way back to the house Long tried to analyze a confused train of ideas. He thought of Gaetano, standing on the bank, a machete in his hand, checking fruit. He thought of his cook, with a scar on her face, making coffee for Harry Keetson. He thought of the mysterious telephone call, and Bender's strange absence from his bungalow.

Don Carlos was finishing his breakfast. Long sat down at the table opposite him. As he did so his eye caught sight of a bit of red-and-gold paper on the floor. Another thought rushed to his mind, a thought that he had been deliberately avoiding. He stooped, picked up the gaudy bit of paper, but kept it within the closed fingers of his right hand.

"Well, did you find Señor Keetson?" asked Don Carlos.

"Yes," said Long.

"Is he not coming in to say hello to an old friend?"

"He is not," said Long, drawing two native stogies from his pocket with his left hand. "Have a *puro*?"

"You know I don't smoke cigars, Señor Long." Don Carlos smiled.

"I thought you had changed your habits," said Long. "I just found this *magnifico* cigar band on the floor."

Don Carlos' smile congealed. A shadow of anxiety flickered in his friendly brown eyes.

"What does that mean, Señor Long?" he asked after a brief pause.

"It means you weren't telling the truth when you said that Keetson had not been in your house."

"I did not say Keetson was not here. I only said— But what is the matter, my friend? Why look at me thus?"

"Let's go outside, Don Carlos," said Long. "I want to show you something."

Don Carlos was nervously voluble as he walked beside the district superintendent. He saw Keetson's body without Long's having to point it out. Immediately his demeanor changed. The glib chatter, with which he had been trying to hide the ebbing of his usual easy-going spirits, suddenly stopped. He stared, his mouth open.

A bright cloud of white and green butterflies whirled lightly above the purplish, grimacing face of the dead man, then deserted him for a black, rotting stem of bananas on the ground nearby. The sweetish fragrance of fermenting bananas permeated the atmosphere. Long was watching every wrinkle of expression on the portly planter's face.

"*Por dios!* How did this happen, my friend?" Don Carlos broke the silence at last.

"I thought that perhaps you might be able to tell me, Don Carlos," said Long quietly.

Don Carlos started toward the body. Long caught his arm, made him walk far around in order not to disturb the tracks and imprints in the grass.

Finally withdrawing his fascinated gaze from the face of the corpse, Don Carlos let his eyes fall upon the outstretched arm. He clutched Long, then pointed.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

The dead hand that protruded from Keetson's soiled silk cuff was turned palm upward. On the underside of the exposed forearm were two tiny red marks, like pin pricks.

"A snake bite!" Don Carlos continued. "See the fang marks? Our friend has been struck down by a *barba amarilla,* no doubt."

"I hope so, Don Carlos," said Long slowly. "For your sake."

Don Carlos turned eyes of foreboding upon the superintendent.

"You believe I killed Keetson, my friend?"

"I can't imagine you killing any one, Don Carlos. Still—there is strong motive, and I'm afraid there is circumstantial evidence."

Don Carlos groaned.

"Circumstantial evidence again," he said. "I am to be eternally condemned by circumstantial evidence, it seems."

"Listen to me, Don Carlos." Long gripped his hand. "I know you must have had good reason for whatever you may have done. Still, I have had to send for the *comandante.* He can not get here for at least half an hour. In half an hour you can be in Honduras. I can look after your *finca* until matters blow over."

Don Carlos shook his head.

"Thank you, *amigo;*" he said. "But I will wait for the *comandante.* Let us go to the house for a drink of *olla* while we are waiting. I am trembling like a dog about to be whipped for something he has not done."

WHEN the perspiring Guatemalteco had poured out two stiff portions of clear, potent sugar cane spirits, Long asked once again—

"Why did you conceal the fact that Keetson had been in your house, Don Carlos?"

Don Carlos downed his *olla* at a gulp and wiped his lips before he said thoughtfully—

"Perhaps I will tell you that—after the *comandante* has come."

The *comandante* and Dr. Paz arrived together. Dr. Paz, a gray haired, kind eyed Guatemalteco, was slightly more corpulent than Don Carlos, and the *comandante* was several bulges larger than the doctor.

Dr. Paz nodded his head gravely as he looked at the body.

"So Mr. Keetson has come back to us," he said in a soft voice that seemed to liquify all consonants.

Long pointed out the two red marks on the arm of the corpse.

"Couldn't a snake's fangs have made those, Doctor?" he inquired.

Dr. Paz made deprecating sounds with his tongue.

"Snake, if you like," he replied. "A snake Mr. Keetson has been carrying in his bosom for some time. See here—" He pulled the sleeve higher to display similar marks. Then he showed the other arm to be full of tiny scars. "Morphine," he explained. "He had started using it before he left the company. One had only to look at him."

"Then an overdose might have killed him?" Long asked.

Dr. Paz shook his head. He was bending over the body, his skilful fingers—fingers which had saved scores of lives—seeking the cause of death.

"No," said Dr. Paz. "Mr. Keetson's death, from all outward symptoms, was caused by asphyxia. The discoloration of the face, as you see—that comes from suffocation, from strangulation."

"But there are no footprints near the body," said Long. "He seems to have

been alone where he fell."

"And he fell face up," commented the *comandante,* who was watching the proceedings with baffled interest. "He could not have smothered himself to death against the soft ground."

"And there are no marks of fingers on the throat," added Dr. Paz thoughtfully.

"Perhaps apoplexy?" suggested Don Carlos.

"This man was not apoplectic," said the doctor, going through Keetson's pockets.

He removed a stubby automatic, which he handed to the *comandante,* and an empty hypodermic syringe, wrapped in a silk handkerchief. After a casual examination, Dr. Paz replaced the syringe in its handkerchief and put it into his own pocket.

"Who was the last to see this man alive?" asked the *comandante.*

Long tried hard not to look at Don Carlos.

"I suppose I was," said Don Carlos. "I offered him coffee in my house about one hour ago. He refused."

"There may have been another," Long offered. "A *caporal* on one of our launches, a man named Gaetano, walked to the house with Keetson."

"Please get him for me," said the *comandante.* "It grieves me much that I must ask you, Don Carlos, to place yourself temporarily in my custody. And you as well, Señor Long. And this Gaetano—at least until we have a report from Dr. Paz."

"I am taking the body to the hospital for autopsy," said Dr. Paz. "Won't you organize your investigation there?"

"I'd suggest my bungalow," said Long, "inasmuch as the dead man's belongings are still there.'

"Then I will join you there this afternoon," said the doctor.

As they were loading Keetson's body aboard the *Embustero,* another launch swung into the bank, with a bright green load of bananas gleaming in the dull red lighters alongside.

The *comandante* immediately took possession of Gaetano, who seemed neither surprised at the death of Keetson nor much concerned over his own arrest.

At Long's suggestion Smith turned over the thermos bottle to Dr. Paz for analysis of the remaining coffee.

The curly headed timekeeper seemed greatly interested by Keetson's death and suggested that he, too, be taken into custody.

"You finish collecting your fruit," Long directed. "We're loading a ship at Puerto Justo tonight."

THE arrival of Long, the *comandante,* Don Carlos and Gaetano at the district superintendent's bungalow was followed by much confused bustle. The *comandante,* anxious to begin his investigation, was faced with the problem of not knowing as yet whether he was investigating murder, an accident, or merely death from natural causes. He temporized by ordering a detail of two soldiers from the *comandancia* to stand guard outside the bungalow while he questioned Gaetano.

While the *comandante* held court in the brown wicker furniture of the veranda, industriously learning nothing from Gaetano, Long was on the telephone trying to locate Ned Bender. He was extremely curious to know where Bender was at 3:30 in the morning, but Bender could not be located. Long came out to the veranda and saw Juan Maximo Schulbacher leave the little yellow office building next door and walk rapidly toward the bungalow.

"Excuse me," said Schulbacher, "but I happened to lift the receiver and overhear you phoning for Mr. Bender. I thought I would tell you that Mr. Bender came by here about two hours ago. He was very much excited. He had heard that some one was dead at Don Carlos Vida's *finca* and he wanted to find out who." Schulbacher scanned the faces on the veranda. He nodded to-

ward Don Carlos, smiling. "I am glad it was not Don Carlos."

"It was Harry Keetson," said Long.

Schulbacher's mouth opened—and shut.

"Where is Bender now?" continued Long.

"He is riding his farm. He said he would come by again at noon."

"You'd better stay around yourself, Schulbacher. The *comandante* will probably want to ask questions about last night."

Schulbacher took a chair. Long called the houseboy and told him to ask the cook if she could provide a light lunch for his uninvited guests. The houseboy, with ill concealed confusion, said that the cook was not there.

"Where is she?" demanded Long. He was thinking again of a scarred cheek and a thermos bottle.

The houseboy said a man had come with word that the cook's mother was very ill, and the cook had started walking to the town of Dos Rios early that morning.

"Then cut us some cold meat, some bread and some cheese," ordered Long. He wondered if he ought to communicate the news of the cook's absence to the *comandante*. Perhaps it would be better to await a report of Dr. Paz's analysis of the coffee in the thermos bottle.

Before he made up his mind, Ned Bender dismounted from his mule outside Long's hibiscus hedge, and with long strides joined the group on the veranda. Bender was a tall, bony man with dangling arms and nervous hands. He seemed greatly relieved to see Don Carlos, but showed continued agitation as he lighted a cigaret. He smoked in short, nervous puffs.

"Where were you at 3:30 this morning, Bender?" Long asked without preliminaries.

"I was home."

"You weren't there when I looked in."

"I was there. I phoned you from there as soon as Smith told me he was picking up Harry Keetson. I couldn't hear you, the connection was so bad, so I slipped on some clothes and started over to talk with you. I was walking when I saw your motor pass."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I was dumfounded to hear Harry Keetson was back. I always had an idea that the reason he tried to frame Don Carlos at the time of the commissary robbery was that Don Carlos knew something about him. The only reason I could see for Keetson's return was to settle something with Don Carlos, and I thought Carlos ought to be protected. I'm glad to see it wasn't necessary."

Don Carlos shifted uneasily in his chair. The *comandante* cleared his throat.

"We all sympathize with you, Don Carlos," said the *comandante*. "But in my official capacity there are certain explanations due—"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"I will explain," said Don Carlos solemnly. "I will begin at the beginning. I was awakened just before dawn today by Mr. Keetson. I was astounded. I had no idea he was within a thousand miles. 'Do you hold a grudge against me, Don Carlos?' he asked. I said I did not. 'Then promise on your honor that what passes between us will be for no other ears.' I promised. I break that promise now, gentlemen, not because I consider myself released by Mr. Keetson's death, for I was taught that it is more wicked to injure the dead than the living, but as the lesser of two evils. Since I stand accused in your eyes, I would rather have you look upon me as a violator of confidences than as a murderer . . .

"I got up. I offered Mr. Keetson coffee. He refused. I drank myself. He said, 'Carlos, do you know who robbed the commissary car three years ago?' I said no. He said, 'I did, Carlos. I killed that black fool and robbed the safe.' I was speechless. He went on.

'Where is the giant ceiba tree that used to stand where your land makes a *bolsa* into the river?' I said it was cut down when I cleared the land for planting. He said, 'But the stump? That tree had an immense buttress. I have searched everywhere, but I can not find it.' I told him the river had flooded the *bolsa* last year, and the stump was probably buried in silt.

" 'You must help me find it, Carlos,' he said. 'The money from the commissary is buried in a metal box in the roots of that ceiba. Half the money is yours, Carlos'. I told him I could countenance no such bargain. I would keep his secret, since I had given my word, but I would have to give back the money to its rightful owners. He sneered. 'Why do you suppose I hid the money on your land?' he asked. 'Didn't all the other evidence point to you? This will merely incriminate you further. I will see that it does—unless you show me where the ceiba was.' He was angry. His face was getting red.

"I wanted time to think. I gave him false directions. He showed me a pistol. 'If you are playing tricks on me, Carlos—' he said. Then he took a shovel and went away from the house. That was the last I saw of him—until Mr. Long showed me the body. That is the truth, gentlemen. I swear it."

There was a heavy silence on the veranda—a hot, oppressive silence that seemed to be part of the steamy atmosphere surging in from the somnolent, sunstruck outdoors. The slightest movement on the veranda caught Long's notice. Bender was nervously mopping the perspiration that streamed down his face. Schulbacher was blotting the palms of his translucent hands on the knees of his white drill trousers. Gaetano seemed to be asleep. The *comandante* nodded sympathetically at Don Carlos, who was running fat, restless fingers through his black hair.

Suddenly Schulbacher leaned forward in his chair. His lips moved, as though he wanted to say something yet could not make up his mind to pronounce the words. He was staring at the *comandante*.

Long got up, walked quickly to his side, took the youth's arm.

"Come inside, Schulbacher," he said. "I want to ask you something—about those cleaning and pruning reports."

Long turned to the *comandante* for authorization.

"Permiso, Señor Comandante?"

The *comandante* waved his hand. Long took Schulbacher to the latter's room and closed the door.

"Sit down," ordered Long.

Schulbacher complied. He again began pressing the palms of his hands against his knees.

"Schulbacher," said Long, "I've been thinking about the way you acted last night when I introduced you to Harry Keetson. Obviously you weren't telling the truth when you tried to give the impression you'd never met him bebefore. You knew him, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied Schulbacher in a hollow voice. "I knew him—in Santa Juana."

"What were you doing in Santa Juana, Schulbacher?"

Schulbacher's blue eyes were dilated.

"I was a pharmacist," he said, "in a large drug importing firm."

"And Keetson?"

Schulbacher swallowed several times. He moistened his lips. His eyes bulged as he pointed a trembling finger at Long. He half rose from his seat.

"You know!" Schulbacher shrieked. "Keetson told you about me! You—"

Schulbacher dropped back into his chair with an intake of breath that was almost a sob. Long did not move.

"I may as well tell you everything," Schulbacher resumed. He no longer shouted, but his voice was shrill and unsteady with emotion. "The story has been like a cancer in my breast. I am glad to get rid of it at last. It has been plaguing me and torturing me, just as if I were really guilty. Harry Keetson was an intimate friend of the proprie-

tor of my firm in Santa Juana. He was representative for some American manufacturing chemists. I had frequent contacts with him, as I did much of the buying for my company.

"One day, out of a clear sky, I was arrested for embezzlement. I was accused of defrauding my firm out of thousands of dollars through supposed purchases which I did not make. There was a perfect case against me. I was amazed at the details which some one had devised to incriminate me. If I had been the judge, I should have found the same verdict. But Keetson, when he testified against me, gave himself away to me. I knew then where the money went, but I had no proofs. Keetson was a trusted friend of my boss. I was convicted. I was sentenced to twenty years in prison—"

Schulbacher paused. He mopped his face with agitated fingers.

"Twenty years," he repeated, shaking his head. "I served a hundred years the first six months. Do you know what a tropical prison is like? I do. And I am afraid of nothing any more—nothing except a return to the agony of those months. I was starved. I had scurvy. I nearly died of dysentery and fever. I was devoured by insects. Thank God, after six months I escaped!"

Again Schulbacher paused. He closed his eyes.

The sound of a motor vibrated on the hot silence in a crescendo of explosions, then stopped. Long opened the door. He saw Dr. Paz getting out of the automobile with flanged wheels which stood on the rails in front of the house.

THE doctor beckoned to the *comandante* as he came through the double screen doors to the veranda. The two men walked toward Long. There was a suppressed charge of excitement manifesting itself beneath the doctor's usually benign and placid mien.

"Did you analyze that coffee, Doctor?" asked Long.

Dr. Paz ignored the question to ask one of his own.

"Where did Mr. Keetson sleep last night?" he inquired.

Long showed him. The *comandante* and Schulbacher came along.

The doctor went through the dead man's effects. He seemed particularly interested in another hypodermic syringe, a tin box of white cubes and two bottles of colorless solution. He sniffed at everything he touched.

He went into the adjoining bathroom and examined at length a medicine cabinet containing a regiment of bottles—antiseptic sprays, mouth washes, germicidal soaps. He placed the tip of one tapering forefinger on the cork of a bottle labeled hydrogen peroxide, seemed about to remove the bottle, then thought better of the idea.

"Who owns all these bottles?" asked Dr. Paz.

Long said nothing.

"I do," said Schulbacher.

"Where did you sleep last night, Mr. Schulbacher?"

Schulbacher indicated the room opening off the other side of the bathroom.

"And you, Mr. Long? Still on the other side of the house?"

Long nodded.

"Were you in Mr. Keetson's room at all yesterday or last night, Mr. Long?"

"Only after he left," said Long, "at 3:30 this morning."

Dr. Paz nodded.

"Señor Comandante," he said, "I regret to report that the result of my autopsy was not very enlightening. I analyzed the coffee in the thermos bottle; it contained no poison. There was no trace of poison in Mr. Keetson's blood or stomach. He was neither shot nor stabbed. He was not killed by a blow on the head or any vital organ. He did not die of apoplexy, cerebral embolism, or any disease that might have carried him off suddenly. Considering that he was a drug addict, his body was in a remarkably healthy state."

"But what caused his death, Doctor?"

"As I said before," declared Dr. Paz slowly, "symptoms show death was caused by suffocation—" He paused.

"Suffocation?" The *comandante* shook his head. "I do not see—"

Dr. Paz turned to Juan Maximo Schulbacher.

"Mr. Schulbacher," he asked, "do you know any chemistry?"

"A little," Schulbacher admitted.

"Then you might explain to the *comandante*," said the doctor, "that hydrogen peroxide is an unstable compound, breaking up ultimately into water and oxygen."

Schulbacher's lips seemed glued together.

"What has hydrogen peroxide to do with suffocation?" asked Long.

"Just this," said Dr. Paz in a quiet voice. "Hydrogen peroxide, injected into the blood stream, would form bubbles in the blood. The bubbles would form a froth on the lungs, which would suffocate a man. The freed oxygen would disappear in a few hours. The residual water would be unnoticeable in the blood."

Schulbacher's lips finally parted. Little by little his face muscles had relaxed. He seemed quite composed as he inquired—

"What makes you speak of hydrogen peroxide, Doctor?"

"Three things," said Dr. Paz. "In a hypodermic in the dead man's pocket I found a few drops of hydrogen peroxide. In the dead man's valise I found two bottles—one full, containing a morphine solution, the other half empty, containing hydrogen peroxide. Again, in the bathroom adjoining the dead man's room, there is a large bottle of peroxide, half empty, which you say belongs to you—"

"Yes," said Schulbacher.

There was a trace of quiet resignation in his voice. His head was up, his shoulders back. A touch of color came into his translucent cheeks as he turned toward the *comandante*.

"Then the whole matter becomes quite clear," said Long quickly, speaking in Spanish. "Keetson got up during the night for his usual injection of morphine, and, fumbling in the dark, accidentally filled his syringe from the wrong bottle. Don't you think that's what happened, Doctor?"

Dr. Paz studied Long's face, then shifted his gaze to Schulbacher. When he did not reply at once, Long resumed quickly:

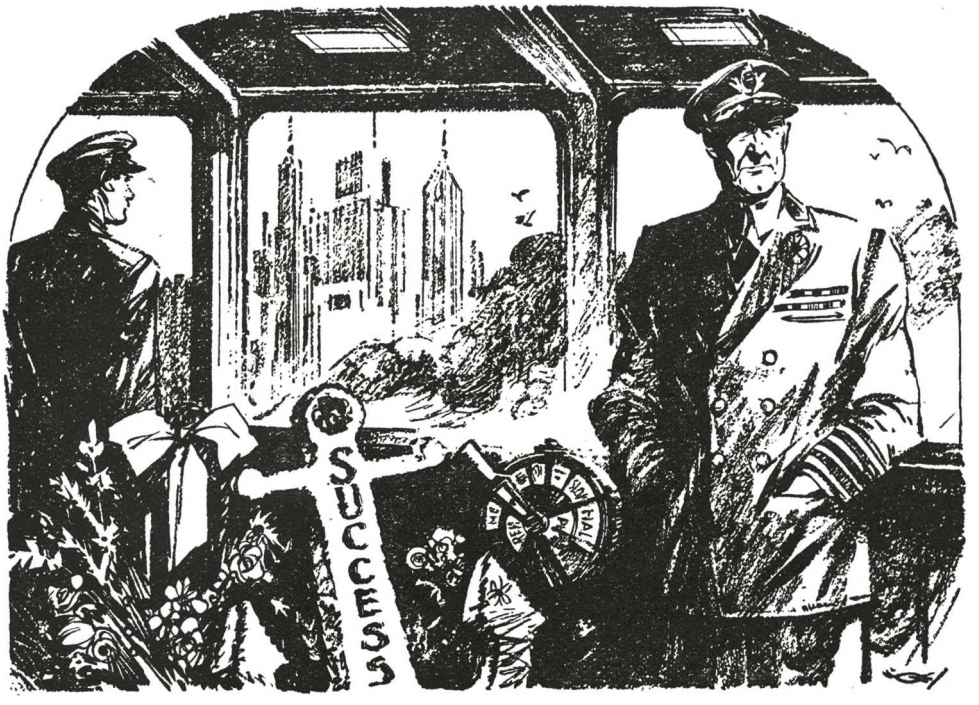
"I'd call it poetic justice, Señor Comandante—that he should come back to die—by mistake—at the scene of his crime? While you were away performing your autopsy, Dr. Paz, Don Carlos told us that Keetson confessed to him this morning that he was the one who killed the Jamaican clerk in that commissary car robbery. The reason he had come back was to dig up the loot which he had hidden on Don Carlos' land. This was his first mistake—not as serious, of course, as the mistake of filling his syringe from the wrong bottle in the dark. You think that was what happened, don't you, Doctor?"

Dr. Paz looked Long in the eyes for a full five seconds as he nodded his head slowly.

"Yes," he said. "Quite possibly that is what happened."

"In that case," said the *comandante*, unclasping his hands from behind his back, "my investigation will be simplified. I will spend the afternoon digging for buried treasure. Don Carlos!" He called to the veranda. "Don Carlos, I am going back with you to your farm. You must lead me to that stump of a ceiba tree."

A Story of the Sea



GRATITUDE

By F. R. BUCKLEY

THEY built the *Evelyn* to American order at South Shields in 1900, when riveters wore bowler hats with funny little narrow brims and bitter beer was twopence a pint. They built her bull-nosed and beamy, and they powered her for six knots; and, cargoes being in those days less scarce than skilled humanity, they built rooms for the officers, instead of pigeonholes in which officers could, as it were, be filed. Even the third mate could have swung a cat without getting fur on the bulkheads. As for the captain, he had space to perform airplane whirls with lions.

And so for thirty years the *Evelyn* bunted her way amiably about the great circles with an afterguard that habitually went on watch in slippers and without a crick in its back; while Mr. Edward Carr, third mate at the time of her launching, rose steadily to the rank of captain, and stayed there. There were flashier vessels in the Blue Ball Line. Not to mention freighters—patent ones with well-decks—there were passenger ships; and by seniority Mr. Carr was entitled to the best.

He had indeed been offered, as they successively went into service, the *Padua,* the *Mantua,* the *Verona,* and that floating palace, the *Romagna.* He had refused them all, as he planned to refuse the *Sicilia* when she would be offered. Simply, he had accumulated twenty shares of the line's common stock, obtained permission to replace his berth with a large brass double bed, and continued where he could go on duty in his underclothes.

He was very much in negligée now, cooling his feet on the bed's footrail and talking to his chief officer, while the *Evelyn* nosed her unhurried way across the Atlantic.

"Sir's out," said Captain Carr.

It is impossible to play deep-sea checkers and address your opponent with respect, and from twenty years of play with Mr. Elphinstone, this formula had emerged as due notice that formality was dispensed with. Mr. Elphinstone automatically reached under the settee for the board.

"I dowanna play tonight," said Captain Carr. "I've been thinkin' again."

"What about?"

The captain passed a hand over his forehead and stared up at the telltale compass.

"Oh, I dunno," said he. "You know, just before we left New York the missus came down to the ship? Well, seems the woman next door's got a fur coat—electric fox, or one of them names they call rabbit that's been dyed. Got it with her husband's insurance money, and now the wife wants one like it. Only seventy-five dollars, she says. Only!"

"Women are like that," said Mr. Elphinstone.

"*She* wasn't, until I'd saved enough so we could move to Flatbush. The neighborhood's gone to her head. That's what it is. She's gettin' classy. Won't even have the photograph of the ship in the dining room any more, because it ain't some cockeyed liner. Seventy-five dollars—not that the money gripes me."

Mr. Elphinstone seemed to know what was coming. And it came. Captain Carr rolled on his right side, and to the natural ruddiness of his countenance was added the dull underflush of wrath suppressed.

"It's that dirty swine of a Wilkins."

Mr. Elphinstone, managing his breathing, contrived to sigh wearily without being heard.

"Do you realize that he owes me seventy-five bucks? I'm not countin' interest for the last two years, but that's what I paid for him out of my own pocket, in Joy Street police station for bail; and then he jumped it. Jumped it, when they wouldn't have fined him more'n twenty-five dollars or a month—and if he hadn't knocked two hundred smackers' worth out of that longshoreman, I'll let a dog bite me. Any dog you pick, Elphinstone. In the stern.

"Lets me put up seventy-five dollars, and then sails at midnight. Can you imagine such a thing, and us friends since boyhood? And don't even have the guts to face me after it. You know 's well 's I do, Elphinstone, that in two years we'd have been in port together before this, barrin' dodgery. Don't tell me. He owns seventy-five per cent of that lousy tub, an' he fixes things to avoid me, that's all.

"Look at this trip. With freights the way they are, wouldn't the *Mirandola* naturally go to New York? Certainly. But does Mister Wilkins go there? No, he don't. He knows his old friend Carr'll be there, with one hand out for seventy-five bucks, and the other balled up into a fist. And he decides that he'll go to New Orleans."

Captain Carr writhed upright on the brass bed.

"I tell you, Elphinstone, there's times when the wife's been gettin' after me for a fur coat, like now, or to have the house painted or something, I lie here nights an' sweat at the thought of bein' on the same ocean with that guy. Right this very minute he's no more 'n a hundred miles to the south'ard of us; walkin' his bridge, eatin' his meals, an' smok-

in' his pipe with my seventy-five bucks in his pocket. I could be alongside of him tomorrow, fightin' it out on a hatch; but I don't own seventy-five per cent of this ship. No, I'm the kind of fool that goes around puttin' up bail for his friends, and so I got to go where I'm told, when I'm told, gettin' no peace out of my life."

"Oh, you ain't got it so bad," said Mr. Elphinstone.

"Listen. I know I'm comfortable in my body, Mister. Why d'you think I turned down all those big ships? Because I've got this one just to my liking; and I'm fifty years of age, and I'll only be alive once, and I wouldn't have time to get another ship cozy even if they'd let me. Which they wouldn't in the passenger trade. Then we got a nice crowd, even the engineers, and you don't play a bad game of checkers, an' if anybody wants to stand watch without his trousers, the way you did after that night at Port Said, why it's all right and nobody bothers. That's what I'm kickin' about. All I want is to be happy an' contented, an' I've worked at it—an' here's this swine—"

There was a knock on the door, and the wireless operator came in.

"Well?"

"Weather report, sir."

Captain Carr took the yellow sheet and scanned it resentfully.

"Yeah, an' we're in for a storm, too," he said, throwing the flimsy at his chief officer. "All right, Sparks."

He lay back on the brass bed and covered his eyes with his clasped hands.

"Wouldn't it be grand," said he, in the languorous voice of a *hashishin,* "if that buttertub of Wilkins' sprang a leak or somethin', with nobody around within call but us? Wouldn't it?"

NOW the sea is chiefly remarkable for being the only present day arena for miracles. Anything not only can happen at sea, but does: *Videlicet,* that within forty-eight hours after Captain Carr's Isaiahad, the *Mirandola* was effectively in trouble; not a leak, but rudderless and minus two propeller blades in a sea that ran mountain high and was bare of any ship save the *Evelyn.*

There was some difficulty about picking up the SOS (*Mirandola* had a spark transmitter that should have graced some museum—her operator had to wear rubber gloves and sneaks); but finally it came through on an ether quite free from answers. And when he heard of this, Captain Carr threw his cap over the side and said there was a thank offering to Neptune. He called Neptune Davy Jones, and the cap was one he chanced to have borrowed from the second mate; but his meaning was unmistakable.

"Lost his rudder, has he?" demanded the captain, in a voice audible over the howling of the gale. "An' two-thirds of his propellor? Well, the careless, careless, careless young dog!"

"We gonna change course, sir?" asked Mr. Elphinstone, eyeing his chief as warders eye patients who begin to ask for their golden crowns and their second-best suit of purple.

Captain Carr was normally a kind man; but seventy-five dollars plus two years' brooding can disarrange the functions.

"Change course?"

"Well, he's about sixty miles to the south of us," said the first mate reasonably. They were in the charthouse now, and it was possible to speak reasonably, if one roared. "And I don't see how we're going to reach him, sir, if we keep on the way we're heading."

Captain Carr, his mouth open, stared petrified at the mate.

"After all I told you, you think I'm goin' to turn around in a gale like this, riskin' my ship for that—"

"No, sir. But I was thinkin', there's your seventy-five bucks to be thought of."

More and more was Mr. Elphinstone the warder; the kind warder of the hospital reports, who has laid aside his

length of rubber hose and calms his charges by humoring them.

"An' furthermore, a hell-bender of a storm like this can't last forever. And if we get down there, an' stand by, an' the weather clears, an' we give 'em a pull into port, there'll be more than seventy-five dollars comin' in towage. And who'll have to pay it? Who owns seventy-five per cent of the ship—not countin' that you'll have him face to face at last?"

Captain Carr's mouth closed. He appeared to swallow something; he considered for a moment, and then his eyes lighted. Raising a steak-like hand, he smacked Mr. Elphinstone terribly upon the shoulder.

"Johnnie," he roared, and he was no man for Christian names at sea, "by Judas at the mainyard, you're right! Gimme the chart an' those instruments. Where'ja say he was? We'll yank that tub into New York harbor, and serve the lugger right."

Which was easy to say; but in some respects not quite so easy to perform.

A four-thousand ton ship in a high sea, with no rudder to guide her, is a revelation of diabolism; and as the gentlemen manning the *Mirandola* had found out, sea anchors, those noble preventers of broaching-to and foundering, may become playthings of the devil.

One built cone-shaped out of awnings, by two hours' labor in the peril of boarding seas, may collapse in as many minutes; and another, built square and weighted with a kedge anchor, may whip the bitts out of a ship and with the bight of its departing cable snake three men overboard. Both of which things had happened to the *Mirandola;* and when the *Evelyn* came in sight, it was to find her falling slowly off into the trough of seas that raged high above her funnel, while a desperate knot of men by the aftermast wrestled with the makings of a jury-mizzen.

Captain Carr peered through an atmosphere largely consisting of spume. The *Mirandola* was not in sight for more than a second at a time, but even so certain things were notable. For instance, the facts that she had lost all her boats, and that the jury-sail could not possibly be rigged in time. On the *Evelyn's* port bow the sea tossed the wreckage of the sea anchor as a savage tosses aloft the head of a vanquished foe.

"His wireless still working?" screamed Mr. Elphinstone; and found himself turned upon savagely.

"Do I need any remarks from him?" bellowed Captain Carr in return. "Go get No. 1 boat away. Fly to it!"

Mr. Elphinstone dragged his chief into the charthouse. The weather door was of four-inch teak, well fitted; but the wind had driven water in around its edges until the floor was six inches submerged.

"The men won't man any boat in this sea! It'd be—"

"Who's asking 'em to? I'm gonna float the boat downwind empty, with a line to it so's they can haul in our hawser. We'll pull her ruddy head up! Get along an' see to it."

"Aye, aye, sir. Er—Captain Wilkins 's dying."

"What?"

"Wireless, sir."

And, handing over the yellow slip he had just received, Mr. Elphinstone staggered forth about his business.

It was an agitated sort of message that Captain Carr, wiping spray from his eyes, read in the gray light from the porthole. It was sent by a Marconi man aged twenty who had not before seen death on the deep waters; and it had been received by another who didn't even like to think about such things. It recited, with several repetitions and in an agitated handwriting which made Captain Carr swear, that Captain Wilkins had been forward when the second sea anchor carried away; and that the cable, while leaving him aboard, had done its best to take one of his legs with it for a souvenir. Wherefore he was lying on the floor of the wireless room

bleeding to death, and the operator was feeling very sick.

"Tell 'em to put on a tourniquet!" shouted Captain Carr, entering his own wireless room after the manner of a whirlwind. "My God, hasn't anybody there got the sense—"

"They've shut down, sir."

"Shut down?"

"Middle of a word, sir." The *Evelyn's* operator was looking extremely pale and wishing he had not had sardines for breakfast. "I dunno whether his apparatus 's gone, or whether he's fainted. He was just sending—"

THE men about No. 1 boat found their commander among them. He was cursing in a way which, at other times, must have excited their respectful admiration, and they were currently doing some creditable blasphemy themselves. But what now monopolized their attention was Captain Carr's apparent desire not only to get the boat launched, but to get into her himself. They endeavored to restrain him, and he knocked two of them down. It is only fair to say, however, that he instantly kicked them up again.

"I'm going!" he roared to Mr. Elphinstone. "That jackass got his leg cut off. Seventy-five dollars. 'Sides, that mate of his don't know his truck from his keelson, an' I can't be losin' hawsers. You work quick, Mister. Tend this line, an' be ready with the ten-inch manila, time I'm alongside."

Mr. Elphinstone said nothing. He was not a loquacious man, and now the number of things he had to say, storming his unaccustomed glottis, gagged him. He wanted to point out that one man in a drifting lifeboat must infallibly drown; that the *Mirandola,* if reached, would probably broach-to before the hawser could be passed; and that if towing were begun, even such towing as would just keep the *Mirandola's* head up, it could not long continue before something would carry away. And there would go Eddie Carr, and twenty years of checkers, and no having to say "sir," and—

He summarized all this in a sort of snarl; hearing which, and seeing his first mate rushing at him in wrestling form, Captain Carr unbolted a right and left that knocked Mr. Elphinstone senseless against a skylight. Then he climbed into the violently swinging boat, waved his hand and gave the order to lower away.

And at that, mark you, Mr. Elphinstone was right. By all the probabilities, Captain Carr should have been washed out of that lifeboat. But he was not. Or the lifeboat and he should have been smashed against the side of the *Mirandola;* but they weren't. Or, climbing up the line thrown him from the steamer's deck, Mr. Carr should have been battered to death against her plates; and he was battered, but not to death.

He came aboard with only one sea boot and without his sou'wester, to be sure; and there was literally blood in his eye as he instructed the *Mirandola's* first mate what to do about the tow. But he was not dead—far from it; much farther than Captain Wilkins, for instance, lying in a pink swash of water on the wireless room floor.

We will not go into matters of surgery; because, though well paid ashore and therefore in marvelous repute, it is a messy sort of art; and at sea it is not even well paid. Let it be said that Captain Carr, having carried Captain Wilkins to the charthouse settee, busied himself with a rope loop and a stick to twist it with; and then turn we to the brighter, breezier, outdoor doings on the forecastle.

Here was the matter of rigging a hawser that should stand the pull of four thousand tons multiplied by two, and sliding up and down mountains. The *Mirandola* had a hawser; which, according to the instructions of Captain Carr, her first mate roused out, while the Second saw to the proper reception of the

similar rope from the *Evelyn.* Meantime the Third—a nice boy, but inclined to cry when hit over frozen fingers with a sledge-hammer—was arranging that the visiting hawser should be fastened to the end of the chain cable, and the cable veered away to its first shackle.

It was while this shackle was being unpinned that his fingers met the sledge; so that on the chief and second officers devolved the duty of making fast their own hawser to the cable's inboard end, veering away until the length of chain was halfway to the *Evelyn,* and then belaying with bridles around everything that would stand a pull.

Upwind, Mr. Elphinstone, recovering from a dream in which he had lost four teeth, was using oil cannily; the seas still came at the *Mirandola* like panthers—but panthers under a tarpaulin. And gradually, as the *Evelyn's* engines went ahead, that threatening twist of the sick ship's head to the south became a steady northward point. The weighted catenary of the hawser, spring-like, tightened, slackened, dipped and rose.

"I believe," said Mr. Elphinstone, as the bridles groaned about him, "she's goin' to hold!"

At which same moment Captain Carr, joined by the *Mirandola's* mate with a similar report, looked at Captain Wilkins and used almost the identical words.

"I believe," said he, giving Captain Wilkins another tablespoon of brandy for good luck, "by God, he's goin' to live."

Captain Wilkins' eyes fluttered. One opened, then the other; they regarded, salt-rimmed, two quite different sections of the chartroom ceiling.

"Hey, Wilkie!" roared his doctor in his ear. "Snap out of it, will ya? Where's my seventy-five bucks?"

IT WAS a queer stimulant for a man at point of death from hemorrhage; but it worked. Medicine, especially as practised over two thousand fathoms of water, holds these little surprises. And then, of course, for twenty-four hours, while the *Evelyn* dragged steadily and the storm began to show signs of weariness, Captain Carr was doing other things for his debtor.

The *Mirandola* had a medicine chest that would have graced a liner; and once his rope tourniquet had saved the immediate day, Mr. Carr went into this thoroughly with the aid of Yates' "Practical Medicine & Captain's Friend." Altogether he did amazingly well with Mr. Wilkins, both physically and psychologically; for by the time the linked ships arrived off Quarantine one balmy forenoon, not only was the leg comfortable; not only was Captain Wilkins' temperature normal; but also in Captain Carr's pocket reposed the seventy-five dollars of contention.

"It's a hell of a thing, Ed," remarked Captain Wilkins tearfully. He was rather weak. "You know, I didn't mean to do you a trick like that. I was stewed, and it just—just happened. And then I was kind of broke at the time; and then afterward I got kind of ashamed, an' then you went ahead and wrote me that mucous letter, an' I got mad, an' —oh, hell!"

"Don't you bother about it," said Captain Carr.

"A lousy seventy-five," protested Mr. Wilkins, tears actually appearing on his cheeks. He chanced just to have had half a tumblerful of brandy. "And for that I've lost the best friend I ever had. A friend I used to catch birdnests and barmaids with as an innocent, innocent boy. A friend that'll come an' save me an' my ship, an' glue my right leg on again for me, an' stick around for days and nights, forsaking his own v-hic-essel. Lost, lost! Sold for seventy-five bucks!"

Captain Carr took his patient's hand.

"You shut up, Wilkie," he said. "Listen. Be a man! This ain't like you. Listen. We're just as good friends as ever we were. We all make mistakes, and I grant you I got mad; but it's all over now. I'll come an' yarn with you in hospital as soon's you get there, and

when you're up and about—say in a week—we'll have one of our old-time evenings. Eh?"

Captain Wilkins responded with the most powerful grip at his command.

"They're wigwaggin' from your ship, sir," said the third mate from the doorway. "Chairman of the board of directors is there, an' wants to see you at once, sir."

"I'm coming," said Captain Carr. "An' remember, Wilkie—hundred per cent O. K. Eh? What do you mean, you'll make it up to me?"

"I will," said Captain Wilkins. "I'll make this up to you somehow, Eddie."

"Don't you bother yourself. S'long. I'll be back."

It was half an hour later, in the well-remembered comfort of Captain Carr's cabin on the *Evelyn,* that Mr. Victor Broughton II developed the precise object of his visit. He was a well fed gentleman, unaccustomed to visiting freighters; and whereas Captain Carr had relaxed visibly as the peace of his own quarters sank back into his soul, Mr. Broughton had been getting more and more tense every minute. The settee may have been, at that, slightly prodigal of its horsehair; rather irritating to an unaccustomed skin.

"The fact is, Captain," said Mr. Broughton petulantly at length, "that you'll have made a pretty good thing for yourself out of this tow, and of course we're the last firm in the country, I hope, to complain about interrupted voyages and extra coal and structural damages, when it's a case of saving life. But at the same time, with business the way it is—especially the passenger trade—you must expect the company to want a little consideration other than towing fees. Now, this can be made better publicity than any of the rescues recently. Boyhood friends meet again at sea; call of the blood; all that hooey. I've been talking to your mate, you see. You'll be the best known captain on the Atlantic by tomorrow morning."

Mr. Carr leaned forward, a terrified look in his eyes. For a moment his lips moved soundlessly. Then—

"A freighter captain don't need—"

Mr. Broughton flicked the ash off his cigar into the washstand—that noble washstand into which a man could get his head and shoulders and really enjoy himself.

"You won't be a freighter captain any more, Captain. You're too valuable a man. We need you to make money for us in the passenger trade. The *Sicilia's* ready for commission, and you'll—"

Captain Carr rose suddenly.

"I won't!"

His eyes, at first blazing at Mr. Broughton, wandered vaguely around the cabin. Seashell from Nantucket in 1910; pictures of momma and the kids—all built into the bulkhead. Brass bed he'd just got up from, Tomlinson's Deepe-Sleepe Internal Coil Spring Mattress—thirty-five dollars only last June. Picture of the *Nancy* bark built into the bulkhead.

He looked back at Mr. Broughton, who was smoking with every appearance of enjoyment.

"Oh, yes," said the chairman of the board. "You will command the *Sicilia* henceforth, Captain. Or—"

AMID boomings from tugs whose bow-pads dripped like beer drinkers' beards, the *Sicilia* was backing into the North River for her maiden trip. On the pier two crowds at different levels waved small American flags and shouted unintelligible adieux. On her decks a large number of gentlemen, still in shore-going clothes, were eyeing a large number of ladies, most of whom were in possession of orchids. And on her bridge a figure in a gold oak-leafed cap and shoes evidently two sizes too small was listening to the remarks of a man in a velour hat. That hat distinguished the publicity agent of the Blue Ball Line.

"Listen, Cap'n Carr," he was saying, "this 'll wow 'em. Radio from Captain Wilkins."

"Radio?" said the *Sicilia's* commander in a choked voice. "Why, I only saw him off day before yesterday."

"And we got a column in four papers out of it," said the publicity man. "We'll get another column out of this. Sent RCA, so the press can check up and see it's kosher. Listen.

"AS WE TAKE ONCE MORE TO THE PERILS OF THE DEEP COMMA OLD FRIEND COMMA WANT TO TELL YOU MY GRATITUDE FOR SAVING MY LIFE AND THAT OF MEN IN MY CHARGE STOP STILL MORE GRATEFUL FOR FRIENDSHIP OF YEARS RESTORED STOP HAPPY VOYAGE AND MEET YOU IN OTHER PORTS COMMA OLD SEA HEART."

"Old *what?*"

" 'Old sea heart'," said the publicity man with unction.

"Did Wilkins call me that?"

"Well, I wrote the text," said the man in the velour hat modestly, "but, honest, Cap'n, it's time you knew the part Wilkins has played in all this. Right after the way you acted at that ladies' club lecture, Mr. Broughton was doubtful about letting you have this ship after all. Now, Wilkins wouldn't let us mention it, wanted to do good by stealth, but it was him that got you back on the front pages, tipping the reporters about your school days, and the time you were both apprentices, and how you wanted to marry that cabaret dancer in Lisbon, and the knife fight; swell stuff. You don't know—"

"Yes, I do," said Captain Carr, still in that same choked voice. "My wife read it to me."

"Well, anyhow," said the publicity man, folding up his radiogram with satisfaction, "you want to realize that if it hadn't been for Wilkins—"

"You'd better get off the bridge," said Captain Carr formally; and he turned to pace his new post of command.

It was a very different bridge from the *Evelyn's*. It was holystoned to a point where not even Gargantua could have spat on it with pleasure; it was scattered with minor officers at telegraphs and things, all standing strictly to attention; and the lookout houses on each wing were equipped with those patent windshield wipers which take any rain or sleet available and fling it into the officer of the watch's eye.

Captain Carr turned on one throbbingly compressed heel and started back from starboard to port. Not only were his shoes tight; his overcoat owed him two inches across the shoulders and his cap, fitted with precision when he had just had a haircut, now bound his temples like the Borgian bowstring.

Worst of all, however, and contributory factor in the starting out of small purple veins all over the commander's face, was his collar—a strict uniform requirement of the Blue Ball passenger service. This, emerging in two stiffly starched points from a mess of white silk muffler, was designed to catch the wearer four inches forward of the carotid artery and one-half inch inside the jawbones; thus making him hold up his head like a mettlesome horse while causing (if he was past forty) his cheeks to bulge over like the dewlaps of an aged hound. Captain Carr had a dozen of these collars, one to be worn when another got dirty. He had found his cabin steward arranging them with pride on a berth that was thirty inches wide, and which had sharp edged sideboards.

"In the stream, sir," said a voice; and the captain revolved bodily to face his chief officer.

This was a young man who wore his cap slightly to one side, like Earl Beatty, and had a dark, sarcastic eye. He did not resemble Mr. Elphinstone.

"Very good. Do you," asked Captain Carr thickly, "play checkers, Mister?"

The chief officer saluted.

"No, sir. A little chess."

A new vein sprang into view on the commander's nose.

"Euchre, then?"

"No, sir. Only bridge."

The publicity man reappeared.

"Sorry, Cap'n, but you know what I was saying about Captain Wilkins. What I mean, after all, it's largely due to him that—"

"Yeah. Well?"

"Well, I was thinking that you ought to wireless him a reply. I'll write it—"

"You won't! And it's against regulations for you to be on the bridge. Send the wireless operator to me."

"Well, so long 's you send it, and make it sound, you know, heartfelt, like his."

"I will!"

The wireless operator came promptly; but the *Sicilia* is a ship of magnificent distances, and before he arrived Captain Carr had completed six more round trips from starboard to starboard. On the first he had thought, cinematographically, of the *Evelyn,* steaming south to Para with Elphinstone in command and in carpet slippers. On the second he had tried, unobtrusively, to loosen his collar, nearly cutting off his forefinger in the attempt. On the third he had eased his cap and dropped it and had it handed back to him by an eighth officer or something, who saluted.

On the fourth, fifth and sixth promenades he had thought without ceasing about Captain Wilkins, who had been reconciled with his old buddy (*vide Times*) in the presence of death; and whose efforts had overcome the misgivings of Victor Broughton II, Esq.

"Wireless, sir?"

"Yes." The operator, who dabbled in verse, looked at Captain Carr's countenance and thought of mulberries. "Wireless to Captain Wilkins, S. S. *Mirandola.* At sea."

"Yes, sir."

"Dear Wilkins," dictated Captain Carr, risking his forefinger again and busting one of his collar's buttonholes. His voice at once lost that choked quality and became indecently loud. The pilot looked around.

"Dear Wilkins," repeated the commander, "this is to acknowledge the wonders you have done for me—"

"Yes, sir."

"And to tell you comma you—you—"

"But, sir," gasped the wireless man after thirty seconds, "we—we can't send that over the air, sir!"

Captain Carr took off the gold-laced cap and wiped his brow. More hoarded blood joined his general circulation.

"Can't, eh?" he said, more mildly. He looked down the shimmering bay toward where the *Mirandola,* two days out, was flogging her disheveled way toward England. His right fist clenched, damaging three of his cap's oak-leaves.

"Well, then," he said, "just finish it up in your own words. Tell Cap'n Wilkins I heartfeltly appreciate all he's done for me."

"Yes, sir."

"And that the next time I see him," said Captain Carr through clenched teeth, "I'll beat him to a bloody pulp!"

Concluding a Two-Part Story of the Saharan Camel Corps

THE STORY THUS FAR:

WORD came to Marcay, lieutenant of Meharistes—the camel corps of the French in the Sahara—that a Beraber raiding band was loose again in the south, pillaging and plundering, its wake strewn with looted corpses. The Beraber rezzou numbered ninety rifles strong, while Marcay could muster but eighty to lead out of Adghar on the long chase which must end in the complete extermination of one force or the other. No quarter was asked or given in this ruthless feud of the desert.

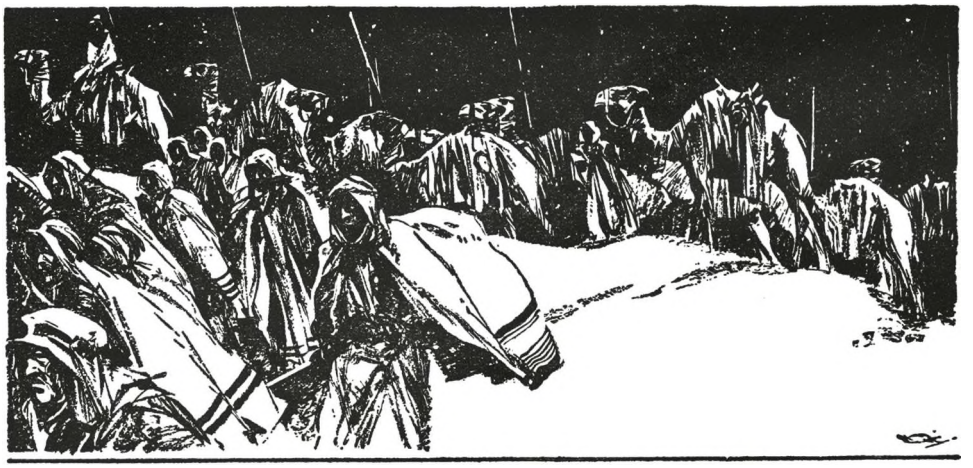
Marcay welcomed the chance for action; but he shrank from thought of the awful toll the burning leagues of sun and sand would exact of both men and camels. Marcay had matched wits and strength with elusive Beraber rezzous before . . .

Second-in-command was Lieutenant Kermeur, a rather foppish and untried transfer from a regiment of Spahis. Considering him, Marcay grieved for his old companion in arms, Lieutenant Bettini—whose death by a slug from a Beraber Mauser in the last fight to the death with a rezzou Marcay had sworn to avenge.

Days of pitiless heat and sand and rock, torturing thirst, gradually worked their heartbreaking metamorphosis; the confident, immaculate White Squadron became in time a straggling, ragged, thin line, driven by courage alone. But worst of all was the plight of the Spahi, Lieutenant Kermeur. Marcay doubted his courage and cursed the powers that had sent the novice into this hell. He tried to disguise the younger officer's condition to keep heart in the men—but he failed.

"One might think a corpse was riding in the saddle," a voice from the file came one day.

Marcay turned angrily on the speaker, but Kermeur had heard. He straightened in his saddle with a pathetic show of determination—only to sag back like an idol too heavy for its pedestal.



The WHITE SQUADRON

By JOSEPH PEYRÉ

THE squadron was about to reach the Cliff of Hank—the gloomy barrier which all troops coming from the North must pass—which strings its wells at intervals of fifty kilometers as far as the desolate Desert of Ouaran. It was the fifteenth of October. After marching twenty-five days the rezzou must be about to cross the Hank, which barred the path to the Sudan. But at which well would it arrive? At Chegga, El Kseib, El Mzerreb?

Marcay thought it would be the Chegga Well, which his column was about to reach. Although this seemed unreasonable, the tracks of the Jacannahs seemed to him a presage. As the hours passed he grew more and more convinced that the Berabers were making for the Chegga Well, for them the shortest route. To avoid giving alarm he ordered a slower gait. But Telli and Negoussi, who were the extreme point of the vanguard and had gone forward to reconnoiter, gestured with despair.

"*Kanga!*"

From the rims of the still invisible wells, the *kanga,* partridges of the desert, rose in hundreds, forming a whirling cloud in the sky. From the rear Marcay saw at the same time the flight of the birds and the guides' signals; his arms dropped wearily. Targui stopped short, and Kermeur's camel rested his neck across his rump. The pack-camels shut their eyes and waited for the rain of blows which could not fail to drop.

"What happened?" Kermeur emerged from his torpor for a few seconds to inquire.

"Nothing. We've arrived."

"Are they there?"

"They're there," Marcay lied.

"At last—the combat—the combat—" Kermeur murmured. His chin fell back on his chest.

Discouraged, almost disorganized, the column covered the distance remaining to attain the well. But its approach merely sent off a few gazelles in a scurrying of snowy rumps gleaming in the sun, and startled a Barbary sheep.

Negoussi dropped it with a bullet, and the animal tumbled into a gully, splitting its skull on a sharp rock.

Shots should not be fired within the danger zone. But despite Lazraf's reproachful glance, Marcay could not scold the hunter; Chegga was empty, and the shot could not possibly warn any one. The Cliff of Hank is cut through by many gullies. It is in some of these that one finds, among the runted thalla trees and the scattered blocks of stone, water oozing between slabs of slate. Trails lead to these holes, coming from all corners of the horizon—the trails of antelopes and gazelles, traced on the gravel since the beginning of time.

"*Tifinar* inscriptions," Marcay said in a melancholy tone, as his troops passed before the brown rocks which bore red and white characters.

This was another abandoned stopping place. These inscriptions were the last witnesses of the passing of the dark veiled Tuareg who formerly had frequented the region of Hank. Today their guides no longer knew the road to Chegga. Thus have the long cruises of the nomads ended. The sole visitors to Chegga are the Beraber raiders from the north and the Reguibat tribes driven from their pastures by drought.

"Soon even the rezzous will not come here," Marcay thought sadly.

He dragged behind him a band of dispirited warriors and a man condemned to die. He placed Belkheir and Mohammed ben Ali in charge of the camp, as he wished to spend the whole evening with his comrade. He tried to make Kermeur comfortable for the night. But Fennec, who had been sent to find a grotto which might serve as a shelter, returned. He spoke with visible fear.

"You couldn't put the lieutenant in there. The jackals have hidden the bones of camels in there, perhaps the bones of men, dug out of the sand. You can't have a secure grave around here."

Marcay selected a sheltered nook, removed the stones carefully and spread his thickest, warmest blanket.

"The southern cross; the southern cross?" the stricken man asked in delirium.

"Not showing yet."

"But you can see it from here?"

"From here? Yes."

"The southern cross—the south—"

Marcay listened to this dying voice with an anguish he had experienced during no other agony. This wrecked body, which still heaved with short quivers, hurt him as if it had been his own. The breathing muffled by the veil could scarcely be heard. Yet Marcay was conscious of no other sounds. Memories gathered to depress him. Why had he asked to leave Syria, where Captain Müller had taught him the arduous trade of the Mehariste? With Müller he had fought at De Rhezza and Palmyra. Had the horizon of the Syrian desert been too small for him? He already counted six years spent in the Sahara—for the one combat at Timissao—which had cost him his dearest friend. Of what use was this immensity, if one found here nothing but flights of partridges, trails of gazelles and *tifinar* characters painted on stone?

HERE he was on another raid—perhaps his last—and he would not bring back the comrade entrusted to his care. He was already thirty-four years old. The wear of the desert, revealed in his face only by the wrinkles, flowed in his veins with the sadness and cold of the night. He had draped over the sick man his last cover, the white burnous taken from his own shoulders, which was pale as a shroud.

"The rezzou!" Kermeur suddenly panted. "There they are, with their blue veils! Defend yourselves! Don't you see them? They're creeping behind the boulders! They're there! They're circling us! Marcay!"

The cry carried to the nearest men, who believed that death had come. Laz-

raf lifted the white burnous to cover the lips of the sick man, who saw in the delusion of delirium the combat he had yearned for. Marcay bent nearer.

"Accursed life!" he murmured.

His dull voice seemed to arouse that of Kermeur, for the lieutenant resumed with visible anguish.

"Marcay, let me stay near you! Two more fall! Lazraf is hit! Lazraf!"

Lazraf did not stir. Marcay hid his face in his hands. Around the group the Meharistes remained awake, agitated by disappointment, discouragement, worry. Sergeant Mohammed ben Ali attempted to cheer them up. He had prestige in their eyes because he was the only man present who had entered these Southern Dunes before—with Adjutant Hertz, pursuing the 1922 rezzou.

"It was here at Chegga that we picked up their tracks—right here, near the third tree," he explained.

The Chaamba stared into the night in the direction indicated, seeking the third thalla tree, as if the tracks of the rezzou they were pursuing must pass necessarily over that fated spot. They no longer heard the cries of the dying man. Mohammed ben Ali went on:

"But we had lost time on the stony stretches of the Hank; our feet were cooked—cooked. After Tamsagout Well there was no guide to pilot us. The tracks grew fresher and fresher as we followed them into the Chesh Dunes. At the end of three days we remained seven out of twenty, seven as good as dead from thirst. We continued the chase. Have you ever held your carbine when your *guerba* has been empty for twenty hours? It drops out of your hands, and you lack strength to pull the trigger. You lie down like Lieutenant Kermeur—"

"Mohammed ben Ali is relating the fight at Agerakten," Lazraf told Marcay, who had heard the drone of the voice.

"Agerakten!" Marcay said. "He alone can talk of that, since Hertz died."

Agerakten—a famous combat in the legend of the desert. Of the seven Meharistes, dying of thirst, who had reached the end of the quest, Mohammed ben Ali had been the only one able to drag himself to the nearest well. He had returned with a full *guerba*, to revive his chief and his comrades. Then he had done as much for the survivors of the rezzou, who were dying of the same thirst on the other side of the dune. The voice of Mohammed ben Ali murmured on . . .

It was perhaps three o'clock when Marcay was awakened by the icy cold. His first gesture was to grope for Kermeur's hand. But he was several seconds finding it in the darkness. The hand had thrown aside blankets and burnouses, to grip the ground and dig into it with cold nails. It was inert.

Marcay bent low, freed the stricken man of the garments stiffened by dew, pressed his ear against the chest. The heart was no longer beating.

CHAPTER VI

DESERT TOMB

THE death of Lieutenant Kermeur delayed the squadron. Marcay himself wished to inspect the grotto which Fennec had found. It was a cave facing the north, and received but a feeble light. From the entrance one beheld only a rocky wall. Then the cave turned like an elbow, ending in a sort of pocket where the eyes, blinded by the outside light, discerned nothing. Only after a few seconds were scattered bones visible.

The black schist walls near the entrance formed a frame for the deeply trodden area around the well. Like a backdrop, the arid earth, sucked dry by a few stunted trees, rolled to a horizon merging into a too intense sky. Where did the jackals who roamed around the camp throughout the night hide for the day? As Fennec had said, no tomb was secure. The thickest sand could not resist these despoilers of graves, that had

brought and mingled in this cave the bones of camels dead on the trails, those of men they had dug up.

Marcay decided to dig a tomb in the rock. All day long the narrow gully echoed to the blows of the picks which bit into the stone with metallic squeals. On the other hand, no cry of camels was heard for hours. The animals filed to the well, drank long and walked off slowly, necks at ease. There were no quarrels at the water hole. Tired out, the pack-camels had at last found a chance to rest.

Marcay desired to pay unusual honors to Kermeur's body. Throughout the day Belkheir and Mohammed ben Ali, sergeants, replaced each other near the corpse. Garbed in a spotless *gandoura,* carbine butt resting on his thigh as if on parade, a mounted Mehariste stood guard. From all points of the camp this tall silhouette could be seen outlined against the cliff.

"No other chief was guarded thus," some one said.

But Marcay could not find sufficient show, sufficient glory to surround his farewell. Yet no other ground would have been so well fitted for his death. Never had Marcay been so sensitive to meditation, to the introspection caused by infinite space. The religious sentiment aroused by the desert, the excessive solitude, stirred him.

In camp he saw Kermeur's camel and Fennec's piebald animal kneeling head to head. Fennec sat near, rosary in his hands. He had not eaten that day. He had spoken to no one. His long nose, his lipless mouth, the lowered lids, gave him an expression of mourning which wiped out the ugliness of his face. But he had refused to stand watch over his dead master. Instead of blaming him, Marcay was surprised to find himself grateful to the native for this lack of moral courage.

He, Marcay, had not had the will power to remain near that hole from which the pick blows resounded, more and more muffled. He sat near Fennec and the kneeling camels. It was the first time he saw Kermeur's mount so near. He passed his hand over the flank, on the lusterless hair. And he noticed that one of the animal's pallets was hard, swollen.

"Should it be slit?" Fennec asked. His eyes had followed the officer's every move as if he shared his remorse.

"Yes. Should have been slit long ago," Marcay replied. But he voiced no reproach. He examined the beast's limbs with more attention, murmured, "I had never seen his camel, either." Then he addressed Fennec once more, "It must be taken care of immediately. I don't want it made the target of jokes."

The thinness of the camels tended by Fennec had long been a cause for laughter and jests among the men. Marcay insisted before leaving:

"You hear me? Lieutenant Kermeur's camel shall continue to carry his baggage as long as we don't need it."

At sundown the last blow of the pick struck a spark from the rock. Marcay, who had stepped to the edge of the grave, thought of the blue spark which had streaked the darkness of the wireless room when the message had dropped down to him at Adghar. The rezzou? The entire camp appeared to have forgotten it to stare at the mounted Mehariste rearing his dark shape against the gloomy rock, filling the sky.

"Lieutenant Marcay is wearing his red burnous tonight," Telli remarked.

In fact, the officer had asked Lazraf to bring out this garment, for he wished to leave to Kermeur, as a shroud, the white burnous that had screened his last hour.

THE next afternoon, after Kermeur had been buried, the squadron reformed its ranks and moved toward El Kseib, second water hole along the Cliff of Hank. At the moment of departure the Chaamba paid last honors to this tomb dug with particular piety, the

sight of which had saddened their chief more than any preceding death.

"You are really certain that the jackals can not dig him up?" Marcay asked of Belkheir when the entrance of the cave was almost lost to view.

"Most certain. We added another thickness of stone slabs, which four men found hard to move."

"Then I shall return sometime to see him."

Protected by a patrol of three men which flanked it along the jagged crest, the column skirted the foot of the cliff. Marcay rode alone behind the guides. At the place that Kermeur had occupied during his brief period of command, Fennec led the dead man's camel by the reins. This empty saddle, the butt of the carbine jutting into the air from the flank of the riding camel, gave the procession the semblance of a funeral cortège.

The halt had lasted too long. The camels, allowed to cool off, now felt their sores. The Chaamba camels had suffered severely during the trip across the stone plateau. For they were animals accustomed to the softness of the sand and could not cover long distances over pebbles and gravel with impunity. Two in particular, S. 101 and S. 147, hoofs burned, already slit several times, found difficulty in keeping up. Despite their riders' efforts, they lagged behind.

Belkheir had selected for the flankers on the crest three men mounted on Ifora camels, beasts marked on the hind quarters with *tifinar* characters, animals hardened to travel on stony soil. It was they who reached El Kseib first, the second gate through which the Berabers might have crossed the barrier of the Cliff of Hank.

But instead of the *chouf*—lookout—the sentries who guard at long range the camps of the rezzous, an immense number of *kanga* lifted before the scouts, flew in a black oval against the sunset sky, strung out and vanished like smoke. Men had not visited El Kseib for a long time.

"We couldn't hope to find the Berabers. Neither at El Kseib nor at Chegga. It was impossible," Belkheir said when he saw the partridges.

"That's true," Marcay replied calmly. "That's why I let the flankers go ahead so far. Do you think I would have walked blindly into El Kseib to serve as a target for the fusillade of Winchesters, had I believed the Berabers were at the well?"

"What about Chegga?" Belkheir resumed quietly.

"At Chegga I had reason to hope. Since I knew by the couriers that the rezzou was coming down by Hassi Tounassine, I might presume that it would reach the south of the Iguidi at Bou Bout or Grizim. Put yourself in the Berabers' place, and tell me where you would have crossed the Eglab? By the trail to Chegga and none other. If we did not find the raiders, we could hope to pick up their tracks."

"It was the path the Berabers should have followed. But we are walking with death. It was what I meant when I said that neither at El Kseib nor at Chegga—perhaps you don't know that Lieutenant Kermeur extinguished his lighter by blowing out the flame? Didn't Fennec tell you? Now he is dead, the third after the two men we had lost. Death is everywhere; there are no warriors along the Hank. Only the flights of partridges. Behold!"

"Belkheir, will you become a man lacking in courage? Yet you have just seen a real man die, one who had a stanch heart. Hear me; we'll water and then leave for El Mzerreb. Tomorrow we start an hour earlier."

The Berabers, to make sure that they would not encounter the Saharan platoons, must have swung farther westward than had been believed. They had avoided the direct trail to Chegga and El Kseib. Now, even admitting that they had gone as far west as possible before starting toward the Cliff of Hank, the squadron must meet them at El Mzerreb.

"We'll hook up with them before reaching El Mzerreb," Marcay told Lazraf, when he found him waiting at the end of the last inspection for the night. But the orderly shook his head, and Marcay spoke with an impatience he no longer controlled, "Where do you wish them to pass, then? Surely they won't circle by Ouaran and El Djouf, to leave their carcasses in the attempt. And they're not going to seek loot in Mauritania."

How shake off the discouragement that seemed to have gripped his best men—Belkheir, Mohammed ben Ali, Lazraf? For the first time the officer despaired of success: Had he not given the example of weakness himself? To recover his poise and strength he needed the strong light of morning. At night, with the howling of jackals coming downwind from Chegga, he was haunted by specters.

"You've never quit any one? A comrade?" he asked of Lazraf, many hours later.

The orderly, stretched at his chief's feet, answered as always.

"No, never. Why do you ask?"

"I knew it. I was sure a Chaambi had never abandoned a companion."

In the immensity of the Sahara, from the Draa to the Iforas, there had been only Marcay to fail in the comradeship of the nomads. The very excess of his remorse frightened him, as if it had been forced on him by some mute power. Meanwhile, Fennec struggled with his own problem, and with him the Chaambi to whom he had confided the last delirious words of Kermeur, his prophetic cry:

"Lazraf is hit! Lazraf is hit!"

Could a dying man cast a spell upon a man?

AT DAWN the column started for El Mzerreb, marching in close order, protected by flankers on the crest. Marcay had resumed his place with the advance guard, among the guides. One by one, all the water holes that form gates in the Cliff of Hank would be investigated, all the corridors through which the Berabers might pass through the Hank to reach the south must be examined for tracks. And one by one these gateways were attained and found deserted as those of a ruined fortress. The flights of partridges hovered over them.

"But where have the Berabers gone?" Negoussi cried.

He was furious that he was not permitted to fire on the birds, or even to pursue the white antelopes that fled when the riders arrived.

"Surely they didn't turn back."

Even the veteran hunters had never seen so many antelopes and gazelles. To behold them gathered in such numbers meant that the region had been very quiet. How long had it been since nomads had passed by? Cheikh ben Kouider, the young Chaambi, who now despaired of engaging in his first combat, thought of this so intensely that he saw in the full light, reflected on the blinding sky in the lakes created by the mirage, the fleeting image of the rezzou. Belkheir had described it too often. Si Mahmoud rode ahead and, behind him, gathered around the captured camels, were the she-camels of the blue clad warriors. How could they ride thus without saddles? Because they were Berabers, hardened riders and marvelous marksmen. The chiefs who equipped them for war did not entrust Winchesters to poor warriors.

Aguelb el Khadra was left behind, and Dayat el Khadra was ahead. To reach the water hole the column had to crowd into a gully narrower than the ravine of Chegga. Despite the protection of the scouts, Marcay disliked this sensation of being choked in a treacherous pass where ambush could be expected. But Dayat el Khadra was deserted also.

"They can't have vanished into space," some one cried.

Where was the phantom rezzou? Every one thought of it, with the exception of Fennec, who hid his face in

the hood of the burnous as if the sand wind were blowing.

When the column resumed the march, Lazraf came to inform his chief that Hagel, his second camel, was lame, although no one had been up on him for several days. A wound had reopened on his flank; it must be cared for. Moreover, Hagel was lame in the left shoulder, without visible wound.

"Once bad luck starts . . ." Lazraf concluded.

The number of healthy animals dwindled from day to day. All knew that S. 101 and S. 147, who always lagged behind after an hour on the trail, could not hold out much longer. The stone plateau had foundered them. The squadron traveled at such a rapid gait that only fresh camels could have kept up without damage or suffering.

It was during the morning of the twenty-eighth day that the point of the advance guard, led by Marcay and Telli, emerged from a gully to behold a flitting spot in the distance, which vanished in a cloud of sand.

"There's another antelope for you, Negoussi," the chief of the guides called out.

But in spite of the dust kicked up by the flight, not a man had mistaken what he had seen. It was a camel bearing a rider. Without an order being given, the platoon trotted behind Targui. The Tuareg camel seemed to have scented the hunt, the battle. But the fugitive disappeared behind a rocky swell jutting far into the sand, away from the cliff.

"Damn him!"

A single oath fused from the group of ardent riders tossed in the saddles by the furious strides of their animals and the quickened hope of combat: Why should the mounted stranger have fled if he were not a foe? Surprised by the quick spurt of the advance guard, the main body of the column had almost lost contact. But within a few seconds the fastest camels were in action, and to avoid leaving behind the pack-animals, Belkheir fought hard to restrain his mount.

The van circled the rocks which had concealed the fugitive for a few moments. The man had not expected such a rapid pursuit, and had spurted too late. The Meharistes were near enough to see him clearly.

"A Reguibat!"

The men who had come from the main body of the column heard this call echoed against the cliff. Immediately the squadron strung out on the sand like a white platoon on a level race track. The Reguibat, fleeing due west, kept up a long gallop that ate up the distance.

"Easy to see he hasn't a month's forced marches in his legs," Marcay cried.

He crouched lower on the neck of Targui. How long could the blue garbed warrior keep up this mad gallop?

"He's gaining on us," Telli cried.

The Reguibat was gaining ground steadily. Behind him his pursuers galloped in a compact group. But the panting of the animals grew shorter and shorter. Mohammed ben Ali suddenly dropped his blood stained lash in a gesture of despair. His camel was about to fall. Successively the others had to draw rein and walk their beasts—with the exception of Targui, who had won the great race at Adghar three years in succession. But Marcay felt him weakening also. Yard by yard the Reguibat gained. Soon it would be sufficient for him to keep the lead obtained to escape, to vanish in the approaching night. It was then that Marcay was seen bending forward.

"The Savage!" Telli shouted.

THEY all understood. The lieutenant was about to fire upon the fugitive. All knew the deadly precision of the weapon. From the saddle, in full course, Marcay was the best marksman in the south. They saw him shoulder the carbine.

The detonation had not slapped against the wall of the cliff before the mounted silhouette dropped in a cloud of churned sand. It was time, for Targui was slowing, exhausted.

"A bullet in the shoulder; all that was needed," Marcay explained, shouting to Telli and Negoussi who first joined him.

They reached the Reguibat, who had squatted near his wounded mount, resigned to his fate. A Mauser carbine was slung behind his back. They sought the trace of the bullet which had dropped the camel. The bullet had torn through the right shoulder, "all that was needed". Turning from the pool of blood seeping into the sand, Marcay addressed the Reguibat.

The man was an old warrior, dry as tinder, hollow eyed and with sharp cheekbones; beard stained blue by the dye coloring his cheap cotton veil, long black hair fastened with strips of leather ornamented with amulets. He must have been sent out as a scout on the left flank of the rezzou.

"You are here as a lookout," Marcay persisted. "Don't tell me different. There are no Reguibat encampments around here that I know of. And one doesn't go on a pleasure trip wearing a war headdress and carrying a Mauser."

But the officer repeated his patient questions vainly. Although he was accustomed to the long questionings and palavers of the desert, the silence and impassivity of the Reguibat taxed his nerves.

"You are here as a lookout! This isn't the first time I meet a scout. How long have you been watching here?"

The Reguibat did not appear to understand. He stared at the officer of Meharistes without insolence, without fear, then his eyes wandered back casually to his wounded camel.

"Since when have the Reguibats of the Fokra tribe failed to understand Arabic?" Marcay resumed in a last attempt. "All right, hand over the Mauser. You'll stay with us."

Lazraf was taking the man's weapon when the main body of the column reached the advance guard and its spent camels.

"Another race such as that one and we'll all be afoot," Belkheir grumbled.

He could not console himself for having missed the show.

"We're closing in on the rezzou," Marcay assured him, drawing him aside with Mohammed ben Ali. "How far are we apart? That's what we must find out. On other occasions we have seen men on lookout duty one hundred and fifty kilometers from their rezzous, to cover them better. Isn't that so, Belkheir? If we don't learn tonight, we'll learn tomorrow. We'll make him talk!"

Until nightfall the men crowded around the Reguibat, who had been placed in the care of Mehariste No. 432. But the prisoner paid no attention to them, and even his guard could not coax a word out of him. The whole camp was talking of the miraculous shot of the Savage, a weapon which never left its leather boot save on worthwhile occasions, for Lieutenant Marcay was as sparing of cartridges as a born raider.

"That was the first shot of the battle," Belkheir told Cheikh ben Kouider, of whom he hoped to make a man worthy of his teachings.

Despite the silence of the Reguibat, the Chaamba now knew the truth. A meeting would come soon. It was simply a question of days and miles.

However, Belkheir, who wished to prevent disappointment, related that one year when he was going south with a platoon an isolated nomad had been captured, who had informed them that he was bound for Tripolitania. A month later, when they were returning north to Adghar, they had picked up the same man traveling toward the Menakeb, a direction opposite to that he had indicated. They had forced him to confess, finally, that he was a flanker for a rezzou two hundred kilometers to the east, a raiding band returning from an expedition to the Sudan. He traveled alone thus for months and months. If it so

happened that this mute Reguibat was as far from his comrades, the rezzou was not yet caught.

CHAPTER VII

TRACKS

THE next morning the prisoner had not talked. But his identity as a raider was no longer in doubt. The neck of his animal bore the brand of the Sudanese Meharistes, to which it had belonged before being stolen by a band of Reguibats operating near the Niger River. As rapidly as possible the column made for El Mzerreb.

The squadron had been on the move twenty-nine days, and men and animals were worn out. Marcay now hesitated to give the order to dismount and proceed on foot to relieve the camels. The men must be spared also. Some of them seemed about to yield to fatigue. Marcay felt in his own legs and loins the fatigue of the detachment. S. 101 and S. 147 had to be coaxed at departure and thereafter slowed down the rear guard, which had to herd them on like cripples.

"They can't last long," Marcay said to Belkheir. "If only they walked as well as the prisoner!"

Near the middle of the column, in the shadow of his guard's camel, the Reguibat trudged on as he had since the starting whistle, at an even, strong pace. He seemed resigned to his lot, as he was to the burning sun, to the scorching of his feet, to the thirst parching his tongue. He knew he would not be given water until he talked. And, near his ear, his guard's *guerba* gurgled.

The next day, at the noon halt, Marcay could no longer bear the sight of this man tortured by thirst, called him for another questioning. If the Reguibat spoke, the fate of the raid was decided. It would be the end of this Calvary. Was the rezzou near the Cliff of Hank, or had the captured camels delayed its march? Had it followed the El Kseib trail? Had it started on the southern route? The Reguibat did not appear to hear.

"Hear me," Marcay said in a last effort to convince him of the uselessness of silence. "I know what I should know. I know that Si Mahmoud will not go far if he loses Mouilid, the one-eyed guide. Don't you think I have been kept informed from day to day? I know as much as you do. I have here a cousin of Mohammed ben Salem, the only guide able to show the way through the Azaouad. You are not certain of keeping him until the end, that one. As for you, I know you were on lookout duty, had been for at least eight days, on the Davat el Khadra trail. It isn't at this season that the drought drives the Ahl Taleb Ahmed from their pasture lands."

Marcay watched the effect of these words. But the Reguibat did not even meet his eyes, glanced between half shut lids at the ground. He listened, playing with the sand trickling through his fingers.

"A last time," the officer insisted, "I advise you to talk. Unless you prefer being taken to the Lord of the Adrar?"

This threat had no result, although a Reguibat fears above all to be handed to the authorities of the Mauritanian Adrar. Further attempts were vain. When the column was about to start Marcay called Belkheir, indicated the prisoner, already standing beside his guard's camel.

"Give him drink."

But Belkheir did not seem to hear.

"I said to give him a drink," Marcay repeated.

"When he is about to talk?"

"He won't talk. He did not even blink when I threatened to turn him over to the chiefs of the Adrar. He'll let himself die."

"An Ahl Taleb Ahmed doesn't go that far, rest at ease. He knows you'll give him water. Then he'll ask for his camel, and you'll give it back to him. When this raid is over he'll ask pardon

and freedom. That's what will happen."

"Then you think he'll talk if we don't give him drink?"

"Maybe not tonight. He probably drank enough for two days when he was along at the well. I'm sure he will tomorrow morning. And we'll be through with partridges. Within forty-eight hours we'll be on the trail of the Berabers."

Marcay allowed himself to be convinced. To spare one man the suffering of thirst, did he have the right to gamble the fate, the life, of the column? The Reguibat did not get a drink, and resumed his shuffling on the hard soil. The riders of S. 101 and S. 147, unable to mount their camels, which showed swollen, very sore hoofs, had piled their belongings on other beasts and followed on foot. They were in trouble from the beginning of the evening's march, and advanced with sagging knees.

"They won't hold out half an hour," Belkheir predicted.

"They're cracking fast," Marcay agreed.

The two men, broken by their last effort, reeled. There was confusion at the rear, then the three riders bringing up the end of the column came on, leaving the stragglers to their fate.

"They'll catch up when we camp," Marcay stated.

Hagel seemed to have waited for the failure of the other camels. His reopened sore became infected, despite the heat of the sun. He had to be relieved of his pack that he might finish the march. The Cliff of Hank unrolled endlessly.

"It's enough to make one smash one's head against that wall!" one of the pack-camels' drivers said.

He had served in the infantry before, and was considered a stranger by the Chaamba. Not one of them, certainly, would have had this profane thought. But they rode huddled in the saddles, watching the shoulders, the loins, the hocks of their camels with wearying worry. Was the Reguibat, who looked at nothing save his burned feet, about to speak, to betray his comrades of the rezzou?

"He won't talk," insisted the yellow man with the hollow cheeks, the former raider, the wounded man of the Berabers' Gara, whose brother had been killed by the militia.

No one contradicted him. He must know, he who had been on several rezzous; he who, after the combat at the Gara, had covered more than five hundred kilometers strapped to a camel, his belly ripped open.

Marcay was unable to obtain information in a last, desperate questioning. Nothing seemed able to bend the will of the Reguibat. Although he was accustomed to meeting desert characters, the officer granted grudging admiration to his prisoner.

"Give him a drink," he ordered Lazraf at the end of the questioning. "He'd let himself die."

This time Belkheir obeyed without protest.

But the next morning, before the camp was awakened, Mehariste No. 432, assigned to guard the prisoner, disturbed the men with his cries. The Reguibat's place was empty. A *guerba* and his camel were gone with him. Riders leaped in the saddles, searched the vicinity of the encampment. But they soon returned, for the Reguibat's tracks were nowhere on the sand. He must have fled over the rocks. It was useless to pursue him far; as well look for a jackal in the desert.

"Bring the careless man before me," Marcay ordered.

No. 432, responsible for the prisoner's escape, had been terror stricken, and had fled to the crest to avoid chastisement. He was brought back amid the indignation and rage of the Chaamba.

"I didn't trust the Reguibat to you so that you would sleep soundly. You should have watched," Marcay addressed him. "By your fault we will not learn anything of the rezzou, while the Berabers will learn where we are within a few hours."

The lieutenant did not need to speak longer. Strict justice would be carried out. In the Sahara a man is not shot. He is left to the desert. Before the assembled riders, without show, without the parade of military executions, the culprit was given a full *guerba*, a few dates, and ordered to leave. He went away with lowered head, at the hour when the sun throws long shadows.

THE column reached El Mzerreb Well, the last gateway through the Cliff of Hank, and found it deserted, with its long file of one hundred and fifty palm trees which make it a picturesque spot in the Occidental Sahara.

Marcay delayed departure a whole morning, to give himself the certainty that he had done the best possible. But the two stragglers left behind with their foundered camels did not come. The two drivers sent after the strayed pack-animal laden with cartridges, Lieutenant Kermeur, the man who had not watched the Reguibat, the riders of S. 101 and S. 147—already six men lost. And Fennec could no longer be called a soldier. Since Kermeur's death he had been gloomy, indifferent.

Hagel was no longer of use. His oozing sore spread, reached his loins. The sulphurous dressing did not help. But instead of ordering him shot, or leaving him as he would have the camel of one of the men, Marcay screened the sore with gauze, which kept off the flies. Lazraf chased them off with his whip, but they returned and clung to the animal's flank, for they lived off his flesh. Marcay had given Hagel to one of the drivers he trusted particularly. From then on he could not look at the pack-animals without suffering. Hagel dragged along with the condemned.

He replaced Hagel with Kermeur's camel. He climbed upon it for the afternoon's march. Targui and this camel, mounts of Bettini and of Kermeur, seemed to him to bring back his two lost comrades, to make their presence felt. But Fennec still cared for his dead master's camel that nothing might be changed.

Had the rezzou been warned by the escaped Reguibat to flee in a new direction? Or, to end matters, would it come to meet its pursuers? Marcay hesitated between the two suppositions. Fearing an ambush, he reenforced the scouts.

Beyond the Cliff of Hank spread the Chesh Dunes, where Mohammed ben Ali, alone of the Meharistes, had penetrated before. They evoked in the men's imagination the idea of a hell. Erg Chesh, the Veil Dunes, thus named because the constant wind forces the nomad to keep the veil across his face. The first slopes of these dunes appeared one morning. The rising sun slashed on the golden flanks gigantic patches of shadow, the geometrical plan of an immense metropolis. As the column drew nearer, these fabulous structures melted, became the limbs of a dune, the saber edged crest of which slid for hundreds of meters to end in a salt lagoon.

On the banks of the dried lagoon the white crust of the saline efflorescence, cracked and swollen, allowed brown earth to show through. It seemed a white lake suddenly petrified while boiling. The center of the depression formed a vast skating rink made of immense circles with dark reflections, with violet and green shimmers. The leading camels refused to cross it when the soil resounded hollowly under their unshod hoofs. They stiffened their limbs, quivered, turned aside. It was necessary to make a detour of several kilometers to reach the opposite shore, where a few spiny *ethel* bushes, crowning a low hillock, marked the wells of Amchaniat.

Oglat Amchaniat—an "oglat" was another type of well, which resembled neither the wells of the Menakeb nor those of the Hank region. Under the light sand fringing the lagoon, the sheet of underground water was so near the surface that it was sufficient to dig a

yard deep to bare it. The sand immediately became moist; the yellowish water oozed and formed a muddy pool. As many holes, oglats, may be dug as are needed, and within eight days nothing shows. The sand wind has passed.

On the thirtieth of October, when the column had been marching for thirty-five days, the advance guard discovered on the far side of the Amchaniat lagoon six gaping oglats, dug in sand that had been trampled by the hoofs of many camels. The men who had watered there had not taken the time to secure the walls of the wells with the lining of grass supported by intertwined branches of *ethels* that caravaneers use to hold the holes safely.

"Made last night," Telli stated, after scanning the tracks.

These were in fact so fresh that the seal of naked heels might be discerned among the imprints of hoofs.

"Three antelopes' heads," Negoussi reported.

He had looked farther, under bushes. He indicated three heads of antelopes on the sand. Meanwhile the column had reached the wells and the men dismounted.

"Telli has found the tracks!"

THE news sped to the riders of the rear guard. The tracks expected for thirty-five days, so fresh that water still seemed to seep into the depressions made by bare feet—the tracks had appeared. All talked in low tones, as if the sound of a voice might have started rifle firing. A man muzzled his camel roughly. Nevertheless, the plain beyond the lagoon was empty, and the sentries, who upon a brief order from Marcay had climbed to the crest of the dune, signaled nothing new. Telli and Negoussi, gone in search of the tracks of departure, reported. After a careful examination of the prints Belkheir spoke.

"Eighty-two camels with riders, Reguibats and Berabers, and twenty captured camels with fairly heavy loads. Two of the camels limp badly. One was cared for at the wells." He concluded, "They're going southeast."

"That's it," Marcay said, unfolding the maps. "They've circled the Hank on the extreme west, and now they're shifting southeast." Belkheir and Mohammed ben Ali scanned the maps. Marcay resumed, "Mohammed ben Ali, you will have to lead us through the Chesh Dunes as you led Adjutant Hertz in 1922. Let's hope we shall not need your *guerba*. The first well is Oum-el-Hacel?"

"That's the first the Berabers can have reached if they followed this ravine," Mohammed ben Ali replied.

"We're twenty-four hours late. We have twenty-four hours to make up. We shall have to lighten ourselves as much as possible, leave behind rations, the wounded."

His hand had not been lifted from the map, on which a nail stroke had underlined Oum-el-Hacel, the goal of the pursuit, but his ardor had passed like a stream into the hands, into the hearts, of his men. It was necessary to gain twenty-four hours, or fifty kilometers through the dunes. There was a tumult around the wells.

Dragged up by nervous hands, the leathern buckets brought the muddy, salty water which the camels drank greedily out of the canvas troughs propped on the sand. Several times they had to wait for the water to filter back into the drained wells. As much water as possible must be obtained to face the infernal gullies of the Chesh Dunes.

"If we water quickly enough we can cover twenty kilometers more before night," Marcay declared.

The men's ardor increased. To fill their *guerbas,* they scraped the sand with their tin cups. New wells were dug. Amchaniat became a slough, a spread of trampled mud. To speed up his column, Lieutenant Marcay decided to cache part of his supplies. A deep hole was dug on

the bank of the lagoon, into which were lowered sugar, rice, the last cans of oil and Tuareg butter. Each man kept only a minimum of food, aside from the stock of dates which remains stitched in a goatskin as long as the chief has not given the order to touch it, an order uttered only in the last extremity of hunger.

Large stones were heaped on the abandoned sacks; the sand was smoothed over the cache.

A rapid inspection of men and animals followed.

"I don't want to listen to any grumbling," Marcay warned. "Don't let me hear a single protestation." He preceded his two sergeants, striding quickly along the line, naming those to be sent away. "You, and you—your camel, note that, Belkheir: M.128, M.230, M.209. You chaps are going back toward Adghar and, if you meet them, you'll pick up the riders of S.101 and S.147, who were to follow along and join us at El Mzerreb."

The officer forgot that the riders of S.101 and S.147 were lost men. He thought only of stripping his forces of weak members. Belkheir noted in his head the numbers of the victims. Downcast, the men selected to go back, who had suffered much, but who had been cheered up by the appearance of the miraculous tracks so that they no longer felt sores or wounds, were instructed to start for El Mzerreb.

"That one can be killed," Marcay said, pointing to a camel chewing the cud aside from the others. "Bleeding won't do him any good."

At once five or six men leaped upon the kneeling animal, stilled its panting struggles. From the long neck, drawn back, a jet of blood spurted under the knife.

Fifteen minutes later, when they left Amchaniat, enormous lumps of meat still dripping blood were suspended on the flanks of the camels.

Reduced to sixty-seven men, the column entered the dunes.

THE squadron was able to cover twenty-five kilometers before night. Action, the obsession of the pursuit, united these men until they seemed fused into one being. Marcay spoke often to the two sergeants. If evil befell him, Belkheir would take his place.

"If Mouilid spots you first, he'll want to avenge his right eye. And it isn't healthy to be before his Winchester," the officer joked, addressing Belkheir.

Not a man could fall asleep until late in the night. The discovery of the tracks, the hasty watering, the speed of the trip following the news, had whipped their spirits, and they felt as fresh and strong as on the first day.

The next day, after forty kilometers covered at an infernal gait, the squadron climbed a gully of the dunes in the gathering twilight. So near the rezzou, whose tracks had served as indications for the guides since leaving Amchaniat, the ascent of this gully, deep and narrow, did not progress without a definite anxiety. The men could not see the horizon; they were plunging deeper into the Chesh Dunes, which have the reputation of death.

The wind suddenly lashed a dune on the right, blew up a light golden smoke into the glow of the setting sun. It was not the sand wind which blew each day at the same hour, but a violent whirlwind, a tempest, increasing in strength until the entire crest flew off in dust. Blinded, the flankers riding above the main body sought shelter on the lee side of the dune. It was a brutal storm of the late season, sweeping the corridor of sand like a torrent over a pebbly bed. Driven by the gusts, black clouds skimmed the crests.

Startled by the wind filling their nostrils, the leading camels of the column sought to kneel. Their eyes screened by the veils, the men urged them on with the whip, as if they could have crossed, in a few strides, the tornado of wind and rain beating down upon them. They strove to protect their saddles, their packs, with their free hands. The rain

lashed their faces; the wind tore at their burnouses.

Then a camel of the second platoon, which had tried to escape several times, started to whirl in one spot in a slow, dizzy movement that made him stagger.

"Camel's vertigo!" Telli murmured.

Why did this terrible sickness strike during the worst of the storm? There exists no explanation for the disease that swoops upon a marching camel and makes it spin in one spot like a beast mortally wounded, vacillating in a sort of drunken dance until it falls.

Marcay strove to keep order in the column. But the rain did not stop, and he was forced to order a halt. One hour, perhaps two hours, would be lost. The camels, who sought only to lie down before the wind, knelt and huddled their necks. The men covered the saddles with blankets and canvas. Then they squatted with their backs to the wind, behind the animals whipped by the violent storm.

The rain did not last long, but it had been enough to prevent the squadron from camping thirty or forty kilometers farther on, thus causing the loss of what had been gained by the dash of the preceding afternoon.

"We're under an evil sign," some one said.

In that cold gully rutted by the downpour, no one needed to hear that voice. There were men who shivered, others who swore as they opened the locks of their carbines. Instead of gleaming cleanly to the tiny disk of light at the muzzle, the insides of the barrels were blackened as if fouled by powder. Others tried to dry their saddles, a needed precaution, for the acacia thorns used to fasten the leather yield to dampness.

Marcay permitted small fires to be lighted before night fell. The packs would not have dried otherwise. The saddlebags were emptied, stretched out, the squares of thick felt, the cinches, the ropes were separated. But the roots dug from the flooded sand smoked, and tiny flames sputtered weakly. The men tried to cook strips of meat over these fires. A nauseating smell of clotted blood, melting grease and smoke lifted, to mingle thickly with the odors of felt, wet wool, drenched and sweaty leathers and rotting ropes. The stench of the camels, bathed by the rain over their tar smears, over the sores treated with sulphur that dominated the nauseating stinks, increased by the belches of the animals as they chewed the cud. The men's clothes, their hands, their lips, were impregnated with the smell. Nothing dried, and the shaggy Winter coats of the animals, plastered down in patches, gave them a miserable, hunted aspect.

Marcay climbed the dune and surveyed the ground. Already dry, it revealed only the network of rivulets left by the driving rain. He sought for the tracks in vain; they had been washed away by the storm.

"We've lost the tracks," Marcay said to Lazraf.

"We have a guide," the orderly answered.

It was true; they had Sergeant Mohammed ben Ali, the only one among them who knew the Chesh Dunes.

Marcay was depressed. Now the "great raid", the weary pursuit to Timissao, which had been his worst remembrance of hardships, appeared to him only a test that had tempered his youth and strength. Even in the death of Bettini, riddled by the last bullets, there had been something worthwhile, victorious.

This present quest, which threatened to last as long, assumed an air of continuous mourning, of impending evil. Why did he think so often of that tomb at Chegga?

The next morning there was little to remind men of the storm, save for the stiffness of the felts, the unusual firmness of the sand hardened by the downpour and, on new leather, shimmering moist blotches. The column halted for a moment at the opening of the gully.

"Where is Oum-el-Hacel from here?"

Marcay asked Mohammed ben Ali.

"Straight in that direction." The Chaambi lifted his arm.

The squadron started. Two hundred and forty kilometers still separated it from Oum-el-Hacel Well. Lieutenant Marcay set the rate of progress at eighty kilometers each day. Even if the rezzou knew of the pursuit and was going on in forced marches, it could not, weighed down as it must be by booty, cover over sixty kilometers a day. In three days, even allowing for accidents on the way, it was possible to make up the delay to gain the fifty or sixty kilometers needed to overhaul the Berabers.

"We'll fight at Oum-el-Hacel," the lieutenant promised.

No trumpet call could have stirred the squadron as did the voice and gesture of their chief. Negoussi and a few others stood awhile on their saddles, as on the dawn of the pursuit. Nevertheless eighty kilometers a day, expected of a column with five weeks of effort behind it, was a mad pace.

CHAPTER VIII

TWELVE FALL OUT

THE tracks were picked up again sixty kilometers farther on, sixty kilometers covered in eight hours. These sixty kilometers formed the lead of the rezzou, for the Berabers had camped on the spot during the storm and had started out that morning.

"Still eighty-two mounted camels," Telli read aloud, for the white footprints and deep hoof marks were plain on the brownish sand, "and twenty beasts carrying loot. But their animals are tired, the men travel on foot. They have with them three boys, fourteen or fifteen."

The discovery of the fresh tracks gave the column new strength, and twenty kilometers more were covered in two and one half hours. It seemed impossible to keep on at this killing gait, but the men were determined to meet the enemy at Oum-el-Hacel. That night they ate only a few scraps of meat cooked on the preceding day.

The hunt was resumed at dawn, and at nine the leading guide called out—

"Dead camel!"

"Here are its tracks," Telli said, pointing at the ground. "Couldn't go much farther."

It was evident that the raiders were pressed for time. They had cut up the carcass hastily, had left nothing except scraped shinbones, large and pinkish, and shapeless débris of brown flesh strewn on an area of sand caked by clotting blood. A few strips of smelly meat were toasted on small fires at the noon halt, and the squadron was off.

Never had the outfit been so aware of its power. It was proud of its chief, of the Savage carbine which never missed, of Targui, noble as a war steed, of the machine guns which mowed down men like wheat. And it nurtured a fierce lust for loot. Twenty captured camels were reward for raid and combat. Times were spent such as when Lieutenant Cuvelier brought back four hundred and fifty she-camels from a raid, a herd defended each night with carbines. The Sahara had grown avaricious.

The squadron found more traces of the raiders as it progressed, water holes with rims still intact. Eighty kilometers were covered on the second day. An hour before sunset, after scanning the tracks, the chief of the guides declared that the Berabers were in trouble.

"They no longer keep order. Fifty-eight are mounted, the rest travel on foot because their camels can't carry them."

This news sped along the column. Marcay had to hold his men back when the signal to camp was given. Many suffered secretly, but would not complain. Mohammed ben Ali was ill with fever, the day had worn him out, but the column had no other guide. He swallowed quinine pills which he carried in his pack, and told no one that his teeth chattered when he rested in his hole. The old nomad who had served in Tripolitania

had wrenched his ankle. He slit his foot with two deep gashes, explaining to his brother:

"Tomorrow morning the swelling won't show. Thus, during the combat, I shall not be ordered to remain to guard the packs."

Few men slept that night. Marcay remained awake.

The third day, before the noon halt, the pack-animals weakened alarmingly, for to gain on the rezzou the start had been made before dawn. Nevertheless, this stop was cut short. There was barely time to drink a few cups of tea, which the brackish water from Amchaniat made more bitter, to swallow, with the last stringy shreds of dark meat impregnated with camel sweat, a few dried dates that clung to the teeth like putty. Mohammed ben Ali did not eat.

Marcay had to slow down the gait during the afternoon's trip, for too many camels suffered, and he must avoid tiring his men too much before the combat. The guides noticed that the rezzou was increasing its speed. Telli reported that all the men in it were mounted once more. Did the Berabers sense the nearness of the White Squadron? Soon it was obvious that there remained no hope of overhauling them before they reached the well.

"They're traveling too fast," Telli stated. "They must have reached the well a long hour ago."

Lieutenant Marcay then ordered a halt. At this critical moment he had to restrain rather than encourage his men. Fifteen kilometers left; he had kept his schedule, had gained nearly twenty kilometers a day. The column reformed ranks in the lee of a dune. Then it started out on the last march that was to bring it to Oum-el-Hacel by night. When dawn broke on the morrow it would be the surprise attack; carbine shots would crackle from the crests.

The sand and the soft hoofs of the camels muffled the stealthy march. Precautions had been taken to obtain silence. When the last rise of soil preceding the tall dune of Oum-el-Hacel was attained, Marcay sheltered the column behind the ridge and warned it against noises.

He took command of a reconnoitering patrol of a score of men and headed for the well. Two Chaamba crawled ahead. Within a few minutes they stood on the crest of the dune. They signaled with their veils. Oum-el-Hacel was deserted. Deserted save for two crows which rose from a carcass and flew off into the sunset, where a streak of light lingered redly.

"THEY'VE been gone two or three hours," Telli declared. "But it's too dark to be sure."

"They didn't have time to water the camels."

"They must have known something—"

"They were hurrying long before reaching the well," Telli pointed out.

"They heard the camels yelling at the noon halt, perhaps."

"Or a lookout spotted us."

Swept by disappointment, the men talked and argued aimlessly. Most of them had dropped the reins of their camels and squatted on the sand. In a first outburst of rage, Marcay almost uttered the order to go on. But it would have been madness. Watering started before night had fallen completely and was resumed when the moon rose. The wells of Oum-el-Hacel open at the bottom of a gravel slope. In Arabic the name means "Hole of the Weary."

"It deserves that name," Marcay remarked to Belkheir. "I have nothing but sick men." He indicated the riders who had dropped everywhere, white patches under the moon, while awaiting their turn to water.

"We have many sick men," Belkheir agreed.

"I know and could name them all," Marcay cut short. "Until now I refused to see them. However—" the officer dropped his arms in a gesture of discouragement, concluded—"have you noticed Mohammed ben Ali?"

Belkheir nodded.

"I must speak to him," Marcay went on.

"Better not."

"It'll be time enough in the morning. And the others?"

"Hammou ben Sebgag sprained his leg; did you notice?"

"Yes. He must be sent away. With his brother, for his leg is no good any longer."

"Badly healed. He shouldn't have come."

"And 311. His camel is leading him."

"The lashes are growing into his lids. Since Amchaniat."

"A blind man, truly! His camel will have to be tied to another, as was done before Chegga for Lieutenant Kermeur."

"You know that Lazraf flees from Fennec. The man drives him crazy. This noon, at the halt, the poor fellow was piling rocks together, saying, 'They're not thick enough. The jackals will tear them up. Lieutenant Kermeur wishes them thicker.'"

"I know! Shut up, shut up! Fennec shall be sent away also. And the one who coughs?"

"Just like Mohammed ben Ali? He's down near the first well. Sick."

"They must leave us, all the feverish, those with sore eyes, those who are weak or too young—save for Cheikh ben Kouider. I don't want them any more."

"Two and two, four—"

"And numbers 97, 108, 322, 337 and 112."

"Five more."

"And the fellow who sprained his wrist this morning makes twelve. Twelve men to send away. Belkheir, the three days since Amchaniat have been hard days."

"Hard days indeed."

"All right. Tomorrow, as soon as it is light enough, we shall look at the animals. That of Negoussi has a sore into which you could shove your fist. You saw? It must be abandoned—the flesh can not be good to eat. Same with Hagel. But we'll allow Hagel to march with us until—he drops." Marcay frowned.

The following morning, the fourth of November, before dawn, Marcay and Belkheir made a last inspection. The sixty-seven surviving camels had all suffered. The last three days had melted them. Their humps were marked on their backs only by folds of skin. The long hair of their Winter coats gave them a shabby appearance, drooping in unkempt wisps on their gaunt flanks. Their sagging loins arched to the skinny thighs, they resembled gigantic locusts. The sores made by the friction of the saddles gaped, oozing beneath the plasterings of grass and charcoal, slowly gnawing through the thick hides.

Lieutenant Marcay announced the names of those who were to leave, assigned them to the available camels. When they were called the two brothers started. The older one had thrown away the dressing which would have betrayed him, and had hoped to stay. Marcay cut short all protests.

"Get out—97; 108—"

Who would be the twelfth? The chief swept his men with a glance. Mohammed ben Ali had walked out of his sight, stood behind him, striving to hush a fit of coughing. Marcay turned.

"Mohammed ben Ali, you'll take charge of the returning detachment. Your camel is in fine condition. So you'll leave it for Telli. His could not go on with the raid. We'll settle the price of exchange at Adghar."

"Who will lead you?" the sergeant stammered, although he knew the squadron would have no need of him on the return trip.

Marcay avoided his pleading glance, and Mohammed ben Ali lowered his head and walked away. To select the six healthy riders who were to escort the group of sick and wounded men, Marcay resorted to drawing lots, excepting the guides from the general chances. When Fennec was told to go he remained squatted, rosary between his fingers. Two men led him away. But no one would ever forget his voice.

"Lazráf is hit. Lazraf! Lazraf is hit! Lieutenant Kermeur saw him fall!" he screamed as long as he was in sight.

Marcay would not leave until he had seen the departure of the other group, which was to dig up supplies left at the Amchaniat Well and try to reach Adghar. The discarded detachment started. But it had not traveled a league before Mohammed ben Ali bent low in the saddle, coughed up blood. The camel immediately following was sprinkled with a spray of red drops driven by the wind. For it often happens that a man, undermined by the arduous life of the desert, drops suddenly as if struck by a bullet.

No one saw this from the camp. With the column about to start, it had been discovered that the camels which had watered during the night had trampled and befouled the wells, so that those which had not drunk could not slake their thirst.

As for the *guerbas,* it was out of the question to fill them with this water mixed with liquid manure. A man discovered, behind a low dune, a well half obstructed by a dead eagle, which had been unable to spread his wings to fly out. The first buckets were given to the camels, then the skins were filled at this unsavory source.

Leave, they must leave!

Marcay did not have to spur his men with his feverish eagerness. Two hundred and fifty kilometers separated the squadron from the next well, that of Tadjenout. The *guerbas* were suspended on the flanks of the camels, half filled. This deadly imprudence in the heart of the Dunes of Thirst gave the men the conviction that they were condemned to death from now on, unless they caught up with the Berabers inside three days.

OUM-EL-HACEL to Tadjenout, two hundred and fifty kilometers of soft sand, cut by a dozen long dunes which delayed the squadron. For the rezzou was now so near that one must fear each crest. Marcay halted before every dune, waited until his scouts had reached the top and signaled that all was safe before crossing it. The men then climbed the dune in zigzags, drawing their camels by the reins. Few attempted to climb straight upward.

The animals sank to their bellies, progressed obliquely, and when they had reached the top they slid down the opposite slope in a few strides, dragging with them avalanches of sand. The column would reform below, leaving behind the line of sawtoothed crests and the inclines of virgin sand cracked as if by explosions.

"We'll never get through," Marcay grumbled at each dune.

Yet caution must be shown. How could he know from which one the shots might come? No sooner had they left their observation point than the scouts had to climb new crests. Nevertheless, marching without rest, the squadron covered seventy kilometers before evening. As soon as preparations for the night were made, the men dropped in their tracks, crushed by fatigue, and there rose the cries of the pack-camels, which were bearing the additional load taken from sick animals.

"When will we catch them?" Marcay asked Lazraf, wearily.

"Telli claims that seven of their camels are giving out."

"And how many of ours? I greatly fear that we shall rue that hasty watering at Oum-el-Hacel."

"What do you wish done with Hagel?"

"Is he worse?"

"His sore is wider than my two hands."

"I've told you. Let him go as long as he can. I don't want to see him. When you see his knees sagging—a bullet behind the ear."

The next day, marching from dawn until night, the column covered nearly sixty-five kilometers. But the following day's march fell below sixty.

"I don't know how we contrive to keep going," Belkheir said, "with those dunes to break our march, one after another. They're endless. Cheikh ben

Kouider, I don't know whether you'll get a chance to fight, but you can tell everybody, when we get back to Adghar, that you've seen the desert!"

"Did you think of the water?" Marcay asked.

"Yes. I gave orders yesterday evening."

Since leaving Oum-el-Hacel, there was nothing to eat during the dreary halts save a few dates and cakes of ground wheat. But in particular, it had become imperative to ration the water. The heated air of the dunes, the sand dust, created thirst. Marcay strolled through the camp to encourage the men.

"You might go back to Oum-el-Hacel," he addressed Negoussi jokingly, "and bring us back two full *guerbas*. Merely the weight of an antelope, and but a short walk for such a hunter as you!" To the men, who thought only of water, the lieutenant promised, "We'll find it tomorrow night at Tadjenout Well."

"And the men of the rezzou guarding it?" one asked.

The men of the rezzou, their blue garments and water. From now on the two images were mingled. For Telli was certain that the column was gaining steadily, and all were certain that the Berabers held the Tadjenout Well.

For twenty-four hours it had been forbidden to drink save at special times. To avoid drying their mouths the men had stopped smoking, spoke little. For hours they had traveled in silence, swathed in the folds of their burnouses. When they dismounted to cross the loose sand of the dunes they seemed to be walking on their shinbones. Once a guide climbing a slope faltered and dropped to his knees. Telli had to go to his help and hoist him to his feet. Since leaving Oum-el-Hacel, three days of racing had cut down the remaining men. Marcay, Belkheir and Lazraf held out, as befitted chiefs. But they were powerless against the weariness of the shattered column.

Marcay was stretching out in his hole when he heard a sharp detonation. The next moment Lazraf's white form slid to his side.

"You finished him?"

"You couldn't have stood seeing him suffer."

"I want you to have the carcass buried."

Hagel had dropped out.

When morning came after the night of thirst and fatigue, it was hard to recognize the men towing the camels by the reins.

"You have to come into the Chesh Dunes to see this," Marcay said to Belkheir. "I understand now the dead men's combat at Agerakten, and Mohammed ben Ali left standing alone, to bring them back to life with water from his *guerba*. Did you ever see such specters?"

The surviving Chaamba straightened when the chief passed by—fleshless faces, protruding bones, eyes reddened by conjunctiva bloodshot from fever. Their eyebrows and beards were gritty with sand. From their shoulders hung torn *gandouras*, which they had neither time nor courage to mend.

"You're as ragged as the Berabers!" Marcay joked.

But his words rang false. Replacing the immaculate squadron with which he had left the distant walls of the Adghar Citadel, an emaciated, ragged troop had risen from the night. Now that Mohammed ben Ali was not here to lead them, how could they escape from death? All the men thought of Mohammed's last campaign, of the last platoon he had commanded.

STILL thirty-five kilometers to go.

But the tracks were so fresh that the rezzou must be very near. What did it matter if the Berabers had heard the pistol shot which had ended Hagel's suffering? All were now certain that they would fight at Tadjenout. Marcay ordered halts several times as the column advanced slowly.

He went from one man to another, striving to arouse the martial spirit, the barbaric lust for loot. But the men, allowed but a few swallows of water, thought only of drinking.

"We should have drunk Hagel's water," a cameleer said in a low voice. "Some men of the militia did it last year—they killed a camel to drink the water in his stomach."

"What about the Tuareg who came to Adghar last Spring with a caravan? They had met nomads who had slain ten sheep to drink the blood."

"You'll drink at Tadjenout, after you've defeated the Berabers."

Near evening the men seemed to be stronger. They had struggled over another dune.

"Perhaps the last?" a rider asked.

"Perhaps the last," Telli agreed.

The line of dunes ahead, etched against the horizon, must have been six or seven kilometers away. But the night was darkening them already. A man, who until then had remained at his place in the ranks, came to Lieutenant Marcay, lifted his hand to point.

"Tadjenout is there," he declared, "right behind that dune." As the lieutenant stared at him without concealing his surprise, the man explained, "I was a raider in 1920, and I came here with a rezzou. I know the well."

"You might have spoken sooner," Marcay remarked.

He said no more. A nomad is not asked for his past history when he joins the Saharan Companies. Bou Khresba, Matricular No. 330, offered—

"If you wish, I'll go and scout near the well."

The former raider started an hour later, after nightfall, with a carbine, thirty cartridges, a handful of dates and perhaps a cup of water in the deflated *guerba* slung over his shoulder. Oddly, his departure seemed to surrender the column to the night. The men were certain that the Berabers' lookout had reported them long before darkness had come. Not one thought that Bou Khresba, who had been a raider, might go over to the Berabers, betray them. Bou Khresba was serving in the company.

While they listened, thinking of their empty *guerbas,* of their leathery mouths, of the wells which were defended by eighty repeating rifles, the Chaamba distinguished, coming down the wind, a dull droning—a droning such as is heard in a seashell—which quivered in the night.

"The *teubeul* of the marabouts—" said a voice.

The name was uttered with dread: The music of the holy men, called by some the drum of the sands, the muffled beat heard by men dying of thirst. It was a distant roll, duller than if it came through the thick walls of a tomb, the drumming of the dune lifting into the night, of another dune, of all the dunes which string one after the other in infernal circles like the crumbled walls of a graveyard. The roll no longer resembled the drear music of widely spaced waves beating a shore, but filled the intervals of silence, lingering with a long note, a vibration penetrating the ears, reaching secret nerves, flowing through the marrow down to one's loins.

To shut it off men pressed their palms over their ears. Why did this feast of phantoms occur tonight? Why were the dead gathering in the heart of the dunes?

"Hellish music!" Marcay cried. "The holy men should have stayed in bed tonight!"

For the officer knew the fear gripping his men as they huddled in their holes, foreheads against the sand. As for him, the roll of macabre drums aroused no superstitious dread. Yet this drumming announced the day of death. He made an effort to think of the battle.

The situation was clear: The scouts of the raiders were on the crest of the big dune, seven kilometers away. Around the Tadjenout Well was the encampment of the looters, with its double sentries, its square of shelters bristling with quick-firing carbines. With seven of their camels foundered, the Berabers had been unable to carry on. Did they know

that they were to fight men driven by thirst? Men who even after the death of all their chiefs would not flee, men who would have to be killed one after another if they were defeated, who would take their last step toward water?

The imprudence at Oum-el-Hacel, the departure from the holes with half empty *guerbas,* would grant the Meharistes, despite their weakness, despite the funereal drum of the holy men, desperate strength. Marcay had no doubt of victory.

The *teubeul* throbbed a veiled marching tune of which he knew the rhythm, which had lasted since the grim night at Chegga, since the agony of Kermeur and his gloomy funeral; a tune which had yielded to the sun, to the drunkenness of pursuit, to resume when the Mzerreb Well was emptied, when the storm whipped the column, and again when Mohammed ben Ali vanished into the silence of the desert.

CHAPTER IX

THE REZZOU

BOU KHRESBA returned at two in the morning, hailing the sentries to avoid a shot. He reported the result of his mission to Lieutenant Marcay: Crawling through the bushes, for the moon shed a dangerous radiance, he had reached the vicinity of the well. There, in the hollow of a dune, he had noted the presence of Reguibats.

"There were two of them," he explained, "near a small fire, which gave just enough light to see by. They were praying. I had them at the end of my rifle. And I wouldn't have wasted my bullets!"

Bou Khresba had resisted the temptation offered by these splendid, motionless targets. He had returned without giving the alarm. The rezzou would be surprised.

Two hours before dawn the men were awakened one by one, by a touch on the shoulder; the camels were muzzled. The southern cross hung low on the horizon when the Chaamba lined before their animals. Their *guerbas* smelled of tar—the smell of empty *guerbas* when water no longer moistens the leather. To refill them they must walk over corpses.

Of the White Squadron there remained only this handful of men, shivering with cold. After forty-two days of marching, fifteen hundred kilometers of stone and dunes under a sky clouded but once, there were left, of the eighty Meharistes who had started, fifty riders. Of these, but forty would go to the combat. The ten others remained to guard the camels and baggage.

To circle the lookout which the Berabers must have placed on the crest, Marcay decided to take his detachment across a dune three kilometers lower, then to walk toward the well along the bottom of a gully. This was a low ravine, squeezed between parallel dunes, between which the water holes were situated. The holes were somewhere in the rolling sand gathered near the rows of bushes. No one had seen them save Bou Khresba. But all imagined the petrified surges of sand, the bushes concealing death, and the pools of water beyond—the pools of water.

The *guerbas* were empty; the men had shared the last drops of water before starting.

When Bou Khresba estimated they were within an hour's march of the well, camels and packs were sheltered in the hollow of the dune. Ten men were left to guard them, the number strictly needed to afford protection. During the action the Berabers might renew the ancient tactics of the Arabs and attack the supplies. And in the desert a column on foot is a column lost.

The forty Chaamba climbed the dune behind Marcay and Belkheir. Day was breaking. From the slope on which they stood they could discern, perhaps three kilometers ahead on the floor of the gully, the rolls of sand and the tufts of dry grass marking the holes.

"Now if you wish to fill your *guerba,*

go to it!" Neguossi whispered into the ear of Cheikh ben Kouider.

They slithered down the dune and scattered in the lingering shadow. Ten men were to flank the main body, marching along the crests of the dunes, shores of this Valley of Thirst. The rest formed a cordon across the gully, which was four kilometers wide. The riflemen were in groups of four or five, five hundred meters apart, without contact with each other. This was needed to close the width of the corridor between the dunes. This preparation occupied an hour.

When the flankers had reached the crests they were to follow, Lieutenant Marcay went ahead. The line of riflemen then faced right and started to go up the gully. *Guerbas* were limp, the bandoleers heavy. In the center advanced the machine gunners.

SUDDENLY a shot slapped out like a whiplash against the left dune.

"The enemy!"

Marcay rose for a moment and scanned the terrain with his field glasses. Not a silhouette was in sight. But the officer had scarcely cocked his carbine before a volley, fired at an agreed signal, ripped from one side of the gully to the other. The Chaamba had dropped flat. The intervals between combat groups increased: Every twenty or thirty meters there was a tufted bush, behind it a man, carbine in hand.

The Meharistes answered the enemy's volley with a deliberate, well aimed fire, started from afar, as Saharan tactics ordain against a troop of Berabers. Belkheir commanded the flankers on the left, those who would attempt to circle the well. Marcay was in the center of the attacking crescent. He had no orders to give; his men were trained for desert combat.

The advancing crescent menaced the water holes. The officer passed his glasses to Bou Khresba, and the former raider recognized the spot where he had camped with the 1920 rezzou.

"That's it," he explained. "The Berabers are camped two hundred meters beyond the holes, on the very spot where we stopped. From there you hold the holes under your fire."

The Chaamba continued sniping.

But they were fighting against thirst also. Telli, Negoussi, the other guides, had drawn their veils over their mouths, Tuareg fashion, to shut off the dry dust, the fiery breath exhaled by the sand. Nothing showed of their faces save the eyes, gleaming with fever.

"The oglats! If the water holes are not in our hands by night—"

Telli, who was twenty paces to the left, was alone to hear Negoussi's cry, to see him drop his carbine. Then he recalled Mohammed ben Ali's words: 'Have you ever held a carbine when your *guerbas* have been empty for twenty hours? It drops out of your hands.' To gain confidence, Telli listened to the crackling of the machine gun—the mad one, the Chaamba call it—which hammered viciously, heedless of thirst. Steadily it spurted from each clump of bushes five, six, a dozen white spouts, marking its slashing fire. Supported by the machine gun, by the widely spaced, accurate shots of Marcay's Savage, more murderous than a volley, the Chaamba slowly gained ground.

At intervals the sharp crests of the dunes slithered under the unseen progress of the flankers, who dragged forward the two tips of the attacking crescent as fishermen close a net. The fire of the enemy was punctuated by the duller detonations of Mausers.

"That's the Reguibats shooting," Bou Khresba declared.

The Reguibats, armed with Mausers, held the center of the enemy's line, defending the water holes.

"They're mine!" Marcay said, shouldering his carbine.

He pressed the trigger. A blue silhouette, which had stirred behind a bush, half rose in the throes of death, dropped the rifle and rolled head first.

"Another!" Marcay said.

After two hours of fighting, the Chaamba had but two wounded, when Lieutenant Marcay saw the Mehariste nearest him on the right, No. 422, uncover himself to aim at a Reguibat who was crawling away and was about to disappear behind a sand ridge. 422 had guessed he was a liaison man and must be stopped. In his eagerness, he forgot caution. Marcay had no time to warn him. Struck, mortally hit the moment he showed himself, No. 422 dropped on one knee, hands clutching his belly, spun twice and dropped.

The attack progressed. The Meharistes soon were only two hundred meters from the enemy. When they arrived within calling distance, a volley of curses greeted them.

"Sons of dogs, worse than the Christians whose slaves you are!"

No anger rose to the hearts of the Chaamba, hypnotized by the humid spread, trampled, deep and cold, of the sand near the water holes. The remaining saliva rose to their palates; they opened their lips on their rasping tongues, the "parrot's tongue" of thirsting men. They could not even speak.

Bou Khresba, who had the strength and endurance of a nomad participating in his twentieth rezzou, alone replied to the repeated insults.

"Not one of your camels but was stolen from your neighbors, Moslems in speech and not at heart!" he shouted.

He had been unable to resist the pleasure of informing the raiders of his presence, although aware that after his share of personal insults he would become the target of the Mausers.

"Bou Khresba!" some one shouted from the enemy's line.

The former raider had been recognized and bullets hummed near him.

"Get down," Marcay ordered him.

Several times the officer had glanced at the crest of the dune on the right. The intensity of the firing behind that ridge worried him. The group of flankers maneuvering there were confronted with a difficult task, evidently. And it was Lazraf who commanded them. On the other hand, the flankers on the left dune, under Sergeant Belkheir, were progressing steadily along their crest and would soon take the Berabers in the flank.

No. 123, who had replaced No. 422 on the right of the lieutenant, was struck squarely in the forehead and dropped in his turn, with wide spread arms. Marcay saw his skull burst.

THAT shot had been fired by Si Mahmoud, the best marksman of the rezzou. Since the lines had drawn nearer, the officer sensed that bullets were seeking him; the sand jetted near constantly. Steady, mortally accurate shooting, the work of one man.

"Si Mahmoud—me or him!" Marcay murmured.

As a cannon swings with its turret, the Savage sought its enemy. Several rifles concentrated on the spot where Marcay had taken cover.

The sun had reached its motionless station at the zenith. The tawny sand had turned white, burning the feet and knees. Torture by thirst was starting. Marcay saw the young Chaambi, Cheikh ben Kouider, rise suddenly from the sand one hundred meters away, throw aside his carbine and run toward the well. But a man caught him, dragged him down to safety.

"Delirious!" Bou Khresba called out. He fought near Marcay.

"Here," the officer said, handing him a small *guerba* which contained perhaps two thimblefuls of muddy water. "That's all I have left. Try to reach the kid."

Bou Khresba crept toward the young boy. Telli, who was so hardened to thirst, was seen tying a rope behind his neck, a rope passed between his teeth. Others imitated him. Those who had no rope gripped a fold of their veil in their clenched jaws. It was then that during a brief lull in the fusillade, the call was heard for the first time—

"El ma!"

Water, a cry of anguish. Marcay did

not at once know this hoarse voice as that of Lazraf. The call seemed to come from behind the firing line of the Berabers. In fact, first of all his men on the right crest, Lazraf had circled the enemy's position and had come within a few yards of the water holes. But he had been shot at short range and lay dying between the lines. It was impossible to help him.

"They won't even finish him!" Marcay groaned.

This must end. Not because of Lazraf, whose cries would be stilled soon, but because of the living, who no longer replied spiritedly to the fire of the Berabers, the Berabers whose *guerbas* were full, who owned the water holes. If the Chaamba did not get drink before night, Marcay knew that he would be surrounded at dawn with men prone upon the sand, incapable of rising for the hand-to-hand fighting. Not one would escape the massacre. There would remain in the gully only stripped corpses, mutilated, disfigured, deprived of their carbines and cartridges, and the camels, choicest booty of the desert.

But could he order an attack against the precise fire of the Winchesters and Mausers wielded by men under cover? Only after sunset, when gathering shadows would spoil markmanship, must he attack, cost what it might.

Fortunately, the cry of Lazraf no longer was heard.

"He's hard hit," Bou Khresba said.

"Lazraf is hit! Lazraf is hit!"

Marcay heard at the same time the delirious voice of Kermeur at Chegga, and the shrill tones of Fennec. Had Lazraf been marked for death? No, for death obeyed no sign. It was the fate of the desert men to lead, until the end, a hard life, to wear themselves out under the sun, with thirst, against the sand wind, then to fall in combat.

The wind rose at noon, as every day. It swept through the gully and blew upon the Chaamba clouds of sand sliding over the soil, whirling, spinning into the sky where they spread and vanished in russet vapors. Then the horizon whitened. The sun was gradually veiled; the sky became a dull hued canopy of lead.

Suddenly, during a whirling of sand dust and a lull in the firing, a tall blue silhouette rose behind the rampart of brush and grass.

"Si Mahmoud!"

Marcay had no sooner guessed that it was the Beraber chieftain than he pressed the trigger, moving automatically, almost without taking time to shoulder, as one shoots at a bird on the wing.

The high, blue figure swayed, then braced on the rifle, vacillated as if rooted in the sand until a second bullet brought it down.

"No need to waste ammunition." Marcay turned toward the man who had fired after him, his hands clutching the warm metal of the carbine. "You should have granted him time to die. A man such as Si Mahmoud doesn't drop like a woman. One bullet was enough for him."

Marcay thought of Adjutant Devars' little joke, "Si Mahmoud won't review me again!"

Si Mahmoud lay on the sand; the old Saharan adjutant would have been very happy.

Above the crouched men, over the intermittent firing of the machine gun, which alone kept on beating the bushes at random and hammered with unexpected, vicious bursts, the gusts of wind increased in violence. The dune crests crumbled, heavy masses slid down the slopes. Tawny sand crackled against the *guerbas* like hail. It penetrated the ears, the nostrils, the thirsty lips that opened to inhale the wind. Visibility soon dwindled to five or six meters. Then nothing could be discerned from one bush to the next.

Each man felt alone. Eyes veiled, slowly buried by the sand behind his twisted tuft of leaves, under that infernal sky, he waited for death like a brute.

LIEUTENANT MARCAY propped himself on an elbow. He listened. Not a sound. The sand dropped back like rain in the silence. Evening had come. A prone form was visible twenty meters away, as far as could be seen.

"Bou Khresba!" the lieutenant called.

"Nasty day!"

"In a few minutes we'll be able to see."

Like shredding fog, the rifting sand cloud bared at one gust the width of the gully, on which scattered forms were sprawled.

"Look like corpses," Bou Khresba said.

"Some are corpses. The others not much better."

"Nothing stirring ahead?"

"Nothing."

No shot had been heard since noon.

"Don't rise!" Bou Khresba said to the officer. "Bullets may be waiting. I'll go and have a look."

Before Marcay could restrain him, the Mehariste risked himself in the open, between two bushes. The Berabers did not shoot. At once, along the line held by the Chaamba, startled men arose. They seemed to question one another from group to group.

After crawling several minutes, Bou Khresba stood up, imitated by Lieutenant Marcay, and they signaled with uplifted carbines. The raiders had left the well! Taking advantage of the sand storm, the Berabers and the blue Reguibats had fled through the end of the gully.

There was a rush. To cover the few hundred meters that separated them from the oglats, the men found desperate strength, even those who had fought from the crests. Marcay controlled his thirst until the end, trying to prevent disorder, like an officer on the deck of a sinking ship when the boats are lowered to the sea.

"Cheikh ben Kouider first! He's a child!" he called out.

The wild eyed young Chaambi, who had been delirious from thirst since morning, shoved aside Telli's shoulder and fell headlong on the sand, drowning his lips, his whole face, in the pool of water. When all had found a place around the springs, the officer yielded; became a man like the others; a man violently swayed by the love of life, who scraped the bottom of a hole with the brim of a tin cup.

When the fear of death was over, the Chaamba searched for the bodies of the fallen, picked up the wounded. There was a body near the oglats; the only one fallen near water—that of Lazraf.

"If Fennec is not dead, he must see Lazraf now," Belkheir said.

"Lazraf was marked for death."

"Two others killed," Belkheir announced later.

The body of M. 422 had been found, two hands clutching his torn belly, and that of M.123, who had taken his place and whose forehead was shattered.

"A bullet between the eyes—" Belkheir turned the body over. "Mahmoud's shot. I know it."

"It was meant for the lieutenant, that bullet. But the lieutenant—"

"Bullets shun the lieutenant," Belkheir stated.

As for himself, he could not be consoled for having allowed his foe, Mouilid, to escape.

After the wounded were brought in, one gravely hit, with a broken leg and broken arm, the other two lightly touched, a rider was unaccounted for: M. 340, who had been with the flankers commanded by Lazraf. It was at nightfall that a patrol searching for him caught sight of a rag fluttering above the sand. It was the veil of the missing man, who had been dropped by the bullets of a lookout and buried in the dune by the storm.

"Four dead," Marcay said. "Four more dead."

"But you got Si Mahmoud. You two had an old grudge to settle. It's over now," Belkheir reminded his chief.

"Yes, it's over."

Si Mahmoud's corpse seemed unbelievably long.

"We'll never dig a hole big enough," Telli said, humorously.

The rezzou had lost eight dead, of which three were Reguibats in blue cotton garments. Bou Khresba turned them over one by one; they had skinny bodies, their brown ribs showing through the rags. His work was in vain, for although he scanned their faces a long time, he did not recognize any of his former comrades.

"You hoped to find some?" Belkheir asked him.

"No, no," Bou Khresba replied. Then he took from Si Mahmoud's body a curved knife with a silver handle, which he offered to Lieutenant Marcay. "It's due you."

One of the dead left behind by the rezzou was a hunchback guide of whom the Chaamba had often spoken. He was almost a dwarf, and wore red leather amulets in his hair. The raiders had taken their wounded, but had been forced to abandon the stolen camels, who cried from thirst. The fires were lighted. Bonfires?

Lieutenant Marcay gave permission to kill one of the captured camels. Twenty animals had been taken. Only twenty—the days of great raids were indeed over.

"Sahara boush," an old Saharan said, running his fingers through the sand.

"The desert and its fatigue for nothing." Only a nomad of his years, who had known the time when rezzous were two hundred rifles strong, when camels were captured by the hundred; a nomad who kept the passion for the desert intact, and who, returned to Adghar, would not bear for a week the stifling air of the palm groves, could be forgiven for uttering these bitter words.

It was the end of the Sahara, on both sides. The Tuareg of yore had forgotten the trail to the Hank, for lack of guides. In this combat the Berabers had lost one of their remaining two or three guides. Soon they too would forget the paths of the south for want of those who could lead them.

"Within my time," Belkheir said, "they still had about ten. Now where will they seek them?"

The vanquished had turned back toward the north. They would be a long time getting back to Tafilet, with their camels burdened with wounded men. How many of them would reach their goal alive? For eight who had died here, how many more had been wounded behind the bushes riddled by machine gun fire?

"Sahara boush!" the old Saharan repeated, thinking of the rezzou at the mercy of the sands.

Remaining away from his men, near the body of Lazraf, whose pale blue eyes were open, Lieutenant Marcay had dropped his carbine. For the first time he did not think of cutting the two notches that would be inlaid with silver bands later. In his hand he held the knife of Si Mahmoud, his foe. The rezzou was beaten. But the head of Lazraf rested upon the sand. And on the path from Chegga, starting at the tomb on which heavy stones sealed his mourning, the officer thought of those who had fallen.

It had been best for Kermeur not to witness this victory. His soldier's hope would have been disappointed. He had not known the exacting desert, its arid road, its misery, and the bitter measure of its joys.

"Sahara boush!"

The southern cross rose above the horizon.

THE END

Number One Boy

By JAMES W. BENNETT

THE foreigner who has once dwelt in the Land of Chin will dimly recall temples and pagodas, Buddhas and bonzes, crenelated walls and canals, funeral barges and flower boats —in fact a welter of impressions that blur with the passing of time. But in the mind of each Westerner one clear cut memory lingers—the recollection of the No. 1 boy. This ubiquitous creature can make life a halcyon affair for the foreigner—or he can make it decidedly to the contrary. He is the main connecting link between the West and the East. His chief function is that of interpreter. His lesser duties are those of valet, butler, housemaid, messenger boy, plumber, roustabout and general factotum . . .

Han was one of the several No. 1 boys who have enlivened my China days. Before entering my service he had been an apprentice paperhanger. Something of a Chinese Beau Brummel, Han delighted in sartorial contrasts. Under his regulation white grasscloth robe he wore a pair of my discarded tweed trousers, banded about the ankles with wide, baby-blue ribbon. The socks which appeared beneath the banded trousers were of sheer purple chiffon silk. Confronted for the first time by that vicious purple, I asked irritably—

"Han, where in the love of heaven did you get those stockings?"

He smiled cheerfully.

"Oh-a, mastah. My catchee those of my brodder. My brodder he cook fo' foreign missie. She very rich! She wear stocking, one time, two time, den throw away! China man throw nothing away; keep evvathing."

With the exception of footwear, Han showed no other indications of effeminacy. In fact, he was a trifle too free

with his fists in a crowd of his countrymen, pummeling—and kicking—a path for me to pass.

He possessed that pride in his employer which is normal with a No. 1 boy. Once when I bought a pair of eiderdown comforters for my house and proposed taking them back myself to the shop for alterations, Han objected. I overruled him. He retaliated by directing our rickshaws by the most circuitous route, avoiding all foreign houses. We rode for nearly three hours before arriving at that shop. During our journey Han crouched low in his cart, visage carefully concealed by a huge muffler. When a foreigner loses face—by bearing on his lap a huge, billowing comforter—his No. 1 boy also loses it.

Han was a maladroit servant, with an unshakable habit of setting the after dinner coffee on the floor and squatting there to serve it. On the days that we had tea guests at our home, Han would disappear in the early afternoon and then come in, panting—long after the guests had not only assembled but had drunk their tea. He would arrive breathless but glistening, with slicked-back hair and a spotless gown. He had taken the news of the tea as a signal for him to rush out and purchase a bath at one of Peking's many bathing establishments.

One evening, just before we were to have dinner guests of some importance, a careless cigaret of mine touched the paper of the living room windows of our Chinese house. In an instant the lovely Korean parchment was ablaze—and one side of our living room looked nakedly out on the courtyard.

Appalled, I looked upon the scene of desolation. The time was five minutes to eight; my guests were due at eight. A chill wind was blowing through those charred gaps in the woodwork. One could hardly entertain guests all evening in the dining room, yet this living room seemed to be thoroughly wrecked.

As I was staring disconsolately at the ruin, Han spoke calmly:

"Ne'r mind, mastah. My can do."

He galloped out to the kitchen, reappearing in a brief space with a roll of parchment paper, a gourd of flour and water and a pair of Chinese shears that looked like tongs. Han gave the flour paste an experimental stir, turned to the paper and began cutting it in long, even strips.

At ten minutes past eight—I know the time because I stood watch in hand and an ear cocked for the bell at the gate—the side of the room facing the courtyard had new paper windows. Windows of gleaming white Korean parchment, unsmirched by that omnipresent Peking dust or by the ineradicable fingermarks of past tenants of the house.

Han, to repeat, had once been a paperhanger's apprentice.

THE name of another of my No. 1 boys was so nearly unpronounceable that he furnished his own nickname—

"Evvabody call me Drew-boy."

Drew was tall in stature and commanding in presence. He had a way of introducing guests that impressed them as much as it did me. In a word, his manner was courtly, verging on the haughty.

His aplomb was magnificent. No unexpected influx of persons for tea or dinner could ruffle him. At a moment's notice he managed to bring forth a sufficient number of plates, knives, forks—even chairs for the occasion—borrowed heaven knows where!

In this species of legerdemain Drew was not unique. It is a common occurrence in China for dinner guests to find themselves dining from one of their own plates, even using their own silver—lent for the occasion by their No. 1 boy to their host's No. 1 boy.

Drew, however, proved a trifle too decorative. His manner of beating rugs was graceful but not efficacious. As for dust, his eyes were usually blind to it. Furthermore, he had the habit—de-

cidedly not the rule with Chinese servants—of making raids upon my cellaret and cigaret supplies. Particularly the cigarets. Not for Drew the harsh bite of Chinese tobacco—when my Egyptians were at hand.

Finally his depredations forced me to remonstrate with him. He listened in stony silence. Then, instead of the denial which I expected, he said arrogantly:

"Mastah, you do not r'lize how lucky you are to have *me* as you No. 1 boy. Befo' time I was not servant. I was—" Drew hesitated—"wait, my show you."

He ran into the servants' quarters and returned with a bundle of clothing, a uniform by its appearance. On the top rested a large gilded sword.

"One time, mastah, I was officer in army. Dis is my swo'd."

"What was your rank?" I asked curiously.

He shook out the tunic of the uniform and pointed to a pair of huge epaulets sewed to the shoulders. On each of the epaulets were embossed five straggling gold stars.

"I b'long general, mastah!"

"What? Then how do you happen to be here working for me?"

Drew shrugged.

"Generals mus' eat, mastah. My side loose battle, loose war. I am force' to run away—fast. Some day maybeso I go back, fight again. Become governor of province. Then—" his face grew a trifle grim—"then I *take* all cigarets I want! If anybody say to me, 'No can do!' what you think *I* will say?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you will say."

Drew drew the sword from its scabbard and gave it a tentative flourish in the air.

"I will say, 'Cuttie off his head!' "

NOT long after the passing of Drew—and he left my services immediately upon his historic utterance—I was having dinner at the home of a foreigner who had lived long enough in China to be called an old China hand.

As I entered his courtyard the No. 1 boy reached out a hand to take my hat and walking stick. It had been raining that night and the stones of the courtyard were wet. The boy skidded, fell heavily and in the mêlée tripped me so that I also fell. When I arose a map of Peking was crisscrossed over my evening dress shirt and my face must have been a mask of mud.

My host, appearing at the door, gave me a horrified look. Then with a roar he laid violent hands upon his servant. The boy reached his feet and stood dumbly under the rain of blows. I expostulated, shouting that it had only been an accident. At last the foreigner desisted and with a curt command sent the boy to the servants' quarters to get a fresh robe. He refitted me with a clean shirt and collar, since it would have delayed dinner too long for me to return home for new raiment.

Dinner that night was unforgetable. The boy came in, face like a typhoon sky, and began serving salad—instead of soup. My host remonstrated sternly. The salad was removed.

When the roast appeared the vegetables were molded to form the Chinese ideograph for a turtle, subtly indicating that my host's ancestors were descended from tortoises, the most insulting of Celestial innuendoes.

My host said grimly:

"I should have known that this would happen. The boy has lost face by being beaten before you. He's taking his revenge."

"But I don't understand. This is food. Isn't the dinner the cook's pidgin?"

"It is; but the cook was hired by the No. 1 boy. What the boy says to do the cook must do. That's Chinese *kuei chü* —old custom. As soon as you leave I shall have to fire them both."

When the frozen pudding came on we found that a pervasive bouquet of leeks had been added. And to end the meal

in a perfect blaze of glory, we discovered that salt had been sifted into the demitasse.

Later, in an atmosphere of gloom, I left my host's compound. His farewells were understandably distrait.

The next morning I ran across him in the lobby of the Hôtel de Pékin. As I seated myself at his table he was in the act of rapidly downing five fingers of straight whisky.

"All the blether," he said in a violent tone. "The police questioning!" He faced about in his chair and called to a loitering barboy, "Boy! Another spot! Chop-chop!" And to me, "What'll you have?"

"The same."

"Make it two. Dewar's Imperial. And leave the bottle here."

My former host stared morosely for a moment at the ceaseless flow of life on Chang An Street—a Mongol camel train, coolies with creaking barrows, darting rickshaws, trudging peddlers with packs.

Turning back to me, he went on:

"After you left I went out to the kitchen to fire the staff. But no one was there to fire. They had all cleared out. About two o'clock in the morning the police knocked at my gate. They told me that my No. 1 boy had gone over to that dirty canal in the Chinese City—you know the place, just outside the Tartar Wall. He had tied a thundering big rock around his neck and hopped overboard!"

"Good Lord! Did he die?" I asked.

"Well, seeing that his neck was broken and he'd been under water for an hour when the police fished him out, I should say that he was pretty middling dead."

Beginning to realize dimly my own share in the tragedy, I also reached for a second drink of Lord Dewar's distillation.

"I've just been down to the police court," my host went on. "My cook testified—truthfully, I won't gainsay that—that I had made the boy lose face in the presence of a stranger. The magistrate fined me three hundred dollars."

"Good heavens! Worse and more of it!"

But my host shook his head.

"No, that was the only ray of light in the whole miserable affair. By committing suicide the boy made me lose face. By paying over that money—which went to the boy's widow—I redressed the balance. Three hundred is a fortune to a Chinese servant, and as a matter of fact I added a couple more hundreds to it. Following the trial, my cook came back to me. Face, I tell you, is the only real religion the Chinese possess."

"Let's have another spot," I said.

IF ONE Chinese servant was willing to carry his loss of face to its ultimate and dismal conclusion, there was another in my experience who used it as a technique for amassing money. The latter was Loh, No. 1 boy of the Taipan's Club. Loh was more than a humble servant; he was a gentleman of affairs, an exponent of Big Business. His legitimate "squeeze" on the club's food and wines, his percentage of the wages of the large staff that he managed, gave him a comfortable income. But it was his singular aptitude in turning to his own advantage all slights put upon him that made him a rich man.

It began years ago. Loh had been openly reproved in the club's foyer by old Colonel Cavanaugh of the legation guard. Unjustly reproved, Loh thought. The next day a rumor began to be bandied about the clubrooms that the Marine officer wore a corset. Cavanaugh was a stuffy, pompous old soul and the rumor was thoroughly relished.

It finally came to the victim's ears and he detonated—with a loud whoosh! It was a canard, a lie, he bellowed. Six or seven members, rendered convivial by brandy and tansan, told him to prove it a lie. The colonel hesitated, fidgeted and started to back away. The six gen-

tlemen made sudden flying tackles and caught the colonel at the door. Then ensued a scene unique in the Taipans' Club—and probably in any club—in which Cavanaugh's tunic and shirt were forcibly removed.

"Ho!" shouted the six inebriates. "Guilty!"

"Guilty, hell! That's my cholera belt!" roared the badgered Marine.

And thanks to that little band of flannel—superstitiously worn by old campaigners in the Far East to protect themselves against a chill on the liver—the colonel became known in the capital as Cholera-Belt Cavanaugh. So ribald grew the laughter that he applied for a transfer and, not many months after, thankfully left Peking.

It was from this incident that Loh developed his great idea. He awoke to a realization of the power of the whispered word. From that time on, if he conceived himself to be mistreated by a member, he at once began a whispering campaign in the club, calculated to annoy the most hardened Pekinite. But the moment the inevitable cumshaw crossed his palm Loh ceased.

From revenge he progressed to a species of gentle blackmail. At the time of the New Year holidays, when the regulation gratuities envelop was handed out, he got in his deadliest work. Loh had a fixed scale of tips, based upon a percentage of the members' salary checks. The information as to the size of that salary was not difficult to obtain; in return for a few coppers it was furnished him by the Chinese clerks in various banks.

And woe unto the club member whose yearly cumshaw fell below the sum Loh deemed reasonable! That luckless individual found himself greeted at the club by poorly concealed smiles and by suspicious chuckles behind his back. Little contretemps in his home—which he had thought safely concealed—came nakedly to light. For example, his wife's heated words after a dinner party, because he had addressed phrases of too fatuous a character to the alarmingly beautiful baroness who was visiting the Italian legation. Or, that evening when he had drunk, not wisely but too well, and had tried to make a speech bitterly denouncing Sovietism—before the Russian Embassy. Needless to say, the next year that particular member leaned strongly toward generosity, filling Loh's cumshaw envelop until it bulged.

This information of Loh's was bought—so the club suspected—from the *amahs* and No. 1 boys in various foreign homes. The rate was thought to vary with the luridness of the story. It is regrettable to say that the club aided and abetted Loh. In those idle moments at the cocktail hour, the members were—humanly—not averse to hearing a tale well told, particularly if it pricked the bubble of the too dignified, the too self-righteous. Some of the members were strongly suspected of furnishing Loh with his choicest tidbits.

Then, one Winter, trouble suddenly loomed for Loh. Elliot, his bitterest enemy among the club members, was elected president. Immediately upon taking office Elliot declared war. The new executive had once been stung by Loh's serpent tongue and had never forgiven the No. 1 boy. Elliot called a meeting of the club's governors for the purpose of ousting the Chinese tatler. The meeting was to be held the following Monday.

LOH promptly began his usual deadly routine. The club was flooded with spicy stories about Elliot. His marital infidelities were thoroughly aired—and apparently these were many. Next, his ability as a bank manager—he was the *taipan* of the Sino-American Bank—was questioned. Ostentatiously Loh removed his savings from Elliot's bank. An inexplicable run on the bank began. It needs only a whisper, among the Chinese, to start a run on any banking house in China. Elliot had to wire to Shanghai and borrow money by tele-

graph at ruinous rates. Only with some difficulty was the run halted.

As the time of the governors' meeting drew near Loh evidently realized the seriousness of his predicament. His attack widened. All the club members were impugned. The struggle took on the aspects of a civil war.

The American Express man told me confidentially that he was daily filling the Blue Train to Shanghai with tearful women, parting from their husbands because of rumors that could not be disproved. I accepted this as an example of the usual Peking exaggeration, extracting, however, a certain residue of truth.

On the appointed Monday evening the governors gathered around their long table and drummed their fingers nervously on the polished blackwood surface. The air held an electric quality that precedes earthquakes and typhoons.

Into the room walked Loh, smiling his pleasant No. 1 boy's smile which was disarming but never obsequious. In acknowledgment of the gravity of the occasion, he wore his finest uniform —a short satin jacket with buttons of lustrous jade over a robe of brocaded silk. Belting the robe was a girdle of gleaming cloth of gold. He spoke slowly —his English was always glib:

"I hear that club is goin' to fire me. Aw right. I resign. I have written out resigning paper. Here it is."

Elliot took the paper, a bulky document. The governors looked at one another, a little bewildered. They had expected a battle. With a desire to be magnanimous to a fallen foe, Elliot said:

"In many ways, we are sorry about this, Loh. You have been with us a great number of years. We have no complaint as to the way you run the club's dining room and bar. That is perfection. But we—"

He looked down at the paper. It contained a long, long list of names, literally hundreds of them.

"Why, what on earth is this?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Dat is my resigning paper."

"But this list, Loh?"

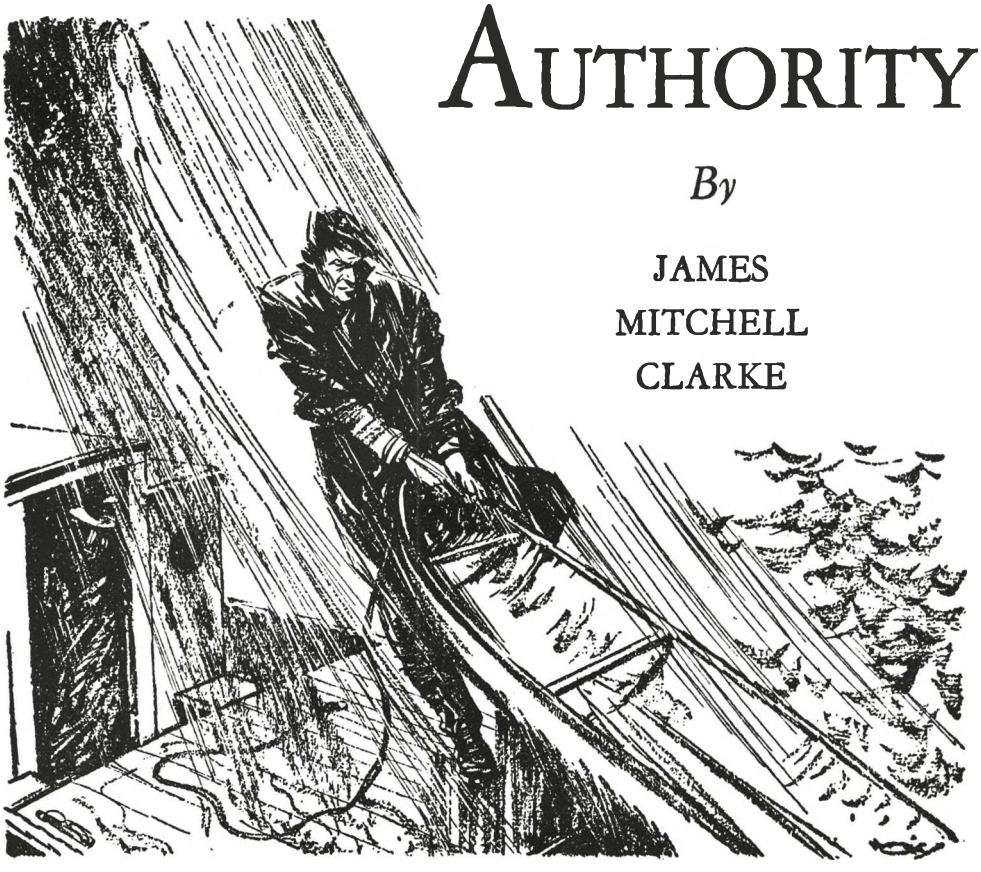
"Oh-a, dat!" The No. 1 boy's smile broadened. "Dose are signature'. All servant' in Peking. They have sign' name, resigning with me. I am head of Peking Servant' Guild. If you accept my resignings, tomorrow servant' all go 'way. In legation', in hotel', in club, in home'. Tomorrow you no will have cook, boy, *amah,* coolie, chauffeur, private rickshawman. Tomorrow morning you no will have hotie watah in you' bas, no fiah in you' bedderroom stove, no breakkafahst on you' breakkafahst table." Loh paused and then asked softly, "You still wantchee me to resign?"

There was a wild scramble about the table. A dozen hands reached for the paper. It was torn up, ribboned to a hundred pieces. Loh gave a bow and left the room—still the Taipans' Club No. 1 boy.

There was one resignation, however, that night: Elliot's.

The next day rumors flew thick and fast—beneficent rumors. Chinese capital returned to Elliot's bank. It bombarded the doors, demanding to be allowed deposit facilities. No more adverse gossip was heard about Elliot. Loh, having won his point, was never vindictive. And now he obligingly loosed numerous pleasant but unfounded tales, such as that Elliot had been given an increase in salary, he had been offered a flattering post as financial adviser to the Central government, he and his wife had become reconciled . . .

There is, I believe, a Chinese official in Peking whose duties correspond to those of an American city mayor. But of power—both raw and sinuous—Peking's mayor possesses not a tenth as much as Loh, No. 1 boy of the Taipans' Club. And not only Loh. In every foreign household in China there is a presiding genius, adroitly ruling that small domain—the No. 1 boy.



AUTHORITY

By

JAMES MITCHELL CLARKE

ST. ALBAN — called Sanalban — Roget, sheriff of the last watery patch of the Mississippi Delta, watched young Louis Sardu. Here in Len Hammer's combination post office and store were gathered the important men of this isolated settlement on the river's narrow bank: Paul Dumont, the rich trapper; Nick Brankovitch, the burly Slavonian fisherman; and Old Sardu, Louis' father. The occasion was grave. Len Hammer himself now told how the body of Syclen, the wealthy St. Louis sportsman, had been found. But Sheriff Roget did not look at these important men. Though he heard Len Hammer's voice, he thought of something else.

Young Louis' good natured face, not yet etched by care and hardship with any wrinkle, was drawn taut. Though he sat quiet, he seemed always on the point of jumping to his feet and breaking into this discussion. The sheriff thought of hunting dogs.

Roget had seen the fine looking dogs, lithe, clean limbed, intelligent, eager— but scarcely dogs any longer. Training and discipline had taken away the natural dash and charge that was theirs by heritage. They waited at heel, looking up with wistful, pleading eyes, unable to move toward food or hunting till their master gave the word. The sheriff watched Louis Sardu and thought these things.

"Nick Brankovitch, here," Len Hammer said, indicating the fisherman, "stopped by his camp before noon today. There was blood on the tent floor,

and Syclen lying in it, just where he fell. Two bullets went through his back. He was still breathing when Nick got him on the boat, but died before they got out of the bayou. All his money was gone, and his watch and his guns."

"Nick," the sheriff asked, "why did you stop by Syclen's camp?"

"Beeg birds," the Slavonian said briefly. "They don't fly around so—" he made an upward gesture with his thick hands—"when somebody is all right."

The sheriff nodded. White light from a gasoline lantern fell on this circle of swarthy, sun cured faces, but especially on Louis Sardu. Louis' brown, clear eyes had the look of a hunting dog, pleading to be let free, yet not daring to move. Sheriff Roget remembered that the big guide, Henry Lorraine, whom they had locked up on suspicion of Syclen's murder, had been Louis' best friend.

Len Hammer's rough voice went on with the explanation:

"Nick pushed right along and got here just before dark. We knew Henry Lorraine had gone into the prairie with Syclen, but he come in this morning and tied up alongside Lalo's wharf. Nick and Dumont and me went down. Henry was just fixing to leave for New Orleans. He was wearing Syclen's watch and had better than five hundred dollars in cash. He got pretty mad when we asked him when he'd last seen Syclen."

"He didn't kill that man, no!" Louis Sardu was on his feet, muscles twitching in his face under the intensity of his feeling. "Henry Lorraine would not—"

"Shut your mouth, you!"

At his father's growl Louis looked around, then sank back into his chair. It was as if a hunting dog had yelped and its master silenced it with one sharp command. Harsh faced old Sardu glared at his son. Louis looked at the floor.

Len Hammer ignored the interruption and went on.

"The last time Henry was in town he cussed Syclen up one side and down the other. Said he'd get even some day for the way Syclen treated him. And who else but Henry would have found the camp? Nick would have passed right on by if it hadn't been for the birds."

Paul Dumont, wisest as well as the richest trapper in the district, spoke from a shadow.

"That Syclen is one bad when he drink, and he is drunk plenty, him."

"Sure," Len Hammer said. "But that's not the point. Syclen's rich. If we don't turn Henry over, Syclen's people will send detectives down here, and lawyers—"

Louis Sardu had looked up from the floor. His tense face turned now toward Len Hammer, and once more the sheriff thought of a hunting dog. His mind, while he half listened to Len Hammer arguing with Dumont, went back fifteen years to a morning when he and Louis' uncle, now dead, looked down into the schoolyard from the levee road. A boy, slightly bigger than eight-year-old Louis, was slapping him. Louis hid his head in his hands, tried to dodge, but made no attempt to fight back.

The uncle swore in French.

"Louis," he called, "fight yourself. Hit him back, yes!"

For a moment Louis looked up at his uncle unbelievingly. The boy slapped his unprotected face once again. The next moment Louis was swarming over him like a young wildcat. When the tangle of arms and legs finally parted into two separate boys, Louis had a black eye, but the other ran whimpering to the sanctuary of the schoolhouse.

The uncle grunted.

"Now I must go tell my brother not to beat that boy. Louis' mamma, she is want to bring him up a priest. So my brother beat him for whatever he does like other boys."

Len Hammer's words brought Roget back to the lanternlit room and the murder of Syclen.

"We can't fight them, can't afford to. They've got too much of a strangle

hold on this country—and too much money. You'd better take Henry along, Roget."

Len Hammer was right. Always the Delta had fought its own battles, settled its own quarrels according to the ancient justice of an eye for an eye. Cut off from the rest of the world by deep marsh and crisscrossing bayous, beyond telegraph and rail, these descendants of French pioneers had paid little attention to written law or the cumbersome machinery of courts. In twenty years as sheriff, Roget's job had been to smooth down tempers, adjust some quarrels, prevent others, rather than to arrest men. And justice had been well served.

Syclen, who had more money than he knew what to do with, had bought up much acreage and turned it into a hunting preserve. Other individuals and syndicates had done the same thing, until the original people of the district found themselves forced off of land which they and their ancestors had trapped and hunted over for generations. Quarrels between Delta men and the sportsmen owners had been bitter, sometimes bloody, the trappers gradually losing more and more. An uneasy adjustment had finally been reached, by which trappers could lease privileges on preserve land.

But if no effort were made to punish the man responsible for Syclen's death, deep trouble was sure to follow. They could not only expect a horde of "foreign" lawyers and detectives, but reprisals as well—perhaps the closing of all preserves.

THE sheriff turned to Len Hammer.

"Bring Henry in. I'd like to hear what he's got to say."

Len Hammer stood up. Trouble was written all over his rugged face.

"All right," he growled. "Maybe Henry will talk to you. He won't to us."

Len Hammer and Brankovitch brought Henry Lorraine and left him standing alone. There was no fear in the rangy guide's face, or in his manner. His whole bearing was sullen, defiant. He glowered at the sheriff. Roget spoke quietly, as if this were a friendly talk about nothing more important than hunting or the weather.

"You have Syclen's watch and much money, Henry. Where did you get these things?"

Henry Lorraine's teeth showed against his lower lip. His scowl darkened. He said nothing at all. Roget was not surprised. In Lorraine was the hot blood, the fierce, proud disregard of restraint and law beyond the range of a rifle ball which made these folk as little amenable to civilization as the wild land from which they wrested a livelihood. The sheriff spoke again, still quietly.

"Why did you leave Syclen, Henry? Maybe you had a fight, yes?"

Lorraine's only answer was a steady, hard eyed stare.

"It's no good to keep still," Roget said. "I am friends to you, Henry. I want to know the truth of how this thing has happen."

He waited for an answer while an alarm clock overheard clanked off three long minutes. The others scraped their feet on the floor. Lorraine simply stared at the sheriff, unblinking, stubborn. Roget sighed.

"Take Henry back," he said.

Lorraine's coat bulged suddenly under the swell of shoulder muscles. He looked around swiftly, at the doors and windows, at the men ringed about him. His defiant eyes had a gleam in them, the look of a fresh-caught range horse about to send its body crashing against corral bars. Hammer and Brankovitch got up, but the guide scarcely noticed them. For an instant he was poised, ready to make his fight. Then his eyes fell on Louis Sardu and sullen, contemptuous resignation came into his look. His glance cut at Louis like a whip. He shrugged. It was as if he had said—

"If he wasn't a coward, we could fight our way out; but what's the use?"

Roget scarcely saw Hammer and Brankovitch lead Lorraine away. He looked at Louis' unhappy face and a scene, clear as the succession of instantaneous photographs which make a movie, rose in the sheriff's mind.

Midnight, in a gambling room up the river. Louis sitting in a card game with half a dozen others. A man rising suddenly; Painter, the shrimp trawler who had brought his boat over from one of the Mississippi coast towns to the river. This man, with the mouth like an iron bar and eyes which flicked here and there as if unable to come to rest, tore up his cards and flung them on the table.

"I won't play with no crook. What do you think you're getting away with?"

He looked straight at Louis when he spoke. Louis' hands rested for a moment on the chips which he had been gathering in, and his expression was a curiously child-like mixture of hurt and surprise. Then his face tightened. Anger burned it white. Slowly his hands clenched. He got up slowly, facing Painter.

"I don't cheat, me! You are tell a lie."

Before Louis could duck or bring up his hands, Painter struck from where he stood. The impact could be heard all over the now quiet room. Louis staggered back, lost balance, fell.

Roget turned to watch Painter. The Mississippi trawler stood his ground, flicking Louis with those restless eyes. His Indian blood showed in very coarse black hair and a certain deceptive quickness of movement. Everything the man did was sudden, deceptive; most of all this attack on Louis.

For Sheriff Roget, along with others, had been for some time sure that Painter himself was cheating. He had made this play to cover up. Now Painter stood with one hand in his pocket. Roget measured the distance. If Painter drew his long bladed skinning knife, he would throw a chair first. The fight would not last long.

Louis was on his feet, now. He took two steps toward Painter and stopped, as if sizing him up. His hands were clenched at his sides, his face still white as hot metal. The next instant, Roget thought, he would leap at Painter. But Louis did not leap. It was as if the strong pull had gone suddenly off a rope. Louis sagged, almost visibly. All the stiffening went out of him at once. His hands unclenched. Blood leaped up into his cheeks, and without a word or glance at any one, he turned to plunge through the door. The room's silence was first broken by Painter's laugh . . .

ROGET knew he was not the only one to remember that happening. Lorraine had remembered, when he looked at Louis. Louis was remembering now. There had been little chance for him to forget. Till that night he had been just another Delta lad newly come into manhood; somewhat looked down upon for his general meekness and self-effacing ways, rather lonely, but liked and even respected for his skill in handling a boat or a gun. Now he was an outcast, looked upon with contempt even by the negroes. For cowardice is the one crime which people who live by their strength and knowledge of the wilderness can not forgive.

Len Hammer and Nick Brankovitch had come back. The Slavonian sat down. Hammer approached the sheriff, on the point of saying something about Lorraine. But Louis was before him. Unable to contain himself any longer, he sprang up and stood before Roget, squarely blocking the older man's path.

"Mr. Sanalban—" Louis' voice quivered a little under the strain of feeling.

His father roared:

"Shut your mouth, Louis! Who told you to talk?"

Len Hammer put a hand on Louis' shoulder to shove him aside. But Louis was not to be stopped so soon.

"Henry has talk to me, Mr. Sanalban. He told how Syclen—"

"Get out from here!" old Sardu shout-

ed, and Len Hammer gave Louis a jerk which should have sent him staggering aside.

Roget, calmly taking all this in, noted that Louis did not budge, although Hammer was a strong man.

"Let the boy talk," the sheriff said calmly. "If he has something to tell I want to hear, yes."

By his years of service and a force of character demonstrated many times, the sheriff had gained an authority almost unique in the Delta. Len Hammer sat down. Old Sardu subsided with a growl. Louis' words came out in a rush.

"Henry is not a thief to steal a watch and money. He has talk to me through the shed door where you have him lock up. That five hundred was what Henry has save out of his pay. Syclen paid him good, yes. Syclen gave him that watch two weeks ago when Henry jump overboard and save him his life in the river. Syclen was drunk, yes. Last night he was drunk some more. They had gone for the prairie to hunt duck, but Syclen would only drink. One case of brandy he had along.

"Last night he start in and call Henry names. Henry called him names back, and Syclen said for him to get out. Henry went back to Syclen's big camp in a pirogue and took his boat here. That is a long way, yes, and he didn't get here till today. Henry didn't kill that man, but it is make him mad when you say he did, so Henry won't talk."

"Nick," the sheriff said, turning to Brankovitch, "was Syclen's boat by his camp?"

The Slavonian grunted an affirmative. Louis said—

"That is how it was," and sat down.

The silence which settled over the group was broken by Len Hammer. He was not impressed by Louis' defense of his friend.

"It don't hold water," he said. "Nobody ever knew Syclen to give anybody anything. And Henry wouldn't walk off a good job because his boss told him to when he was drunk. Henry had Syclen's watch and all that money. You can't get away from that. And he had reasons for killing him. Henry's a pretty bad actor when you get him mad, too. I don't like turning him over to the law, but we've got to. You can't go killing foreigners—not if they're rich."

The sheriff said nothing. A rising wind pushed against Len Hammer's old building, making it groan. In a back room hammers rapped sharply where Len's negroes were nailing up a rough pine box. Mr. Syclen of St. Louis now lay somewhere in the dark beyond the lamp's circle under a piece of canvas, waiting shipment on the mail boat tomorrow. Doubtless his family would make up for this rough and makeshift treatment of his remains when the time came.

"Will you take Henry up now, or wait till morning?" Len Hammer asked, meaning to the larger town upriver where there was a jail.

The sheriff held a match to his pipe and looked at Louis Sardu when he answered.

"I'll go have one look at his camp first."

Louis' head snapped up, his face as easy to read as a boy's. Bright hope was there. Roget was going to do something, try, at least, to save his friend.

"No use in that," Len Hammer said. "Henry killed him. Didn't you see the way he looked around a minute ago, like he was going to make a break? Ten to one he will try to get away before morning. If he hadn't killed Syclen, why'd he act like that?"

Paul Dumont's deep growl said:

"The wind is blow hard. We'll get a norther soon."

Roget, listening to the rise of the wind, nodded.

"I think I'll go, me," he said mildly.

Again he was looking at Louis Sardu; again the sheriff thought of hunting dogs. Louis' face was tense once more, his expressive eyes wistful. His whole being seemed to plead, as a dog pleads to be taken along.

"Nick better take you then," Len Hammer said. "That's going to be a mean trip, and you might need somebody, if you should find out anything different."

"Sure," Brankovitch said. "I'll go."

They were all, Roget saw, hoping that he could find some new evidence. They believed Henry guilty, but hated the very thought of a Delta man's being brought to trial in a strange place. He was one of their own, and it wrenched them to let him face conviction without a hand having been raised. It would reflect on the whole Delta community—as Louis' backing down from Painter had disgraced every person on the river bank.

Coward, they had called him, and left him contemptuously alone. And it was that very loneliness of which the sheriff now thought. In Winter Louis trapped alone. In Summer he fished alone, taking his midget boat well out into the treacherous Gulf, pulling his own trawl nets. To pull trawl alone requires strength above the average. To face by one's self the dangers of Gulf and deep swamp required other qualities—qualities which the sheriff had never known a coward to possess.

In a moment he must answer Hammer and Brankovitch. Before he answered, he must decide, and much rested on that decision. Down in the marsh he might find things which none of them had yet imagined, things which might send him searching for a killer. In any case he would need a good man by him—for the sheriff was old. Twenty years of rough living and exposure had left their mark. His body carried bullet lead. He would have to depend on the man he took; and more important still, he must find a man on whom he could depend in future emergencies.

The sheriff looked around at the circle of lanternlit faces. These were all proven men, strength tested, courage tested. Once more he looked at the tense, eager face of Louis Sardu, at the eyes pleading with a hope already mixed with expectation of disappointment. Sheriff Roget was no sentimentalist, but he thought he knew dogs—and men.

"Can you find Syclen's camp, Louis?"

The light which flamed into Louis' face was as sudden and intense as when Len Hammer first touched a match to the lantern over their heads. But his voice was low.

"Yes, Mr. Sanalban."

Louis' own father shouted:

"You can't take him, no! He's got no gut."

"He knows the way," Roget said. "I need somebody good in a boat."

Len Hammer, restless and excitable, had got up and begun to pace the floor. Now he stopped and shook a work-heavy finger in the sheriff's face.

"You're crazy, Roget! He's no damn good and you know it. If—if you should happen to find out we're wrong about Lorraine, you'd have to go on a man hunt. Besides, it's a bad night. You need a *man* along."

All the joy had gone out of Louis Sardu's face, leaving a kind of patient despair.

Under his graying brows the sheriff's eyes were like points of flame reflected in copper. When Roget looked that way people stopped what they were doing and paid attention.

"I have been sheriff twenty year," he said. "You don't think I know what to do?"

Len Hammer stood glaring down at him a long moment. But though argument was strong in him, the words did not come. He shook his head.

"All right, you can take my boat."

Another protesting voice rose.

"You are make a mistake. That boy has no—" But Roget had risen and turned his back squarely on old Sardu.

It was as if he had given a signal. Without more talk the men got into jackets and headgear and started out. On the plank runway leading from Len Hammer's place to the levee, Sheriff Roget staggered under the push of the wind. Beyond the levee, drift logs in

the river were grinding against the revetment. On the road the sheriff felt a hand laid on his arm. In the darkness he did not recognize Louis until he spoke, voice low and almost painfully respectful.

"We can't take Len's *Mutt* so good as my boat. She draw too much water. In my boat we can go through another way and save time, us."

The sheriff did not hesitate.

"Len, we'll take Louis' boat. He says the *Mutt* draws too much."

The party veered and started down the shell surfaced road, heads bowed against the driving wind. Sheriff Roget shivered inside his jacket, and the old gunshot wounds woke to torment him. His joints were very stiff and a little painful already.

IT WAS quite late, and houses below the levee's shelter were asleep. But halfway to the Sardu landing the party had to move off the road for a car, which stopped while a man asked news of the murder. He was a bony, old-faced young man named Goriot, who grew oranges and made money at it. His young wife was with him, looking very fragile and pretty in the faint light from the dash. Roget noticed that while Len Hammer laconically answered Goriot's questions the girl looked at Louis. But Louis was standing with his back turned, staring at the dark river, and presently the woman turned away also. The car drove on.

Dumont and Brankovitch cast off the lines as soon as Louis had his engine running. The others stood at the wharf end. For a moment, as the craft gathered way, Roget saw the row of faces, heavy with the gravity of this departure, worried. Then there was nothing but the dark night and the swift water. Something struck the boat and staggered her. The next instant she climbed steeply and slithered down, only to be lifted again. Louis, braced against the wheel, turned with a shy smile.

"Rough," he said. "This will be a bad storm, I think."

The sheriff grunted. He had no liking for open water, and here the great river widened out to the size of a bay. Wind could whip the surface into the angry chop of waves. Spray now blew against the glass of the tiny cabin. The craft climbed and dipped more crazily as they neared midchannel. Louis turned suddenly from his peering into the dark.

"I got to take in that pirogue. He'll swamp, yes. Take the wheel, Mr. Sanalban."

Roget had forgotten the dugout canoe towing behind. He took the bucking wheel and heard the cabin door slam. Louis was gone a long time, and when he came back, wet glistened on his face and clothes. It was no child's play to haul a heavy canoe aboard in weather like this. The sheriff knew he would not have been able to do it himself. Probably he'd have gone overboard trying. But Louis was smiling, as if he'd done nothing but an ordinary job of work.

He took the wheel from Roget, put it over and instantly they seemed to be lifted by some great hand. Mississippi's current picked the little boat up and hurled it seaward.

The dark hours passed in a succession of wild leaps and plunges. The boat heeled far over under the wind's push, struggled upright once more. There was no rest, no stability anywhere. And it had grown very cold, as only the saturated Gulf coast air can be. The sheriff, weary and strained from holding himself upright, felt flaming rheumatism eat farther and farther into his joints. The old wounds ached. He wished for daylight, since he could not wish for bed.

Once during that night Louis spoke—

"Henry couldn't kill that man, Mr. Sanalban."

"Why not?"

"Syclen was shot two time in the back. Henry wouldn't shoot a man in the back, no."

The sheriff nodded approvingly. He

had noted this about the wounds. It had, in fact, decided him to investigate the camp. For Henry Lorraine was not, as Louis said, the sort to shoot from behind. It pleased Roget that Louis had thought of it. He said—

"Who do you think killed him, Louis?"

"I don't know about that. Some man who want his money and his guns. Do you know, Mr. Sanalban?"

"No," the sheriff said, and spoke the truth.

In the facts he had been told, in the bullet punctured body of Syclen, had been no indication of the criminal. But Roget was a patient man, neither baffled nor discouraged by first failure.

Toward morning Louis cut down his power and drew in to quiet water near the bank. The channel they must take was near, but in the dark they would only go aground. Louis lay down on the floor, insisting that the sheriff take his single bunk, and was asleep almost at once. Roget, tortured with pain, lay awake and heard the first big drops of rain grow to a steady thunder on the cabin roof. But he did not have to wake the younger man.

With the first pale light Louis was up and lighting a charcoal fire in a clay burner. While the sheriff carefully spooned water to make the strong, bitter coffee no true Louisianan will go without, Louis unlashed the pirogue and got it overboard. On deck, it projected over the sides and would not clear the banks where they were going.

No birds flew along the bayou. The engine made a muffled sound against the rain and the boat appeared to move alone in the world. Everywhere stretched gray "prairie"—the water threaded marsh of muskrat, snake and alligator, drenched and beaten flatter still by the rain.

After two hours, when the watery sun had struggled up over the horizon rim, Louis made the boat fast to a willow tree and drew the pirogue alongside. The sheriff climbed stiffly down into the bow. As he lifted the paddle, pain shot through his arms and he knew that he would be of little help. But the dugout shot away and into a narrow, tortuous channel with a steady, even surge. Loss of sleep and a night spent fighting a boat's kicking wheel appeared to have affected Louis not at all.

HERE between grass grown banks the wind did not strike. But the raw, penetrating cold went to the bone; the rain beat down to reduce a man's clothes to soggy masses. After awhile Roget left off his pretense of paddling. Only his mind lived in a body numb where it was not in pain.

He did not really know much about this chap paddling so steadily behind him. He had reasoned out a cause for Louis' strange action, which had marked him as a coward. And Sheriff Roget had been sure enough of his reasoning to bring him along. Yet he was not fully satisfied. If anything came up which would bend and test the metal of a man, Louis must not show a flaw. Roget would like to know more before any such test came.

During the night an idea had come to him, born of what he had seen on the levee road when Goriot stopped his car. Now the idea was more clear; he had remembered that Goriot's wife had been Louis' girl.

"Women are funny sometimes," Roget said suddenly into the silence. "They say one way, but in their heart they feel another. When I was one young man I ask my wife to make marry. She said, 'No. All the time you are fight. If you stop fighting people all the time, maybe I'll marry you, yes.' "

The sheriff chuckled reminiscently.

"One night we are go to a dance. A man is drunk and he put his hand on her. I slap that man and we fight—bad. I am hurt, but I fix that man so he can't talk. My wife made promise to marry me that night."

There was no reply. The sheriff could not see Louis' face. But as he

finished speaking there came a sudden check in their movement. Certainly Louis' paddle hung for a moment in the air, held in rigid arms. Why else would the pirogue lose way and twist in toward the bank? Sheriff Roget smiled.

Only the sheriff's watch told them that it was past ten when Syclen's tent appeared across a barren flat of marsh. The day was no warmer and scarcely lighter than at dawn. The wind howled across this place with an empty sound. As they approached, a flight of ducks rose drumming from directly in front of the camp. Only the hiss and slap of falling rain greeted them when they stepped ashore.

One point in the story of Henry Lorraine was undoubtedly correct. Long necked brandy bottles lay all about, some in the grass, some in corners of the tent. The case which had contained them stood outside, but, the sheriff noted, no drop of liquor remained. If any had been left after Syclen's debauch, his murderer had taken it.

Of Syclen's personal effects, Roget found a few clothes, a fancy shaving outfit and other toilet articles. The two English shotguns and fine rifle which Henry Lorraine said the sportsman had taken with him were gone. So was his sleeping bag. Aboard Syclen's boat, still lying against the bayou bank, the sheriff found everything in place except the compass, easiest to transport of all its fine fittings.

Roget went back to the camp with Louis following silently. Around a gasoline stove, now beginning to rust, were various cooking utensils and one plate. Sheriff Roget bent stiffly down and began examining the remaining scraps of food. He shook the coffee pot, poured out a little and sipped it, absently. Immediately he spat out the mouthful.

"That was bad, yes!" he said, straightening. "Syclen must have cooked himself a meal before he was killed."

But Louis shook his head.

"He couldn't cook, Mr. Sanalban. Henry has told me how he cook all the meal himself when they go for hunt."

The sheriff's eyelids drew down.

"You think Henry cooked this?"

"No, Mr. Sanalban. Somebody—the man that killed—"

The sheriff was already stooping again. Picking up each in turn, he examined the cooking utensils and plate, sniffing their contents. He took in his hands for a moment the cloth which had held the coffee while it was being dripped, then tossed it away, grounds and all. Abruptly he straightened.

"Louis, where would the trawl fleet be today?"

"Bull Bay, I think, Mr. Sanalban. The shrimp have been run near there, and they would go in to hide from the wind."

"Can we get there before dark?"

Louis looked at the near horizon, dim with rain, at the small bayou by which they had come, and the larger one where Syclen's boat lay.

"In the pirogue we can get there before night."

"I'm no good," the sheriff told him. "All stiff. You'll have to paddle by yourself."

"We'll get there, Mr. Sanalban."

Smiling a little at this unquestioning, unhesitating obedience to his wish, the sheriff followed Louis to the dugout.

Hour on hour the slender craft followed the twistings of narrow dark water under the steady drive of Louis' paddle. Noon came and went, and nothing seemed to change. The marsh looked the same. The rain fell. Louis' back and shoulders swung in the same steady rhythm, never hurrying, never slackening at all.

EARLY in the afternoon Sheriff Roget asked a question.

"Would any man try to take his boat into the Gulf when this norther was blow up?"

"Only one man," Louis said. "George Martel, he'll take his boat out in anything, him."

The sheriff nodded and sank his head deeper into the sodden collar of his jacket. It was perhaps an hour later that Louis broke silence in his turn. His voice had a curious note of strain, as if it were difficult for him to say this thing he was yet compelled to say.

"Women are funny like you say, Mr. Sanalban. I had a girl once. She told me not to fight, like your wife told you. I—I didn't fight, me. You saw how I didn't fight that time. And she got mad. When she hear how I didn't fight she wouldn't speak no more. Now she has marry Goriot."

The sheriff smiled to himself. Always Louis had done what he was told. Everything Roget remembered or had been told about the lad, everything he had observed or heard from Louis showed this fact plainly. No matter whether a child of a girl ordered him, or his father, he obeyed.

The hidden sun was near setting when the bayou at last wound into Bull Bay —so called because of the amount of lies and boasts which fishermen, lying up out of storms, told to one another there.

"Land here," Roget said.

Louis ran the bow on to the low marshy shore and they stepped out. On the flat bosom of the shallow bay, white trawl boats rode uneasily. In between, the choppy waves broke in irregular patches of white, and the gray rain fell, making all obscure. The sheriff, peering as hard as his aging eyes would permit, did not see what he was looking for.

"Is Painter's boat out there?" he asked.

Louis did not need to look again.

"Yes, Mr. Sanalban. He is lie between Michelle Marceau and Pierre Rigaud."

The sheriff's stiff hands unbuttoned his jacket. They undid the buckle of his cartridge belt. He held it out toward Louis, the heavy .45 dangling.

"Go out and arrest Painter," he said. "If he makes trouble, shoot quick, yes."

For a moment Louis looked at the sheriff with blank, uncomprehending eyes. Then that same quick glow Roget had seen last night flamed up in Louis' face. But his voice was low and respectful.

"Yes, Mr. Sanalban."

Louis turned toward his dugout. After three steps he hesitated and came back.

"Henry will go free now?" he asked.

"Yes," the sheriff said. "Here." He unpinned the tarnished star from his own wool shirt and fastened it on Louis' coat.

If Louis was weary after all day of paddling and all night of hard travel, he did not show it. The sheriff sighed a little as he watched him run out the pirogue and step lightly in.

But as he watched the fragile craft duck and bob in the waves, drawing steadily nearer Painter's boat, he had some twinges which were not rheumatism or old wounds. He had counted heavily on two judgments of his own. Now his conscience bothered him.

If he were wrong about Louis, if Louis flinched even for an instant, or tried to back down, he would probably be killed. Painter was a quick man, treacherous and handy in a fight; doubly dangerous now. If he had been wrong about Painter, if the Mississippi man were not guilty, trouble would follow also.

It seemed as if Louis paddled out very slowly. Of course, he was bucking a big wind, and a pirogue handles crankily in rough water. But nevertheless, he seemed to Roget to be taking a lot of time. The rain sluiced down his neck and his aches were unnoticed as he stood there straining old eyes after the diminishing canoe.

A sudden fierce squall of rain cut off his vision for an instant. When he could see again, Louis and the pirogue had disappeared. He concentrated on Painter's boat, but the distance was too great to make out any sign of life on her decks.

In his twenty years as sheriff, Roget had never felt so alone as he felt at that

moment. He had sent another man out to do his job. Not only that; he had sent a man proven to the world as a coward, banking his own judgment against the facts, believing he saw deeper than facts. He had become fond of Louis, but that was only part of Roget's feeling. Better for him to die than to live if he were as bad as people thought. But suppose Louis let him down? Suppose he had been wrong?

Roget remembered Louis' last words —"Will Henry go free now?" He had spoken as if doubt of his ability to take Painter had never entered his mind. But was this calm assurance what it seemed? Any other man would have seen in it only the dazed, mechanical steadiness of fear, which would hold up only till a crisis, then crumble. And Roget had no proof to support his faith.

The sheriff cursed the pain which made him useless, and steadied himself. He tried to see once more, but could make out only the blurred outline of Painter's boat. He listened for the sound of a shot, heard none. He could only wait in doubt and anxiety. The rain fell into the bay. There was no other sound.

Suddenly Roget saw a skiff pulling toward him out of the gloom. Michelle Marceau stood up in it, and Michelle's large face was red with excitement. He leaped ashore and seized Roget by the shoulders.

"I am of thirty-three years," he shouted, "and never have seen a thing like this. Rigaud and me are on Painter's boat drinking brandy. Louis is all of a sudden on board, like one cat. He stand in the door and say—

" 'Painter, you are arrest for killing Syclen.' We all look at Louis and Painter laugh loud. Louis comes down in, and he touch the star with his hand.

" 'You are arrest!' he say, and pull a gun.

"Painter is laugh again and say—'You are too coward to shoot.' I think that too, me. Painter has his long knife and run at Louis. He is one quick, but Louis he is quicker, and one fool for brave. He did not shoot, no. He grab the wrist of that Painter, and bring down the gun—boom! on his head. Painter is still like one dead, and Louis has found Syclen's gun. Come quick."

THEY went back in the morning, through a prairie coldly washed with Winter sunlight. In Louis' bearing Roget had yet to find a trace of conceit over what he had done. Beyond delight that Lorraine was cleared, Louis regarded this episode, as he had the bringing aboard of his pirogue last night, a mere job of work, through and done with. Watching him at the wheel, the sheriff's smile grew till it was a grin.

He knew dogs—and men. And Louis in his way was like a good bird dog, a little too well trained. Tell him to stay back, tell him not to fight, and he would obey. But let him go, put authority behind him to help instead of hold, and you had a man who would go on doing his job until there was nothing left of him, and take joy in doing that job. The sheriff had need of such a man.

Roget stepped close to him.

"Louis, I am old now. Down here there should be a deputy sheriff. I will give you that job if you want."

Louis turned toward him and what the sheriff had seen before happened again; blank incredulity, then a glow spreading over Louis' whole face. His hand left the wheel and crunched Roget's.

"Sure," he said, "I'll take that job, me. Thanks, Mr. Sanalban."

"You're a good man," the sheriff said. "I don't know anybody could do it so good."

Louis turned shyly back to steering. But after awhile he spoke again to the sheriff.

"I'll never be smart like you, no. How did you know it was Painter killed Syclen, Mr. Sanalban?"

The sheriff chuckled.

"When he have kill Syclen, Painter

stopped to make breakfast. He left coffee in the pot. I tasted that coffee, and it was weak, yes. No Louisiana man would make coffee like that. Only a foreigner can drink what taste so bad. Now Syclen didn't make it, no, so I ask myself— 'Sanalban, who in the trawl fleet makes bad coffee? Mississippi men. What Mississippi man is here now? Painter, and he is one bad.'

"He would try to run home, I thought, where no man would know Syclen's things that he took. But the norther was blow up, so he must stay. He is smart, I thought, so he will stay with the fleet. I said—

" 'Sanalban, we will go to the fleet, and Louis will go and make this arrest, because you are old and can't fight or walk good.'

"It is not hard to be sheriff when you know men and what they will do."

Wild Turkey

By A. L. SPELLMEYER

THE wild turkey is the same breed as the domesticated turkey, and the identical bird that was tamed and eaten by the Mayan people five thousand years ago. The first known animal life to be tamed were the turkey and the dog, and it's a guess which was first.

"Talking turkey" signifies speaking to the point and meaning it, as the wild turkey does. His calls are the fluttering *putt-pt-pt* of assurance, the gobble of warning and the rising *wupt-wyp-wyp,* a call to come.

Every lynx, wildcat and coyote is their enemy, and in nesting or chick time, vermin and hawks. A big gobbler can whip off a small coyote, and helps guard the nest and the chicks. Late in the Fall the gobblers band together in flocks, wild and wary.

Wild turkeys feed on berries of all kinds, including the juniper and bear berries, and seeds of grass. Sand grass and gramma heads are favorite food, as are all species of insects. They can run as fast as a horse slightly downhill, or will fly a mile and sail another if they wish.

Wild turkeys leave tracks and only range a few miles from their roost, in some big pine or spruce, preferably on a hillside. When nesting, or during the time the chicks are small, the turkeys scatter and hide in dense brush, but when the chicks feather out, take them to a tree roost. They leave the roost at dawn and return shortly before twilight, and their droppings indicate it as their scratching does a feed ground. The roost will not be on the water but not too far distant—a mile or half mile possibly. Before roosting they fool and play around and are very unsuspicious.

They have keen sight for anything moving, and can hear, but can not smell. The assertion that wild turkeys smell has no basis beyond the same wild imagination that ascribes powers to pet horses or dogs of intelligence they do not have. I have repeatedly hidden myself in a bush and, lying still, have watched wild turkeys until they were all around me. They were upwind and downwind and crosswind, and I could have touched them . . .

A warm blaze, the fragrant odor of cedar, the nicker of the horses hobbled down the draw, and the repletion of a meal of fried turkey breast, strong coffee and hot buttered biscuit isn't so bad, as you lie back on a tarp and smoke, and let the world go by.

A Story of Napoleonic Days

CITIZEN FOUCHÉ

By ARED WHITE

SINCE the whisper had reached his ears that Cadoudal, chief of the Royalist mischief makers, had slipped incognito into Paris, Citizen Fouché had kept meditatively to himself. Cadoudal, secret agent of the conniving Louis XVIII, had sent the tip himself to the youthful minister of police. And Cadoudal had followed up this reckless audacity by appearing personally at the ministry, in thin disguise, with an arrogant demand that Fouché see him immediately.

The minister of police ignored the summons and remained shut away in his private chamber for more than an hour, deaf to the insistent knocks of Lieutenant Pierrot, most trusted of all the Fouché deputies.

The purpose of Cadoudal's visit to Paris was no mystery to Citizen Fouché. He guessed that the Royalist spy had come from the North Sea to kill Citizen Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul of France, a necessary preliminary to another Bourbon throne for the latest uncrowned Louis. The problem of dealing with Cadoudal would have been no problem at all except that there were other dire complications affecting the interests

of Citizen Fouché, erstwhile leader of red Republicans, and all those who were loyal to him. And Cadoudal's very audacity was eloquent of his own intimate knowledge of these complications; otherwise he would have exhausted every resource to avoid Fouché's police.

Pierrot halted occasionally in his restive pacing of the tiled corridor outside to peek through a private panel into the Fouché chamber. Behind Pierrot, racked by impatience, their tongues lolling with important information, were Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud, trusted Fouché shadows, who brought staggering information.

"*Mon dieu,* Citizen Pierrot!" muttered the broad and swarthy Bouvet. "But we must have action—or Bonaparte may die and leave us in the lurch. This is no hour to be standing by while any mortal dreams."

Pierrot snapped his fingers in Bouvet's face. Five times Pierrot had rapped at the Fouché door. And certainly Citizen Fouché knew that Pierrot would not disturb him unless pressed by important developments. What more was there to be done?

"But Cadoudal will walk out on us if he is kept cooling his toes in an antechamber for much longer," Bouvet protested in a raucous whisper. "For all we know his Chouans may be striking at the First Consul this very night."

"That for the Royalists!" Pierrot retorted with another snap of his fingers close under Bouvet's nose. "Citizen Fouché always knows what he is about. And the same halter that fits the Corsican—ha, our minister will shape it to the head of any man who rises to power."

"But he ought to know what I know, and talk to this fellow Cadoudal at once," Bouvet persisted.

Pierrot glared at his friend and fellow agent.

"Why not force the minister's door yourself with your intolerable impatience," he sneered. "Five times I have knocked. You may see through the panel that he pays no attention to me."

Bouvet stepped forward and pressed his nose against the tiny glass pane. He stood for a considerable time with his black eyes upon the immobile figure within the chamber, then turned suddenly to Pierrot.

"Look closely, Pierrot. He does not move. Does Citizen Fouché even breathe?"

Pierrot thrust the panel wide open with a tremulous hand. The light of a large oil lamp fell across the Fouché features, illuminating an angular face of projecting jaws and cheek bones, of taut, bloodless, thin lips and pointed nose, over which there was the repose of marble, the pallor of death.

The deputy began plucking at his chin with a nervous hand. His chest rose and fell under the throb of a gripping fear. Had some sinister hand stilled the minister's pulse in this critical hour? The fear grew, finally overwhelming the cautious but impulsive Pierrot. He rapped at the door.

"Monsieur, you are feeling well?"

Citizen Fouché's long head moved slightly at sound of the quavering voice close to his ear. He fixed Pierrot with cold level gaze.

"My health is perfect, Citizen Pierrot," he said, dry rebuke in his low, measured voice. "Perhaps it will continue so, and your own health as well, if I am permitted an occasional moment of privacy in which to think. What do you want?"

The eyes of the four men glowed with relief, despite the rebuke.

"Citizen Fouché, I thought it my duty to report that there is information of great value," said Pierrot. "Also the visitor you expected is growing impatient."

Fouché turned quickly to Pierrot, an eagerness in his face.

"The lady of the sable coat?" he demanded.

"The Monsieur Cadoudal, who says he will not be kept waiting much longer," said Pierrot. "And he seems strangely arrogant, for some reason of his own."

The minister yawned.

"Cadoudal will wait until I am ready for him," he announced. "There is information I have sent for before I talk to the Royalist rat. In the meantime, I need privacy for my thoughts."

Bouvet pressed forward, with a furtive glance back at the door which caused Dinant to close it tightly.

"There are twenty of Cadoudal's Royalist henchmen in rendezvous in a garret of the Rue Nicourt," Bouvet exclaimed. "I feel it in my bones that they are up to some serious mischief, such as slipping a knife into General Bonaparte. Cadoudal left them to come here, with the three of us trailing him."

The minister of police weighed this information in solemn silence, without looking up at Bouvet.

"I wished to receive Cadoudal only after I had certain other information of the Citizen First Consul," he said, as if thinking aloud. He thought on for a time, then turned to Pierrot. "But on second thought perhaps I'd better see the Royalist weasel at this moment. You may send him in, Pierrot. But, remember, the instant madame comes you must give me warning. She must not be delayed."

CITIZEN FOUCHÉ drew a sheaf of papers under his eyes and pretended to be deeply engrossed while the Royalist intriguer was ushered to his desk and left standing there. Cadoudal countered with an impudent assurance. He seized a chair, placed it with a deft jerk and plopped himself down beside the minister's desk.

"My time is valuable tonight, Monsieur Fouché," he announced with a blunt bravado. "An emissary of Louis XVIII, king of France, deserves better treatment even from the great minister of police, eh?"

Fouché turned slowly and fixed Cadoudal with glassy eyes.

"Are you not taking a great deal for granted, Cadoudal, coming to Paris without my sanction?" he said coolly. "*Émigrés* and Royalist plotters against the Republican government which I serve are still under the ban. What reason have you for thinking I will not arrest you?"

The Royalist agent was a swarthy little man with round, sleek, wine tinted cheeks and black, treacherous eyes, which now lighted up with insolence. He was disguised as a postilion and carried a leather driving whip with which he beat a nervous tattoo upon his booted legs.

"The minister of police is too much of a patriot for that," he said in a half sneer. "Since, as Monsieur Fouché must know, France is going to have a king, it is merely a choice between the rightful claimant to the throne, Louis XVIII, or that Corsican intriguer, who is not fit to be a king's man in waiting!"

"I am perhaps too much a Republican to qualify as an expert in kingly qualities, Cadoudal," Fouché retorted, ignoring the other's impudence. There was a momentary flicker of his caustic smile. "And so long as the Citizen First Consul publicly acclaims his adherence to the Republican government, why should I not protect him against Royalist plots?"

Cadoudal swished the air with his whip and his eyes burned venomously.

"All France knows what is in that mad militarist's swollen skull, Monsieur Fouché!" he snarled. "Bonaparte means to put a crown on his head just as soon as he can set the stage for an imperial throne for himself. And when he does—" Cadoudal leaned forward, a leer in his voice—"he will kick you aside like an old rag doll."

"An unpleasant picture you paint for me, Cadoudal," Fouché bantered. "And my cue, I take it, is to fly into terror and proclaim my allegiance to your gilded Louis?"

"If your agents do not inform you, Monsieur Fouché, I will tell you the truth," Cadoudal blazed back. "Behind your back, Bonaparte flays you alive to his ministers. He calls you the *mitrail-*

leur of Lyons, the red fangs of the black terror, the headsman of the Jacobins. Ah, Monsieur Fouché, Bonaparte uses you today, but he intends to destroy you just the moment it suits his royal purposes."

"So I have heard before," said Fouché, unmoved. His thin smile recurred as he fixed his eyes on Cadoudal. "Then I am indeed in a serious plight with nowhere to turn. For Louis, your proud king, would hardly forget that I voted to send Louis XVI to the guillotine, eh, Cadoudal?"

"Diantre, Monsieur Fouché!" Cadoudal cried earnestly. "His Majesty vows that bygones are bygones; and I am empowered to promise you the highest consideration. If ever there was a grateful man, it is Louis; and he depends upon your good offices. As for your Republican excesses, his Majesty says you have been disillusioned along with all other misguided Frenchmen."

"Delightful pleasantries, Cadoudal, and I thank his Majesty for his kind opinion," Fouché rejoined. "But of Bonaparte—do you not forget that he is a reality as head of the government, while Louis, your Louis, merely pretends to the throne?"

Cadoudal pressed close, his eyes sinister points of fire.

"But if this diabolical Corsican upstart should cease to exist, eh, Monsieur Fouché? *Oui,* if something should happen to him?"

"There have been so many plots to destroy Bonaparte, Cadoudal, that the Citizen First Consul grows lonesome for new ones. And you forget that it is my business to see that such a plot does not succeed."

"Not even you, Monsieur Fouché, can long cheat destiny," blared the Royalist.

"So you do not make a secret of what brings you back to Paris, eh, Cadoudal?"

"But I am counting upon your sound sense—and that your interests rest with Louis XVIII, not with Bonaparte," Cadoudal pleaded.

"Let us suppose, Cadoudal, that I should elect to care for my own interests and place you under arrest?"

"It would remind me, Monsieur Fouché, of the silly yokel who sharpened the guillotine—only to have it fall next upon his own neck," Cadoudal countered.

He rose impetuously and began pressing his arguments openly.

"But let us quit parrying and speak our minds openly, monsieur. First let me remind you that I came direct to you and offered you our friendship. The king admits your power, pleads for your services for stricken France. Bonaparte, as you well know, will destroy you when he becomes emperor. Louis, on the other hand, will reward you richly. I beg of you, Monsieur Fouché, can we not come to an understanding and discuss matters on a common ground?"

"You have not said, Cadoudal, what it is you expect of me."

"Only, monsieur, that you close your eyes and your ears for a short time."

Fouché sat in silence, looking at Cadoudal without seeing him. It was as he had suspected. Cadoudal came to Paris knowing the Fouché extremity. The Fouché enemies in the Bonaparte camp were intent upon destroying him. Not in the reddest days of the revolution, not even when he faced the sinister Robespierre as adversary, had he to meet so dangerous and intricate an intrigue. Would not either Louis XVIII or Napoleon I destroy him at the first opportunity after making a throne?

As Fouché sat in silent thought, the Royalist agent watched him breathlessly for the slightest indication of his decision. But he saw nothing behind the cold mask of the Fouché face. Presently they were interrupted by four sharp raps at the door. Fouché rose.

"In a few days I shall give you my answer—or perhaps tomorrow, Monsieur Cadoudal," he said coolly. "In the meantime I advise you, if you value your good health, to keep to cover in close disguise, and attempt no mischief

against the Citizen First Consul."

"Let us complete our business at this moment, monsieur," Cadoudal pleaded, with a desperate insistence in his voice.

The knock at the door was repeated.

"I will send for you when I am ready, not before," Fouché said sharply. "Now, Cadoudal, you will leave by way of my private door, which leads you directly into the street."

The Royalist accepted his dismissal with a cold bow.

"We shall meet again, Monsieur Fouché," he said. There was a malignant gleam in his eyes, a vindictive threat in his voice and manner which he put only vaguely into words. "In the meantime, circumstances may soften your humor, though a bit too late. Au revoir, Monsieur Fouché!"

AFTER closing the door upon Cadoudal, Citizen Fouché, ignoring the Royalist's taunt, hurried to a mirror and smoothed out his stringy, scant red hair, flicked a few fallen hairs from his lapel, seated himself at his desk and signaled Pierrot to enter. His deputy ushered in a mysterious visitor without the formality of announcing that it was a woman —a stooped, slender figure with shoulders pinched together under a long cloak of Russian sable. As Citizen Fouché stepped forward to greet her, the woman threw her shoulders erect, laid aside her cloak and tossed back the heavy veils on her hat with an imperious toss of her head, to unmask a very attractive young face in high ill humor.

"I have waited the better part of a minute, exposed to the prying eyes of your henchmen, Monsieur Fouché!" she stormed, her cheeks crimson under deep olive skin, her large black eyes flashing malevolence. "One might think me a person of no consequence, and you the king of France. Well, my time is valuable, since I must dress for the opera tonight."

The minister of police bowed profoundly and placed a chair.

"A thousand apologies, Madame Bonaparte," he replied. "The stupidity of my deputy in causing you an instant's delay was inexcusable." He added with a gallant bow, which he executed somewhat awkwardly, "But that my agents should look at you, madame, was only human, since not even the best disguise could conceal such charms."

"Nonsense!" she retorted, and shrugged a refusal of the proffered chair. "I have only a moment left for you, so to business. I have talked to Bourienne, who puts at rest the silly chatter that General Bonaparte holds you in secret ill will. It is only the prattle of my general's relatives that you have heard retailed. As for his wishing to become king of France, that is more idle rumor, Monsieur Fouché."

"Of course," he assented cheerfully. "It is exactly as I thought it must be. The general, he has expressed to you, or within your hearing, his good opinion of me, Madame Bonaparte?"

"I do not retail my husband's private conversations," she flared. "Is it not enough that I have brought you the information you wanted, monsieur. Have I ever in the past misled you with inaccurate report?"

"Pardon, madame. Of course I do not question either your unsupported word or the excellence of your judgment."

He crossed to a cabinet and poured two glasses of red Burgundy, seeming to have closed the subject. He spoke lightly, as if belittling his own foolish words in what he had to disclose.

"There are so many silly rumors, one hardly knows what to believe," he said casually, passing her a glass of wine. "Bonaparte's flock of relatives are also authority for the report that as soon as General Bonaparte is proclaimed emperor he will placate the old order and strengthen his position by marrying a sister of the Czar of Russia, or perhaps a Badenese princess, madame."

Madame Bonaparte's hand was thrown into a tremor that spilled half the wine.

She raised the remnant to cover the emotions that shook her at Fouché's words.

"Or if Austria is to be courted, there is a beautiful daughter of the House of Hapsburg waiting for an imperial suitor of appropriate rank!" Fouché's eyes shone in polite amusement, as if he spoke absurd platitudes, though behind the mask of his face he was observing his distinguished visitor with hawk-like alertness. "Of course, such a dream as that would appeal to that bevy of his brothers and sisters, who think you in the way—"

"Stop!" Madame Bonaparte cried out. "I know only too well what is in their minds, and I know they are trying to turn the heads of all the ministers and generals and all the flatterers against me! But I will deal with them!"

"Madame, your pardon if I have offended," Fouché spoke up gravely. He seized his opportunity quickly. "But if they have such a plan, they shall have me to deal with as well. I have your husband's welfare too deeply at heart to see him attempt such a step as setting up a throne."

"Monsieur Fouché," she cried impulsively, her eyes stark with fear, "if you will swear you have only the best interests of my husband at heart?"

"Have I not proven that by nipping a hundred plots against his life, madame?"

"I'm afraid, monsieur!" she cried.

"Afraid? What have you to fear, madame?"

"The slick tongues, monsieur. Oh, the general is surrounded by those sycophants and sly flatterers, and his kin, who keep putting into his mind the thought of a throne. And you know his vanity, monsieur."

"Surely, madame, he would tell you above all others, if he had such a thought in his mind."

"My Bonaparte has been different of late, evasive with me, as if something which I can not see is drawing us apart."

The minister of police laid a reassuring hand lightly on her arm.

"Please, madame, have a seat," he said softly. "Let us canvass these fears of yours. If I am to be your ally against intriguers, you must take me fully into your confidence."

Madame sat down reluctantly, then glanced at the clock on Fouché's wall and got up.

"Another time, monsieur," she said anxiously. "Tonight we go to the opera and I have barely time to get home and prepare. But you do not believe they could succeed with such an intrigue?"

"Of course not, madame," he reassured. "Please do not worry yourself over mere shadows." Fouché snapped his fingers at the folly of such fears and turned to his desk, from a secret compartment of which he brought forth a jangling chamois bag. "And I must not forget, madame, that you were to receive another advance today. You will find in this bag the precise amount of your needs—a thousand gold louis."

"*Merci, Monsieur Fouché,*" she cried, taking the gold without hesitation. "Again you save me embarrassment with my creditors—and my husband."

"It is always an honor to serve madame," he rejoined as Madame Bonaparte caught up her cloak, adjusted her veils and extended her hand. "But you must use caution, and keep eyes and ears alert," he admonished as they reached the door. "If I am to serve you truly, you must keep me informed of this royal patter."

"Monsieur, how great a comfort it is for me to know there is some one upon whom I can depend," she exclaimed, pressing his arm gratefully. "I will call again very shortly. Adieu, monsieur."

PIERROT hurried in the moment Madame Bonaparte was clear of the chamber. Pierrot was a tall, broad Gascon, emotional, effervescent, fond of direct action, the very opposite of Fouché in temperament. In long years of association, through the crimson crises of the revolu-

tion, he had learned to adapt himself to his master's moods with discreet restraint. But just now he was bubbling over; and when Citizen Fouché ignored him, to sit down staring at the wall, Pierrot burst into a torrent of report.

"I want instructions, Citizen Fouché," he announced. "There's trouble in that Royalist scoundrel's heart. And if I'd had my way, we would have scotched him before he left the ministry. It is in my mind now to put a hundred gendarmes on his trail and round him up with his entire crew. All I ask is your authority for such action, Citizen Fouché."

"I presumed, of course, Pierrot, that you would have Cadoudal shadowed when he left my chamber," said the minister of police dryly, without looking up at his deputy.

"*Mon dieu,* Citizen!" cried Pierrot. "But I sent Bouvet close on the fellow's heels. But Cadoudal waited for Bouvet in a dark corner, and laughed at him and said something the sound of which I do not like. He said there were cobwebs on the guillotine in the Place de la République, but that his Majesty, Louis, soon would attend to all that. Then he snapped his fingers under Bouvet's nose and sauntered off. Before Bouvet could make up his mind to arrest the Royalist for his impudence, Cadoudal was trotting away in a cab."

"And gave Bouvet the slip, I presume," Fouché supplied.

"*Oui,* Citizen. Bouvet follows quickly in a second cab, but Cadoudal slipped away in the dark so that Bouvet found only an empty cab when he overhauled the vehicle. Citizen Fouché, I warn you that the agents of Louis XVIII are forming for some coup. That arrogant rat was feeling unusually sure of himself when he demanded an audience with you. If they should reach Bonaparte, might we not wake up to find a king on the throne in the chaos? Cadoudal must be arrested at once, Citizen Fouché."

Fouché sat unmoved for several moments. Finally he looked up with a thin, sneering smile.

"Whether we like it or not, Pierrot," he said quietly, "France is going to have a king. It appears to be, so far as we are concerned, merely a choice of kings."

"*Diable!*" Pierrot exploded. "But did Madame Bonaparte bring us such information!"

"No one else, Pierrot."

"But—" Pierrot paused to weigh his thoughts, "—but might not madame have been sent here to test your loyalty, Citizen Fouché—to study the response you would give to such a thought?"

The minister of police stifled a yawn.

"You know, Pierrot, without my having to say so, that the Citizen First Consul would not tolerate having his wife put to any such usage. No, she came clandestinely, as she so often comes, because her riotous extravagance goads her need of funds, well knowing that I am generous where there is information to be had." Fouché's thin lips lifted at the corners. "Also she came, Pierrot, because my intimate knowledge of her affairs with Hippolyte Charles and Monsieur Barras, while the general was absent in Egypt, renders it wise for her to come when I send word."

Pierrot weighed the situation under his suspicious black brows.

"But I do not put anything past some of your enemies who are close to Bonaparte," Pierrot persisted.

"You have decided I am a simpleton, eh, Pierrot?" Fouché rejoined indulgently. "Well, if you must be convinced, let me remind you that Madame Bonaparte is a shallow Creole who trapped the Corsican into marriage in the days of his poverty, and her flares of fortune since have not deepened her wit. Besides, she had no remote intention of telling me what I wanted to know. I dragged it from her by filling her brain with fear. It was for that information, and some knowledge of how our fortunes stand with Bonaparte, that I was waiting when Cadoudal forced himself on us."

Pierrot walked back and forth across the chamber, gnawing nervously at his thumb as he digested the minister's disclosure. To his republican soul a monarch meant swift disaster. Disaster for him, for Citizen Fouché, for Bouvet, Dinant, Geraud, for all the Jacobins who had stripped a throne from under Louis XVI and dragged him to the guillotine. Pierrot had opposed the Bonaparte *coup d'état* of five months before, urged upon Fouché the arrest of the general for sedition, stood ready to raise his Jacobins to assassination of the First Consul once the Corsican had seized the government.

But Fouché, whose mastery in weaving webs had seen them through many dangers, emerged in his own mysterious way from that *coup d'état* to state that he had tamed and bridled the Corsican stallion. And Bonaparte had taken them into his fold, though there had been whisperings of late that the Corsican bided his day. Once king of France, Bonaparte would center all power in his own hands and declare short shrift for Jacobins of the Fouché stripe.

"Then we must get the warning to the factions; our trusted friends must set to work," Pierrot cried.

"On the contrary, Pierrot," Fouché responded in a quiet, level voice, "you will keep your own counsel." He added tartly, "Here are your orders. Have Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud guard the Citizen First Consul tonight with most zealous care when he goes to the opera. You will personally supervise his departure from the Tuileries and report to me when all is well. When Bonaparte is safely back at the Tuileries, we will round up Cadoudal and wipe out that Royalist nest."

Pierrot gasped. From a humor of violence his orders swept him into an attitude of protecting the Corsican. But he had learned the habit of unquestioning obedience. And his keen eyes saw that there was no equivocation or indirection in Fouché's voice or face. He bowed and turned on his heel.

FOUCHÉ slumped back in his chair. Presently a servant brought him a meager dinner, without wine. The minister of police munched absently at the food. His face was again a plaster cast, his eyes looking out from under half closed lids, as he sought to penetrate the thick veils of the future.

Which king? That question had occupied his mind earlier in the day. With the henchmen of Louis making overtures and the enemies of Bonaparte seeking to destroy him, he had been forced to a precarious decision. Madame Bonaparte's visit had forged his decision. Not by her assurance of the First Consul's friendship, but because she had revealed herself as a certain ally. Madame Bonaparte saw the perils that lay under the shadow of a throne, danger of divorce, of her own destruction on the altar of her husband's soaring ambition.

Fouché decided now to strike a final blow at the Royalists. The arrest of Cadoudal would be a bombshell against the Royalist cause. More than that, it would be a decisive blow against the Fouché enemies in the Bonaparte camp. It would obligate the Corsican, finally, in the public eye. Fouché traced out in his mind's eye the public announcements in the press. Royalist plot nipped. Cadoudal facing the guillotine. As for a crown for Bonaparte, events must shape themselves. Fouché would remain true to his Republican convictions as long as possible. But if destiny brought a throne to France, he would trim his sails accordingly, unite his own lot with that of the Emperor Napoleon rather than risk the uncertain tempers of another Louis.

An hour passed. Pierrot came in from the Tuileries. Fouché, having made his decisions, formed his plans for the night and nibbled his fill of dinner, was checking through the day's grist of official reports. He cocked an ear for Pierrot's report.

"The Citizen First Consul has departed safely for the opera to hear

Haydn's 'Creation'," said Pierrot in a formal monotone. "With him were members of his staff and Madame Bonaparte, while in front and behind rode Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud."

"You kept an eye open and saw nothing unusual or suspicious about the Tuileries, Pierrot?" Fouché inquired.

"Only that the driver of his carriage was drunk, Citizen Fouché," said Pierrot. "I brought this circumstance to the attention of a member of the Citizen First Consul's staff, since it was nothing of our affair. They did not relieve the fellow, and he left the Tuileries almost at a gallop. But I warned Bouvet to keep an eye open. The Citizen First Consul is safely escorted."

Fouché questioned further—

"And you arranged for a suitable guard at the theater, Pierrot?"

"Ten excellent gendarmes, Citizen Fouché. Nothing can go wrong at the opera."

The minister of police nodded approval, laid aside the official reports and turned to Pierrot.

"Now your further orders, Pierrot. We will arrest Cadoudal and all his henchmen as soon—"

Fouché's words were drowned in an explosion whose violence rocked the ministry. Windows rattled for several seconds under the vibrations. Its force likewise jolted the minister of police out of his web-weaving complacency to his feet, though without upsetting the composure of his face. Without a word he strode hurriedly through the building to his carriage, with Pierrot at his heels, and set the vehicle in motion with a terse command.

That explosion could have but one meaning. Its significance, its tragic portent and devastating possibilities had gripped Citizen Fouché's mind even while the windows rattled. Cadoudal had struck. The Royalist's bold sneers and subtle effrontery were unmasked. Cadoudal's powder had been placed in the Corsican's path even while the Royalist was at the ministry.

FOUCHÉ indulged no speculations as he drove at a gallop past the Tuileries and plunged into the narrow Rue Nicaise, through which Bonaparte had driven to the opera. He would shape his course when he knew the facts. Feverish crowds guided him to the scene of disaster. His carriage was brought up in a litter of wreckage, frantic milling crowds, and maimed and dismembered victims of the diabolical Royalist plot.

As they climbed from the carriage a shadow loomed up suddenly and saluted. The alert and dutiful Bouvet made his report tersely.

"A great barrel of gunpowder, Citizen Fouché!" Bouvet exclaimed. "It was mounted on a cart, drawn by a single horse, and the fuse lighted to explode as the Citizen First Consul's carriage came abreast. Twenty persons killed. A hundred hurt. It is the work of the Royalists, say I, although there is the cry in the air that it was our Jacobins."

"And Bonaparte?" Fouché demanded.

"The Citizen First Consul has gone on to the opera, Citizen Fouché," said Bouvet. "The fuse was so poorly timed that the glass was not shattered in his carriage."

Fouché strode into the wreckage and surveyed the havoc under the light of a police lantern. A score of gendarmes already were checking the ruins and removing the injured. The minister of police spent only a few moments here. He assembled his four shadows and hurried with them to the carriage.

"We strike back immediately!" he said decisively. "When Bonaparte returns from the opera he shall find the Royalist perpetrators of this outrage in our cells."

Fortune played into their hands when the four reached the Royalist lair. Pierrot closed in upon the lone lookout at the curbing under the Cadoudal garret and throttled the fellow before he could utter a sound. With Fouché in the lead they crept up the stairs to the rendezvous and listened in the black hallway outside. The hum of conversation

shortly was punctuated by the popping of champagne corks, followed by an audible toast—

"Vive le roi!"

Fouché held his faithful four in close leash. Cadoudal was not inside, he reasoned. Otherwise the Royalist crew would not be drinking in such blithesome fashion to a lost cause. Cadoudal would skulk in with the sad news, and then there would be a prompt snuffing of wicks and hurried preparations for flight to the North Sea. At sound of a stir on the stairs below, the four lay flat in a black alcove until the Royalist door opened and closed. The hum of voices died. They heard a single voice, in a hushed, somber tone. Fouché sprang lightly to his feet, went to the door and burst it open with a single violent kick.

"No resistance, messieurs! You are completely trapped," Fouché said in a level, brisk voice.

Cadoudal's Royalist crew filled the little room. Twenty of them, young men, tried at arms, desperate in the audacious courage that had brought them to Paris to kill Bonaparte, stood in a momentary glowering uncertainty. Behind Fouché were Pierrot, Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud, each with a brace of leveled pistols. Fouché was unarmed. But it was the cold, commanding poise of the minister of police that circumvented a sudden reckless surge upon the invaders. Fouché estimated their number and read their humor. He shouted a crisp ruse into the black hallway—

"Form the gendarmes in a solid line into the street to guard these prisoners!" he commanded.

Cadoudal swaggered up from among his henchmen. He made a bold play at being coolly collected. But his face was flushed, his eyes distended and there was a quaver in his voice.

"On what charge does the minister of police interfere with the rights and security of honest citizens?" he demanded.

"For childish mischief, Monsieur Cadoudal," said Fouché with a caustic smile. "Firing gunpowder in the streets of Paris to no better purpose than maiming a hundred innocent bystanders."

"Eh là!" blurted Cadoudal, with a surge of bravado. "But certainly all Paris knows Jacobin violence when it sees and hears the evidence, Citizen."

"So that is your defense, monsieur?" Fouché bantered. "But all Paris knows likewise that the Jacobins do not make such a mess of their plots as you have made of this one."

"We shall see," said Cadoudal. His courage had wholly returned now. There was a sneer, an undertone of insolent assurance in his voice. "The minister of police may arrest us, but it is the courts that will pass judgment, eh, Citizen Fouché?"

Fouché looked sharply at the Royalist plotter, arrested by the mysterious note in the fellow's voice. But he put it down at the moment to Cadoudal's inordinate vanity, the making of a show for the Royalist's unhappy followers. With a jerk of his hand the minister of police sent Bouvet among the prisoners, disarming them one at a time. One hesitated at surrendering his arms. Instantly Bouvet crumpled the objector with a swift downward thrust of his ponderous fist.

The others yielded without question and were herded together under guard of Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud while Fouché and Pierrot left to send back a detachment of gendarmes and vehicles.

Reports at the ministry gave the minister of police the further details. The Royalist gunpowder had been timed with great precision. Cadoudal had failed to take into consideration one unexpected element. Bonaparte's driver, hilariously drunk, had whipped his horse into a gallop and unwittingly upset the Royalist calculations. And Bonaparte had gone serenely on to the opera, sitting unmoved through the performance, to receive the applause of the audience at his miraculous escape. The Paris gendarmes were setting a net already. A hundred suspects were in arrest at this

moment. Additional suspects were being brought in every few minutes.

Fouché indulged his thin smile. There was a glow of satisfaction in his eyes, a note of triumph in his voice as he turned to Pierrot.

"If our enemies have been gloating the past few hours, Pierrot," he said, "what will be their thoughts when they learn that already those Royalist assassins are ready for the guillotine? Come along while I make report to Citizen Bonaparte."

THE Citizen First Consul had arrived at the Tuileries only half an hour before when Fouché and Pierrot were admitted to his reception room. The room was filled with ministers, high officers and other dignitaries of state, come to felicitate Bonaparte on his miraculous escape. The hum of conversation hushed suddenly as the minister of police crossed the room.

Fouché smiled inwardly. He guessed that these scheming relations had been berating him, blaming him for carelessness. And even now they thought he came with glib excuses. General Bonaparte stiffened as Fouché came up and received him with an icy silence. How quickly his own report would change all that, utterly confound his carping critics, Fouché thought. He bowed stiffly, with the restraint and poise of a man who is very sure of himself.

"I wish to felicitate the Citizen First Consul," he said formally. "Destiny intervened miraculously for France in sparing the Citizen First Consul's life. And I have the good fortune of being able to report that the unhappy Royalist conspirators—"

Not even the Royalist explosion of a few hours before cut Fouché off more sharply than the sharp crackle of the Corsican's outburst.

"*Diable,* Fouché!" roared Bonaparte. "You dare come here after what has happened with a subterfuge on your lips. *Diantre!* But do you think I will tolerate such conduct from the minister of police!"

Fouché straightened. There was a momentary amazement in his eyes, then that blank, level stare. He proceeded coolly.

"I wish to report that the Royalists who—"

"You insult my ears with your lies!" cried Bonaparte.

The little general's face was livid with rage, his gray-blue eyes flashed a volcanic fury. He made a step forward, half raising his arm as if to strike the motionless minister. Madame Bonaparte stepped forward quickly and caught her husband's arm, whispered a placating word in his ear.

"I tell you, Fouché, it was your Jacobins did this," Bonaparte roared. "Those rascals are always in rebellion, pitted against all government, and to destroy me they think nothing of slaughtering thousands of victims. But I shall deal with them in a way they will understand!"

Fouché, meeting Bonaparte's fury unblinkingly, shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak again. But his persistence only touched off a new volcano of temper. The Citizen First Consul launched into a torrent of abuse. He recited the Jacobin excesses, intimated that the police had winked at this Jacobin plot, had been grossly negligent in not circumventing it. Fouché listened unmoved, no quiver of emotion passing his face, until the Corsican's passion spent itself. Then he bowed stiffly, turned on his heel, and walked from the room, followed by the withering glares of all.

"*Bon dieu,* Citizen Fouché!" cried Pierrot as they emerged into the open. "But why did you not hurl the truth straight into the Citizen First Consul's teeth? That would have brought him to his senses like a dash of cold water."

Fouché smiled ironically and gave an enigmatical shake of his head.

"Silence at times is golden, Pierrot," he said soberly. "And I saw that Cadou-

dal had planned somewhat deeper than I thought. Our work has barely begun."

"But in the morning Citizen Bonaparte will be himself," Pierrot protested. "Certainly he will apologize when he learns what we have done, Citizen Fouché."

"Our work, Pierrot," said Fouché, with another shake of his head, "has barely begun. I want you to assemble the shrewdest agents in Paris and search every inch of the Rue Nicaise for every whit of evidence you can find."

"But, Citizen Fouché—"

"Please, we will not discuss the matter further. I wish to occupy myself with my own thoughts."

Until long after midnight the minister of police remained at his desk, incommunicado, his level eyes fixed upon the wall directly in front of him. Occasionally the thin smile tipped the corners of his mouth, though with a grimness in which there was no mirth. Not since his duel with Robespierre had he faced a more critical conflict. Fouché accepted this estimate at the outset. In that grim struggle the guillotine of Robespierre, red master of Paris, had hovered over his neck for days, only to fall at last, out of the welter of black intrigue, across the neck of Robespierre himself.

But such a conclusive turning of the tables upon the Corsican was out of all reckoning. Fouché knew that he must be satisfied with the saving of his own neck and the necks of his followers. Bonaparte was a strong man, and strongly entrenched. So strongly that an open display of the Bonaparte displeasure against any man was enough to destroy that man.

Therefore, the present evidence against the Royalists, conclusive as it might appear, was worthless. Bonaparte's courts would remember their master's thoughts. They would throw out charges based upon nothing better than the testimony of Fouché and Fouché's own agents. So Fouché's enemies, with the government at their back and Bonaparte's sanction ringing in their ears, had their great chance at last. They would destroy the minister of police and with him the last bulwarks of Republican influence. That would be another great step toward a new throne room at the Tuileries, a crown for Napoleon I and a thousand regal rewards for the faithful.

When he had completed his estimate of the situation, Fouché began receiving the reports of the score of police agents whom he had thrown into the breach. There must be conclusive evidence of the Royalist guilt and that material evidence must be unearthed. But succeeding reports revealed that the gunpowder had left little behind. Of the horse that drew the powder cart there was found a single hoof; of the cart, a pair of splintered spokes. And among the survivors in the neighborhood of the explosion none was able to offer a whit of information.

At daybreak Fouché turned his attention from the empty trail to another defensive weapon. Public opinion must be forged, the Royalists blamed in street gossip. His own agents, incognito, must shape the trend of discussion. A thousand men, decrying the Royalists in cafés and public places, would set a hundred thousand tongues to wagging. Bonaparte's sensitive ears would not be deaf to such a force. Public opinion was not to be flouted too lightly even by the First Consul.

But the first of the minister's agents were receiving their instructions when this weapon was snatched from the Fouché hands, his blackest fears confirmed. A courier from the consulate brought a bulky letter before the sun was up. Fouché slit the message open with a deliberate hand, though his quick intuition told him that the Corsican had struck. He read:

> The Minister of Police will cause to be arrested as public enemies the conspirators listed.

There followed four pages of names. Fouché's expression did not change as

he read that list, upon which appeared the names of his stanchest supporters, Jacobins with whom he had shared black hours of danger, men to whose loyalty he owed his very life. When he had finished reading, he sent for Pierrot.

"Arrest these men immediately," he commanded. "Hold them in close confinement and release none except upon my personal order."

Pierrot took the order without question and turned hastily on his mission. But in a few moments he was back in the minister's chamber trembling from head to foot in suppressed passion.

"Citizen Fouché, but have you read this list?" Pierrot demanded. "It bears the names of our friends—even the names of Bouvet and Dinant and Geraud. Our own faithful agents whom the Citizen First Consul dares brand conspirators and public enemies, though they have guarded his life with their very own!"

"You will carry out your orders, Pierrot," said Fouché, looking sharply at him. "Furthermore, you will act without delay. Put two hundred gendarmes at work, and report back to me when you have done so."

Pierrot stood for a moment, mouth half open, the veins at neck and temple throbbing. But he managed to keep himself in hand and turn dutifully to his inexplicable task. When he returned in half an hour, Fouché was sitting with the salvaged hoof on the desk before him.

"So our agents have found no clue, Pierrot?" he inquired whimsically.

"Nothing, Citizen," said Pierrot, then blurted out, "but what does that matter when we have the plotters in our cells? Does not the Citizen First Consul—"

"Here is evidence," Fouché cut in, ignoring Pierrot's outbreak. "Under your very nose, Pierrot. It should teach you to be more observant, use your mouth less and your eyes and mind more. Note this brand 'H' on the hoof. Now then, have our agents go to every breeder of horses in France. Do it quickly. Find out who bred this horse that drew the powder cart. A Percheron, which means that it was purchased by some one of ample means, and doubtless for the very purpose."

"But our friends, Citizen Fouché," cried Pierrot. "Is there not some way to spare Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud at least from a day in a dungeon?"

"Only by finding the man who sold that horse," Fouché rejoined. "And please remember it may mean something more than a day in a dungeon if we fail." Fouché's shadowy smile passed his face. "Was it not the Royalist who said the guillotine is covered with cobwebs? So I give you something to work for, Pierrot. Your own neck, and Bouvet's and the other necks—including, perhaps, my own. You will take personal charge of the search, and do not rest until you are successful."

DAYS multiplied as the relentless, silent search of France went on—days in which Pierrot did not sleep. The shadow of disaster deepened over the ministry. The minister of police found his influence ebbing swiftly toward the point where it would be a safe and simple matter to throw him aside and with him the last vestiges of Republican influence. Arrest of the Jacobins shaped public opinion. Before the end of a fortnight Bonaparte had begun the trial of the alleged conspirators. One at a time they were convicted. Punishment was meted out to fit the crime. Death by the guillotine, or banishment to Guiana, as the courts decreed.

At the consulate Fouché was ignored. He read in the eyes of ministers and officials of all ranks his own impending doom. When the last of the one hundred and thirty Jacobins had been disposed of, then would come his turn. His secret police brought him the news from the cafés and casinos. The public was turning against him; betting odds were that he would follow the plotters into oblivion. But Fouché went silently

about his business. He kept a strict secret his arrest of Cadoudal and the Royalist conspirators. They were his great trump, but he must wait his opportunity to play for great stakes.

Then came the darkest blow of all. Bouvet, Geraud and Dinant were condemned to the guillotine. News that the faithful three would be executed in another forty-eight hours shook Fouché out of his complacency, set him to a slow, measured pacing of his chamber. The spiderweb of misfortune was closing fast upon him now. Bouvet's grim silence, his refusal to speak out in his own behalf even when the red blade hung close over his neck, stirred Fouché to action. Such loyalty warranted risks. He seized his pen and wrote a covert note to Madame Bonaparte, baiting it with the subtle hint that he held vital information for which she must come immediately.

Precarious though he saw this move to be, Fouché dispatched the note by secret messenger. In some way he must enlist Madame Bonaparte's intervention. By laying such a foundation he would be able to beard the First Consul with a request for delay in the executions until new evidence could be uncovered. And even if this coup succeeded, it would all but destroy the great victory he had planned for himself, a victory to humble that arrogant Corsican for all time. But since there was no word from Pierrot, the situation now demanded desperate action, no matter what the compromise.

Two hours had passed; Fouché was fretting for the response to his note when Pierrot appeared suddenly, his face burning with triumph. He broke into exultant speech on entering the chamber.

"I've found them, Citizen Fouché!" he cried, indicating two cowering peasants who followed him in chains. "Citizens, here are the two men who sold the mare, and only two days before the explosion. Our friends are safe!"

Fouché rose, his face expressionless except for an unaccustomed light in his eyes.

"The description they give, does it fit Cadoudal or any of his henchmen?" he inquired quietly.

"*Oui,* Citizen, more than that," Pierrot fairly shouted. "For I have taken them to the cell and they have identified Cadoudal himself as the man who purchased the horse from them."

Fouché sat down. Coolly and without haste he questioned the two men. They verified everything. Moreover, they were positive in their recognition of Cadoudal. And the hoof, so well did they know their stock that from the grim remnant they were certain in their identification. Yes, by its size and shape they knew it to be the hoof of that identical mare they sold Cadoudal only two days before the explosion.

Fouché's veins warmed with the nectar of victory. He indulged in the rare luxury of rubbing his lean hands together in satisfaction. His secret emissary returning from Madame Bonaparte with a small, perfumed envelop, he tore it open with an amused detachment. Madame Bonaparte refused to come. She wrote in a cramped, disguised hand, a vague sentence or two. But between the meager lines Fouché read volumes. The Corsican's mold was cast. Even Madame Bonaparte had accepted the inevitable. Or at least did not dare risk the indiscretion of visiting a minister who was marked for destruction. Fouché smiled thinly, crumpled the letter and turned to Pierrot.

"You will remove Cadoudal from among the others to a solitary cell, Pierrot," he directed. "At midnight you will bring him to me. These men of yours, make them comfortable for the night, and see that no one communicates with them."

"But, Citizen Fouché—" Pierrot began in hot protest.

"Do as I tell you!" Fouché snapped him off. "Then return here for your further instructions."

The minister of police was lost in thought when Pierrot returned. That thin smile was now stamped on his face

and there was a gleam in his eyes as he stared at the wall. Pierrot shifted from one foot to the other until his patience suddenly bubbled over.

"But, Citizen Fouché, there is barely time!" he cried. "I expended three coaches to get here before it was too late, and our witnesses are ready to recite their story to the court."

"Their testimony, Pierrot, would make no impression upon either the Citizen First Consul or his court," Fouché replied ironically. "They would merely order a keener edge on the great blade."

"But, Citizen, we have the proofs positive of a great injustice!" thundered Pierrot.

"When men must be convinced against their will, your evidence must leave no possible loophole, Pierrot," Fouché replied, without raising his voice. "There are great stakes in this little game, greater stakes than mere justice to a handful of unhappy Republicans."

"But are we to stand by and see our friends murdered without raising a hand to help them?" Pierrot demanded. There was a flare in his black eyes, as if in sudden suspicion of his own chief's motives in this sinister intrigue. "Citizen," he cried, "if Bouvet dies, I shall die with him!"

"Bouvet shall not die," said Fouché through his tight lips. "Nor Dinant, nor Geraud, nor any of the others. We have in our hands, Pierrot, a great victory, if we do not muddle. Yes, as great a victory as Bonaparte won at Marengo. Tomorrow the public will be singing our praises, shouting from the housetops that we foiled this terrible injustice. Bonaparte has his neck in an embarrassment from which he can not escape, and our enemies will be flouted forever. *Voilà!* Now your further instructions, Pierrot. Place two of our men in the cell with those Royalists disguised as prisoners. Have them whisper the word that they were betrayed by Cadoudal, who is saving his own neck by testifying against all of them. Then bring Cadoudal in from his solitary cell at midnight. Our spiderweb is ready for the flies."

FOUCHÉ left the ministry after these instructions, and went for the first time in weeks to the Café of the Golden Goose for dinner. He sat alone for a leisurely two hours, toying with the viands, covertly noting the significant glances and exchanges of cautious whispers among the gilded officers and petty officials who filled the café. His goose was cooked. A hundred francs to ten that he would lose his head within the fortnight. The courts had passed judgment; the die was cast. Bonaparte was more than a match for such blasé intriguers. And the Citizen First Consul did well to clear the stage of red Republicans before setting up his throne.

Fouché sensed the comment, read the jibing thoughts as clearly as if they had been shouted across the room at him. It warmed him with a glowing satisfaction. Against such a background his victory would be the more brilliant. Shortly before midnight he returned with leisurely step to the ministry. Though time pressed hard he felt no impatience. The potion he made was brewing and from it he would draw the nectar of victory when the critical moment came. He was back at his desk at midnight when, with fine precision, Pierrot ushered in Cadoudal.

The Royalist was lean, chalky and disheveled from his confinement on thin fare. And though Cadoudal had received no word from the outside world, his arrogance had been fed by the long delay in pressing charges against him, something of the reason for which he must have guessed.

"My Royalist friend, the complaint you brought to Paris is about to be corrected," said Fouché, turning to Cadoudal with a leering glitter in his eyes. "The cobwebs are being cleared from the guillotine, and we are preparing a Royalist spectacle for the Place de la Répub-

lique." He bowed politely.

Cadoudal winced under the cool certainty of Fouché's manner, but quickly mastered himself.

"If Monsieur the minister of police had not found himself fully circumvented," he sneered, "our heads would have strayed long ago. *Oui, monsieur,* your cell has not blinded us to what is happening, for all your bold pretense."

"It is for this we have been waiting, Cadoudal," Fouché rejoined, taking up the telltale hoof. He signaled to Pierrot, who immediately ushered in the two peasants. "And for these men, Monsieur Cadoudal, who identify you positively. I really credited you with greater wit and caution than to leave such evidence behind you."

Cadoudal gulped convulsively, squirmed in his seat and recovered himself to meet Fouché's accusing eyes.

"The game is up, Cadoudal," Fouché charged, as Pierrot took the witnesses out. "All of you must die, a great loss not only to Louis XVIII, but to yourselves, eh, Cadoudal?" He fixed Cadoudal with his smile, leaned slowly forward and added in a low voice, "But while both justice and expediency demand that the guilty must die, I'm not unmindful that should the majority of Louis' faithful agents escape it might serve his Majesty's causes to great purpose one day. And mine as well, Monsieur Cadoudal."

Cadoudal started, hopefully.

"*Eh, là,* But what do you mean, Monsieur Fouché!" he gulped eagerly.

"If one of you accepts the guilt—the others may escape the blade, Cadoudal," Fouché averred.

"One?" Cadoudal was breathless as he caught the earnestness in Fouché's face. He turned the proposition over warily. "Eh, any one?"

"But one, monsieur. The leader of the flock. You, Monsieur Cadoudal, who led them into this sorry mess, and complained that the guillotine is left in gross disuse."

"An absurdity!" cried Cadoudal, shrinking back in his chair. "You are up to some trick to extricate yourself from mischief, Citizen Fouché!"

"Listen to reason, Cadoudal. You are a dead man now, except for a few mere formalities. You know the rules of evidence well enough to understand what will happen when I present your case in the morning. So there is nothing left but the matter of your immortal soul and your loyalty to Louis. Will not Louis erect a great monument to your name, eh? When he remembers that you took the blade alone to save twenty of his faithful? And those men of yours, is it not your duty to save them?"

Cadoudal studied the floor as he weighed the thought for a brief moment. Then he turned livid and leaped impulsively to his feet.

"It's absurd, I tell you!" he cried. "My men wouldn't accept it, nor my king." He mustered a defiant smirk. "Go ahead with your trial and we'll see what happens, Monsieur Fouché. If I'm not mistaken—"

"Pierrot!" Fouché commanded, cutting Cadoudal off. "Take this prisoner back to the cell with the others. Presently I shall tell them that he refused to save them, and perhaps they will deal with him, eh? And be prompt, Pierrot. We must inspect the guillotine at once and make sure that Monsieur Cadoudal and his henchmen have no fault to find tomorrow with its state of repair."

Citizen Fouché sat watching the hands of his clock until Pierrot returned. He left his shadow standing restlessly until five minutes had passed, then rose abruptly.

"Our agent in the cell, Pierrot, has he passed the whisper that Cadoudal barters with the state for his own life?"

"But yes, Citizen Fouché. I read the looks in their eyes when I took Cadoudal back to them."

"Then it is now time to act," said Fouché, rising and leading the way to the dungeons under the ministry.

No slightest doubt crept through his mind as he went to Cadoudal's cell. His

web was spun. He had enmeshed his man, woven Cadoudal's vulnerability into its strands beyond hope of extrication. Cadoudal might flounder, but he could not escape. The Royalist's vanity would hold him in the last critical instant. Cadoudal's responses had told him as much. He threw open the cell and faced Cadoudal's twenty henchmen. Quietly but tersely he summarized the case against them.

"And above and beyond that evidence against you, messieurs," he announced in a low, insinuating voice, "there is one among you who would betray his loyalty to your cause. But I will not dwell upon that, for I have a proposition to make that will save nineteen of your necks. If there is one of you who will volunteer to die for all the others, I will release the others at once. Since you all will die otherwise, do I make a hard bargain, messieurs?"

The eyes of all were fixed upon Fouché in a glowering stare. No one of them spoke or moved as they weighed his grim proposal with conflicting emotions. A painful minute had ticked by when the youngest among them, a youth of nineteen, stepped forward impulsively.

"If you speak in earnest, monsieur," he cried, "I will die for my king and my friends!"

There was another stifling silence, then a second Royalist, barely older than the first, pressed up from the rear and raised his hand.

"Monsieur is too young. It is I who must die!" he cried.

Fouché ignored the two. He had fixed his eyes upon Cadoudal. The Royalist leader tried to avoid the gaze, then met it with an awed fascination as he hovered on the brink of a yawning precipice that offered the one tragic avenue of escape.

"Are there no others who have the courage to save you?" Fouché leered. "Does the man who led you fear—"

Cadoudal's decision crystallized. He plunged in headlong, shouting his decision aloud to drown Fouché's bantering words.

"It is my place to die for my men," he exclaimed with a dramatic toss of his arms. "I yield my neck to save my friends."

Fouché pointed a tense finger instantly at the open door of the dungeon.

"I accept!" he exclaimed. "Leave immediately. And when you have signed your confession as an evidence of your good faith, these others shall be freed, on condition that they leave Paris immediately."

Back in his chamber the minister of police dictated slowly the words of confession that suited his purpose. Cadoudal, taking refuge in bravado, wrote with a steady hand. When he had signed the document, the Royalist rose with an arrogant smile.

"I am curious, Monsieur Fouché," he sneered. "If circumstances dictated, would we find the brave Minister of Police offering his own neck to save his friends and serve his master?"

"Certainly," said Fouché, indulging his vague smile. "But perhaps I serve my friends better by thinking for them, which makes it unnecessary that they die, eh, Cadoudal?"

Fouché dismissed Cadoudal with a toss of his hand and sat down to pen an order while the Royalist was led back to his cell.

When Pierrot returned from Cadoudal's cell, Fouché handed him a crisp document.

"I will take the responsibility of this order, Pierrot," he announced quietly, his thin smile expanding slightly. "It orders the release of all our friends from prison. And you may take Bouvet, Dinant and Geraud to the Golden Goose for wine and food—and to provide a feast for the eyes of prying officials. I go to the Tuileries with this document of Cadoudal's, and to slip our good halter back upon that balky little Corsican."

A Complete Novelette of the

"OH, SURE, he's mad all right," Hogan said, staring after the figure that limped away among the palms. "Long time now since he came to Waihiti. Only fit for shark bait."

Rafferty of the *Saint Anne* grinned.

"What's the bee in his bonnet?"

"Some bloomin' box that he's lost. Hadn't got the sense to know how to keep it, I reckon."

"Seaman, ain't he?"

"Says he is," said Hogan, beginning to attack a crate of trade goods with a rusty hammer.

His fat, sturdy body dripped with sweat under the Pacific sun. Tall, thin Rafferty watched him lazily.

"Says he used to sail aboard the *Fanny Davis*," pursued Hogan. "Always mouthin' about it, so he is. The Old Man was called Maultry— Hullo, what's he stoppin' for?"

The slouching figure had paused, half turning, as though even at that distance he could hear the cursed name.

"Quite crazy," Hogan said, wiping his neck . . .

But Lambert wasn't crazy. He was at pains to assure himself of this. It seemed of enormous importance that he should prove this to his own satisfaction. Surely no one could remember the past with such devilish clarity of detail unless he were sane. He knew what everybody on the island thought of him. Even the Kanakas believed he was crazy. Not that it mattered to them. They thought all white men were more or less queer.

Lambert came to the bay beyond West Point. Under a solitary palm high above the sand he sat down, his back pressed hard against the trunk. The wind from the sea fluttered the rags of his shirt and worried the frayed ends of his trousers. On the barrier reef the singing waves hammered out their everlasting chorus. Oh, it was peaceful enough on Waihiti. But he didn't want

South Seas

By BASIL CAREY

The Box

peace. He remembered that once upon a time Maultry had said that a quiet life was the worst thing the devil could wish on a man.

Maultry!

The name roused him, as it roused him every time its heavy syllables crossed his mind or his lips. He sat bolt upright, his thin body quivering, his small bright eyes dark with anger. With a hot hand he pushed away the tousled black hair that tumbled damply about his forehead.

Lord, if he could but get at the fellow! Yes, get at him and choke him, tearing the thick throat until his fingers . . .

"If I could find him," he said aloud. "But I'll never find him. The sea—I can't—"

He stared at the heaving blue water beyond the lagoon. Somewhere out there his enemy lived and moved, while he himself must remain a prisoner on Waihiti. He'd never get a ship again. Every trader in the Pakahikis knew him. And strangers were warned by Hogan. No one wanted a lame rat, reputed to be halfwitted. He might try a stowaway again. He'd tried it three times.

He stretched himself out, flat on his belly, his face buried on his outspread arms. Later he'd go up to Hogan's and beg another whisky. He shut his eyes, and immediately he saw Maultry, as he had seen him on that last night in Fuchow, more than five years ago.

It was when the *Fanny Davis* was slinking down the coast in the China Seas that Maultry first cast his eyes on Lambert's box. The old *Fanny* nosed her way into a storm that would have finished any other vessel; Maultry didn't care. He cared for nothing in the world or out of it, did Maultry. With his own bare hands he forced the ship to ride out the storm, coaxing her, bullying her, putting her up into the tearing, screaming wind as coolly as though he were in the midst of a choppy sea on a fresh Autumn morning. He knew very well what sort of timber he was handling. The *Fanny Davis* wasn't much to look at, but her dogged resistance to the thrash and fret of the waves outweighed the appearance of her clumsy lines and old fashioned build.

Maultry knew she'd never sink in

anything less than a typhoon. So he hung on grimly to the tiller, squaring his powerful body to the northwest wind that nearly cut his eyelids off. When he perceived that his crew were turning white about the gills, he laughed. It was at times like these that he smelled out secrets, and saw all the things that his men thought they had hidden so well. Five whites and seven lascars aboard the schooner, and all of 'em rats —rats! With enormous contempt he surveyed them as they scurried about the boat. Look at fat Dominico, the great swarthy fool—

"Hey, Dominico! Come here!"

"Signor, signor, we are lost! Saint Antonio, he forget us. *Antonio mio, ora pro nobis—*"

"Shut up, you fat swine," Maultry shouted. "What's up with those blasted lascars? Afraid?"

"*Si, signor,* they all afraid."

Maultry frowned. To his superb self-confidence fear was utterly contemptible, utterly incomprehensible. He shot a quick glance at the panting, dripping Dominico clinging to a stanchion and shrugged his shoulders.

"No time to waste on 'em now. Say that the boats can go. And be damned to all of you."

He raised his great voice in a roar.

"Lambert! Make the longboat ready. Bo-o-oat ready!"

HOW they scampered and panted and tussled and swore! It wasn't often that panic occurred on any ship in which he sailed. In the rare pauses between waves he glanced at the scuttling crew as they tried to lower the longboat. Lost their heads, all of them. Even young Lambert. Best of the lot, that chap.

Panic—it wasn't a pretty sight. Dominico and the lascars were like pigs outside a slaughterhouse. Of the white men, only Lambert retained any sense of his blood. But he looked like a wet ghost as he fought his way across the deck, waist deep in water. The longboat was ready. The excited, clamoring men tore at the ropes like mad things. Ha, thought Maultry, they'll find it's not so easy to launch the damn thing. Better stay here and fight it out.

But they weren't staying. They couldn't even weigh their chances up. In the grip of fear one thought, one mad idea, remained in their minds; to escape from the ship. From hulking Tommy Danvers to the thinnest lascar they were of one mind.

Maultry dismissed them from his consciousness for ten minutes. The foaming sea occupied all his attention. It roared and spat at the *Fanny Davis.* The deck was awash. From the lee scuppers the water spouted fiercely every time the ship rolled. Gray and green and black and white, the sea roared about the ship in column, swirl and eddy. The deadly northwest wind cut at her like the sword of the Lord. Maultry set his teeth. Ride it, ride it, he adjured her. Ride it, you jewel, you swan, you damned slut! Up—up *up—!*

In a lull that lasted a hundred and thirty-two seconds he had a chance to see what his men were doing. They had managed to launch that cockleshell of a longboat, then. Good. He hadn't supposed they had the guts left. Already the lascars were piling in, shoving aside Dominico and the burly Danvers. Where was Lambert? Ah, here he came, ploughing across the deck. What had the fool been to fetch? Heavens, every white man there except the cook had something. Dominico had a sodden bundle in a blue cloth. Danvers hugged something wrapped in sacking. Schultz had fetched his best clothes. Yes, think of it, all his best clothes, at a time when a minute's delay might drown him. And Lambert—it looked like a small black box . . .

None of those who lived could ever say exactly what happened, then. Those who died might know. No doubt they had long arguments about it down there.

To the survivors it appeared that a wet green hell swallowed them up for good. But apparently only the lascars and the little squid from the galley tasted good. The rest were spat out again, to lie winded and half drowned, jammed together against the deckhouse. Of the longboat and its dusky load nothing was ever seen.

When Maultry could find time to look at his rats again, they were crawling to their feet, limp and deathly sick. Schultz' best clothes had been swept from his frenzied clasp. But the others —Maultry's eyes narrowed. Dominico's bundle, Danvers' parcel in sacking, and Lambert's black box—something good in each of them, hey? Something damned good, that they should have been chosen to go into that sea-hell with their owners.

Time and the hour, time and the hour, thought Maultry. They ran through the rough day at last, and just before sundown the wind dropped. The crew of the *Fanny Davis* had supposed—wrongly—that the limit of their endurance had been reached. They were undeceived very thoroughly by an enraged Maultry. He staggered from the wheel that he had held for thirteen hours and lashed Dominico in his place—yes, that fat Dominico, whose huge fingers refused to grip until Maultry poured rum into him.

Throughout the night Maultry and his three remaining men struggled with tangled cordage and torn sails until Lambert dared not stand still for fear that he would fall, and Danvers swore in three languages. But Maultry beat him, for he swore back in five.

At noon next day the *Fanny Davis* limped into harbor where a huddle of junks and a trader or two had watched out the storm. As soon as the rattle of the anchor chain sounded the men dropped where they stood and slept like the seven sleepers of Ephesus. Hour after hour they slept, until a pallid sun wavered down a watery sky and the first stars showed. The slant eyed Chinese in their dhows watched the *Fanny Davis* like lynxes. Had it not been for the tiger Maultry, they might have chanced their luck in a quick raid. But they knew Maultry.

HE AWOKE before the others and rolled stiffly out of his bunk. His sodden clothes had dried on him. They were stiff and caked with salt. Slowly he dressed in drier garments, pausing to rub his thickset, hairy body with a rough towel. As he dressed he made quick plans. He was looking forward to his jaunt on shore, when he would stride down Maitland Street and watch the people scuttle out of his way. He knew what they said of him, those seedy whites who cocked it so ignorantly among the wily, sly eyed townsfolk.

"There goes Maultry," they said. "Nothing's ever stopped him."

True, that. Nothing ever stopped him when he had made up his mind. And he had made up his mind now. Something in a blue bundle, something in a parcel of sacking, something in a black box . . .

Over the meal that they ate later in the damp saloon, he watched each man by the light of the hanging lamp. Schultz had a face like a horse. His white eyebrows and bleached hair made him look old. Maultry poured out coffee from the black pot and said:

"Bad luck about your clothes. Best suit, ain't it?"

The sullen pale eyes lighted up.

"*Ja,* all my best."

He talked on in a flood of resentful English and German. Maultry heard him out, but he wasn't listening. He was watching Lambert and Danvers and Dominico as their brains sought furiously for lies with which to beat off the question which they knew he would shoot at them.

Schultz finished his tirade in a mumble of oaths. Across his weak tenor came the roll of Maultry's bass.

"Danvers, you were pretty set on

something, weren't you? Something worth having, eh? A bit heavy to carry?"

"Reckon it don't matter a red cent, boss."

"No?"

"No," said Danvers, breathing heavily. "Guess I can smell out what you're after. Like to see it, wouldn't you? Well, you won't."

Maultry said suddenly—

"I'll play you for it."

He waited, knowing his man. Knowing that Danvers could resist the lure of women, but not the lure of the thumbed, greasy pack. Danvers' eyes glinted. He knew that if he won, he would be allowed to keep his treasure in peace. Maultry would accept the decision of the cards. Chance it, then. The gambler in him rose to the bait.

"Cut you for it," he said, not too steadily.

From the pocket of a coat hanging on the wall he took a pack with blue butterflies on the back. Without looking at them he flung them a-sprawl on the table. They skittered against the mast around whose base the table was built. With an impatient hand Maultry gathered them up and tossed them to Schultz for shuffling. In a tense silence Danvers turned up the ten of clubs. But Maultry licked his great fingers and beat him with a red queen.

Danvers went white. He picked up the queen and stared at it. His right hand moved uncertainly. He wasn't such a fool as to draw on Maultry. But he'd have given a year of his life for the courage to try. He began to bluster instead and Maultry raked him up and down with his deep eyes and said dryly:

"Stop opening that trap of yours. I'm ready for the goods."

Without a word Danvers lurched away to his bunk. They heard him stirring things about. No one moved or spoke till he returned. The sacking was still wet. For a moment he held the shapeless lump greedily, desperately. Then he banged it down on the table and went out, hands thrust into his pockets.

In the glare of the yellow light Maultry ripped up the coarse stuff with his jack-knife. In silence he drew out a crumpled, sea wet object and shook it out. It was a robe of flowered silk sewn with little pearls and gold thread. He eyed it critically. The pearls were valuable, he decided. But he said nothing. He rolled the silk up again and threw it on a locker, where its crumpled folds showed crimson and blue under the yellow light.

Maultry cracked his fingers and looked at Dominico. The stout body writhed protestingly.

"Signor—"

Maultry shot out a hairy arm. His hand caressed Dominico's neck. His fingers sank swiftly, cruelly, into the rolls of flesh.

"What were you carrying, you fat slob?"

"Signor, what should I—"

"Cut it out," Maultry said quietly. "You know what the law is on this ship. You know everything comes into the common pool. You—all of you—what right have you to any private loot? Eh? Tell me that."

"Loot!" young Lambert echoed, leaning forward across the table. "Let me tell you—"

"Shut your mouth," Maultry flung at him. "I'll deal with you in a minute. I've dealt fair with all of you, and you'll deal fair with me, or I'll stretch you out cold."

"Fair!" Lambert blazed at him. "Huh, I'll say that's the word! Fair to yourself, that's all. Everything's to be brought to you, as if we were dogs after hares. Half a share for you and the other half between the rest of us. You're choking Dominico."

"It's what we agreed, ain't it? Shut up, Dominico. What is it you want to hide, Lambert?"

"Let him go. You'll strangle him. Look at his eyes. Maultry, look at his eyes!"

Dominico's fat, nerveless body was lolling forward. His hands clawed unavailingly at his master's arm. Maultry released him suddenly. He groaned and pitched forward on the table, dragging at his throat where the tortured veins throbbed and quivered.

"What is it you want to hide, Lambert?"

HE MOVED closer, and Lambert's nostrils quivered at his approach. They stood facing each other, oblivious of the noisy Dominico and the silent Schultz. Maultry had red hair—a great unruly bush of it. His eyes were the cold, hard blue of slate. Young Lambert felt a curious tremor at the nearness of that flaming hair, those bitter eyes. But he stood his ground, in spite of a sudden dryness in his throat.

"I'm hiding nothing," he managed to say. "I'm keeping what's mine, that's all. See? When I joined this outfit I came in with my eyes shut. I was down and out and I jumped at anything that said food. That's how you get your crew, isn't it? Pick 'em out of the garbage can."

"Tell me this," Maultry interrupted. "How would our trade go on if each man took what he wanted?"

"Trade? Trade in other men's goods. We ought to fly the skull-and-crossbones. Thieves, looters—that's all we are. Told me you traded ivory and copra. My God, what a fool I was!"

He began to laugh, high, hysterical laughter.

"Everything in the pool. That's the idea, isn't it? You can't say I haven't acted fair up to now."

"Fair?" Maultry blazed at him. "You call it fair to keep back some of the goods? You hand it all over, get me? Hand it over. Now. And quick. If you don't—"

Lambert went white.

"Blast your soul, you can keep that bluster for the rest," he said hoarsely. "This time it's different. I'm keeping what's mine, see? Danvers is a fool and Dominico's a coward. But you can't bluff me, Maultry. You've talked about acting fair. How many times have you cheated us when you've doled out our mangy bit of a share? Every time. Every time, do you hear? Well, you're not having the chance again. I'm quitting. Tomorrow."

He spat out the last words, and immediately his brain flashed a warning. What the devil had made him say that? Too late to call it back. He went on recklessly, his slight body taut, a little pulse beating to suffocation in his throat.

"It's a damned rotten life," he was saying. "I'm sick of it. There's men lying drowned because of us. I can see 'em sometimes at night, all at the bottom of the China Sea, with their faces eaten out by the fishes. I've stuck your ways for nine months and it's nine months too long. I'd have quit before if I'd had the nerve. I'm through with you, Maultry."

He swayed drunkenly, and Maultry said:

"Too much rum. Go to your bunk."

But he didn't go. He stood there defiant, his breath coming too quickly, his heart beating too fast. Maultry's cruel mouth tightened. He said smoothly:

"Very well. Tomorrow. Do what you like. You've never been any good. White livered. A cowardly fool."

He half turned away, shrugging his great shoulders. The light from the hanging lamp turned his hair to fire. Through the open doorway came the sound of the tide against the sides of the ship. Dominico lifted his heavy bulk and staggered to the porthole. He opened it and the smell of the sea rushed in. On the side of his throat were great purple ridges. The impassive Schultz eyed him stolidly.

Maultry poured out a drink. He hesitated, and then filled a glass for Lambert. His cold eyes betrayed nothing. In an even voice he said:

"I'll be glad to be rid of you. But

we needn't cut each other's throats."

He raised his glass and Lambert responded. The liquid showed clear and amber. But it never reached their lips.

Maultry had a left hook that was like a rope's kick. It came smashing into Lambert's face and landed right between the eyes. Lambert reeled back, the full glass crashing from his hand into a hundred splinters. The room spun in a wild confusion—lockers, ropes, a torn chart, Dominico's back, Schultz' startled face. Lambert staggered and went down, taking with him into blackness the last things of which he was conscious—the ice of Maultry's eyes, the fire of Maultry's hair.

II

MAULTRY was searching the ship. He was white with eagerness. His greedy hands grabbed and tore, his firm, high arched feet pattered noisily on the bare planks. A box —a little box of ebony—where should a man hide such a box? It was too large to secrete on his body. Where was the secret hole, the cunning crevice? He wrenched open Lambert's locker and scattered the tumbled clothes. He delved into the bedding. Suspecting that one of the others might be in league with Lambert, he made waste of their belongings. Nor dared they stop him, so much did they fear him in this dark mood.

Lantern in hand he plunged into one berth after another, flinging aside everything that did not contain the treasure for which he searched.

Lambert lay where he had fallen and Maultry cursed every time he stumbled over him. But he would not let him be moved.

"Let him lie. Let him have his sleep out," he ordered fiercely. "I'll put him to bed when I'm through. *I'll* do it. Get me?"

Understanding what bed he meant, they shrugged their shoulders and got out of his way. No one but a fool would try to stop Maultry when he went berserk. Dumbly they watched him as he stormed about the ship, peering, prying, tapping the bulkheads with a hammer. In vain.

Then, quite suddenly, he knew. Out of a corner on the top shelf of his brain stole a picture. A picture of himself passing the hold and pausing to watch Lambert swing himself up by the rope that hung over its black depths. He remembered a sharp question and a reply that should have been satisfactory but—in some vague way—was not.

Maultry snatched up the lantern again and went to the hold. In its malodorous depths he flashed the light here and there. His heart beat fast with excitement. Now—now— He set the lantern on the ground and swung his hammer gently against the timber . . .

Two hours later he was still there. His shirt was sticking to his skin and he had sworn till his throat cracked. On his arms every vein was swollen and knotted. His eyes weren't wild any longer. They were dull and set, like a man's eyes after a stubborn fight with an enemy who will not die. To him it seemed monstrous that Lambert should do him down. That weakling—that dock rat!

Gradually Maultry became obsessed with the necessity of discovery. Lambert's defiance merged with Lambert's box into a menace that must be fought and conquered if he were to know a quiet mind again. But he couldn't find the thing for which he sought. Toward five o'clock he swung himself out of the hold, a begrimed, sweating figure sullen with defeat. He went back to the cabin where Lambert still lay unconscious, and found Schultz, Danvers and the subdued Dominico. They said nothing, only stared at his hands until he said irritably—

"Any of you know where it is?"

He heard truth in their denials and sat down, a hunched, powerful figure with his arms flung before him on the table.

"Damned if I can make it out. I've even searched the galley. Cunning swine! Here, move, Schultz. I'll put him in his bunk."

He took Lambert by the heels and dragged him away, to throw him on his blankets with savage force. The little rat had beaten him. Beaten him—Maultry! Ah, but wait. You wait a bit, Lambert. I'll get you. Yes, by God, get you where I want you and the Lord have mercy on your soul when that happens.

When he regained the cabin where the others awaited him, stolidly he said:

"Which side are you all on? Are you trying to do me down with him? Or are you game to take a hand with me to get what pickings you can?"

They came nearer, trying to read his mind. He began to talk—smoothly, quickly, on fire with a plan that had leaped into his mind out of the dark.

"We must get him ashore with it. See? Let him think he's making a getaway. Now, listen here."

Their heads drew closer about a grimy piece of paper on which he marked out certain things with the stub of a blue pencil. As he talked they forgot their resentment of Maultry, their enmity toward a hard master. Into their eyes crept emotions with which he was familiar—interest, greed, excitement, love of a plot for a plot's sake. And mingled with all these was admiration—admiration for him because he was Maultry—Maultry of the clever brain and strong hands.

LAMBERT awoke in darkness. Stretching out a cautious hand, he rubbed it against the wall and felt the familiar rasp of his rough plank that didn't fit. He was in his bunk, then. He shared a berth with Danvers, and now he said softly:

"Hey! You there?"

No answer came. Nor was there any sound of breathing. The dark air felt damp and hot. He sat up and immediately it was as if he had run his head against a bunch of spears. He felt sick and dizzy, but he swung his legs over the side and stood up. His matches were damp, but the eighth one struck and flared up before its head broke off.

In that sputter of light he saw the wrecked room. Every article of his belongings had been flung out on the floor. All of Danvers' things, too, lay helter-skelter about the cabin. Had Maultry found what he was looking for? Lambert sat down again and pressed his hands over his eyes.

What would be the end of all this? He had sweated and slaved and fought for Maultry, and to what end? For the sake of a miserable share in dead men's goods. He was sick of fights and lawless ways. He wanted to cut loose from all the racket and start on his own. Get his own ship—yes, he could, too, if Maultry didn't find what he wanted.

Lambert set his teeth and crept to the door. It was unbolted and he opened it cautiously, peering along the dim alleyway. Already a gray dawn was stealing over the ship. Blear eyed and tousled, he went shakily along the narrow passage. A plank creaked and instantly a muffled voice said—

"Get in, fool."

It was Danvers who came round the corner with something furtive and excited in his manner. Lambert said breathlessly:

"What is it? Has he—has he—"

"He's not found it," Danvers whispered. "Keep quiet, you blasted idiot. I'm put here to shoot you down if you show your nose."

Tall and forbidding, he loomed above the slighter man.

"He carried you in and dumped you down on your bunk," he went on. "Fell hard, too, you did. If he comes back, sham you're dead. Reckon you feel pretty sick, don't you?"

Lambert nodded. He leaned back against the door, furious, resentful, exhausted. His spirit was at Maultry's

throat, but his shivering body had not the strength to tackle him yet. Presently, presently—all in good time. Later on he would face him again, stand up with desperate animal courage to the huge, grim fists and contemptuous eyes of Maultry. But not just yet. He sagged back against the supporting wood and fought off the faintness which threatened him.

"Danvers," he whispered, "what are you here for? Does he reckon I'll make a getaway?"

"Just that. He's aiming to keep you aboard till we sail. After that—well, the sea's deeper than the harbor. He don't want you making trouble in Fuchow. Get that? Our cute Maultry don't want trouble explaining how things come to be this way. And he allows that if you get ashore you'll start something."

"He's a swine," Lambert said passionately.

Danvers hushed him sharply.

"Do you have to sing out that way? Want to get me in trouble, eh? Sure he's a swine. But he's a clever swine, Lambert. You'll never make a getaway from here. Die here like a rat, you will."

Lambert swore at him and crept back to his bunk. He flung himself down, the tears smarting against his eyelids. Danvers was a sport. Danvers meant him no harm. He was afraid of Maultry as every man aboard was afraid of Maultry.

As he lay there in the gray dawn a plan began to mature in his brain. Why should he have to stay where he was? He saw now that he must quit the ship as soon as he could. Danvers would help him. Good stuff in Danvers, in spite of the beggar's shifty eyes. He examined the plan and could find no flaw. With feverish excitement he crept to the door again. Danvers' shadow showed eerily on the wall. He came quickly at the faint call. Carefully he listened, nodding his fair head in agreement. But he remained skeptical.

"You'll never do it," he decided. "You're to be kept here, understand? Most likely there'll be a guard on you day and night till we're well out to sea."

"B-but if y-you were on guard?" Lambert stuttered eagerly. "Danvers, you can share with me. I promise you —I'll swear it on any blasted thing you like—"

Danvers hesitated.

"We'll see, then; I can't promise. What'll my life be worth if you make a getaway while I'm on guard? How am I to square up with Maultry?"

"Don't come back," Lambert retorted. "Quit the ship and take a chance with me. What I've got, I tell you—what I've got—"

"Easy does it," Danvers admonished him. "Lie low a bit. Get inside. Get in! I can hear him."

Lambert vanished. A heavy tread came down the alleyway. With a heart like a sledge-hammer Lambert heard Maultry's voice raised in a question, and Danvers' answering mumble. Then came retreating steps, and silence. At the end of seven minutes Lambert tiptoed to the door and tried it.

But it was locked. Pressing his ear against it, he could hear no sound save the noise of some one whistling in the distance.

It never crossed his mind to wonder why Maultry had set Danvers to watch that night—friendly, talkative Danvers, rather than the taciturn Schultz or the embittered but faithful Dominico. Lambert thought of nothing but the prospect of escape. Danvers would help him. He would get away all right—yes, get away from Maultry.

A faint noise, and he turned quickly to see a piece of paper pushed under the door. He snatched it up.

He's going ashore now.

Lambert smoothed out the paper and read it time and again. Danvers would row Maultry ashore in the dinghy and then return. His heart began to beat faster. Escape, escape! He would get ashore. He and Danvers together—

Danvers was a good friend, a real good chap . . .

Far away in the ship a sound of whistling began.

III

"COME on now, jump to it, Lambert."

"Where is he?"

"He's gone ashore. So's Schultz and the wop. We're all on our little lonesome and I've got the dinghy tied."

"You're sure he's gone? Sure, Danvers?"

"Oh, hell, yes. Do you think I want to doublecross you?"

"No. Oh, no. Sure, that's all right. Come on. I'll get it. You don't know where it is. He didn't know."

"He had a notion, though. He figured it was in the hold."

"Did he look?"

"Did he? I'll say he did. Nearly three hours he was down there smashing about."

"Didn't smash in the right places, eh? No. Lord, I feel queer on my feet. Let me catch hold of you. Gimme some more whisky— That's better. Come on. He might come back. Yes, it's in the hold all right. Hustle, can't you?"

Lambert dragged Danvers to the hold. It was long past noon, and the heat was intense. But Lambert was impervious to heat and dizziness and the racking pain in his head. His bruised face was aflame with desire. Through the deserted ship they hurried, and though Lambert saw no living being yet, it seemed that the living spirit of Maultry hung about still, watching him with sinister, deadly intent.

Danvers shared in his excitement. He was of two minds as to his course of action as he strode toward the hold. Should he go through with it and trust to Maultry's sense of fairness for his share of the goods? Or should he conk Lambert over the head and not bother to let Maultry know? Lord, but it would be one on Maultry all right! For fifty seconds he was tempted. He saw himself wealthy, powerful, able to defy the world and Maultry besides. But his senses returned. He had known men tracked down by Maultry. Their ends had varied. But the result was the same.

They were in the hold and he had taken the lantern from Lambert's unsteady hand. With growing curiosity he watched while the eager fingers felt and groped and found what they sought. Lambert had hidden his treasure in a cavity which he had scooped out in a beam. Maultry had gone very near it but it was high, just too high for his swinging hammer head. Lambert piled two packing cases one on the other and went up like a monkey.

His head throbbed and every bone in his body ached, but he stuck grimly to his task. With the blade of his jackknife he levered and teased the wood until it moved, dropping forward to disclose the ebony box. He snatched it out and slammed the wood into position again. He leaped down, knife in one hand, box in the other. Danvers' eyes lighted up.

"Let's have a look."

"No. Not now. He might come back."

Swallowing his chagrin, Danvers followed him sulkily. Lambert hurried ahead, oblivious now of everything in the world save the necessity of reaching shore before Maultry returned from Fuchow.

The dinghy rocked in the tide. From the huddled town came the jangle of a thousand wind bells and the lonely note of a horn. For a moment Lambert stood motionless on deck. Here was the end then, and the beginning. The end of the reckless life aboard the *Fanny Davis*, the end of raids and pillage, the end of Maultry and the things for which he stood. From now on Lambert might straddle the world if he chose. Danvers? Yes, Danvers should have his reward, to spend it inevitably

in pubs and dens and brothels. Good luck to him anyway, thought Lambert. He's been a darned good pal to me. Why, without him—

"Hey, there!" shouted Danvers from the dinghy. "Come on, can't you?"

He swung into the dinghy. With enormous care he had wrapped his treasure in a red handkerchief and knotted the ends to make a bundle such as seamen carry. His thin, pale face was tense with emotion. Over his bruised forehead his black hair hung in lank, strappy locks. Danvers, remembering his part, said suddenly—

"Get under, can't you?"

Instantly Lambert crawled under the tarpaulin that lay negligently thwartships. Crouched there, he listened to the creak of the oars in the locks and wondered whether he would be alive by evening.

For he had yet to avoid Maultry's eye among the myriad eyes of Fuchow. Suppose he were seen by chance? Suppose he ran into Schultz or Dominico? Suppose—well, suppose Danvers wasn't on the square? Damned nonsense, he told himself roughly, and raised his head so that he could watch the brawny arms at their work. On toward Fuchow they went, and presently Danvers said casually—

"Going to unload the goods here or wait for a ship?"

"Unload 'em here," Lambert retorted. "What's the good hanging around waiting for a New York boat? I might get a better deal, but it's too damn risky."

"Going to old Sen?"

"I was thinking of it. We'll get a good price from him."

"Sure. House of the Seven Thousand Grandsons, ain't it?"

"Yes. Are we nearly in?"

"Pretty well. Lie doggo for a bit. Craft passing."

Lambert lay low till he felt the bump of the dinghy against the rickety jetty. Danvers had chosen a secluded corner and Lambert crept out of the dinghy unobserved. Into the noisy, stinking street they went, Lambert ahead, his slight figure moving warily, his bright eyes alert for signs of a sudden jostle and confusion that await the stranger who looks as if he might be worth robbing.

The street of Nine Delights looked bad and smelled worse. Bells were ringing everywhere, even on the thin white ponies in from the hill country with loads of *tsai*, eggs, wild oranges. No wind stirred the shopkeepers' signs which hung motionless like painted carpets. All around moved the yellow people, and something about their walk and their dark eyes set obliquely in their pale flat faces confused and angered Lambert.

He hurried on, staring straight ahead. He did not look behind. If he had, he might have been in time to catch Danvers in the act of raising his arm in a signal for which two eyes were watching—two eyes out of the myriad eyes of Fuchow.

THE House of the Seven Thousand Grandsons lay on the outskirts of Fuchow. Lambert and Danvers waited to walk through the rice fields at dusk. All the afternoon they sat in a corner of Lister's place down in Francis Street, just beyond the Padang docks. Maultry never went there. He preferred flashier, smarter places, where fan-tan was played for high stakes, and where he might count on finding a cosmopolitan crowd among whom he would be sure to recognize useful acquaintances. He favored White Olssen's in Ridgeway, or the Golden Candlestick down in the Street of Blue Lanterns.

Lister's place wasn't smart, but it had one enormous asset—safety. Lister himself had been a bartender in Greenwich Village until he hit a cop with a quart pot which left a deeper mark than he intended. Lister said it was the cop's fault for having a thin skull, but he didn't suppose that the coroner's jury would see eye to eye with him on that

point. He was a small, spruce man with a squint, and he shaved so often that his skin was blue and tender. His shabby, friendly room seemed a haven to the harassed, nervous Lambert.

He poured out rum at Danvers' request and eyed Lambert's bruises.

"You had a fall?" he inquired diplomatically. "Guess you want arnica. Rosie'll fix you up. Oh, Rosie!"

At his call Rosie Lister came into the bar. At that time she was nineteen. Her yellow hair was piled on top of her shapely head. Her eyes were brown and saucy. She had plump white arms and a round white neck. Her treatment of her father's patrons had brought much custom to Lister. The impudence of her sharp tongue coupled with her physical attractiveness proved a magnet that drew many a seafarer to the dingy house in Francis Street.

"My!" she said at sight of Lambert's face. "How've you gotten yourself in this mess? All right, I'll fix you up. Well, Danvers, how're all your wives?"

She fetched arnica and warm water. Soon her deft hands were at work. It was Danvers with whom she talked and laughed, Danvers who bandied quick jests with her. Lambert sat like a log and said nothing. Yet his tongue burned with the words he was trying to say. No doubt she thought of him merely as some one to be tended. It wasn't likely that she took much notice of him. He had seen her three times in two years. No, she wouldn't pay much attention to him.

He felt stupid and tired and sick. When she had finished and he no longer felt the touch of her cool fingers, he tried to thank her. But because of the way in which his heart beat he could only say:

"Well, Rosie, thank you. Very kind—thank you . . ."

She didn't seem to hear. She gathered up the jar of arnica and the basin of warm water and then stood with her bright eyes fixed on Danvers, talking nonsense with him, while Lambert's brain went round like a squirrel in a cage, trying in vain for some brilliant phrase, some flash of wit that would claim her attention.

At the end of ten minutes Danvers saw Lister beckoning from the counter. He went over, and immediately Rosie put down the things in her hand and pretended to readjust a bit of plaster on Lambert's cheek.

Her full rich voice sank to a solicitous whisper:

"Who's been at you?" she asked. "Who's been beating you up?"

Lambert winced.

"Maultry."

"Him? Damn his eyes for a coward, then. A kid like you!"

He said hotly—

"I'm twenty-four."

"Oh, yes? Where are you going with Danvers?"

"Oh, no place."

"You've been away a long time."

He choked out—

"You—you thought about me?"

Her brown eyes dropped, and she answered softly:

"Maybe. They ain't many nice guys come in here. Too fresh. But you—just a kid."

Her eyes met his. They had lost their bold look and were shy and tender. Lambert stuttered out:

"You feel that way, Rosie? I've thought about you all the time. You—you wouldn't care if you got out of here, would you?"

"I wouldn't care," she agreed. "But there—not much chance for me to settle down."

"I—I'm going to be rich," he blurted out. "Maybe I'd want to settle down too, Rosie. If I come back for you, pretty soon."

"Money don't matter all that much," she told him. "Dad's got a bit to spare for me."

They were silent, staring into each other's eyes with a secret, troubled look that had in it ecstasy and joy and sweet deep pain.

LISTER called and Rosie went out from the bar. Danvers came back to the little table in the corner and sat down to smoke. His narrow eyes grew narrower as time went on, and presently he stole a furtive glance at the one-handed clock.

"Half after five," he announced. "It won't be so long now before we can make a start."

Lambert sat in a quivering dream. But Danvers fidgeted and hummed and fretted himself into a dither of nerves. It was almost too easy, he reflected. The young fool—the young blasted fool.

As soon as the forefinger of dusk slid across the sky he stood up, shaking his untidy hair out of his eyes. Without a word, Lambert rose too. Still in silence they went out of Lister's place and sauntered through the blue shadows of Fuchow toward the House of the Seven Thousand Grandsons. With habit born of experience they kept to the middle of the road, avoiding walls and narrow openings. Lambert did not speak, but Danvers chattered distractedly for a long time and then fell quite silent. It was almost dark in the ricefields.

The House of the Seven Thousand Grandsons stood in the center of a walled garden. The place was lonely. Ah Sen, the wealthy tea merchant, was the second greatest rogue in Fuchow. His avenue of peach trees was one of the wonders of the city. He had committed most of the known crimes and invented a few more. But his word was his bond and he paid top price. Maultry and his crew had had dealings with him over a period of years.

It was almost dark. Above Lambert and Danvers the wall of Ah Sen's garden loomed dark and menacing. Over the centuries-old stones came the faint sweet scent of blossom. A bird whistled sharply.

Odd, that a bird should pipe in the dark. Suddenly Lambert came out of his dream. He shivered—turned cold—stopped dead. There was movement in the shadow ahead. Instinctively he put his back to the wall, his left hand clenched on the precious bundle, his knife in the right ready to strike.

He stood there for a time that seemed as long as an hour. Where was Danvers? Peering to the left, he could make out nothing but the empty dusk. A wild anger seized him. What was the perishing fool playing at? Where was he, that he did not come forth to drive out these wraiths in the dimness beyond?

Lambert opened his mouth to shout. Then he heard a sound that froze his heart up. It was the sound of breathing on his right. Some one was there. Some one whom he couldn't see was there, waiting for him as a ghoul waits for dead men. If he could only see—

Figures—creeping figures—closed in on him. He drew himself together and sprang at the nearest, still trying to protect the thing for which his life must presently be forfeit. He struck out desperately, then crouched back against the wall—alone, afraid, torn with anger and dismay. Four shadows rose out of the earth and hurled themselves at him. Stinging, searing pains leaped along his arm, his shoulder, his thigh. He went down dazed and choking, but still game, his lacerated body bent double in a last blind effort to hide and defend the black box.

IV.

WHEN Lambert came to himself, the cold gray rain of morning was beating into his eyes. He sat up, weak from loss of blood, and tried to piece things together.

The box was gone. For awhile he sat in dumb misery that was worse than bodily pain. Maultry had won, then. With his strength and his cunning he had overcome the lesser man. How he must have exulted, as he hurried away through the dusk with the treasure clasped in his triumphant hands.

Danvers— Lambert sat up straight and cursed him for a Judas. But the effort of movement reminded him of his wounds. As well as he could he examined them, shivering with the discomfort of the driving rain. He must get back to town, somehow. It was useless to apply to Ah Sen for help. Without doubt that worthy had been warned by Maultry what was to take place. Even now, perhaps, the box might be in his possession. Lambert staggered to his feet, urged on by a sick fear that Maultry might return to survey his handiwork by the light of day.

He couldn't walk upright. Dropping on all fours in the yellow-gray mud, he crawled along, using two hands and his right knee. His left leg dragged uselessly behind him. The pain of drawing it up made him shout. Twice he fainted and lay sodden with the rain in the place where he had fallen. He wondered after the second time whether he was going to die. Instantly his spirit flamed up. Die—while Maultry lived?

The thought of his enemy sent him forward again, his hatred flogged him into fresh, futile energy. Beyond the ricefield he saw a hovel where he might find shelter and a fire. It was perhaps five hundred yards away, and new hope minimized the distance, but it is doubtful whether he would have reached it save for the help of Ling Foo.

Ling Foo came along wheeling a wide barrow. He was short and fat and he wore an enormous straw hat that kept off the rain like an umbrella. No surprise showed in his flat yellow face at sight of the prone figure in the mud. Indeed, he knew all about the happenings of the night before. From a corner of his field he had followed Danvers and Lambert, melting into the wall at the first sign of combat. He had expected to find Lambert dead in the morning. But on reflection, he remembered how difficult it was to kill an Englishman.

Without a word he gathered Lambert up and dumped him in the wide barrow. If he allowed the foreigner to die in the ricefield the place would become haunted and no crops would grow. Trundling along on his stout bandy legs, he made haste to reach his home.

It was little more than a shed. Damp, windy, comfortless, yet it served to preserve Lambert from exposure. In its miserable interior the Chinese laborer nursed him back to a semblance of health. He grew accustomed to seeing that impassive face with its pale lips and incurious eyes. For the first ten days he suffered too much to wonder why the fellow had bothered to save him. He knew something of the callous nature of the people of this land.

But when he was able to sit up and eat he often debated whether he should try to make Ling Foo understand him. Neither spoke the other's language. But for the sake of hearing a human voice, Lambert would say anything that came into his head. In return he listened to a flood of unintelligible Chinese that usually sent him to sleep.

"What's the idea?" he used to say, leaning back in his straw bed with a blue blanket over his slowly healing body. "You slant-eyed old heathen, why did you do it? I've seen your friends watch a man drowning in Hoang-ho. I've watched them flog a man nearly to death. Well, you stinking old rag bundle, I'm jolly grateful. Savvy? I'd hate to die before I shoot him—Maultry!"

At the sound of the oft-repeated word the Chinese would nod his head and echo "Maul-tee", with a comprehending wave of the hand.

"Shut up, cow face," Lambert retorted. "A hell of a lot you know about it, don't you? I'm going to get him if I swing for it. Get him where I want him, see? I'm down now. Yes, down . . . Rosie! Can't go back to her like this. She might be sorry. Or perhaps she'd laugh or look down on me."

He fell silent, his eyes and his heart burning together at thought of the one woman in the world. Ling Foo, watch-

ing him, began to chant a poem that he had composed. Could Lambert have translated, it would have gone thus:

> In the time of peach blossom
> The stranger lies among the ricefields.
> He is young and very helpless—
> Ling Foo hastens to remove him
> Lest his body die too early;
> Lest his resentful ghost remain here,
> To haunt forever the fruitful ground.

AS SOON as Lambert could hobble, Ling Foo turned him out in the politest and most ceremonious way imaginable. He would not take the scanty payment that Lambert offered, but his refusal to shelter him any longer was definite and complete. So five weeks and a day after he had been struck down, Lambert went through the ricefields on a gray morning when the north wind was blowing down from the distant hills.

He looked ten years older, and his clothes were torn and dirty. His eyes had a harder look, his mouth a grimmer set. He would go limping all his days because of what Maultry's knife had done to his thigh. But he held his head high, with a jaunty defiance that made Ling Foo purse his lips as he watched him go slowly toward the town.

And now began for Lambert an odyssey which was to last for five heart breaking years. At first he was buoyant with hope. The desire for revenge burned so fiercely that no obstacle seemed too great. He had very little money, so he determined to try every ship in harbor for a berth. His main object was to get to the Pakahiki Islands far away to the southeast. These were Maultry's happy-hunting grounds, where he waged his eternal war against all humanity whose loss could show a profit to him. Inevitably he would turn up there sooner or later, reasoned Lambert. The first thing to do then was to find a ship.

Easy enough on the face of it. Ah, but not so damn easy for a chap who limped and looked like a risen ghost. They weren't actually curt, the skippers to whom he told his tale. They heard him out to the end, and nodded their heads in sympathy. But those who knew Maultry wished him good day with decision. They didn't want a row with Maultry. And in any case there was Lambert's lame leg.

After a fortnight he gave up trying for a berth and began to cast about for a ship where he might creep on board and stow himself away in some grimy hold. He picked on the *Anne Marie*—and there he made a mistake.

The *Anne Marie* was loading tea for Dunedin. A careless hand left a gangplank in position, and at one in the morning Lambert crept aboard. Making his stealthy way among the crates that lay about, he felt himself seized by a burly hand.

"Hey, you? Whatcha doin'? Where yer goin'?"

A lantern flashed as he saw a red, angry face six inches from his own.

" 'Strewth! Blasted stowaway, hey? There's been a queue of 'em since we come in harbor. Free trip and all found, hey? Taste of rope end, that's the dope to hand out to 'em."

He dragged Lambert to the gangplank, set him down and gave him a parting kick. By good luck Lambert missed the dark, greasy water that yawned for him, and landed on his face on the stones of the quay. Philosophically he picked himself up, rubbing at the sharp pain in his leg, and hobbled away. After that he grew more wary. But he tried eleven ships in vain.

Food became a problem. He grew adept at lifting small morsels from the stalls of the street sellers. In the early hours of the morning he waited outside the back door of the English Club, and begged for the leavings and scrapings of luckier men's dinners. He became lean and hungry looking, and his clothes hung on him like a scarecrow's tatters.

He went to many strange corners of Fuchow, but he never went near Lis-

ter's place in Francis Street. He told himself he'd sooner die than let Rosie see him like this. His pride rose rebelliously at the thought that she might pity him. Pity! Hell, that wasn't what he wanted. Yet the day came when he was grateful enough for a man's pity.

That was in Singapore. Yes, he got as far as that. Luck favored him one dark night, and he crept aboard a passenger boat. Not until later did he find that her captain was old Sam Treloar, that red faced bully whose name was a byword from Bangkok to Frisco. Crouching in the hold on the third day out he was found and dragged on deck, resisting with all his might. Old Sam made him work his passage, and there were times when he wished he had braved the starvation and misery of Fuchow for a little longer.

"Got to keep 'em under," he heard old Sam explaining to a couple of goggle eyed passengers. "Yes, sir, they got to be kept right under. No use handing out pity. Kick in the pants, that's what they want. Yes, he's working his passage. Oh, he tells some garble about being robbed. All stowaways have always been robbed. That's an old tale."

They all laughed noisily.

"Lame, isn't he?" said one of the passengers.

"That's so," said Sam in a satisfied way. "It's very little he can do to earn his grub. But we keep him at it. We keep him at it."

They did. His hands grew sore with eternal polishing and scrubbing. So tired was he that they had to kick him awake. The crew were a healthy, careless lot who turned away instinctively from his emaciated body and taciturn speech. Only a ferret eyed steward cast a friendly eye at him, and said that he had heard of Maultry and the *Fanny Davis*. He gave Lambert an old pair of trousers, two one dollar bills and an address in Singapore where he was to mention the steward's name.

"Tell 'em Harry Howard," he repeated earnestly to Lambert. "You ask for Bill Cutler and say Harry Howard sent you. He's a pal of mine. He'll see you right."

HE LANDED at Singapore, but before he went ashore old Sam dressed him down in a speech that he kept for stowaways. Usually it reduced them to helpless rage, but it passed right through Lambert's head, in a direct line from one ear to the other. He went down the gangplank with nothing in the world save his clothes and the ferret faced steward's two one dollar bills . . .

He went along to Bill Cutler's place and the name of the ferret eyed steward brought him a handshake from burly Bill with his one gray eye and cabbage ears. Been a bruiser, Bill had, and his right could still lay a man out the first time. He gave Lambert a gun and got him a berth as cook in the ocean tramp *Albatross*, a stinking, rolling tub that was going to Bangkok with a mixed cargo. Lambert leaped at the job, but decided after two days that his joy had been premature. The smell of oil and rotten fish never left the galley. He suffered from seasickness, and the mate took a dislike to him and swore at his cooking.

Lambert endured what he must and made the best of what he could, and the *Albatross* lurched into Bangkok five and a half days late. He quit the ship as soon as possible and mooned about, staring at the fantastic temples whose curled roofs gleamed against a deep sky. He found the Siamese folk a friendly lot. They ran in and out of each other's houses all day long, and ate sitting round a big cooking pot first in one dwelling, then in another. He went to a cinema and sat solemnly through thirty-six episodes of an aged serial called "The Exploits of Elaine". He wandered down to the water and watched the brown boys diving. For three days he hung about the docks trying to get news of Maultry. He knew that the *Fanny Davis* occasionally

touched there.

But he could hear nothing of his enemy,

There were times when he fell into despair. What could he do—lame, penniless as he was? A brooding look settled in his eyes. He took to staring at the water, the dancing, beckoning water . . .

And then he ran into Danvers.

Danvers was coming down a gangplank from a schooner whose topsails were missing. He looked ill and scared. When he saw Lambert standing quite still in the middle of the sunny street he went gray. Without hesitation he turned and began to run. Lambert's voice halted him at the end of ten yards.

"Come back. I've got you covered."

Danvers stood where he was. Then the sound of a click made him turn. He saw murder in Lambert's eyes and his heart failed him.

"Put that damn gun up," he implored.

"Come here."

"Put that—"

"D'you hear me?"

He came. Lambert kept his gun at half cock. It lay hidden in his hand and Danvers never took his eyes off the twitching fingers while he talked quickly, jerkily.

"Where's Maultry?"

"Dunno. I've quit him."

"Why?"

"He chucked me out."

"Where—what did he—"

"Your box? He's got it. Couldn't sell what was in it. Sen wouldn't buy. Wouldn't pay his price."

"Where's Maultry? Where's the *Fanny Davis?*"

"Dunno, I tell you."

"Liar!"

"Hey, what do you—"

"You let me down once. Your middle name is Judas, ain't it? I'd have died if it hadn't been for a chink. Now's your chance. Where's Maultry?"

"God, Lambert, I couldn't help it. He made me do it. I didn't want to doublecross him. He—"

"Cut it out. Where is he now? You know."

"No."

"If I draw a bead on you," said Lambert, evenly, "you'll stop it in the stomach. You'll last about three days. Then you'll die. And you'll be damn glad to die."

"I tell you—"

"I'll count six."

He counted, and at five Danvers told him.

"He's gone to the Pakahikis—to Waihiti."

But that was all that Danvers knew. Though Lambert flung question after question at him, he would say no more. Two months ago Maultry had thrown him out, and since then he knew nothing. He mumbled and swore, and at last Lambert let him go—watched him make for the ship like the scared rat that he was.

THE Pakahikis! Yes, that rang true. Those islands were a favorite haunt of Maultry's. He dealt in copra and vanilla and—other things. He even did a little blackbirding at times. Yes, one might safely look for him in the Pakahikis—most likely at Waihiti.

Get there, then. Get there and wait for him. Wait till he comes ashore. Lie up for him and drop him as he strides down the beach. He has the box. He's got it still. There's a chance then—a chance to get it back.

"If I get it back," Lambert said aloud, "Maultry can go to hell in God's time. But if he's sold it, he'll go in mine."

From that hour he began to work, to earn a few scanty coins that should buy him a passage. He haunted the European quarter in Bangkok and picked up what he could. His lameness was a constant hindrance, a perpetual torment. But he stuck on grimly, limping here and there on messages and errands, holding horses, sweeping steps. He

learned to live on rice and tepid water. He slept where he could. Every day he went down to the harbor and watched the boats sailing for the Islands. His lameness precluded him from every job except that of cook. And every vessel that docked carried a cook.

Slowly, slowly grew his hoard of money — English, American, Dutch, French. At the end of eight months he had enough. He went down to the harbor for the last time and found his way to the battered schooner with whose owner he had made a bargain seven weeks before. He paid away everything except a two-cent piece and an English shilling. He had the clothes he stood up in and his gun—no other asset save his unconquerable determination.

They weighed anchor just before dawn and set out in a fair wind for Waihiti, first port of call. Behind them lay the city, its curved towers pricking the sky. The edge of the sun showed, and Lambert bit back a mad desire to shout aloud. He was on his way at last. After months of hardship and disappointment, he stood at the edge of adventure. How long would this old tub take to make Waihiti? Too long for his impatience. He craned forward, eyeing the swift sails of a schooner beating up from the south toward Bangkok.

He was done with that city. Forward now, forward, to the place where Maultry must inevitably come, be it soon or late. What chance had there been of meeting him in the town that lay behind? None at all.

How fast that schooner came from the south! She drew nearer on a rapid keel, and the rising sun turned her to gold. Soon they would pass her, at half a mile's distance.

On she came, breasting the rollers. And as he watched, Lambert's heart turned to stone. He knew her, knew this ship that beat up north across the path of the sun. He felt the sweat stand on his forehead and in the palms of his hands. His lips were stretched in a savage grin.

The irony of it, the blasted irony!

"D'ye ken yon ship?" said a hairy fellow who was coiling a rope. "Fine I ken her. She's the *Fanny Davis,* sailin' into Bangkok."

Yes, the *Fanny Davis,* sailing into Bangkok.

V

THE *Fanny Davis* took her nefarious way into Bangkok and Lambert sailed on to Waihiti, with a savage anger in him that seemed to burn up his bones. Was this how it was to end? Was he to be the butt and sport of chance all his life? The long idle days streamed by, and every hour found him sunk deeper in despondency. He thought of Rosie, and his thoughts sheered away again as he pictured her waiting for him. Then he told himself he was a fool to expect that sort of faithfulness in these days. Did he expect things to turn out as they do in the colored supplements depicting "The Sailor's Return"? Why, it was months and months since he had seen Rosie. And what had passed between them? Almost nothing.

The sea and sky grew blue and more blue, till it seemed that the quintessence of color had been reached. Far away to port dim lands hove into sight, mere sandbanks with a few palms for a crown. Then came Kikia and the grim prison on Amanu, and last of all Waihiti with its lagoon as still as a piece of blue-green glass.

When the dinghy was ready to take ashore, Lambert stood on deck watching the Kanakas swarming out in their catamarans. What the hell was he going to do in this place? He had hoped against hope in Bangkok that he would find the *Fanny Davis* here. Oh, impossible, of course. Why should she be here eight months after Danvers had told him? He'd expected a miracle and it hadn't come off. If he'd only waited a few more weeks in Bangkok— Hell, that didn't bear thinking of.

He swung clumsily into the dinghy. The oars rose and fell, dripping in the sunlight. He would have to stay here now—stay and wait in this, the one place in the world where he might bank on meeting his enemy—some day. He stumbled up the beach and went into Hogan's bar and spent all he had in the world on rum. It bucked him and he spilled his story to Hogan, who heard him out while he polished up glasses and stood them in neat rows on a nine-inch shelf.

"Goin' to wait here till he turns up, eh?"

"Yes. I'll get him all right."

"Sure, and you may. I know Maultry. He's in here—well, say once a year. You'll get him all right. And now clear out of here. You've had your drink."

Hogan's hostility deepened as days and weeks and months passed. The *Fanny Davis* never came. Lambert mooned about the island. He grew as ragged as a man can and yet remain covered. He needed but little food. All his days he spent near the lagoon, watching for a ship that did not come. Soon every skipper who touched port knew his tale. Some laughed at the idea of this scarecrow pitting himself against Maultry. Others refused to listen. What time was there in their anxious, strenuous lives for the troubles of a beachcomber on Waihiti?

Lambert lived in a wooden shanty at the end of the straggling street. He had found a mattress in the lagoon, flung out of some boat. With enormous care he dried it and beat it up and could now sleep on it without much discomfort. A packing case served him as table, chair, and—very occasionally—washstand.

When he had been in Waihiti nearly seven months he caught malaria. God and Hogan alone know why he didn't die of it. For weeks after he went round like a death's head, and again and again the fever recurred, till he was like a shadow. Hogan watched him with exasperated concern.

"Don't go so near that blasted swamp," he said. "What's the good of me yankin' you through the fever the way I did? Tryin' to kill yourself, eh?"

Lambert shivered.

"Not till I've killed him."

"Say, why don't you let that go? You'll never get Maultry."

"I will."

"But what say he never comes this way again?"

"He'll come."

But he hadn't come at the end of three years. The deadly patience of Lambert that had seemed infinite suddenly snapped. He heard from the skipper of the *Go Down Moses* that Maultry was in Degas. Immediately all the passion that lurked in him flared up. Degas—at the other end of the group! Why, he could get there before Maultry left. He must get there. He *must*.

BUT he couldn't. Horton of the *Go Down Moses* said he was damned if he'd ship a man that was set on killing. Why, it was being accessory before the fact. In vain Lambert pleaded. Horton was adamant.

"I don't care if Maultry gets what's coming to him," he said in his ponderous way. "But suppose you miss him? Eh? And suppose he finds I brought you. Eh? Think I want to be in hell before I got to?"

He refused pointblank, drank up his whisky and went out. From that time Lambert's desire took a contrary turn. What was the use of staying on Waihiti after all? Hadn't he been a fool to spend three years there—years in which he might have been on Maultry's track? He forgot the pains he had been at to come to Waihiti. All he cared for now was to get away.

It had been hard to get there. It was impossible to get away. No one would ship him. He had nothing with which to buy a passage. Even if he had scraped together enough, it is doubtful whether he would have found any one

willing to take him. He tried to stow away. He tried it three times and then gave it up.

Just hang around till he died, eh? Was that what the rest of his life was to be? And, remembering his youth and the many days that remained to him, he cursed Maultry again for his crippled body, his vanished strength.

It wasn't so bad on Waihiti. Hogan's attitude toward him had changed. The first dislike and suspicion had given way to a tolerant contempt mixed with the casual kindness that one shows a dog who wanders into the yard.

Yes, that's what it was. A dog's life. On the day that Lambert heard Rafferty and Hogan discussing him as he limped away among the palms, he had made up his mind to get away from Waihiti or go under. For three years he had waited and Maultry had not come. Dead, perhaps. Or wandering the China Seas. A thousand things might have happened to Maultry.

All the afternoon Lambert lay under the palms perfecting his plans for escape. Rafferty's ship—the *Saint Anne*—was due to leave for Les Aves in two days' time. If Lambert could once get aboard—*if!* Yes, there was the rub. How was he to get aboard a ship that was watched day and night by the sharp eyes of the Kanakas? Rafferty knew a thing or two about stowaways.

Still, a way might present itself. The unquenchable spirit in the thin body flared up again. He pushed his hat to the back of his head and sauntered back to Hogan's. The sun was setting. Soon the brief twilight would fall—and Hogan would place a lighted lantern above his door. Already the hum of mosquitos rose from the swamps. Lambert felt the familiar shiver that came with the night air, and hurried on. Perhaps he might beg another whisky. It all depended on Hogan's temper.

The sun went down in a gaudy sky splashed with crimson and gold. The long furrows of the sea grew violet and then black. Round the point came a schooner, nosing her way into the lagoon through the gap in the reef. Lambert examined her languidly.

Then he stopped, hands gripping his thighs. Through the gathering night he stared till his eyes stung. Had it happened then? Had it come at last after the years of waiting? The groan and creak of an anchor chain running outmad e him prick up his ears. With quick, unequal strides he went to the top of a little knoll and strove to pierce the dusk. Red light and green light started out on port and starboard. The white riding lights shone out like stars. Alone in the shadows Lambert watched and trembled.

Was it the *Fanny Davis?*

He had dreamed so long of this moment that when it came it found him unsure, unnerved. His legs were leaden as he made his way to Hogan's bar. So many times he had imagined his meeting with Maultry, and now that the next hour might bring him face to face with his adversary his mind was confused, his heart unsteady. Panting, he hobbled into the bar and found Hogan lighting the lantern.

"Ship in," said that worthy, wiping grease from his hands with a bit of calico. "Too dark to make out who she is."

He adjusted a fat candle and mounted a box marked, "Best Primrose, Nine Gross", that stood beside the door. Very carefully he swung the lantern on its hook above the lintel. Glancing down casually, he saw Lambert's face. The sight brought him down instantly.

"What's up? What the hell's the matter?"

"Hogan—the ship—the ship—"

"Hey, steady! Wait a bit. I'll fix you. Sit down. Sit down, you blamed fool."

HE WOULD not listen to Lambert's sputtering talk until he had administered neat brandy. Lambert flicked it down as though it were a mouthful of water.

"Now," said Hogan, "spit out the trouble. Gosh, I thought you were sick again. Now—what's eatin' you?"

"The ship. The schooner. It's her. It's the *Fanny Davis!*"

"How do you know?" demanded Hogan, suddenly cautious.

"I'm sure. The cut of her jib—the way she settles at anchor."

"You know a damn lot," Hogan said. "Well, we'll make sure."

He left Lambert crouched on the Primrose soap box and went out to reconnoiter. Rafferty and a few score more were strolling along the beach. They told him what he wanted to know and he came back with a worried air.

"Sure, it's the *Fanny Davis.* You were right. Say, if I took you to a mirror you'd have the fright of your life. Where's your blood gone?"

He stared at Lambert's blazing eyes—and looked away again.

"If Maultry comes in here," he began, and stopped.

"He'll come."

"I don't know so much. What say some fella warns him that there's a lunatic round here lyin' up for him?"

"Think he'll care for that? Besides, who's in that would tell him? You've been pretty free to spill my tale about, Hogan. But barring Rafferty—"

"Rafferty don't know details," said Hogan quickly. "The other chaps—all strangers. Only come in port yesterday. No one's goin' to warn Maultry unless—"

"Unless—"

"Unless I do."

"You?"

"Well, damn it all, why should I let him come in here to his death? If what you've told me is true, all right—but even then it ain't for me to wait by and let you drop him as he stands."

"Hogan, you wouldn't warn him—all this time—escape me—"

"Keep still, you fool! He ain't done me no harm, has he?"

"But me—think what he's done to me."

"Aye. Well, all the same—"

"Hogan—Hogan—"

"Well, what are you goin' to get him with, anyway? When did you last use that gun in your belt? It'll miss fire, sure as eggs. And what have you got to put in it? I'll bet my shirt it's empty."

Lambert said in a whisper—

"I've a knife, too."

"You'll never get him," said Hogan in somber tones. "Shall I tell you what'll happen? You'll act like some fella in a play and stand flourishin' your gun—oh, and your knife, if you want to. And you'll talk to him. Oh, yes. Never knew a guy yet that could kill another guy without openin' his mouth too wide. Not a guy like you are, anyway, all excited and fret the way you are. Want to tell him how you hate him, don't you? Want to tell him how long you've waited and where you hope he'll go to. Sure, that's your line. And while you're sayin' your piece he'll plug you just in the right spot. Next thing I'll be spoilin' new towels mopping up blood."

He eyed Lambert thoughtfully.

"Your blood," he added.

"No, no, no!" Lambert flung back at him. "Hogan, I'll get him. I swear it. I've thought of it—planned it. I shan't kill him till I find out what he's done with my box."

Hogan turned on him fiercely.

"That perishin' box! All this—because of a box! What's in it at all? Hey?"

Through the open door came the crunch of a dinghy's keel on the beach. Footsteps sounded. On and on they came, across the sand and up the beach road. Hogan caught Lambert by the arm and shook him fiercely.

"No killin' in the bar," he said. "Promise me that, or I'll put him wise."

Lambert nodded and shook himself free. He leaned back against the bare wall, his nervous fingers twisting frantically about his gun. Hogan glared at him from the other side of the room, as

though daring him to break the promise which he had made.

But it wasn't Maultry who came in with heavy steps. It was Dominico, the fat Italian. He was older, grayer, fatter, but he was still Dominico. His glance swept over Lambert and fastened on Hogan. A smile creased his greasy face as he bent forward into the light.

"How long since I see you? All well, Signor Hogan?"

HOGAN returned his greeting with a nervous air. But Dominico noted nothing amiss. He straddled the chair with the broken back, and ordered whisky. Lambert sat down with his back to the others. For some minutes his heart beat so loudly that the voices of Dominico and Hogan came through a patter of thudding sound.

"Stayin' long, Dominico?"

"*Non, non.* Very little time. The ship he is going to Degas."

"Where's the rest? Where's—where's Maultry?"

"Ah—Maultry. He is very sick—very sick indeed."

"Sick? Fever, eh?"

"Perhaps. I do not know. But he is very sick. All day, all night, he lie and toss, toss, all the time. I think maybe he die very soon."

"Die? What, him? No fear of that. Maultry won't die in his berth. The rope or the sea—one of 'em will get him."

"I do not think so. What is the matter with your whisky? He is poor this time. No, I think I am right, Hogan, when I say Maultry will die. *Si,* he will die in a day or two days."

Hogan leaned forward, resting his plump arms on the shining, polished counter.

"And then?"

Dominico's eyes lighted up.

"Then we get what we wait for, Hogan."

"What's that?"

"I tell you some other time," said Dominico, smoothly. "But now I ask you to do a thing for me."

"Well?"

"If he die," said Dominico, "it is bad that he die in sin. A priest. You understand? A priest—*soon*—for Maultry. That is why I come tonight."

"Gosh!" said Hogan, and spat. "Why, there ain't no padre around."

"Yes, there is!"

The voice came from the tattered scarecrow by the wall. He had swung round on his stool and sat watching them. Dominico and Hogan stared at him.

"Say, what do you know about it?" demanded the former, and Lambert answered him in a nasal whine.

"Sure, ain't I been on the beach all afternoon? And didn't I hear a guy spill a lot of talk about the padre and how he was expected back today from way over the other side of Waihiti? I'll say I did. Yes, sir!"

Dominico started up eagerly.

"*Si?* He will return soon? Then he will be just in time, signor. Hogan, when the priest come, send him at once. *At once!*"

He gazed at Lambert in a puzzled manner, and Lambert returned the scrutiny without a tremor.

"I see you before?" asked Dominico. "You are here last time I come?"

"Sure. Been here years, ain't that so, Hogan?"

"That's so. Well, Dominico, where's the rest of the party?"

Dominico's eyes flashed.

"They stay on board. Ah, Hogan, it is very bad to wait for a dead man. It is more bad to wait while Maultry die. They say that when a gray wolf die, the other wolves sit down to watch. And as soon as he die, they tear him. Maultry is the gray wolf. And we—all of us—when he die we take from him what we want. But no man trust another one. Schultz, Harding, O'Brien—all like wolves . . ."

He maundered on. Lambert didn't bother to listen. His brain was busy

fitting together the pieces of a plan. Dominico hadn't recognized him, all bearded and dirty as he was. Would Schultz know him? He'd have to take that risk. Lord, another risk wouldn't matter—after all he'd taken. O'Brien and Harding were new names to him. There wouldn't be any trouble with them.

He could hardly wait till Dominico went his leisurely way at the end of an hour. Hardly had the broad Italian back disappeared from view than he stumbled across the room to Hogan's side.

"Hogan, listen—!"

"Listen? I've listened to a lot of twaddle from you tonight. Why did you pull that stuff about the padre? You know we ain't got one on Waihiti. You know we get visits from his reverence over at Johnson Island about once in six months. Well, what the hell—"

"Listen, I tell you! Maultry's dying. He wants a priest. He'll get a priest. He'll get—me!"

"You?"

"Yes . . . Hogan, you've got to help me. You've got to. You must. It's the last chance—the last chance of all. When folks are dying they say what they've done wrong. He'll tell me where the box is. Maybe he's still got it. Maybe that's what they're all after, the way Dominico says."

"What are you goin' to do?"

"Lend me your good coat, Hogan. Lend me a collar—and shoes."

"You're crazy. Plumb crazy."

"No. *No!* I'll get him this way. I'll get what I want."

"Hey, you don't mean—"

"Not kill him? I shall see. Dying—no; there's no need to help him on. Let him die slow. But the box—my box—"

"Crazy."

"Reckon I can make up to look like a parson. Only—clothes. I must have clothes."

"You're goin' to make out you're a padre and go aboard the *Fanny Davis*. Say, don't do that. Go down and drown yourself in the lagoon, all nice and quiet."

"You think I'll fail? No, I tell you. No!"

He was white and tense. Hogan considered him carefully.

"Risky. Damned risky. Maultry will know you."

"Not he! With this goat fringe and lame? If he does, I'll chance it. Hogan, I must do it."

His dilated eyes made Hogan feel queer. Well—let him have his way. If he got thrown into the lagoon, he'd sink, and that would be the end of him. Anyway, it didn't seem safe to refuse him; he was that worked up there was no telling what he might do.

"Oh, all right," Hogan said grudgingly. "I'll fix you up. Is Maultry a Mormon? What sort of padre does he pray to?"

"He's never prayed in his life. They're all the same to him. Your gray coat, Hogan. And the old black vest—back to front to look like that black chest protector they wear sometimes. And a collar—a clean collar."

"You'll have to wash," said Hogan thoughtfully. "Wash hard, and clean all your nails. Stop gibberin', can't you?"

"A Bible—I'll have to have a Bible."

"Steady, steady! You're goin' straight to your death, Lambert. If Maultry finds he's been tricked—"

"He will not! Hurry, can't you? I want to go to him tonight."

"You're mad! Oh, all right, all right. Got any notions about where you'd like your grave dug?"

Lambert turned. His eyes were like coals in the ashen gray of his face.

"You can't scare me, Hogan. I'm going."

And at midnight he went.

VI

IT WAS dark where Maultry lay. The oil in the hanging lamp burned low. The dim blue light flared and flickered without ceasing. Presently it went out, and Dominico brought in a hurri-

cane lantern and stood it on the iron bound chest near the wall.

Maultry was dying. No doubt about that. He was tasting now the bitter salt that he had forced into so many mouths. He lay on his back, his mouth hard shut and his eyes dim. All the vitality that remained in his body was gathered into the flame of his red hair, which lay tousled and unruly against the pillow. On the gray coverlet his great hands wandered to and fro, patting anxiously at what lay pressed to his side, hidden beneath the bedclothes.

A stir of feet on the companion, a rustle of sibilant voices. To Lambert there was something eery about this return to the *Fanny Davis*. He moved slowly, anxious to mask any unconscious familiarity with the ship. His clothes were stiff and uncomfortable. Hogan was a bigger man than he. For the first time in years he was wearing a collar—a clean one. It fretted his neck. Mad idea, too, to wear it back to the front, he thought as he followed Schultz down the steep, well remembered stairs. His beard had been trimmed, his hair cut and oiled. In one hand he carried a worn Bible that Hogan had unearthed from beneath a pile of rubbish.

"Here he is, Father," said Schultz. "In here."

He pushed open a door and left Lambert and Maultry alone.

Maultry couldn't speak. Death had him by the throat. He'd never shout at the boys again, never call for another drink. His eyes, filming now, hardly saw this strange padre who stood regarding him so dumbly.

Lambert went nearer. His heart beat like a trip-hammer. The hand that held the Bible quivered until the book almost fell from his grasp. He tried to think of something to say. All the words in the world played a mad race of tag through his brain, but not one of them could he catch.

What was it that lay beneath the clothes, huddled close to Maultry's body?

Some one was coming in. He looked up quickly to see a stranger—a tall, dark fellow with a scar on his temple and with a brutish mouth.

"How is he? Pretty nigh gone? Reckon you came just in time. My name is Harding."

He advanced toward the dying man and regarded him dispassionately.

"He ain't fer long," was his diagnosis. "See what he's hangin' on to? Ah, he won't keep it for long."

Lambert said hoarsely—

"What is it?"

"Something all of us have planned for months to get. It's a box. Black wood with iron corners."

"Why do you—why do you want it?"

Harding eyed him solemnly.

"Because it's the thing he set most store by. Crazy about it. Hid it. Boasted about it. Made all of us mad to get it. We'll have it, too, before tomorrow."

Lambert said suddenly:

"He's very weak. Why haven't you taken it before?"

"If you knew anything at all about Maultry," said Harding in earnest tones, "you'd never say that. As long as he's alive, we're all plumb scared of him. No tellin' what he might be able to do—yet. No. We're waitin' till his breath's out before we take what we want."

He bent over Maultry and spoke loudly.

"Hey, Maultry! Can you hear me?"

No sign, no answering look in the fading eyes.

"Goin' fast," Harding said. "You goin' to put up a prayer, sir? Might do a bit of good. Not very much, though, seein' what he's been."

He looked curiously at Lambert, and in a panic Lambert thought, "He suspects me. He thinks I'm not a real padre." The idea terrified him. Instantly he dropped on his knees beside the quiet figure and opened his Bible. He had seldom opened one and knew nothing of where to find appropriate passages. By chance the pages fell

apart at the Book of Proverbs. Without thought he began to read where his eyes fell—

" 'When a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish—' "

HE STOPPED, horrified. But Maultry had heard nothing. His hands lay still, with the palms open. His body stiffened, then sagged back, the heavy red head rolling to the left. A long sigh shuddered across the room. Lambert felt the hairs at the back of his neck prickle. A breath of salt wind stole down the companion. The ship stirred suddenly.

Harding, pale and troubled, said—

"He's gone, ain't he, sir?"

Lambert nodded. Harding whistled a low, peculiar note. Immediately there came the stealthy sound of padding feet. Into the narrow doorway three figures crowded, peering anxiously about the cabin. Behind Dominico came Schultz and a shock headed fellow with a broken nose who must be O'Brien. Dominico crossed himself and muttered a prayer. The others stared with stolid eyes at the dead master.

The color came slowly back into Harding's thin cheeks. He hesitated, then looked quickly at the three faces in the doorway.

"Now?" he said.

They nodded. Harding rubbed his damp hands on the seat of his slacks and went right up to the dead man. But he couldn't find the nerve to take what Maultry had kept so well. Twice he made to lift the bedclothes. As he stood there, sweating, the broken nosed O'Brien walked in with curling lip.

"Is it afraid ye are? Get out, then."

Without hurry he slid his hand between the blankets and drew out Maultry's treasure. At sight of his box the blood sang in Lambert's ears. But he dared not speak. He saw four pairs of eyes fixed on one object. And in each face greed and desire leaped into life, conquering every other emotion. O'Brien held the box tightly. He made a sudden movement and instantly the others stiffened watchfully.

Dominico spoke.

"Bring her into the light."

They trooped into the big cabin where a light showed. Same old place, thought Lambert, as he glanced round. By virtue of his supposed office he came second in the little procession. Ahead of him stalked O'Brien, the box clasped firmly in his eager hands. Lambert went and stood by the open porthole, staring out at the dim lagoon. A scent of spices mingled with the salt breeze. Waihiti lay lumpish and still under a star filled heaven. The song of the reef came low and clear. Lambert turned away, his nerves braced and steadied by the dozen breaths of fresh air.

The base of the mainmast came right through the center of this cabin, and round its sturdy base a table had been built. On the dull surface the box stood, closed, secret. Around it gathered the four men, and Lambert edged forward and joined the group.

As he watched those grim faces fear rose in his throat. Had he the slightest chance against any of the four men? No. Not a dog's chance. Even if he held them up at the point of his gun, there wouldn't be any hope of making a getaway. What chance had he of leaving the *Fanny Davis* alive if he attempted a hold-up? But—was he to let this box be torn away from him a second time? Had he found it but to lose it?

Odd that he who knew so little of the Scriptures should yet remember a line that he had heard in the course of a denunciatory sermon years ago.

"I will restore the years which the locust hath eaten . . ."

Yes. But who was going to do the restoring? God? Thin hope, that, decided Lambert. He hadn't given God much of a deal in his short life, and it didn't seem likely that the Almighty would disturb himself about Lambert. He must do it himself then. He looked

at Harding's mouth—Schultz' beefy hands—the giant O'Brien's arms—Dominico's shifty eyes. His heart went right down into Hogan's boots.

"Now," Harding was saying, "guess the day's come, boys."

His face was impassive, but his eyes gave him away. They blazed with eagerness. His lean fingers reached out and stroked the box. Schultz growled at him thickly:

"*Nein, nein.* It's *verboten.* No one must touch."

Harding flung round on him.

"Devil take you for a mangy squarehead! Haven't we talked things out? Haven't we got this all fixed? Share and share alike, whatever's in it. Four equal shares. Hey, Dominico? O'Brien?".

"That's right," agreed the Irishman. "That's right entirely. But lay wan finger on it, and you'll be sorry. Ain't I boss now Maultry's dead? Is any one denyin' that the first mate takes over the ship? It's meself will open that same box. That's right, eh, your Reverence?"

Lambert nodded. Their wolfish faces, their seeking thievish hands—but he'd put up a fight for it yet. He'd been in tighter corners than this and come out alive.

O'Brien crashed down a bunch of heavy keys on the table. They were Maultry's. He had taken them from the nail by the dead man's bunk, where they had hung untouched since their owner lay down for the last time.

"Which key is it?" Harding asked, leaning forward.

Lambert saw that Maultry had had a duplicate key made. He wanted to call out:

"It's the little one—the second smallest key in the bunch. Yes, the one with the hook."

But he kept his head and no words escaped him.

O'Brien was testing the small keys. None of them fitted and he swore impatiently. The fingers of the other men twitched and worried, itching to be at the keys. When at last he struck the right one, they leaned forward, their faces stilled and blank, only their fierce eyes showing their souls' desire. The Irishman thrust the key in roughly. He turned it and opened the box.

THEY couldn't believe it. They were too taken aback to swear. For many seconds they stood round the table, staring at the thing they had coveted for months. Presently Harding spoke in crisp, staccato tones:

"Feel it, feel it, can't you? Maultry ain't the guy to carry round an empty box."

His voice cracked a little.

"Must be a spring somewhere," he said.

Lambert was quivering with excitement. Would they find it? Would they?

They found it, all right. O'Brien bent over the box, sliding his huge fingers delicately over the smooth interior. The others crowded close to him, scarcely breathing, their hands still now, their fingers tense. There was a faint, dull click and the false bottom slid back.

It was left for Harding to explode into blasphemy. The others stood like blocks, their furious eyes tied to what lay at the bottom of the box. Harding's voice broke on God's name at last, and he too stood in a daze.

And at what did they all stare? What was the treasure for which men had fought and stabbed and fought again? What had Maultry guarded so jealously, hoarding it, guarding it at the very turnstile of death? Ah, he'd had the last laugh, had Maultry. Very likely he was in the room now, his cold eyes alight with triumph at the frustration of four men's desires.

A child's shoe and a Dutch doll.

What a joke Maultry had had with them! These were the things which he had kept as a man might keep the Grail. The anger of the four men about the table swelled and broke into a roar

of sound, slashed again and again by the thin wail of Dominico's voice raised high in Latin hysteria. Only Lambert remained silent, his face like parchment, his eyes as quiet as death.

O'Brien swung round on him.

"What do you say to it, your Reverence? Is that the way to be doin' to us now he's dead?"

Lambert flicked a dry tongue over drier lips and said:

"The man is dead. No one must say evil of him."

"Where'd he get the blasted thing, anyway?" Harding was saying.

He had picked up the shoe, and his restless fingers plucked at it till Lambert was in a sweat. Schultz' heavy voice answered him.

"A young man—it was his. Maultry killed him for it. So Maultry haf no luck. And we—we haf no luck."

O'Brien picked up the box. He shook it, and thrust his fingers into every corner in the vain hope of discovering some other spring, some other treasure. Above Dominico's wails came the strident curses of Harding. Looking at them all as they stood in the yellow light of the hanging lamp, Lambert shuddered. What would happen if they knew?

It was O'Brien who pulled himself together first.

"Stop howlin', will ye, Dominico? The devil take you for a lousy dago. We're all in the same boat. Maultry's had the laugh on us, and that's the end. Spiteful baste that he is, that same Maultry. He knew we'd be after the box, and he's fooled us. Well!"

He shouted the last word and they all looked up at him, startled, hostile.

"From now on I'm boss here. And if any one tries any nonsense, it's meself will be after settlin' with him. Now we'll finish with Maultry. Tie him up and sling him over. I don't hold with keepin' dead men aboard."

He picked up the shoe and the wooden doll. They crashed into a corner and the box followed them.

"We'll be goin' straight away," he said. "His Reverence here will read the service—a service for Maultry! And then we'll put him ashore and make for Degas."

"Waste good prayers on him?" said Harding, white with anger. "Waste good words on Maultry? What the hell for? I've seen him do things I'd think shame to put a name to. What's the good of parson's prayers for him?"

"Just wan thing," said O'Brien, thrusting his face to within six inches of Harding. "Just this. His Reverence's words are the nails of God to kape Maultry down below. Throw him overboard like a dead dog—and the next night he'll come back all green and wet, and walk up and down, up and down. I've known 'em do it. I've seen 'em."

His voice sank to a whisper.

"Do you want him to come back in the dog watch? Do you want to see Maultry climb aboard and him all drippin' with the sea?"

"Lord, no!" burst from Harding. "Let's be quick, O'Brien. Let's be quick."

In the hustle that followed, Lambert kept his head. Just before dawn the *Fanny Davis* slid out of harbor with the Kanakas pulling at the sails that opened to catch the early breeze. At the wheel Schultz tacked and turned to bring her out about two miles from Waihiti. Lambert paced up and down beside the deckhouse, his head bent. His mind worked feverishly, making up some sort of jargon that would pass for a burial service for Maultry. Down below, Harding and O'Brien were wraping him up in sailcloth, while Dominico rummaged for weights.

Presently Schultz hove to. Up the companion Maultry came for the last time, and the men who carried him swore at him as they felt the stubbornness of the heavy body in its shroud. The water was green and cold —deep under a clear sky. They laid him down and wiped their necks, waited for Lambert to begin.

He didn't do it badly. He read a couple of Psalms and made everybody join in the Lord's Prayer. A phrase or two had stuck in his memory. "Deep unto deep"—"until the sea gives up her dead"—and he did what he could with them.

Harding spat on his hands. He and O'Brien stooped. The risen sun set the hair on O'Brien's bare arms aflame.

"Heave—*away!*"

THE *Fanny Davis* put back to Waihiti to land Lambert. As she drew near the island, O'Brien came with a leather purse in his hand, to where Lambert stood.

"We'd like to offer a trifle, your Reverence," he said, rubbing his broken nose. But Lambert put out a quick hand.

"No, no. I can't take money for that. But I'd like, if you'd let me have—give me—"

O'Brien waited.

"The shoe and the little doll," said Lambert, and felt his heart smashing against his ribs.

"Why?"

Lambert managed a shrug.

"Just a souvenir. But I—I don't care about it so much as all that."

"Sure, you can have the trifles," said the other. "Take 'em and give 'em to the children. It'll be no pleasure to us to see them same things. Hey, you, Telemai, you go fetchem one fella shoe one fella doll-girl in cabin. All same quick!"

A passing Kanaka ran at his word. The minute and a half that passed before he returned seemed to Lambert the longest passage of time he had ever known.

But at length O'Brien thrust into Lambert's unsteady hands what Telemai brought back from below.

The dinghy was ready, and Lambert went ashore. As the blades of the oars cut the still water of the lagoon he sat very still, while realization seeped into every corner of his being. For this was triumph. This was the end of the bad years, the years of famine and disaster, of poverty and despair and the kick of Fortune. The world lay before him, and he could sit astride it if he wished. His thoughts flew to Rosie Lister and he glowed. Yet—five years? Anything might have happened. He'd go and find out. To be able to go . . .

Even if she were—dead—or married, or if she'd forgotten him—well, what of it? Weren't there a thousand women for every one of Rosie's fingers? He'd suffered too much to be able to suffer again with the same anguish, the same intensity. Of all the evils that God and the devil had in store for him there was not one which could equal in pain or terror the frightful sufferings of the past—the past which had been haunted by Maultry, and now lay dead with Maultry.

Suddenly Lambert began to sing.

VII

"So you got it, did you?" said Hogan skeptically. "And look at the marks on them pants! Ain't never been wore yet."

"Listen—"

"Oh, aye, I'll be listening to this yarn till kingdom come, I suppose. And don't start askin' for drinks at this hour in the mornin'. Gosh, what have you done to that collar? Don't finger it. Don't finger it—"

"I got them, Hogan! Hogan, listen—"

"I might get them marks off with blottin' paper and a hot iron," mused Hogan. "Oil, ain't it? Crazy loon, messin' up clothes that's lent you! What about Maultry?"

"Dead."

"Is that so? Well, reckon he'll teach 'em a thing or two down there. And now get out of them clothes. Where's me Bible? That's a fresh mark on the cover."

Lambert leaned across the smooth counter.

"Look what I brought back!"

Before Hogan's disdainful eyes he set out his spoil.

"Huh! Poor fish! Is that what you risked your neck for?"

Lambert jerked at his knife and began to cut at the shoe.

"Now you hurry up out of here," warned Hogan. "You'll get no booze from me this mornin'."

He began to polish glasses, pausing now and then to watch Lambert. Lambert was busy with the knife. He was ripping the little shoe to bits, and from the inner parts of the worn sole he extracted little pieces of paper, folded tightly—so tightly that it seemed they could never be spread out. Lambert's trembling fingers worked at them until they opened, one after another, until ten of them lay on the counter. Hogan picked up one in his finger and thumb.

"God's truth!" he said.

But Lambert didn't hear. He was busy with the doll. With a jerk he broke off head and arms, removed some cotton wadding from the wooden body. Nine little stones rolled out, nine little sparkling stones.

"Diamonds!" breathed Hogan. "And there—they're English banknotes. My God, Lambert, where'd you get 'em?"

"Tell you some time. It's a queer yarn. A dead man and a dead ship, and a crazy Kanaka who'd seen what his boss had hid and where he hid it . . . I wonder if Maultry knew what was here. Maybe he was going to make use of 'em some time, and waited for a good chance. Well, he waited too long."

He straightened himself and looked at Hogan.

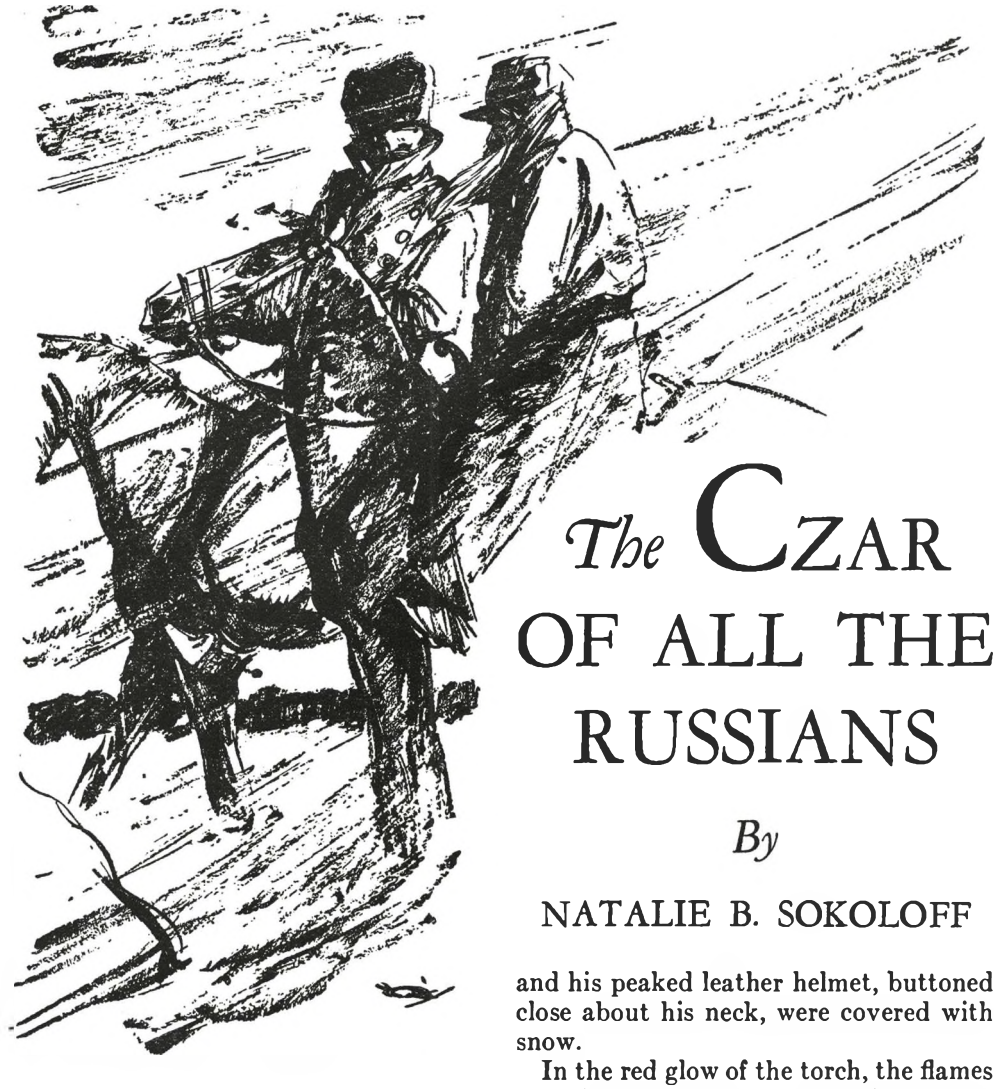
"Bring me a drink," he said.

"Yes—sir," said Hogan.

LUMBER

By HARRY KEMP

AFTER their saw had quenched its swift, keen thirst,
The lithe-limbed, vigorous lumbermen drew back
Along the faintly furrowed wagon track.
The great green top, that towered over all
The littler trees, sank on the solitude
Men's presence deepened. With a tardy fall
First tinkled down a cone, a broken twig;
A wavering branch brought down a sliding leaf.
There was a silence like some mighty grief
That all the forest utterance found too big
For voices; one gray squirrel leaped in time,
Chattering at the solitary crime.
With grieving echoes the great tree bore down—
The following thunder spoke his last renown:
The thunder of his fall that filled the wood.
Slow settled all his foliage with a sigh.
Where once he stood, stood a blue space of sky.
A chain about his mighty bole was cast.
The men who brought him down spoke low, at last,
After the tree had thundered to his fall . . .
They seemed like people at a funeral.



The CZAR OF ALL THE RUSSIANS

By

NATALIE B. SOKOLOFF

"AS SOON as Dimitri takes Moscow," one of the soldiers remarked grimly, "we'll cut all these boyars and officers to pieces. Mark my words, comrades, we'll have our fun yet."

"Sh—" another cautioned him as the door of the turret was suddenly flung open.

Boyarin Mechersky stood on the threshold.

He had been making the round of the guard posts atop the Kremlin Wall and his great coat of bearskins, which he wore over the blue regimental kaftan, and his peaked leather helmet, buttoned close about his neck, were covered with snow.

In the red glow of the torch, the flames of which danced and leaped with the icy blast, the faces of the men looked fierce. The air of the small chamber, open on three sides to the raging blizzard, was tense, vibrating with their hatred and discontent. But Mechersky ignored this.

"Everything in order?"

"Aye, aye," the men answered impatiently, as if grudging him the answer.

A soldier, his shoulders and helmet snow laden from leaning out over the parapet, turned to exchange a swift glance with the young boyarin. He was Gerasim, Mechersky's soldier-servant. Slowly he crossed the floor to the door

where his master, pretending unconcern, stood warming his hands at the torch's flames.

"Looks like it was the signal," he whispered. "Go and see. I'll keep guard here."

Mechersky walked over to the parapet and peered into the storm.

There it was. The signal! That window on the second story of the enormous building which was the Czar's palace was aglow with light for a second, then darkened again, then gleamed once more through the darkness and the falling snow. Far, far away it was, and very small, imperceptible to one ignorant of its significance. Had the soldiers seen it, they would have attributed that play of light to stormy weather.

Even to Mechersky it told nothing but that his presence was demanded in the palace.

He turned away from the parapet and was at the door in a stride. He opened it, beckoned Gerasim to follow and ran down the dark narrow stairs and into the Red Square.

"The men, the soldiers," muttered Gerasim as they hurried through the snow toward the palace. "They talk openly of Dimitri. They are that bold. If anything should happen to the Czar, Dimitri would have no difficulty in entering Moscow. Every one but the boyars are for making Dimitri Czar—"

"But nothing has happened to the Czar," Mechersky interrupted quickly. "And while the Czar lives we need not fear Dimitri. For lack of legitimate heirs, the Czar has been elected and crowned, all in accordance with law. No man dares raise his hand against him while he lives."

"The Czar is sick. Has been for weeks," Gerasim pointed out.

"He is recovering strength rapidly," Mechersky assured him. "In a few days he'll be up and about."

They walked on in silence for awhile. The wind had abated. The square was deserted and very still. Only from a distance there came to them the thin noise of the crowd which they could not see for the falling snow, but which they knew was collecting about the palace doors, for this was the hour for the nightly bulletin reporting the Czar's prolonged sickness.

"I wonder," Gerasim said, hesitatingly. "I wonder if there's any truth in Dimitri's claim."

"That he is the lawful heir? That he is the only surviving son of Ivan the Terrible?"

"Yes. For then the present Czar, Czar Vassily, is no more Czar than I am."

"But Dimitri, the real Dimitri, was killed ten years ago. Every one knows that. You yourself, you've talked with the old boyarin in whose presence Prince Dimitri was murdered. This Dimitri, the living one, is an impostor. Why, even among the populace, who are awaiting his arrival so eagerly, he is called Dimitri the False."

"That is true. But, even so, we may yet see him crowned Czar of all the Russians. God forbid! But his army is nearing Moscow—"

"You mean the Polish army," Mechersky corrected him. "The Poles are marching on Moscow to place Dimitri on the throne. He is in love with a Polish princess, Marina, who has been promised him for wife if he succeeds in becoming our Czar. And through her, the Poles will govern Russia."

"And where is she, this Marina?"

"They are bringing her with them, no doubt. Dimitri, they say, does everything she tells him. She is of striking beauty, it is said."

THEY had reached a side entrance of the palace. They passed the guard at the door and ascended the winding stairway directly into the chamber from which the signaling to Mechersky had been done. It was dimly lighted now and crowded with boyars in long voluminous kaftans embroidered with gold thread, their long white hair framing

their large reddish faces, their white beards reaching to their waists.

One man stood out conspicious in their midst. A tall, gaunt man dressed in black from head to foot. His lean face and round head were clean shaven. He was Marzuk, the royal physician.

They were talking among themselves in hushed tones when Mechersky entered.

"The Czar?" he asked quickly.

For answer Marzuk opened a door and, motioning him to come up, led the way through a series of gloomy rooms toward the Czar's apartments. The boyars followed in a body.

In perfect silence they filed into the antechamber, which was brilliantly lighted and full of nobles in rich dress and superior officers in blue kaftans. An excited group stood near the door of the Czar's bedroom. For the past six weeks the antechamber was always crowded with men eager for news of the Czar's condition.

Marzuk and Mechersky were at once surrounded.

"His Majesty," the physician said, smiling pleasantly, "is much improved. He is still somewhat weak and will be confined to his bed for some days. But all danger is past, thank God!"

Mechersky was not surprised to see faces lengthen at the good news. Even the nobles, who were but one scale inferior to the boyars in rank, would have been glad to see Dimitri on the throne. And all the officers, excluding himself, were with them. Such had been the Poles' success in convincing every one that Dimitri was the legitimate heir.

"I will order the bulletin," Marzuk went on, rubbing his hands like one greatly pleased, "to be hung out on the palace door."

And with a low bow he moved on, followed by Mechersky and the boyars. The soldiers who stood guard at the door let them pass, then closed it after them.

Traversing a second antechamber, they entered the bedroom. Marzuk approached the bed, which stood on a dais, drew aside the hangings concealing it and beckoned Mechersky to come nearer. He pulled back the coverlet gently.

The Czar Vassily lay in his great bed, as if asleep. His face was pale in its frame of black hair; his hands, the color of wax, crossed on his breast over his nightrobe of gold cloth.

"Dead!" gasped Mechersky.

"Poisoned," the physician said quietly, drawing the bedclothes into place. "Some one decided to make sure the Czar would never get well. We had the bodyguard arrested. Mere matter of form. We do not suspect him. One of the Boyarin Oduev's most trusted men. Of course, he could have been bribed."

"That can wait," Mechersky interrupted him. "What matters is that the Czar is dead. We must act at once."

"It is for you to decide what must be done," cried the boyars with one voice.

They looked upon the young officer as leader of their cause, for Mechersky had long ago won the friendship and trust of Posharsky, who was at the moment on his way to Moscow with the army of partisans he had organized in Nijni Novgorod, to fight Dimitri the False. Mechersky also was the friend of the Boyarin Oduev, who had placed his *drushina* — troops — and whatever wealth he possessed at the boyars' command against the Poles.

"No one must know of the Czar's death," Mechersky said. "Let no one enter these apartments. You—" he turned to Marzuk—"will continue issuing bulletins reporting the Czar on the way to recovery. I will start for Kolomna at once. Posharsky's army is stationed there. It's two days' travel. On the way I will stop at Boyarin Oduev's and ask him to send his troops to Moscow immediately. If Dimitri attacks Kremlin, you'll have them to defend it at least. You can't depend on our soldiers. In a week you may expect me back with Posharsky's partisans."

"If you reach them," one of the boyars put in, shaking his white head doubtfully. "There are all these Cossack

bands prowling around Moscow."

"I'll risk it."

"And then Kirshin," another boyarin remarked.

"That Cossack every one is talking about?" Mechersky said quickly. "He is trying to gather all those bands under his leadership. Now if we could persuade him to join us—"

"We've tried," the boyars explained. "But Kirshin is not the man to fight a lost cause. That's how he regards our movement. Perhaps he is right. The Poles are trying to lure him to their side. No doubt they'll succeed."

"Do not let us lose heart," cried Mechersky. "Our cause is the right cause. And now goodby." He set his helmet on his head energetically. "Gerasim, you are going with me."

With Gerasim at his heels, he hurried out of the room, along the corridor and down the main stairway to the front entrance of the palace.

AS THE two emerged on to the steps outside they were met by excited cries of the crowd who had come to learn of the Czar's condition. For answer, Mechersky pointed at the door, where two scarlet coated guards were nailing a large parchment, the bulletin announcing that the Czar was resting nicely. A monk with a lighted taper in his hand was reading the contents to the throng, for in those days even some of the boyars could neither read nor write.

Pushing their way through the mob, Mechersky and Gerasim hurried on to the stables, where two saddled horses were waiting for them. Procuring several flasks of vodka, without which no Russian journeyed in Winter, and pocketing them, they sprang into saddle and at a brisk trot set off across the Red Square in the direction of the Kolomna highway.

The weather had gradually cleared and there was a warm smell of fresh buds in the air, for it was the end of March. The blizzard, which had raged over Moscow for the last few days, was but an unmistakable sign that Spring, which sets in so suddenly in Northern Russia, was close at hand. Soon the snow would begin to thaw.

The thought disturbed Mechersky. The partisans' march on Moscow might be delayed then, even should he succeed in reaching Posharsky. Of this he was not sure.

Riding through the outskirts of the city, he saw on every hand the death and desolation that Cossack bands had left in their wake. Mutilated bodies sprawled across the road; charred ruins of the merchants' houses; shuttered dwellings of the lesser nobles abandoned by their owners who had fled into the Kremlin in search of shelter.

Rumors of the Czar's bad health and the approaching war, inevitable in case of Vassily's death, had lured the Cossacks from the far South to Moscow and the surrounding countryside. They were likened to vultures in those days, for like those birds they seldom took active part in the fighting, but lived on scraps of the conquerors' spoils. In this instance, however, due to the disorganized condition of the Czar's army, they had grown bold. They would make an onrush into the city, up to the very walls of the Kremlin, and depart with their loot as swiftly as they had come, back into the nearby woods where they would watch the roads for travelers. They hated the Muscovites and never missed the chance of killing one for the sheer pleasure of it.

Mechersky and Gerasim knew this and, reaching the empty highway, they urged their mounts on anxiously. It was a desolate plain they were traversing. As far as the eye could see, there was snow flooded with moonlight. Here and there, at some distance, the dark outlines of a wood, a copse. Black-blue skies overhead, and the sound of the horses' hoofs striking the hardened snow resounding sharply through the deathlike stillness.

After two hours' ride they had their

first glimpse of the dreaded Cossack bands—far away, a close group riding leisurely along the horizon, almost one with the skies. Then a wood swallowed them. Evidently they had failed to see the two solitary travelers.

"What is that?" Gerasim cried suddenly, as they galloped.

Far down the road a small object had sprung into view, growing in size as they neared. It was a horse—riderless, the saddle askew and reins dragging in the snow.

"Don't tell me we are to stop," cried Gerasim as, approaching the animal, Mechersky drew rein. "Sheer folly! With all these robber Cossacks prowling about. Anyway, the man, whoever he is, is probably dead."

Both knew what the presence of that horse implied. Its master falling from the saddle in the storm and buried somewhere in the snow, the animal had remained to keep guard over him.

"Think if it were you or I, Gerasim," said Mechersky, dismounting.

"But he isn't me or you," grumbled Gerasim.

Gerasim was a big, red faced fellow of immense strength, but very lazy. Slowly he scrambled out of the saddle and took up his spear.

The abandoned horse meanwhile had come up and was stamping the ground with its hoofs and neighing eagerly as much as to say, this is the place. And there Gerasim began to dig at the hardened snow with his spear. A heel of a boot was disclosed. The whole of the boot. And soon, in the deep gap his body had made in falling and where he had lain God knows how long, they uncovered a Cossack of gigantic stature, his sheepskin hat by his side.

His strong face, with its black beard and with striking black eyebrows above the closed lids, wore that expression of smiling sleep peculiar to those freezing, or already dead, under snow.

Kneeling by his side, Mechersky and Gerasim set to work. Tearing open the Cossack's coat and shirt, they rubbed his chest with snow vigorously, then moved his arms up and down to bring back the circulation of the blood. They turned him on his side, on his face, on his back again, shaking him with deliberate roughness, both panting with anxiety and exertion.

"I'm afraid it's no use," muttered Gerasim, sweat rolling down his face.

The gigantic Cossack gave no sign of life.

"Keep on!" cried Mechersky, failure foreign to his heart.

They began all over again. After a good half hour's work they tried to force open the man's clenched teeth that they might pour some vodka down his throat, but that too failed. Again they started to move his arms up and down and rub his temples and chest with snow. Suddenly the Cossack opened his eyes. The two men watching him held their breath.

"He lives," cried Mechersky.

The Cossack raised his head. He stared at them. Then, limp once more, he fell back; his eyes closed again.

Gerasim swore. Grasping the prostrate form by the shoulders, he propped the man into sitting position and held him grimly while Mechersky forced vodka from his flask through the man's clenched teeth. This time it worked. The Cossack opened his eyes and slowly sat upright.

Black and fierce, yet full of laughter in their depths, his eyes ran swiftly over the rescuers. Had the two men arrived at the spot but half an hour later, no amount of vodka would have awakened the Cossack. He knew it, and perhaps that was what now struck him as funny about the situation. Muscovites halting on the highway, risking their lives to save his! He threw back his head and laughed. Then, without a word, he stretched out his hand for the flask. Mechersky gave it to him. The stranger emptied it at a gulp.

"These Cossacks!" grumbled Gerasim, regarding him with a look, a mixture of contempt and admiration. "They can drink vodka by the gallon, the robbers!"

"Feel better?" Mechersky hastened to ask. He realized the danger of picking a quarrel with a Cossack in this wilderness.

"Feel fine. As usual," the man replied.

He rose to his feet, stretching out his limbs luxuriously. He looked about him with triumph, like one who had escaped death through some prowess of his own. There was cunning in his face. He put on his hat, pushing it back a bit to set it at a becoming angle. He did not thank his rescuers; he smiled as if amused in answer to Gerasim's scowl, for that honest soldier was greatly irritated by the Cossack's self-assured manner and mien.

"That was a close call for me, Boyarin," the Cossack remarked with a laugh. "I lost my way in the storm and my horse must have stumbled. All I remember is falling out of the saddle. Must have been too dazed by the fall to raise myself before the snow began sweeping over me. The wind was terrific. And if it hadn't been for you—"

He laughed again, showing his splendid teeth.

"Boyarin," he went on, "may it please you to tell me your name. Who knows? I may be of service to you some day. May it also—"

"Of service? You?" cried Gerasim. "To my master! The impudence—"

The Cossack ignored the interruption.

"May it also please you, Boyarin," he went on, "to tell me your destination."

"My name is Mechersky and I am on my way to Boyarin Oduev's estate."

"Oduev's?" repeated the Cossack.

He seemed surprised. He scrutinized Mechersky with a frown, then whistled long and softly through his teeth.

"So that's whither the wind blows!" he said thoughtfully. "Well, no concern of mine. Whoever you are, whatever your destination, you may depend on my help, should you need it. And who doesn't, no matter who, nowadays? Here's my ring."

He drew off a large ring of bronze which he wore on his thumb and gave it to Mechersky.

"Get hold of some Cossack and give him this ring and tell him to take it to its owner. Just say where and when, and I'll be there."

"But how will the man know—?" began Mechersky doubtfully.

"That the ring is mine? He'll know." The Cossack smiled.

"Listen to him!" cried Gerasim, appealing to the world at large. "He'll know," he mimicked. "One would think he is Kirshin himself."

"Who?" asked the stranger, suddenly all attention.

"Kirshin. That robber Kirshin every one is talking about. Your leader, chief, or whatever he is."

"What? Is there talk about Kirshin already?" the Cossack asked.

"Sure there is. The way he goes about killing everybody and robbing and—"

"We must be going," his master interrupted hurriedly. "Perhaps your way?" He turned to the Cossack.

"No, Boyarin," the man answered, his foot in the stirrup. "My way is not your way. Goodby, Boyarin."

He swung into saddle and rode off at a brisk trot in the direction of Moscow.

THEY watched him out of sight; then, mounting, they continued their course. Both were silent. Gerasim never talked when in bad humor, and Mechersky, impressed by the stranger's personality, fell into thought, meditating the possibility of approaching Kirshin through the unknown Cossack. Perhaps the man knew Kirshin, was on friendly terms with the already famous leader. Then, recollecting the circumstances of his meeting with the man, he laughed at the thought. The Cossack had been alone on the highway. Improbable that he should prove to be any one of importance. No. All this about the ring, the help he was in power to give for the asking—sheer bluff! These Cossacks, a conceited lot! A lone wolf probably, this one. A wandering robber. On his

own . . .

He dismissed the Cossack from his mind. Graver matters claimed his thoughts. He began to calculate how long it would take Oduev's troops to reach Moscow, should the condition of the roads remain unchanged. And the partisans . . .

By the time they reached Oduev's estate, thirty-six hours after leaving Kremlin, the whole incident had grown as dim in Mechersky's memory as if it had never existed. The ring jingled among the coins in the bag at his sash, where he had dropped it on receiving it from the stranger. And he had forgotten about the ring, too.

The sun was sinking when the snow covered roofs of the various buildings about the huge estate came into view. From the distance, glowing brilliantly in the sunset, they suggested a large town. There were so many of them; and so many people were moving about the front yard, the size of a large market square.

Dusk was setting in when they entered and made their way at a walk toward the boyarin's mansion. The yard was packed with men. Oduev apparently was keeping his *drushina* in readiness to start at a moment's notice, Mechersky noted with satisfaction.

Indeed, it looked as if the old boyarin had received notice already. Wagons were being loaded with provisions. The men were fully armed with spears and hatchets, and wore armor which gleamed from under their warm coats. Officers were running about shouting orders.

Dismounting and throwing the reins to Gerasim, Mechersky smiled with pleasure as he hurried up the steps to the door. A window near it was aglow with light from within. He pushed the door open and entered.

On a bench beside the stove where logs blazed redly in the darkness an old serf sat drowsing. In a loud voice—the man looked deaf—Mechersky explained who he was and that he wanted to see the master of the house. Before the serf had time to rise, there was a sound of quick, light steps and the swish of a woman's skirts, followed by a heavy tread. A figure emerged into the passage, and Mechersky stood where he was, spellbound.

At the side of a woman, Boyarin Oduev was holding her arm and pushing her, ever so gently, into the passage, motioning her to go away. He placed his portly bulk between her and the front door, as if he did not want Mechersky to see the woman. All this Mechersky realized but dimly. At the moment, it was as if the sun had entered the dark, narrow passage, blinding him, rendering him unable to move a limb. So striking was the woman's beauty! Dark and dynamic, there was about her something suggesting a tragic destiny. Who was she?

There was something foreign about her. The bejeweled headdress, the scarlet *sarafan,* whose voluminous folds swept the floor as she turned to throw him a curious glance, the white clouds of her *fata* falling from the headdress about her shoulders and down to the floor, were Russian. But she also wore a short jacket of silk trimmed with fur, foreign to Russian dress. And instead of the ropes of pearls worn by women he knew she had a necklace of rubies and a locket of dark gold.

She was staring at him with her tragic eyes, and then she had turned and was gone, disappearing in the darkness of the passage.

"Who is she?" gasped Mechersky.

"Eh?" the old boyarin seemed embarrassed. "A relation. Eh—a niece of mine—on a visit."

And then they were silent, both suddenly aware that Mechersky's question was impudent, and that Oduev, instead of taking offense, had answered it.

Only now Mechersky noticed how agitated, embarrassed and frightened Oduev was. But then he himself . . . With an effort he collected himself, bowed low to his host, looked about the walls for an ikon, bowed to it, then crossed himself slowly three times.

Oduev, to his relief, appeared as anxious to forget the incident as he was himself.

"Come. Come. This is indeed a surprise," Oduev cried genially, his eyes searching his guest's face. "What brings you here? I hope—" he frowned. "I hope nothing— But, come." He grasped his arm. "Into the front room. Some vodka, and then we'll talk."

"I see your *drushina* are ready to start," Mechersky said, preceding him into the room.

"Eh?" The old boyarin frowned. "To start? Yes. Yes. Of course—as we had agreed. My *drushina* at your disposal."

He bustled somewhat aimlessly about the chamber. It was a spacious apartment with a large oak table in the center, benches along the walls, and many ikons with small oil lamps burning before them filling the whole Eastern corner to the ceiling. Bearskins were strewn over the floor. Silver and gold goblets stood in neat rows on the shelves above a huge stove where logs blazed brightly.

Oduev clapped his hands.

"Vodka," he cried to the serf, who appeared bowing at the door. "For the honored guest. Tell daughters."

Oduev was a large man with a weather-bitten face, eyes bulging like an owl's, a loose mouth and an abundant white beard. His hair was white, too, and worn long. He was dressed in a yellow kaftan, edged with sable, and red boots.

Mechersky remembered him as a dignified man, slow moving, of unhurried speech. He was a different man now. He kept running about the room aimlessly. There was a flush on his cheeks, a frown on his brow. His hands were shaking.

"Of course, my sudden arrival must have unnerved him," thought Mechersky. "He knows that something has happened."

TWO young girls entered the room. They wore bright *sarafans* and bejeweled headdresses and they held silver salvers on which stood silver jugs of vodka and tiny goblets of beaten gold. Mechersky approached one of the girls, bowed low, poured vodka into a goblet, emptied it at a gulp and, in accordance with the old Russian custom, imprinted a kiss on the girl's rosy cheek, first wiping his mouth on a embroidered towel which hung on her arm for that very purpose. He then went through the ceremony with the other girl, after which the young daughters of the house immediately withdrew, closing the door after them.

"Now," cried Oduev, "to business!"

Mechersky explained at length what had transpired in Moscow.

"We had to arrest the bodyguard," he apologized. "Just a matter of form. One of your men."

"Yes, yes. Of course," cried Oduev. He rose and began to pace the room. "Of course," he went on, "no one must know of the Czar's death. No one. Ha-ha," he laughed suddenly, then checked himself.

He sat down again abruptly and listened, pulling at his beard, while Mechersky talked of his plans. Of Posharsky's partisans. He was on his way to Posharsky. Oduev's soldiers must start for Moscow at once.

"Of course. Certainly," the old boyarin repeated absently.

He appeared to be listening. There was indeed a noise in the yard outside, which was not surprising considering all those armed men moving about. The steps leading to the front door resounded suddenly with the tread of heavy feet. Oduev sprang from the bench.

He began to talk incoherently. All Mechersky understood was that his host wanted him to go somewhere. He had some business to attend to at once, Oduev explained nervously. Already he was pulling his bewildered guest to the door and out into the passage.

"Mishka," he cried to the old serf. "The guest. The honored guest. Escort him to his chamber."

Mechersky followed the serf. The front door was flung open at the mo-

ment and, turning at the sound, he caught a glimpse of several men crossing the threshold. They seemed agitated and in a hurry. Then Oduev's portly bulk blocked them from view as the old boyarin placed himself hurriedly between them and Mechersky.

Mechersky walked away after the serf, down the passage and along a gloomy corridor where the servant opened the door of a small bedchamber. He went in, and the serf closed the door softly upon him.

He did not know how long he sat there in the dim light of a small lamp which burned before an ikon. He thought of his host's strange manner, and frowned. Oduev wanted to get rid of Mechersky before those men could see him, or before Mechersky had time to see them. What secrets could Oduev have from him—one of the organizers of the movement against Dimitri the False?

He had been sitting as he had come, in his coat of bearskins and his unbuttoned helmet, his head in his hands, when the creak of the door, opening slowly, struck his ear. He jumped to his feet. A woman, *the* woman, stood on the threshold, a lighted candle in her hand. Again, as at his first glimpse of her in the dark passage, he had the impression as of a sun blinding him. Again he stood speechless, spellbound by the dynamic force of her beauty. Once more there flashed through his mind the disturbing conviction: "Hers is a tragic destiny."

She placed a finger to her lips and beckoned him to follow her. He obeyed. She led the way along the corridor, through a passage, a corridor again, and up a flight of steps, then through a dark hall toward a stairway, which they descended. They were on the first floor again. Through another gloomy hall she brought him into a small chamber where, placing the candle on a bench, she crossed the floor and pressed her head to the wall. Then she motioned Mechersky to take her place.

There was a crack the size of a coin in the wall. Mechersky looked through it. He saw a part of a room, which he at once recognized as the one where he had talked with Oduev. The woman had brought him in a roundabout way into this small chamber adjoining it. He could see two men talking. In the bright light of the blazing logs their heads and faces stood out in sharp relief. One was Oduev. The other . . .

Mechersky felt himself turning cold.

The other he recognized at once. The long black hair, cut round like a monk's, the weak features, the pallor, the half closed eyes which, nevertheless, seemed enormous; blue they were and burning with inward fire. The thin lips, the clean shaven chin. He had seen them all before, hundreds of times, in the crude likenesses the adherents of Dimitri the False carried about on their persons. And now the man himself stood there before him. Yes, it was Dimitri. The false prince. A runaway monk, as rumor had it. A madman, a fanatic. It was Dimitri the False himself!

Struck by a sudden thought, Mechersky turned from the tiny aperture and stared at the woman, who stared back, a strange smile on her lips, as if she were laughing at herself.

"You!" he whispered. "You!"

Slowly she nodded.

Her fingers on his sleeve, she drew him away from the wall.

"Yes, I am Marina," she whispered. "The woman promised to Dimitri for wife as soon as he is crowned Czar. Yes, I am Marina, who is to be sacrificed by her countrymen, the Poles, that they may rule Russia. The Polish army," she went on, "is near the village of Niden, fifty versts west of here. Two days ago Oduev came to Niden and brought me here. The army, it had been decided, would remain there, awaiting further news of the Czar's sickness. Should the Czar get well, it will return to Poland. For the Poles know that however dissatisfied the Russians might be with their Czar, no one would dare raise his hand against him while he is living. But

as soon as they know—"

"To think that I—" Mechersky interrupted her, his head in his hands—"I, of all men, should have told Oduev of the Czar's death."

"Now, of course, the Poles will start for Moscow at once," Marina said. "But do not judge yourself harshly, Boyarin. Oduev had been promised the governorship of Kremlin by the Poles, should they succeed in this venture. How could you know that Oduev, your best friend, would prove a traitor? Forget it, Boyarin. You still have time to correct your mistake—if you hurry. You must go to Posharsky."

"How did you know about Posharsky?"

"When you were talking with Oduev, I was here in this room and I heard every word you said. You see, your soldier-servant was locked up as soon as you entered this house. I saw it done. My curiosity aroused, I hastened here. Boyarin—" she clasped her hands "—you, you alone can save me from that man, that false prince."

"Then you do not want to become Czarina?" asked Mechersky, surprised.

"I would rather die than be the wife of Dimitri. Look." With a swift movement she opened the locket she wore about her neck on a chain. "Look."

Inside the locket was a miniature in oils of a handsome Pole, a Uhlan apparently. A plume was in his helmet and he wore a fur edged cape across one shoulder.

"He is waiting for me in Poland," whispered Marina. "Should Dimitri fail to become Czar, I am to return to him, the man I love.

"Come, Boyarin," she went on, grasping his arm. "You have not a second to spare. As soon as Dimitri is gone, Oduev will have you locked up, killed perhaps. You are losing time," she cried, as Mechersky stepped once more to the wall and put his eye to the crack.

The two men were still there. Oduev stood silent, his white head bowed low.

"I, Dimitri," the false prince was saying, his hand uplifted, his burning eyes raised. "I, Dimitri, the Czar of all the Russians!"

"Does it matter what they say?" Marina whispered, drawing Mechersky by force away from the wall. "Come, come. Hurry."

He followed her along the corridor. She brought him to a low door at the end of it.

"It opens into the orchard," she explained. "This is the back of the house. There is no one in the orchard. Wait for me here. Near the door."

Opening it, she let him pass, then closed it behind him.

He stood, looking at the rows of naked trees glistening in the moonlight. A ray, striking through the branches, showed a narrow path winding through the orchard. The door behind him opened softly. Marina was by his side.

"I've told my woman, my old nurse," she explained, "to bring a saddled horse here. This path will take you into a wood and through it on to the Kolomna highway. Ride swiftly, Boyarin," she added as the bent form of the old woman leading the mount by the bridle appeared from among the trees.

Mechersky sprang into the saddle.

"God bless you!" whispered Marina, her hand on his stirrup. "Goodby, Boyarin."

He proceeded along the path at a walk. Then he spurred and, at a canter, set off toward the wood which loomed before him. In a short while he entered it and galloped between the black trees along the moonlit path. Emerging into the highway, he turned to the right, in the direction of Kolomna.

Again he was traversing a desolate plain like that he had passed through with Gerasim earlier in the day. Again snow stretched endlessly as far as the eye could see, glittering in the moonlight. Black-blue skies overhead, and the brittle sound of the mount's hoofs as they struck the hardened snow. Except that, now, an occasional wood or copse stood closer to the road.

He missed Gerasim's presence. Would Marina succeed in getting him out and sending him on to Kolomna? He wondered about this as he galloped on.

SUDDENLY a group of horsemen emerged out of the wood he was just about to flash past. He had no time to turn his mount about, for the Cossacks (Mechersky recognized them as such by their shaggy hats) had filed across the road, blocking his way. One of them was beside him and grasping his bridle. He caught a glimpse of the man's dark face, mouth wide open, as the man shouted orders to his companions. Then everything grew black before his eyes. Some one had hit him on the head from behind. He lost consciousness.

When he came to, it was to find himself half sitting up by the roadside and staring into the faces of the Cossacks surrounding him. In silence they helped him to his feet. Their evident solicitude bewildered him. One of the men was holding Mechersky's money bag in one hand; in the other he held forth a large ring of bronze.

"How came you to be in possession of this ring, Boyarin?" the man demanded.

Mechersky explained. He saw no reason for secrecy.

The Cossacks looked at one another.

"Your tale sounds truthful enough," their spokesman said. "If it will please you," he went on respectfully, "we will escort you to your destination. The roads nowadays, with us fellows wandering about, are dangerous for travelers," he added with a laugh.

"I would regard it as a favor," Mechersky replied politely.

His horse was led up to him and held deferentially while he mounted. Then the Cossacks swung into saddle and the little cavalcade set off at a brisk trot along the highway.

"There's something I wish to ask," Mechersky said after a prolonged silence. He was deeply mystified by respect and deference in this wild band's manner toward him. "Why are you treating me thus?"

"Because," one of the men explained quietly, "the ring we found in your bag told us that you are a friend of one of our comrades. It is a custom among us to give some object, a sword perhaps, a kerchief, a ring, as in your case, to some outsider who has rendered us some service. Should the man fall into the hands of one of us fellows, he is recognized and treated as a Cossack's friend."

"But surely, you Cossacks are not all acquainted with each other," Mechersky cried. "There are too many of you. And then what if a man thus distinguished by one of you—well, if the trinket he has is not recognized—"

The Cossack laughed.

"Why," he cried, "the man himself would be the first to tell us about it. In your case, however, we happened to know the owner of the ring. We recognized the ring at once. We've seen him wear it. On his thumb."

"You know him? His name?" cried Mechersky eagerly.

The Cossacks shook their heads.

"That would not be fair, Boyarin. Had he wished you to know his name, he would have told it to you himself."

Dawn was breaking when the domes and crosses of the ancient citadel of Kolomna sprang into view—a cluster of glitter and color rising out of the desolate plain in the distance.

The Cossacks slackened their pace.

"Here we leave you, Boyarin."

"Wait," said Mechersky. "One of you take the ring to the man who gave it to me. Tell him I want to see him. Somewhere near the spot where the two of us first met. He'll know."

"And the time?"

Mechersky meditated. Already the snow was beginning to thaw. Patches of mud were appearing along the road. The nearby woods were alive with noise heralding the approaching Spring. The sound of rivulets gushing forth in the fields came to him, and he listened to it with apprehension.

"Time?" he repeated. "Depends on weather. As soon as the roads allow travel again. As to the exact hour—tell him to be on the lookout for me. No doubt he has plenty of time at his disposal. A lone wolf, he looked to me."

He handed the ring to a Cossack.

"Lone wolf," the man remarked. "He is, in a way. Goodby, Boyarin."

They whirled their mounts right about, and Mechersky watched them gallop off and out of sight. Then he rode on to Kolomna.

"NOT that I expect much help from that Cossack," he explained when talking the matters over with Posharsky some hours later. "But the fact that the mere discovery of the man's ring in my possession should have influenced the robber band as it did impressed me greatly. I realize now that a strong sense of solidarity exists among these wild people. All for one and one for all, that is how they strike me. If the Cossack I told you about should join us with, say, three hundred, five hundred men, even that would be a help."

"A great help," Posharsky, a tall gaunt man dressed in a plain blue kaftan, remarked, thoughtfully caressing his graying beard. "They are great fighters and their presence alone would raise the partisans' spirits. So far we have not a single Cossack in our ranks. As to what you call your blunder," he went on, laying a kindly hand on Mechersky's arm, "with Oduev, stop fretting about it. So far it has done us no harm."

"No harm!" cried Mechersky. "The Poles have started for Moscow. Probably they are in Kremlin already. And they would not have been had I not—"

"You mean, had not Oduev proved traitor. The Poles might have learned of the Czar's death through other channels. And in that case our reaching Moscow ahead of them would have been improbable, anyway. Look—" he nodded his gray head at the mud-filled square which stretched outside the window at which the two stood. "And the roads are even worse. We'll have to wait till the sun dries it all."

The sun indeed was shining brilliantly. Mechersky began to take heart as with Posharsky he watched the partisans who packed the streets and alleys about the governor's mansion where the old warrior had put up his headquarters.

Every tribe, nationality and class which made up the population of Russia had its representative in Posharsky's army. Serfs in rags; dignified freemen; fat bellied merchants; lean monks; haughty boyars; narrow shouldered artisans; muscular laborers—all were here. Tartars with their high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes. Flat nosed Kirgisy. Fair haired Choovashy, that Finnish tribe of fishermen one meets in villages along the Volga.

A poor, bedraggled, haggard-looking army, but there was something heroic about it nonetheless. One knew instinctively that here each man had come to fight for his ideal of truth and justice.

Posharsky's *drushina,* some five hundred men, had formed the nucleus of this strange army. The call to arms the old soldier had given voice to in Nijni Novgorod some seven months before had awakened the patriot in every Russian who had chanced to hear it. From all parts of the land they hurried with scythe, sickle, ax, spear, or knife, to answer that call. And during Posharsky's progress from Nijni Novgorod to Kolomna a handful of men had swelled to an army of thirty thousand crude but courageous soldiers. And more and more partisans were joining it every day.

"Yes, they are a splendid lot," Posharsky, his eyes sparkling proudly, agreed to Mechersky's remark of satisfaction. "By the way, where is your Gerasim?" he added, for he had never seen the two separated before.

Barely had he time to utter the question when Gerasim in person stumbled into the room. He was covered with mud from head to foot and could hardly stand for weariness.

"Gerasim," cried Mechersky. "I knew she would get you out somehow. Tell me," he went on eagerly. "What did she say to you? Did she say anything about me?"

Gerasim, lowering his weary body on to a bench, threw his master a keen glance.

"No, she didn't say anything," he said. "If it's the old woman you mean," he added innocently.

"Old woman?" repeated Mechersky. "Certainly not. I mean the young one. The Princess Marina. Did she say anything?"

Gerasim took several deep breaths before he answered:

"Not much. The old woman, the servant, she brought me out of the dungeon and into a stable. And there was the young woman holding a saddled horse. 'You go to Kolomna,' she said, the young one did. 'As fast as you can. Your master is gone there. Tell him Dimitri and the Poles are starting for Moscow at once.' That was yesterday." Gerasim added grimly, "Dimitri by now is nearing Kremlin."

The next day the spies sent out by Posharsky returned with news which more than confirmed Gerasim's words. Moscow had surrendered to Dimitri without a struggle.

Indeed, from all reports, the false prince and his Polish army had been received enthusiastically by the Kremlin garrison and the populace.

"And the boyars?" cried Posharsky. "What has been their fate do you think, Mechersky?"

"They are probably safe," Mechersky reassured him. "We had agreed that should Dimitri take Moscow the boyars would retire to their homes in Kremlin and pretend acquiescence to Dimitri's coronation which, due to numerous formalities that must be gone through preliminary to the event, can not be performed immediately. In reality, the boyars would be waiting for us. My advice is to start at once for Moscow. That is, tomorrow, if the roads permit."

AT SUNRISE the partisans' army left Kolomna. Like some thick and endless serpent it spread along the winding highway, dark save for the gleam of weapons which sparkled in the sunlight. It was a dry, warm day. Not a vestige of snow remained. The whole vast landscape had been transformed from that of dire Winter into one of brilliant Spring. The woods stood in a mist of budding verdure. The pastures were greening. Only the fields were black, but these sparkled with rivulets and puddles.

Two days the army marched without rest and at sunset of the third neared the spot where Mechersky had had his meeting with the Cossack.

"Perhaps the ring never reached him," the young boyarin thought as, riding by Posharsky's side at the head of the rapidly moving columns, he looked about the highway for the Cossack.

Out of the wood beyond some fields on the right a horseman appeared. Another. A third. And soon the fields were swarming with black coated riders.

"Why, it's an army!" cried Posharsky.

There was a sudden commotion in the partisans' ranks behind him. The men had espied the horsemen and had at first taken them for the Poles sent out from Kremlin to cut their advent into the capital. Then, recognizing the enormous sheepskin hats, fear seized them. They started to turn their mounts, in their agitation pressing the columns, which were advancing on their heels. They thought that the Cossacks had joined forces with the Poles and had come here to give them battle in the open fields.

"Halt!" shouted Posharsky, standing up in his stirrups. "Halt! Back to your places. Attention, fools! Can't you see they are sending us a messenger of peace?"

From among the Cossacks a rider had emerged. He started to cross the field at a gallop toward the partisans. He was bareheaded. He carried a tall spear on the tip of which he had set his shaggy

hat, a sure sign that the men he represented had no hostile intentions.

The partisans watched his approach in silence. Still at some distance from them, he cried loudly—

"Who among you is the Boyarin Mechersky? Boyarin, be pleased to follow me."

He whirled his mount about. Mechersky rode up to him and, followed by Gerasim, they rode at a brisk trot across the field toward the Cossacks.

Three of the latter meanwhile had separated themselves from the rest, who remained behind, a black immovable mass, and came riding at a leisurely pace to meet Mechersky.

"Look!" Gerasim cried suddenly. "If it isn't that robber we dug out of the snow, master?"

"What robber?" their bareheaded guide demanded sharply. "Whom are you talking about? That's Kirshin."

"Kirshin!" repeated Mechersky.

"Well met, Boyarin," cried Kirshin as the two parties met and halted, exchanging formal greetings. "You see how quickly I come to answer your summons. Since I got the ring, I and my braves, we've been camping in the woods waiting for you. Ah!" he went on, flashing an amused smile at Gerasim. "An old friend. How are you?"

Gerasim grinned.

"We are marching on Moscow against Dimitri the False," Mechersky explained. "Would you care—"

"Against Dimitri? But I thought you were a friend of Oduev."

"I had been, before he went over to the Poles. I am for the Duma of Boyars and whatever Czar that Duma and the people between them decide to elect."

"Oho!" Kirshin laughed, his dark, strong face a-glow with sunset. "You are ambitious, Boyarin. And I had thought you were with the Poles. But against Dimitri— You know, I am not a man to fight for a lost cause. For that's what it'd be. The Poles number a hundred thousand men more—"

"Still, we might beat them," Mechersky interrupted him quickly. "I can promise you a rich reward."

"Boyarin," Kirshin stopped him, his laughing eyes suddenly grave with emotion. "I am a robber. What riches I need I procure for myself. Do not talk of reward. Now I am a simple man and my speech is simple. Let me explain myself in my own way. It's like this. I hate Moscow and the Muscovites and the Czars, that's true; but I too am a Russian. I love Russia. Then there's the debt I owe you personally."

"Then you agree to join us?" cried Mechersky.

"Yes, if you will not interfere with my braves. That is, once they get inside the Kremlin, they must have a free hand. You must not expect them to be merciful with the Poles. Let the Cossacks do what they like, and we might win. But burden them with conditions—"

"There's some one in Kremlin, I—I had wished to be spared," murmured Mechersky.

"Cossacks are a rough lot and must have their fun," said Kirshin. "So if you agree to let them amuse themselves—"

Mechersky was silent.

It was the fate of a woman against that of a nation. For a moment, only a moment, he wavered.

"What?" Kirshin threw him a keen look. "Is it some woman, Boyarin?"

Mechersky averted his eyes.

"No matter what your conditions, I agree," he said quietly.

He turned his horse and with Kirshin by his side rode back to Posharsky.

The Cossacks, it was decided, would form the front ranks, and in that order the two armies set forth in the direction of Moscow.

In some fashion the Poles had already learned of their advance. They sent out their scarlet coated Uhlans, who, however, in the very act of making a bold onrush upon the enemy some five versts from the capital, suddenly turned right about and galloped off. They had not

expected the Cossacks. With this discovery, their return into Moscow threw the city into commotion. The Poles withdrew their forces into the Kremlin and barricaded themselves behind the massive walls.

It was a splendid sight that met the eyes of the besieging armies as, traversing the outskirts of the city abandoned by the panic stricken inhabitants, they approached the Kremlin Wall and surrounded it.

Black and ominous against the evening skies rose the turrets and bastions of the ancient citadel, aglow with innumerable torches, the windows of its palaces reflecting the red light of the flames. The thunder of cannon shook the earth under them, but the deafening sound was drowned in the shout of the attackers as, sword, scythe or knife in hand, they rushed upon the walls. Partisans formed living ladders which the Cossacks scaled with the swiftness and agility of cats. They reached the cornices and began to creep along them, looking like so many black flies to their comrades far below.

Scalding water and boiling oil were poured upon them from above. A rain of arrows blinded them. Flaming torches were flung into their faces. Many fell and died, but others replaced them; and there they were, again creeping along the cornices toward the turrets where the great cannon stood.

Soon some of the Cossacks were in an inner court on the other side of the wall. Yelling at the top of their voices, they began to cut left and right, pressing the Poles against the walls and making an end of them there in the most cruel manner. It seemed as if they had gone wild with the sight of so much blood—the blood of their enemies and that of their own comrades both arousing them to an incredible fury. It was their passion rather than their strength and strategy which won them that day one of the greatest battles in Russian history.

The Poles, however, had succeeded in opening one of the minor gates. In disorganized bands they started to flee through that exit. The partisans who were still outside the walls did not pursue them. Their attention was centered about the Czar's palace, the windows of which were already dark with the shadows of the Cossacks.

MECHERSKY, in command of the partisans near the gates through which the Poles were escaping, led his men into Kremlin through that entrance. He was anxious to get into the palace. Sword in hand, he pressed through the swarming Poles who, mad with fear, attacked him from all sides. Recklessly he fought his way, step by step. And all at once he was in the inner court. He wiped his sword and rushed up the palace steps.

Death and havoc were there—broken windows and doors; furniture strewn about the floor. Along the great stairway the bodies of the Poles, the Cossacks and the partisans lay in heaps. Blood was everywhere. And the gloomy halls and corridors were packed with shouting partisans and Cossacks who ran about with flaming torches in their hands, seeking victims who had so far escaped their wrath.

Mechersky rushed on toward the Czar's apartments. The first room he entered was empty. The doors of the next had been torn down, and there was light beyond the gaping aperture. A group of Cossacks ran out of the room and rushed past Mechersky who, as they disappeared, in a stride was on the threshold they had just crossed. A figure of a man suddenly appeared between him and the light beyond. It was Gerasim. He laid a trembling hand on his master's arm.

"Don't go there, Boyarin," he said. "There is no need to go there."

Mechersky knew already what it was he would see in that room. He pushed Gerasim aside.

It was a small praying chamber and, on a bearskin before the wall sparkling with bejeweled ikons, lay the body of a

woman. Gently Mechersky lifted her in his arms and laid her on a bench. Evidently she had been praying when the Cossacks rushed in. Her hands were still clasped as if in prayer.

"I hurried here," Gerasim explained. "I saw it done—but they were too many—"

Mechersky, pale but calm, motioned him to be silent.

"Keep guard over her," he said quietly. "I must find the boyars. Have you seen them?"

"Saw them hurrying into the throne chamber."

And thither Mechersky now ran.

On the threshold he paused. It was a singular sight that confronted him. There was no light save from the torches outside which, streaming through the tall windows, filled the throne chamber with a sort of reddish mist. The polished stone of the floor glowed rosily and along it a man was making his way slowly; crawling, creeping, on his feet now, and then down on his knees and hands, toward the huge mass which loomed at the end of the apartment—the throne of the Russian Czars.

The man had long black hair, cut round like a monk's. He was cut and bruised horribly about the face. The robe of gold cloth edged with sable—the robe in which he was to have been crowned on the morrow—was torn and hung about his naked shoulders in tatters. And as he crawled he left a trail of blood in his wake. Wounded and dying as he was, he was almost unrecognizable, but Mechersky knew him at once. It was Dimitri the False.

At the door, watching his painful progress from under their shaggy eyebrows, stood the boyars in a silent group, immovable. They wore the look of men who find a situation above their ability.

Dimitri, as Mechersky learned later, had been attacked by the Cossacks in his bedroom. Snatching his coronation robes and flinging them on hurriedly, he had fled here, into the throne chamber, thinking apparently that the Czar's raiment and the nearness of the throne would frighten the killers away. Too late he was to find out his mistake. The Cossacks took to their heels at the boyars' approach, but only because they had already done what they had come to do. The false prince knew his last hour had come. The boyars too were aware of the fact and so stood in embarrassed silence, watching him.

Dimitri was crawling again. Leaning on his elbow as he paused to rest, his large blue eyes, glaring with their strange fanatical fire, fell on Mechersky and remained there as if pleading for something. Mechersky ran up to him.

"The throne," Dimitri whispered. "I have no—strength—to reach it . . ."

Mechersky understood. He made a sign to the boyars, and between them they helped the dying man into the throne chair. It was his last wish.

"I," whispered Dimitri. "I, Dimitri, the Czar of all the Russians . . . "

And there, on the throne which he was to have ascended the very next day with all due pomp and ceremony, he died, surrounded by his enemies who held him up tenderly as he breathed his last.

The sun was shining as Mechersky flung open the windows of the throne chamber to learn the names of the candidates for the next Czar—which the crowds outside were shouting loudly. Kirshin entered and stood beside him.

"What name are they calling?" asked Mechersky. "For all this din, I can't make out—"

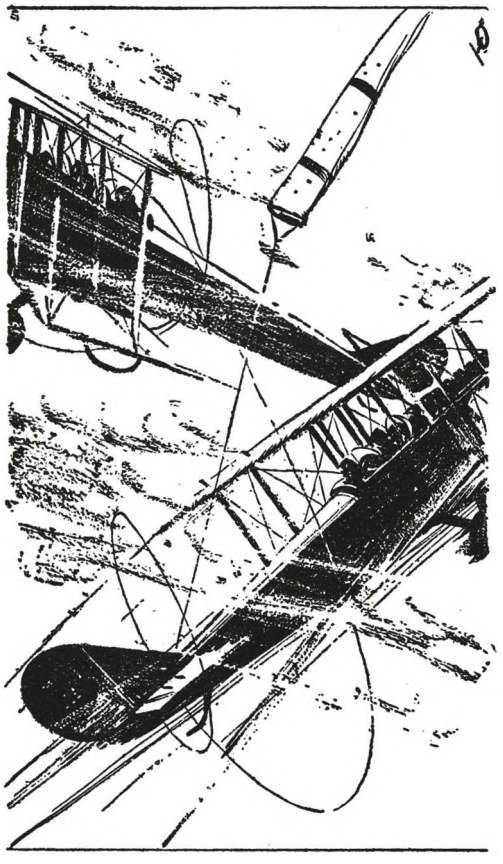
"There've been many candidates," Kirshin said. "But now only one remains. They've shouted the others down. The name of the man—I've never heard the name before. Romanov, it is. Mihail Romanov."

"New dynasty," Mechersky sighed with relief, and both glanced toward the throne, no black looming mass now, but all aglow and blazing with gold and jewels in the morning sun.

"Romanovs. New dynasty, yes. And who knows—" Kirshin smiled his cunning smile—"perhaps the last."

A Story of the Army Airmen

TOW TARGET



By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

FLYING Cadet Delano, trying to explain life to a group of his fellow cadets, was telling them that he, Delano, was doing very well for a young fellow without much education. And he added:

"I'm doing better than well, when you consider the fact that there's at least two strikes called on me every time I come to bat—before I come to bat, in fact. Yes, sir, I'm your old supercharged motor on a hard climb. Your militant, fighting man. Your old he-coon and erstwhile forwarder of the kaydet's just cause, now and forever, world without end. Amen!"

"Suck air, guy! Suck air!" Cadet Acrid Akerly advised, and the rest of the cadet group tried not to laugh.

Delano, they knew, was orating only for Acrid's benefit and undoing. Acrid was one boy who could not see Delano. As for the rest of his mates, the gang fell hard for the wild cadet. Delano was the breath of cool, refreshing air in their hot Florida existence.

Web Field and its killing Summer heat might have knocked them cuckoo were it not for the doings of Cadet Delano. Birds such as Delano are the safety valves. When they blow off, the pressure seems to leave the whole outfit. And Cadet Delano was always on the blow, always cutting himself in for something wild and woolly, seemingly without thought or effort on his part. Trouble seemed to come looking for him, only to dally for awhile, brush Delano lightly, then pass on. But in passing, Old Man Trouble always managed to ricochet off Delano and pop the commanding officer, Major Dumb Dodo Dodson, and the major's able adjutant, Captain High Pockets Merritt. It was the trouble that Delano made for these two that made life worthwhile for the rest of Web Field.

The major and his hard bit adjutant were none too popular, not only with the

cadets and enlisted men but with their fellow officers. This, however, did not go for Cadet Acrid Akerly. But, as Delano often told the fellow cadets, Acrid was understudying Adjutant High Pockets Merritt; and, therefore, Acrid could not be expected to see the fun in fun.

"And Lord love us!" Delano would yell. "There's loads of fun even in the worst of commanding officers and adjutants, if you know how to bring the fun out."

Delano went to extremes in bringing out that fun. At times comedy and tragedy trooped hand in mitt.

At the time of orating Delano and the group of cadets were in the shower room, rear center, of the long cadets' barracks. It was shortly after noon. The hot Florida sun made of that shower room the finest place on earth. There was a pretty stiff poker game under way in the dry corner of the large room. And many of the wild cadets were wearing only what the well dressed gentleman usually wears in a stag shower. Not much.

The poker game was being played, Army style, on the floor. It had been under way since early morning, so most of the cadets were as flat as the floor upon which they played. Poker and all games of chance were under the ban at Web just at that time. Now and then, on all Army fields, such an order goes up, and the law comes down, and there's no more gambling—out in the open—for two or three days. However, as a rule, Major Dodo Dodson and High Pockets made the rule stick; and there was very little gambling at Web, except in the major's quarters when Mayor Button, of Arcadia, and some other outsiders came in to spend an evening with the major and his adjutant.

All of which has little or nothing to do with this story, except to show that the major and his adjutant were out to protect the best interests of the men over whom they held sway. Yep, they'd help 'em just as long as they could make the thing hurt.

Now and then, as that poker game moved onward into Web Field history, Cadet Delano sang snappy snatches of that little ditty which has to do with the Argentine and the Greek. But Delano went light on the Greek, only to come down hard on the Argentine and add the Colombian, the Ecuadorian, the Peruvian, the Brazilian, the Chilean, the Paraguayan and the Uruguayan. All those boys from South America were the real reasons why all these beshowered boys of North America were put in a position where they must needs pass their time in sinful poker and cooling water.

It's the truth: Those cousins from the South had put the wild ones from the North out of work. It was a very altruistic move on Uncle Sam's part, that thing of asking the South American countries to send a number of their officers up to enjoy our flying course. Altruistic and very silly, for at no time did our training fields have equipment sufficient to keep our own cadets in the air. But Uncle Sam invited the Southern cousins, and said cousins came in numbers. Then the guests were put to work flying. And the cadets, midway of their courses, were told to stand by, smile and be ready to take up where they quit, providing that the cousins left any equipment fit to fly.

She was one tough war on the natives. For Delano and some of the others it was hard to take; but Acrid Akerly explained that it was merely inter-country courtesy.

THERE was a loud singing coming down through the barracks. The loud singer was coming from the direction of the orderly room; and the poker game was quickly converted into a sedate game of contract bridge—four long faced players plus a gang of kibitzers.

The oncoming singer was Lieutenant Mosher, officer in charge of cadets. Mosher was the kind of man who, if he were to be changed into a snake, would

have chosen to be a rattler. That is, he was a sportsman and believed in giving a warning. So, as always, he now rattled as he came; and his singing was awful.

Rattling even louder, Lieutenant Mosher hesitated outside the washroom door and, standing there, he yelled a meaningless order to a room orderly at the far end of the barracks. Then, knowing that his victims had been warned, Lieutenant Mosher busted into the washroom.

Somebody, fully military, yelled attention! And Mosher, absolutely anti-military in his action, gave the command the Bronx cheer, adding:

"As you were! And carry on with your bridge. If there is anything I like to see it is a gathering of full chested, red blooded Yanks busy with their bridge. A worthy game. And if I can put a requisition through supply, I'm going to draw a real nice bolt of pink crape and bedeck you boys for our Spring dance. Now in my day the rough soldiers played at charades and kissing games. That's what won the war. But we're no longer at war.

"However, soldiers," Lieutenant Mosher carried on, with a change of subject, "I notice that there's a palmetto fire off to the south. Looks to me as though they'd be turning out the troops to fight said fire before many hours have passed. Also, there's a mob of those all-bone Florida cattle working in along the west fence. Somebody will be shagging them off the flying field before the day's over. It's hellishly hot out on that flying field too. Oh, well, I must be pushing along. I merely mention these things so's you good cadets will be all set to play your part. Yes, sir, fighting fire is hot work on a day like this, and plenty dirty too. And as for shagging thin Florida cattle off a thin Florida range, well, there just isn't any percentage in the thing."

Mosher's wild wards forthwith lost all, or nearly all, interest in the poker game. They were coming to their feet and talking the thing over when Corporal Fox came in and mooched a smoke. Corporal Fox was the flying office clerk. He was also a sort of combination barometer and weather vane. If he'd talk, and he usually would for cigs, Fox could tell the cadets what the immediate future held for cadets. That is, he could spill the flying office dope before said dope reached the vulgar status of common knowledge.

Corporal Fox now took a long drag of the borrowed cig, remarked that he liked a certain other brand much better, and then said—

"There's a swell chance for one of you cuckoo kaydets to go to work for the dolled up gents from South America."

"How come? What do you mean work?" Delano bit.

"The tow target ship needs a pilot," Corporal Fox made known. "Pop Williams got knocked down by appendicitis this afternoon. They just flew him in from the range. Major Feest should be taking the old boy apart by now. So hop to it if you-all want that job. Don't rush. There's almost an hour before the tow target is due over the range for the three o'clock period."

Sergeant Pop Williams, who had been knocked down by appendicitis, was one of the few enlisted pilots at Web Field. Pop had been flying the tow target ever since there was a tow target at Web. The tow target ship is the plane that tows a cloth target at the far end of a long line. The students, eagerly handling real machine guns with real slugs, sneak up on that towed target and try to prove that they are good marksmen. Piloting the tow target is a job that calls for a conservative pilot. Pop Williams was that, and that's why he seemed to have a life job of the thing. Never had Pop's ship or Pop's rear seat man been hit. Some record.

Fox, still standing there in the shower room, made a slow switch and began to pick his left ear, the while waiting to see how the offer of a job affected the listening cadets. But he knew how they'd strike at that fly. Hell's bells, brother,

there wasn't a cadet on Web who didn't want to fly that tow target. What fun, if handled rightly, with said fun as an objective! Each and every one of those cadets stretched an ear and leaned forward. Delano was the first to speak, and he didn't seem to be for it at all.

"Fox," Delano growled, "you must have a dash of hangman in you. Fly the target ship! What a hell of a crust Old Man Fox's dashing son seems to have. Ask a Yank cadet to fly the tow target for a gang of wild shooting outsiders! That's one swell idea. Why, look here, gang. Do you men know that Pop Williams is the only tow target pilot that hasn't, at one time or another, got his tail riddled with slugs? Know what happened to Paul Hass, up at Kelly? He got it, and got it cold.

"You remember that Lieutenant Ott got it at Chanute Field, eh? And at Issoudun, during the war, they lost three men doing the same work. Tell you what—the tow target is one thing that has no place on a training field. Fly the tow target? If I thought that any one of my mates was flying that job I'd—I'd—well, I'd be all broken up. No foolin'—I couldn't sleep.

"Say, Fox, you and your damned bright ideas get t'hell out of here. You're bad luck to cadets. You're a curse, guy."

"It was merely a passing remark," Corporal Fox said. "Give me another cig, Delano, and I'll be moseying along. Guess this field can carry on without me for a few hours. I'm going to quarters and sneak up on a bit of misplaced slumber. See you later."

"Listen, gang," Delano then said, with Fox out of the way, "let's us boys dribble out of this washroom. With that fire coming up from the south, and those cattle moving in from the west, it's best that we boys go across to the wing loft and resume our little game of poker. Some of you birds are in me for plenty jack."

A few of the cadets went out the side door, innocently intending to follow Delano's good advice and retreat to the wing loft down in No. 12 hangar. It was the last hangar on the line, and out of use for flying purposes. Many long games had been safely played therein. Others of the group went out through the other doors.

Delano and a few others who had been operating almost entirely without clothes went to their bunks, there to array themselves in attire that would permit their passage through the camp streets. Delano, however, was hurrying, and dressing fully military. At the same time, Delano kept an eye on his mates, better to note if any of them were dressing in like manner. Cadet Acrid Akerly was; and Delano told himself that you'd expect just such deceit from Acrid.

Acrid, Delano decided, was going down to flying office for that tow target job. So was Delano. All that killing stuff that Delano had recited was bunk. No tow target pilots had been killed at Kelly, Chanute, or overseas at Issoudun. Anyway, to work with the speed of Delano and Acrid, we'll get this story right out into the company street and headed for flying office.

In no time at all, each in his stride and buttoning his blouse, Delano and Acrid were making tracks. One had quit the barracks by one door, the other by another. But Acrid was all of fifty yards nearer victory than Delano. Still, Delano was Delano. While Acrid made his military advance on the flying office via the main entrance, Delano popped his head over the sill of one of flying office's windows, saying to the officer in charge of flying—

"Pardon me, Lieutenant, but can I come in?"

THE officer in charge of flying, Lieutenant Cushman, was alone. He said:

"Climb over, Delano. What's on your mind?"

"Corporal Fox told me to report," Delano lied. "You want me to fly the tow target, I understand."

"He did, eh?" Cushman mused. He glanced at his watch. "Well, you'd best be getting out to the hangar. You're due over the range in twenty minutes. Use your head, Delano."

Just then a knock came on the door. Cushman told the knocker to break it down and come in. Delano, on his way out, sort of stepped aside to allow the pop-eyed Acrid a chance to pass in.

"What can I do for you, Cadet?" Cushman asked.

"Why," Acrid stalled. "Well, sir, Corporal Fox told us that the tow target job was open, and I wanted to apply for it."

"Too late," Cushman told Acrid. "Delano just drew the plum. But I'll tell you what you can do, Cadet. You can fly the messenger ship for a few days. Lieutenant Pope is going to be away from the post for two or three days. You can start right now. You and Delano hop along."

Quitting the building, Delano told Acrid that the latter's job, flying the messenger ship, was a good assignment. Safe, Delano called it. Slow and easy, but perfectly safe. Acrid, trying to quit Delano's walking company, told Delano where Delano could go. Acrid was a bit sore. Delano had sure hung one on him. However, flying the messenger bus was a job. It was a flying job, at that. And flying is flying, no matter what kind of flying a cadet might be doing.

The messenger ship was a plane used as a sort of flying office and headquarters dispatch runner. It worked between the different flying stages, scattered over a dozen or more miles of country surrounding Web Field. Also, twice a day, early in the morning and again at noon, the messenger ship flew up to Arcadia for the post mail. And that in itself was worthwhile. Oh, Acrid wasn't so badly off, after all. He'd have a chance to cut himself in for some fun; and he told Delano so.

"I'll help you, Acrid," Delano promised. "If you run out my way, out over the machine gun range, I'll be looking for your white bus. We'll go round and round, eh? Have some fun. I'll take you on for a bit of combat, maybe. See you later, slow boy."

"Aw, nuts, big head," Acrid shot back. "Hope t'hell the South Americans hang it on you."

The remainder of that hot afternoon produced nothing new or startling in the daily doings of Web Field. Delano flew a long period of tow target work for the Southern cousins. Acrid hopped his all-white messenger plane here and there. Some of the enlisted men and cadets were sent out to watch the palmetto fire; which, after all, behaved very well and kept away from the flying field and long line of hangars.

As for the lazy, wild eyed, all-bone Florida cattle, they required some shagging before the planes could make their landings at the end of the last flying period. Delano ran some of those cattle ragged as he came down for his last landing. But that was against field rules, for more than a few Web Field ships had been washed out doing the same thing.

During the hot night the palmetto fire, still keeping out of camp, reddened the southern sky. A changing wind was fanning the flames, sending the spreading fire to the east of Web. Some of the Arcadia folks drove out during the evening, thinking that Web might be losing a hangar or two. And Web's fire guard watched all night.

Delano and Acrid were the only cadets booked for any flying on the following morning. At early mess Delano regaled the fellow cadets with the glory of tow target flying, assuring them that it was through Major Dodo Dodson's expressed desire that he, Delano, was filling the dangerous job. Naw! He hadn't begged for the job!

"The major told High Pockets to pick the steadiest eye and the firmest flying hand in the cadet barracks," Delano went on to explain, "so High Pockets said to the major, 'Cadet Booth Delano is your man, sir.' And last night, look-

ing me up in person, High Pockets brought me a handful of the major's best cigars, with the major's compliments. Flattering is what I call it. Tell you what, the big boys are always pampering me. Now you take Acrid—he couldn't stand up under such swell treatment. It'd go to his head. But, anyway, Acrid sure drew himself a swell job. Safe too. Tell you what, men, a pilot on the messenger ship should be able to win the aviator's long white beard. Just the job for old Acrid, eh?"

Cadet Acrid Akerly then said some things that are very soldierly but entirely unprintable. He was two tables removed from Delano, but Delano, when he orated, talked to the whole mess. And it made a mess of Acrid's self-control. So, after saying all those unprintable things, Acrid wound up with:

"One of these days, Delano, I'll drive you out of the sky! I'll make you suck air, wise guy!"

"That's a threat and a promise, Acrid." Delano laughed.

High Pockets Merritt was on the deadline when Delano and Acrid came out to climb aboard their ships. High Pockets had a word for Acrid.

"Are you flying the messenger ship to town for the mail?" he asked.

Acrid Akerly saluted and answered that he was. And was there anything he could do for the adjutant? There was.

"Major Dodson just had a telephone call from Mayor Button," High Pockets told Acrid. "The mayor wishes to ride back to the field with the mail plane, so you pick him up at Arcadia. Then, later, you'll fly the mayor out over the burning palmetto. Mayor Button owns some of the cattle and land off in that direction. He wishes to survey the fire."

With that message delivered, High Pockets rushed over to the tow target ship wherein Delano was making ready for the day's work. Already the macs were getting set to start the motor. All along the line, the dolled-up South Americans were climbing into ships.

"Delano," High Pockets demanded, "what are you doing in this tow target ship? Who said you could fly it? What? Speak up!"

"I was assigned to it yesterday afternoon, sir," answered the wild Delano, with a strange feeling around his brave Yank heart.

For a minute it looked as if High Pockets was going to tear down Delano's meat house. Then, on second thought, maybe High Pockets decided that it was all right with him if the whole Army was shooting at Delano's tail. Perhaps, after all, this was the solution to all Web Field troubles. Let Delano fly the tow ship.

"All right," Captain High Pockets finally said. "I just wanted to know, you know. Hop to it, and get over to the range."

DELANO'S rear seat man, Corporal King, climbed overside, strapped into his belt and yelled that they were set. It was King who really handled the tow target. His job it was to pay out the long cable, note the hits, then reel her in at the end of the runs. The tow ship flew red flags. A red streamer at either wing tip, one on the landing gear, and a fourth on the rudder. All other ships, seeing those red streamers, were supposed to get out of the immediate sky. In that way they were sure to keep themselves safe from flying slugs.

Ten minutes after High Pockets gave the word Delano set the tow ship down on the machine gun range and asked for final instructions before starting the day's work. There were ten South American pilots on hand, their ships grounded. At 9:15 Delano and King took the air again. They flew far into the east, away from Web, then turned back toward the range; and every half mile or so, on the return trip, one of the boys from the South would dive Delano's trailing target, open his gun, do his best or worst, and carry on.

When Delano came to the place where the smoke from the palmetto was thickest he managed to lose a South Ameri-

can who'd been waiting. He and Corporal King took time out to laugh at that; and for a few minutes, forgetting his direct east-to-west course, the wild cadet stopped to verage and remain within the acrid smoke. After that, on each trip east or west, Delano hesitated to have fun in the smoke.

The morning wore along. Ten o'clock came. There were some mechanical troubles, motors and gun jams, that delayed certain of the guests from getting their turn at the target. Time and again the tow ship was detailed to fly that run; and Delano was getting in the good old flying hours—gold in the coffers of all airmen.

Back at Web Field Cadet Acrid Akerly had returned from Arcadia with the mail and Mayor Button. Major Dodson and High Pockets were on hand to greet the mayor of Arcadia. Then, while Acrid held his all-white messenger plane in readiness, the three big shots of Web and Arcadia went down to the major's quarters for whatever it is that big shots go to one another's quarters. And it was after ten o'clock before they returned to the deadline, all three walking on air. Some of the mechanics on the line said that High Pockets was skipping.

"All right, Cadet," Major Dumb Dodo Dodson said. "You can now fly the mayor out over that fire. And be careful, Cadet. Don't be like that Delano."

The mayor, aided and abetted by several macs, clambered into Acrid's rear seat. Meanwhile, Dumb Dodo and High Pockets had their heads together; and an idea was born. Just the birth of another notion.

"Mr. Mayor," the major then yelled, above the idled purr of the all-white ship's motor, "we've decided that Captain Merritt should do the piloting. Nothing's too good for the mayor of Arcadia."

"Let me have that front seat, Cadet," High Pockets said to Acrid Akerly. "You stand by till we get back, then take over your ship again. Is your safety belt O.K, Mr. Mayor? Good!"

Major Dumb Dodo Dodson, feeling unusually mellow, chatted with Cadet Akerly as they stood there at the deadline and watched the messenger plane take the air and wing away to the east of the field, where the smoke of the fire drifted high in the sky.

Half a dozen miles beyond that smoke Cadet Delano was just turning his ship and getting set for another westward flight across the range. And by then the worst of the smoke was blanketing the machine gun range. Maybe Delano would lose another gunner in the cloud of smoke. At any rate he was on the alert. And, being on the alert, Cadet Delano spotted Acrid Akerly's all-white messenger ship coming across the range from the hangars. The all-white craft wasn't very high. Fact is, it was just about at the tow target ship's own elevation—fifteen hundred feet.

Delano sat up and took notice. Here was Acrid all set to keep his promise and make good his threat. Otherwise, the all-white ship—or any other ship—would not be crossing the range while so many red flags were flying. And—thought Delano—Acrid was playing wise guy and getting set to jump Delano from above and behind the cloud of smoke. Not this time, Acrid!

Delano, keeping his ship well behind the screen of smoke, slapped full gun to his motor and won some more altitude. He was at two thousand when his ship was only half a mile east of the smoke. And the messenger ship, showing itself now and then, was still down at fifteen hundred. Delano decided to give Acrid the surprise of his young life by diving on the all-white ship while it was in the smoke.

"Get set for some fun, Corporal!" Delano throttled his power to yell.

At the same time he pointed. King looked ahead and saw the messenger. Then he waved Delano an O.K. Wham! Delano had slapped full power to his bus, lowered its nose, and they were in the long dive. The tow ship, behind full

power, began to pick up plenty of momentum. Struts and wires whistled their wild wail; and the old red-flagged crate shook and shimmied under the punishment. Shook and shimmied! Well, there should be a little of that stuff in a hard dive, but it struck Delano that there was a bit too much of the abuse going on here. He turned to glance at Corporal King. King had the same idea.

Both tumbled at the same time—they'd forgotten to reel in the tow target! And back there—high above the ship—the silk cone of the tow target was whipping itself to pieces. That wouldn't do! The thing, with its thin, strong tow cable, might snap the tail off the ship before the thin, twelve-hundred-pound-breaking-strength cable would snap. Fact is, the thin wire cable would never snap. Something had to be done. That hard dive had to be ended in a hurry.

But Delano was already in the upper part of the smoke cloud. And the all-white messenger plane was somewhere out front. So Delano, with full throttle still on his motor, pulled back the stick and zoomed. And as the nose of his ship came up, Delano saw the all-white ship's bow coming abeam of him, and not a hundred feet to spare.

In that same split second of smoke clogged chaos, High Pockets saw the tow ship. And High Pockets made the wrong guess; for, instead of darting beneath Delano, he too zoomed. The all-white ship was running only at cruising speed. High Pockets' zoom was a very feeble, underpowered effort. It merely served to lift the craft's nose high into a stall. And while the all-white messenger hung there in its powerless, controlless stall, Delano's trailing, whipping tow cable came along and lashed itself a few turns around High Pockets' propeller shaft, in between the propeller and the radiator.

By then Delano's ship was on the top of its zoom. Corporal King saw what was happening. He had a few yards of cable on his winch's winding drum. He tripped the unwinding pawl, put a foot on the run-off brake and yelled to Delano. Delano's motor, at the top of the zoom, was now throttled low, and the wild one was getting set to let the ship's nose fall through its whip—that is, out of control.

"The cable!" Corporal King yelled. "It's fouled the other ship's prop. Stall her down! Stall her down!"

Cadet Delano stalled her down, cutting his motor to its lowest idling. Back slid the tow target ship on its tail. 1500 feet showed on the altimeter. Then 1400, 1300, 1200, 1100, and 1000 elevation. All the while, with its motor dead, the messenger ship was falling through a whip too. But Corporal King payed out that cable. Then the cable tightened up at its full length. Delano felt the jar and jerk when that happened; and his altimeter showed 800 feet. By then the nose of Delano's ship had fallen through the full distance of whip, and the under surfaces had hit the air flat. Delano had to ease a bit of power to his craft and redress his fall. He looked below, down to the messenger, through the smoke, and in that flashing second of earthly hell he saw the lower ship do a queer, sickening half turn and free itself from the cable.

Full throttle went back on Delano's ship. Down went his nose, for speed, then up she came; and he had redressed his flight—with an altimeter reading slightly lower than 200 feet.

Looking back, Delano discovered that the smoke had taken the other ship. Tough on Acrid! It was up to Delano to do what he could in the line of rescue work. But for the all-white ship the thing seemed hopeless. It had been too near the ground for recovery.

After a few minutes' sashaying back and forth through the smoke, close to the ground, Delano and King found the ship. It was upside down in a lagoon, with just the landing gear and tailskid above water. And as they circled and watched they saw two men come from under the wreck, helping each other.

That was that, and the pair had had a lucky break. Mighty lucky!

Delano laughed, turned to King and cheered the brave. Then, so as not to be seen, Delano took his ship away from there, back into the thick of the smoke. In a few minutes he put her down and rolled to a stop back on the range where the officer in charge, Captain Traveler, was waiting for him.

"Did something happen back there, Delano?" the captain asked.

"I'll say it did, Captain," Delano answered. "The messenger ship came busting through the smoke and almost smacked me down. And as I pulled up into a zoom my tow cable fouled their prop. They're in a lagoon, upside down. But we took a look at them, and they're jake."

"Serves that damned Akerly right!" Captain Traveler yelled. "Serves him right! Busting in across a machine gun range, and with all these red flags flying. Forget it, Delano. You were on your run; and I'll go all the way for you if anything's said. All right! Get back into the air. I want to give three more of these ships a crack at the target."

"But the target's gone," Delano told the captain.

"I've got another one back at the hangar," King told them.

"That's jake," Captain Traveler decided. "Hop back and get it, Delano." He studied his watch. "And make it fast. I'm hopping a De Haviland to Miami, Delano. Were you ever to Miami, Delano?"

Delano said that he hadn't been to Miami in a long time.

"Well, get going now, and you can hop over there with me. Maybe we'll make a night of it. Maybe a couple of nights. And when you get back to the field, report the crack-up to flying office and tell Lieutenant Cushman to have the De Haviland on the line. We'll hop right out and have a bite to eat in Miami."

"Yep, you will, Captain," Delano said; and added, "but the Old Man or High Pockets will never give me permission to go along with you to Miami."

"Leave that to me," Captain Traveler told Delano. "Don't you say a word. I'll talk it over with Lieutenant Mosher. He's in on the stuff we're going to get at Miami."

FIVE minutes later Delano set the tow ship down on Web. He landed in front of Hangar 3, where Corporal King said the target was.

"I'll have the new one tied on within five minutes," King said as he slid from the ship and ran toward the hangar.

"That's swell; make it fast," Delano agreed. "I'll trot over to flying office and make a quick report."

But Delano, on his way, spotted Lieutenant Cushman in front of headquarters hangar—No. 6—three buildings beyond where his ship had been left on the deadline. Cushman was talking with Major Dodson. As Delano drew closer you could have floored him with a single swat from a small sized question mark. Who was standing there with the major and Cushman but Acrid! It stopped Delano.

"Sir," Cadet Delano said to the major, "Cadet Delano wishes to report an accident out on the machine gun range. The tow target plane met the messenger ship in the smoke that is blowing across the range, and the messenger ship is now in a lagoon, upside down, sir. There are two men with the wreck. Neither, I believe, was hurt."

Major Dumb Dodo Dodson's eyes bulged from their sockets. Then he began to tear his hair and yell:

"You, Delano! What are you doing with the tow ship! You wrecker, Delano! That was Mayor Button and Captain Merritt in that ship. And you knew it too, Delano. This time you'll get a court. Mark my words, a court!"

"But, sir," Cadet Delano said, "the ship had no right over the range. Captain Traveler exonerates me, sir."

"Traveler!" wailed the major. "Exonerates be damned! I'll—I'll—say,

Delano, I'll see you later.

"Cadet," Dumb Dodo now said to Acrid, "you climb aboard that ship of Delano's and fly me out to the lagoon. And you, Mister Cushman, see that the field service trucks start for the wreck. Better send the ambulance too. Come, Cadet. Hurry."

"But the tow target ship, sir," Delano said, "is due back at the machine gun range. Captain Traveler—"

"Be damned to Traveler! Delano—d'y'hear me?—I'll take your ship and see you later."

Corporal King was all set to go. He had the new target attached to the cable's end, pulled up into the long tin cone under the ship's belly. Delano said:

"We don't hop, Corporal. The major and Cadet Akerly are taking our ship."

By then Acrid had swung up into the front seat; and Major Dumb Dodo Dodson was clambering laboriously into the rear pit. And when the major eased his fat self down into that seat there wasn't much room left, not even for argument.

"Better pull the red flags off, Delano," King suggested.

Delano agreed that it was a good idea. He stepped nearer to the ship, holding up a hand for Acrid to pull up for a jiffy; for Acrid was already easing power to his ship.

"Sir," Delano called loudly, starting to explain to the major, "I think—"

"Think!" Major Dumb Dodo Dodson wailed above the snap and purr of the engine. "Delano, you never had a thought in your useless life! Go ahead, Cadet. Take her off! D'y'hear! Take—"

But the C.O's yelling was killed by the roar of power as Acrid hit her on the tail, full gun, and shot out across the field.

While they stood there watching their ship take the air, a cadet taxied in to the deadline with another plane. Delano met him.

"Say, Red," he said, "I'd like to use this bus. Don't kill your engine. Hop in, Corporal, and we'll run out to the range and tell the captain that there'll be no more work this period."

Delano and Corporal King, making a quick take-off, weren't far behind Acrid and the C.O. when the tow ship neared the western edge of the machine gun range. Acrid, forgetting to remember that he was entering dangerous air, headed out over the range, with the smoke and the lagoon far ahead.

Off to the north of the range, strung out over a couple of miles, Delano spotted three of the machine gun ships. They were flying figure 8's, just killing time, and Delano knew that those South Americans had been sent up by Captain Traveler to await the coming of the red flagged tow ship. By having them in the air in that way much time would be saved; and, hence, Captain Traveler and Delano would be on their way to Miami in jig time.

Now, as before mentioned, the tow target's cable was carried on a small winch in the rear pit. The tow target was a silk cone, some fifteen feet long. When that length of air-catching cone went aft it was likely to put some tug on the cable. And to prevent its tugging the whole tail off the ship the winch's winding drum was checked by a foot brake. By means of that brake, worked by his left foot, King could play out the long line without putting any strain on the ship. Likewise, the pawl that prevented the drum from unwinding at the wrong time was controlled by a pedal, right foot. There was no guard on the pawl's kick pedal, for no one but Corporal King ever handled the target.

Major Dumb Dodo Dodson's two-fifty pounds of swelled-up manhood filled that rear pit to the spilling point. A big man in a small pit will always do more or less squirming, kicking, trouser pulling and shoe shuffling. Well, to make short shrift of what happened, Major Dumb Dodo kicked the pawl pedal; and the target snapped back into the air, out of the ship's belly cone. Acrid felt the jar and jerk on his controls. He

guessed what had happened. He turned and pointed. The C.O. turned, and saw. Then, still shuffling, his left foot fell upon the brake pedal; and the cable stopped running. Only about a hundred feet of cable had gone aft; but the tow target's cone was in full bloom.

And they were over the range by then. And Delano saw what had happened. Also, Delano saw the three South Americans stop their cutting of figure 8's and start for the target. That was bad! It was bad because Latin and South American marksmanship is notoriously poor.

The first of the three machine gunners made his try for the short target when Acrid was just about a mile from the pile of smoke clouds. Delano watched Acrid and Major Dumb Dodo look aft with the greatest surprise. Then Major Dumb Dodo, accomplishing the seemingly impossible, managed to duck his head and shoulders down into that crowded pit, taking quick refuge, in his panic, behind a cowling that couldn't have turned BB shot. And the second machine gun ship was bearing down on them.

That second South American was lethal, close to tragic. Delano and the men on the range saw the red flag bounce off the tow ship's rudder when the machine gunner opened his gun.

Acrid had his ship close to the screen of smoke by then. Maybe it would prove his salvation, and Major Dumb Dodo's too. But the third and last machine gunner wanted to get his crack at the good old target. So he actually followed on into the smoke, still shooting.

Delano and the men on the range, including Captain Traveler, missed the rest of that show. But Delano made a quick landing, picked up the captain, as King stepped down, and took the air again. Once more Delano flew low and searched the ground under the smoke. Once more, after about five minutes' work, Delano located a wreck. Acrid had managed to set his plane down in a clump of palmetto. His rudder, one elevator, half the stabilizer and an aileron had been shot away. And Major Dumb Dodo Dodson was out there on the barren, among the palmettos, doing a war dance, shaking his fist at the sky, and—the men in the air knew—cussing.

While Delano circled, Captain Traveler jotted a note. Then Delano tightened his circling into a low, tight verage and the note was dropped. The note said that there was no place a plane could land, safely, within a mile of that spot. But the wreck would be reported at flying office. Then the captain yelled, "Home, James"; and Delano pointed the ship's nose at Web.

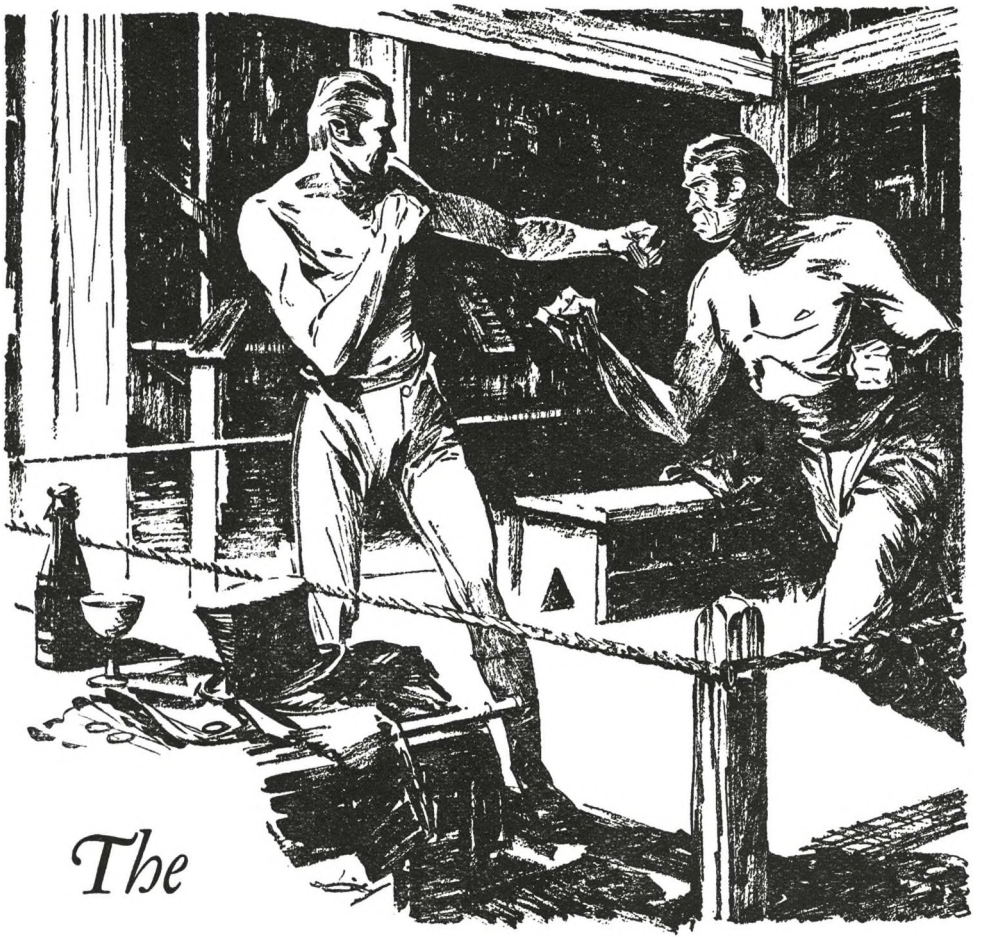
Out on the deadline Lieutenants Cushman and Mosher were talking the thing over with a group of fellow officers and South American guests. Captain Traveler told them that it was an overland job, and to take their time and do the thing right. Cushman pointed to a De Haviland that waited on the line. Lieutenant Mosher, at Captain Traveler's beck, walked toward the De Haviland with the captain and Cadet Delano.

"Jack, old top," the captain said to Mosher, "I'd like to have Cadet Delano along with me on this Miami hop. Too bad the C.O. and Captain Merritt are absent from the post, but maybe you can give Delano permission to accompany me. What?"

"And why not?" was Mosher's reply. "Delano has worked long and well, for almost a whole day, and he has a vacation coming. Take him along."

Ten minutes later, looking neither to right nor left—nor downward—a pair of De Haviland gents passed over a section of wet Florida wherein were two wrecked ships. Those wrecked ships were within half a mile of each other. And while they didn't look down, in a manner that could be noticed by the four men with the two wrecks, the De Haviland men did sneak a glance. All four wrecked men were standing by their ships. Good men and true.

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY



The GENTLEMAN BRUISER

THREE coaches, all bound Brighton-ward, the big man permitted to pass unmolested; but when the fourth appeared he fixed his mask in place and loosened his pistols.

It was a light blue britzska, brightly enameled, with polychromatic escutcheons painted on the doors. In front was a coachman, and clinging to the rear were two footmen in liveries of blue, bound with yellow and trimmed with brass buttons.

The big man walked across the wood to a place beyond the curve and there, in the very middle of the road, he waited. This was not in his ordinary line of business, and he felt an amateur's nervousness. He made a last hurried examination of his pistols; one he half cocked and thrust back into his belt;

the other he cocked fully, and this he held in his left hand. He raised his right arm when the carriage came into sight.

"Stop!"

The horses, reined sharply, came to a beautiful, high stepping halt. The coachman and footmen scrambled down, staring, blinking. Obviously they were unarmed. The robber strode to the door, threw it open, keeping his weapon pointed toward it, and shouted:

"Come out here! Step fast!"

The Honorable Sidney Bassin, when he emerged, did not step fast, but characteristically he did step with grace and dignity. He was a tall, handsome youth. His beaver was cocked at exactly the proper angle; his mulberry coat, his flowered waistcoat, his yellow breeches and shiny knee boots, fitted him as though they had been painted upon his body; he leaned on a tall, silver knobbed cane, and a diamond glittered in a ring on his left hand.

"Oh, damme! This is *too* delicious! Are you really a highwayman?" Apparently not in the least disconcerted by the sight of the pistol, he raised a gold rimmed glass to his right eye and peered earnestly at the robber. "Mask and everything! How this will flutter them at Carlton House!"

The highwayman smiled grimly, sneeringly.

"Hand over that watch and that ring."

"The watch, yes. And what money I have with me, I suppose. But the ring—" the young man looked at it, smiling fondly as though at some secret memory—"you really must excuse me from giving up the ring. You see, it was a sentimental gift."

The highwayman snarled.

"Stop chirping, little canary! Give me that watch!"

With one swift movement of his right hand he snatched the watch from the waistcoat and put it into one of his own pockets.

Sidney Bassin stiffened at the touch of the man's hand. And when the robber tried to wrench off the ring, Sidney Bassin screamed protest.

"You low beast! Take your hands off me!"

Like a nurse losing patience with a naughty child, he struck the highwayman in the face with his open hand. It was utterly unexpected. The robber, stepping back, gasping, forgot all about the pistol he held—indeed, he dropped it—and raised a pair of weapons with which he was much more familiar, his fists. A hard left sent Sidney Bassin back against the carriage wheel, and the highwayman, stepping in close, swung a right uppercut. The dandy went suddenly, grotesquely limp, and dropped to his knees in the dust. He shook his head. Dazed, he rose slowly to his feet.

"Got up, eh?" The highwayman was indignant. "I'll learn you. You won't get up after *this!*"

"This" was a right-hander brought almost from the ground. Sidney Bassin, swaying, his arms at his sides, was a perfect mark. The hard fist struck with a terrible sound at the point of his chin, and he went down full length in the dust.

Abruptly the highwayman realized that he had bungled his job. He became panicky. He snatched the second pistol from his belt and waved it at the startled servants.

"The first one that tries to follow me gets shot!" And he disappeared into the bushes.

They carried the Honorable Sidney Bassin—Buck Bassin they called him—into the carriage and propped him up on the seat. They shook him gently, firmly, for some time. He opened his eyes.

"Beg pardon, sir, but shall we go on?"

"Back to town, you ass!" The voice, though weak, was rich still with arrogance. "You don't suppose I could go to the crush in this condition?"

"You might tell 'em you was drunk, sir, an' fell down."

Sidney Bassin said with considerable dignity:

"I never fall down when I'm drunk. You know that, Harris. Please refrain

from further argument."

He was missed at Brighton, of course, and later in London. In the clubs, at the opera, they asked one another whatever had happened to Buck Bassin.

Servants at his house averred that their master was indisposed; nothing serious, but he didn't care to be disturbed.

It was not until the sixth day after the episode on the Brighton road that he reappeared. Pale, but perfectly poised, and without a mark on his face, he sauntered into White's and resumed his accustomed chair in the celebrated bay window, where all St. James Street could and did see him. His cream colored trousers had, seemingly, never known the slightest wrinkle. His blue tailcoat left nothing to be desired. His waistcoat —scarlet velvet with embroidered silver flowering—was a masterpiece. But the exquisite boredom his face expressed was the crowning glory of his appearance.

Kangaroo Cooke fluttered up.

"Buck, old lad! Missed you at the Rogers' breakfast. Everybody's been asking for you. Are you well?"

"Well enough, thanks so much. A bit tired."

Cooke dropped into a neighboring chair and launched into a recital of all the gossip Buck Bassin had missed. But Buck was not interested in the gossip; he was thinking of something quite different.

They did not understand him when they said that the Honorable Sidney Bassin was incapable of any sustained effort or any serious, continued thought. They did not understand how incalculably sensitive the young man was. And he was governed by a genuine fastidiousness which none of these butterflies appreciated or even suspected.

When that highwayman had laid hands upon him, the Honorable Sidney Bassin was honestly and profoundly shocked, horrified. He felt the deepest mortification at the fact that he had been beaten by a common robber on a public road. The physical pain he did not mind; but the pain in his soul was vastly greater; and even his best friends —if it could be said that he had any real friends—would have been amazed to learn how furious this outwardly calm young dandy could be.

He had been punched into an ambition. Yes, he had achieved a purpose in life. Not an exalted purpose, and perhaps not even a very commendable one; but it was none the less intense for these reasons.

He rose, interrupting Kangaroo's account of the reception given to Edmund Kean in the Covent Garden greenroom the previous night.

"Have an appointment, old fellow."

HE still strolled; but in spite of his appearance of leisure, he was going to a definite place for a definite purpose now.

The place was not far distant, at No. 13 Bond Street. Sidney Bassin knew of it, though he had never before been there. He entered a dim, small hallway. From somewhere near at hand, through a thin wall, came a rhythmical thump-thumping, the scuffling of feet on a hard floor, and occasional grunts and soft thuds. An unliveried servant approached.

"Please tell Jackson I wish to see him immediately."

"Mr. Jackson's busy right now, sir. If you—"

"Please give him my message!"

A business man was Gentleman Jackson, and a good one. He had never met the Honorable Sidney Bassin, but of course he had heard of the famous Buck, and had seen him; and recognizing him from the description given by his servant, he lost no time getting to his private office.

"This is a great pleasure, Mr. Bassin. Can I help you?"

"I want you to teach me how to fight."

"Nothing easier. You want private lessons, of course?"

"*Very* private! I don't even wish anybody in town to know that I am having lessons. You must bring your apparatus

to my town house and help me fit up a gymnasium there." He paused, eyeing the smooth giant in front of him. "All this is irregular, I understand that. And of course you will fix the price yourself."

This amiable bonecrusher was hurt by the request for secrecy. Too good a business man to consider doing anything but acceding to this request, he was at the same time too true an artist not to resent it.

"It—it's none of my business, Mr. Bassin," he said at last, and his manner was faintly truculent, "but maybe I can't help telling you there's nothing to be ashamed of about learning to box. Some of my best—"

"I know, Jackson. I understand. Some of my own best friends are pupils here. Boxing's an excellent sport, no doubt. It happens I've never been interested in it, though, and I'm not interested now."

"But I thought—"

"You misheard me, Jackson. I didn't ask you to teach me to box. I asked you to teach me to fight."

Jackson was a literate fellow, possessed of much common sense. He was accustomed to interviewing gentlemen obsessed with a desire to learn boxing; but that this young peacock, this famous exponent of all that was frivolous, should express a desire to learn the tactics of the prize ring was something new even to Jackson.

"It's a very rough business," he ventured apologetically.

"I'm ready."

"It would mean no fancy boxing lessons, with me treating you like a fencing master with a pupil. You must do exactly what I say."

"I'm ready," the dandy repeated.

"All right. I'll give you a lesson every afternoon from four to six, starting tomorrow. I'll tell you later what you can eat and drink. Meanwhile you must excuse me. I've got a pupil waiting. Good day, Mr. Bassin."

So far as his own circle was concerned, Buck Bassin had simply walked off the earth. Hostesses might rant and weep all they pleased; polite little notes of regret were his only answers to the invitations that still poured in upon him. His servants now merely told visitors that Mr. Bassin was not at home to anybody. He was never seen riding in the Park. He did not appear at the opera or at any of the clubs. He had apparently lost all interest in the theater, gambling, the track and the quadrille. Nobody who had been at Bath, at Brighton, at Tunbridge Wells, or any other place where a gentleman might be supposed to recuperate from an illness, could report having seen him or heard anything of his whereabouts.

The cockpits and race tracks, where he had been a familiar figure in the recent past, knew him no longer. But there was a considerable stir when it was learned, quite by chance, that he had been for some time attending every prizefight and boxing match held in or near the city. Many gentlemen remembered having seen a solitary man at all these affairs—a tall, thin man with a brown slouch hat pulled far down over his eyes, and a long, brown furred paletot which he wore, even in the warmest weather, well up around his ears—a man who never spoke to anybody, never seemed in the least inclined to make a bet, but obviously was concerned only with the fighters and the fights.

They couldn't believe it. Some mistake. Just somebody who resembled Sidney Bassin. The Buck himself would pop back someday—pop back and sit in his usual chair here in the bay window, right next to the chair Brummel used to occupy. And he'd stare out over St. James Street with that expression of ineffable boredom on his face, and be just sufficiently polite to the right persons and just sufficiently rude to the others. Don't ever worry about Buck Bassin! He'd never change.

One afternoon, when they had finished a particularly hard lesson, the Honorable Sidney Bassin asked—

"Jackson, am I a good fighter now?"

"You're a good boxer," Jackson conceded cautiously. "You know every decent trick I can teach you, just about, and you're much faster than I ever expected you to be, and you can stand a pounding."

"Could I beat any man in the ring today?"

"You could beat most of 'em, and you could make all the rest know they'd had a fight. I'll say that much."

"Do you think I could beat any man I'd meet in the street?"

"I do not. You're the best pupil I've ever had. Inside the ropes I'd give you at least an even chance against any but a real veteran who was also a first rate fighter besides. But in the street it's different. Boxing's only part of it in a street fight."

"Can you teach me the rest?"

"Some of it—not all. But I know men who could."

"Then bring them here, Jackson. Bring them one at a time, and I'll pay them well for their lessons."

So it was that the Buck's town house began to shelter ever stranger creatures, and the servants opened their eyes very wide at the same time that they opened the doors for some of the choicest thugs and bruisers and cutthroats of the East End. Earls and duchesses, ambassadors, foreign counts and archdukes, and even one royal prince, had walked through those doors. Such personages came no longer; but now every afternoon there came instead, with Gentleman Jackson, the pugilist, some shifty-eyed fellow from "the Holy Land", who fingered brass knuckles in his pocket, or a pipe of lead, or a dagger, or possibly a sandbag tucked under his coat. Downstairs they would go promptly, and there they would remain for a long time, in the room where Jackson and the young master spent so many hours these days, while the servants listened, awed, to the curious sounds that came from this room.

Buck Bassin learned how to take a knife from a man, how to close in on one who had rocks in his fists, how to slip under a bludgeon . . .

Jackson taught him many things, and the men Jackson brought to that little gymnasium taught him other things. The Buck, grim and silent, accepted it all. Night after night he stretched himself out in his bed, stiff and sore, scarcely daring to move because of the pains all over his body. Morning after morning he surveyed himself ruefully in a long mirror, marveling that any one frame could stand such a battering. And yet, grim and silent still, each afternoon he went down into the gymnasium with Gentleman Jackson and some new expert from the East End.

"IT'S none of my business," Jackson said once, "but you aren't training like this just to be able to beat some ordinary man. You've got somebody special in mind, and somebody who's good."

"Yes." Sidney Bassin frowned.

But Jackson persisted.

"If I knew who he was, Mr. Bassin, I could train you just the way you ought to fight that particular man. Since I know every fighter in the country that's worth a damn, I think I ought to know this man you want to beat."

"Jackson, I don't know who he is myself."

"You mean you just know his ring name?"

"I don't even know whether he was ever in the prize ring."

"But what's he look like? Tell me."

"I don't even know that. I've never seen his face."

"How will you know him when you meet him?"

"I'll know him," said the Honorable Sidney Bassin, "by his voice. He's got an odd voice, and I have a retentive ear. I may not know him when I see him, but I'll know him when I hear him! And when I do, Jackson, I don't care where it is, I'm going to beat that man to within an inch of his life, and maybe further."

Some weeks later, when the last of the consulting specialists from Whitechapel had been paid and dismissed, the pupil asked again—

"Am I as good as the best of them now?"

"You're as good as I can make you," Jackson admitted. "But there's one more thing I can't give you, and that's real experience in a rough-and-tumble. How do I know that when you get into a real fight you won't lose your temper and forget everything I ever taught you and go swinging away like a wild man?" Jackson pulled off his tight leather knuckle protectors. "You got to consider your opponent without any personal feeling at all, if you want to be a first rate fighter."

"How can I learn to do that, Jackson?"

The veteran shrugged.

"By serious fighting, that's all. You got to train yourself to be perfectly cold about the business. Many's the ringster has lost a battle just because he lost his temper first."

"I should think it would make a man fight better if he's angry."

"It will, provided he's experienced enough to take his time and not allow his anger to interfere with his science."

"I see. In other words, the best way to learn how to fight is by fighting?"

"That's about it."

"I see," said the dandy again.

That night, dressed in some clothes borrowed from a servant, and with only a few shillings in his pockets, he made for the East End. And this was the first appearance of that extraordinary person to whom residents of the Holy Land very soon learned to refer as the Gentleman Bruiser.

The Gentleman Bruiser came to be almost a myth in the slums of London. If there had been poets in the stews and gambling hells and booze emporiums of Whitechapel and Limehouse, they would assuredly have immortalized this curious character in song; and even as it was, there were hundreds of stories about him.

Nobody could fathom his purpose, and nobody could guess where he would appear next, or when. He seemed to select the lowest, most dangerous dives in the city; and though he never deliberately provoked a fight, whenever one was launched in his presence he was sure to be in the middle of it. He scorned the use of weapons, even when he was cornered by armed men. He never seemed in the least alarmed if the odds were two or three to one against him.

Many a local tough had sworn to kill him. When he walked the dark streets and alleyways—nobody ever saw him in the daytime—it was with the lightnings playing about his feet, a lone wanderer in a cloud of danger. Every intersection was a potential ambuscade. From any doorway he might expect a horde of club-swinging thugs to descend upon him without warning. But he remained unruffled, erect, aloof. And for all the threats against him, he appeared somewhere in the district almost every night.

"They're all scared of you, Mr. Gentleman Bruiser," shouted the Welsh Tiger one night. The Tiger was a trifle drunk, but three friends stood behind him. "But I think you're nothing but a big fake!"

The stranger merely looked at him—didn't move, didn't say a word; just looked at him. The Tiger, a monstrous fellow, blustered on.

"You're a damn low-life snob, an' that's all you are! An' I think a little of this will learn you something!"

"This" was intended to be a right-hander to the jaw. Nobody was more astonished than the Tiger himself when it whizzed harmlessly over the Gentleman Bruiser's left shoulder. A sharp, short uppercut sent the Tiger back a few steps, until his elbows banged against the bar. He shook his head, amazed, uncomprehending. Then, when he saw the Bruiser, fists raised and ready, quietly waiting, he roared with rage and charged.

The fight that followed was an East End epic. By the time the Charlies had heard of it and had mustered a sufficient force to venture an invasion of the premises, there was very little left of the furniture. The Tiger's friends had joined the battle; but to help offset this, the bartender, himself no insignificant warrior, and a profound admirer of the Gentleman Bruiser, had ranged himself alongside that personage. The entrance of the Charlies was bitterly resented by the Tiger and two of his friends—the third friend was horizontal by this time, and in no condition to resent anything. Perhaps these men were punch drunk, or blinded with blood, so that they didn't know whom they were hitting. Whatever the reason, they set upon the newcomers with much gusto, though without success, and in the ensuing confusion the Gentleman Bruiser disappeared.

When the Tiger got out of jail, ten days later, he swore loudly and in many pubs that he would not rest until he had torn this damned Bruiser to small pieces; but it was gleefully remarked that when he encountered the Bruiser, that very same night, in a public street where there wasn't a Charlie in sight, he simply walked past—scowling and snarling, to be sure, and muttering dire threats, but doing nothing more than this. The Tiger explained afterward that a bone in one of his hands was broken, which, of course, might have been true.

Not that the Bruiser himself escaped unscathed. For all his uncanny skill at blocking and sidestepping, he had plenty to show on his thin, aristocratic face, as evidence of the battles in which he had been engaged. And strolling home one early morning after four uneventful hours in a river's edge pub, he found himself in a short and narrow alleyway the end of which was blocked by two bulky silhouettes. He had by this time developed a nose for danger, an instinct which warned him, a sort of sixth sense. Now he wheeled around—and saw two more silhouettes at the other end of the alleyway. And at that moment the Welsh Tiger himself stepped out of a dark doorway near at hand.

"So, Mr. Smart Man! I got you where I want you now!"

The Honorable Sidney Bassin said nothing. He was nicely trapped, and he knew it. In perfect silence he slipped out of his long black cloak; he raised his fists.

This was as disturbing a prospect as he had yet faced. Fighting five men in a crowded pub, where there was always the opportunity to twist and dodge around and between pieces of furniture, and where, as a general thing, some spectator inspired with a desire to see fair play would take sides with him—that was one thing. Fighting five men in a dark alleyway with nobody else in sight was quite another. Once before he had been waylaid by five men, and they had all but killed him. Perhaps this quintet would not stop short of the final job.

The Tiger sprang suddenly, leading with his left. The Bruiser caught the left wrist, twisted, throwing out his right leg, and sent the Tiger tumbling full length. Without an instant's hesitation, and letting the impetus of this movement carry him on, he butted with his head the stomach of one of the Tiger's friends. There was a choppy *"oof!"* and for the moment, two of the men were out of it. The butted man leaned against a wall, his arms folded over his stomach, gasping, sick. But soon he would catch his wind and return to the fray. And the Tiger already was crawling to his knees, not so much hurt as astonished.

One of the other men punched Buck Bassin behind the left ear and almost knocked him to his knees. Another tried to hit him with a piece of pipe, but only struck the shoulder.

The Tiger rose and charged, bellowing like a mad bull. Buck Bassin stepped this way and that, in and out,

back and forth. For half a minute, in that dim place, nobody was quite certain who was hitting whom.

Then somebody slipped behind Buck Bassin and caught him around the neck, choking him. Two others began kicking and punching him from the front.

"Hi! What's all this? Five of you on one man! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

The Honorable Sidney Bassin found himself released abruptly, and none too soon. He slid to his knees, his senses reeling, his head almost bursting, while the blood banged in his purple temples. Somebody's knee kicked him in the face, then for an instant he was unmolested.

THE newcomer was alone, but this fact did not prevent him from taking the side of the Gentleman Bruiser without hesitation.

"All right, matey? Give me a hand as soon as you can, will you?"

The Honorable Sidney Bassin struggled to his feet, dizzy but undismayed. It gave him renewed confidence to have somebody fighting next to him. He leaped at the nearest footpad, hitting straight and hard.

"Easy, matey! Cool and easy does it!"

In fact, the Buck had gone too far. Somebody got behind him again and grabbed him around the neck. But he slipped the grip, tripping the assailant.

Then the newcomer was in distress. Two men had him down and were kicking him. Buck Bassin, dropping his fists and stepping sidewise suddenly, sprang to his rescue. The stranger rose, to face the Tiger.

"Oh, so it's *you,* you mealy faced insect! Well, I beat you once, Tiger me boy, and I can do it again!"

A long right arm shot out from nowhere. There was a sharp, hard sound, like the cracking of a whip, and the Tiger's knees buckled.

At the same instant the Gentleman Bruiser planted a terrific blow against the lower left ribs of one of the Tiger's assistants. The blow must have broken a rib or two, for the fellow was screaming with pain when he dropped to the pavement.

Two men were on the ground. A third broke and ran for it, losing his nerve. The other two became panicky. Buck Bassin advanced toward one of them—and that man ran. Then the last one fled, and it was all over.

The newcomer stood over the fallen Tiger, poking him with a disdainful foot. The Tiger didn't stir. His companion was moaning.

"I thought for a second or two there I was done for, matey." The newcomer extended a huge right hand. "Thanks for pulling me out."

"I have you to thank for saving my life," said Buck Bassin. He made no effort to grasp the extended hand. "They meant to kill me."

"That Tiger's a mean man. I beat him once before, inside the ropes, but I never expected to have to beat him again, along with half his friends. I'm Jim Brent. The Red Cyclone, they call me."

The Honorable Sidney Bassin did not see fit to say that on one previous occasion he had heard the Red Cyclone's voice . . .

"You must be that Gentleman Bruiser everybody's talking about?"

"I believe they have some such name for me."

The Buck's hands trembled as he put on his cloak and hat, but it was from eagerness, not from fear.

"We'd better clear out," the pugilist suggested. "This fellow's making too much noise here. That sounds like Charlies coming now."

They ran to the other end of the alley, and ran still until they were a safe distance from the scene of the battle. There, in a better light, they turned to survey each other.

"It was a grand fight, matey. We ought to go somewhere and have a drink on it, eh?"

"I entirely agree with you."

"I know a pub that'll still be open and we can get some good whisky." He tried to link his arm into one of the Buck's. "Come on."

"I never drink whisky," said the Buck. He slipped away from the friendly gesture. "But perhaps you'd care to accompany me to my house and break a bottle of champagne with me?"

"Gor, matey! That would be grand!"

On the way, the Red Cyclone was loquacious. For one thing, he was pleased with himself for the manner in which he had fought the Welsh Tiger and all the Tiger's friends. For another, and more important, he was delighted with the prospect of going to the home of the Gentleman Bruiser, drinking wine, and learning at last the identity of that mysterious person.

"If there was more gents like you interested in the ring, matey, men like me 'd be a great deal better off than we are."

"I suppose that's true."

"Not that I'm doing bad now," the Cyclone continued modestly. "They're fixing for me to meet Tom Cribb, and there's a lot of sporting gents are betting on me to be the next champion of England. I'm not supposed to tell anybody that, because it's supposed to be a secret."

"I'll certainly respect your confidence."

"And yet a little while ago, before I beat this Welsh Tiger and a few other roughs, I wasn't able to get a fight even. I had to do all sorts of things to make a living. All sorts of things."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I had to do some things I was really ashamed of at the time." The Red Cyclone shook his head. "Too bad."

"I quite agree with you," said the Gentleman Bruiser.

All the servants were in bed when the two men arrived at the Bassin town house, and the Buck opened the door with his own key. The Cyclone's eyes almost popped out of his head at sight of the place.

The Buck took a lighted candle from a branch in the entrance hall.

"We'll go downstairs," he said.

Jim Brent grinned, winking.

"Down to the wine cellar, eh?"

"No, to another place. I'll get the wine from the kitchen on our way."

He brought out a bottle of his best champagne and one glass and, holding the candle high, he escorted the Cyclone to the gymnasium.

Again that worthy gaped.

"All fixed up like a training stable! Pretty swell place you got here, matey."

The Honorable Sidney Bassin placed the champagne and the single glass on a small table. Then he locked the door and tossed the key high up on top of the punching bag backboard.

The Cyclone watched this deed with wonderment, but all he said was—

"You only brought one glass, matey."

"That," said the Honorable Sidney Bassin, "is because only one of us is going to drink this wine."

"You ain't going to have any yourself?"

"Maybe. Or maybe you'll have it. It goes to whichever is still able to drink it when we're finished with our fight."

"With our what?"

"With our fight. I have a quarrel with you, and we're going to settle it here and now. Brent, you used to be a highwayman on the Brighton road."

The Cyclone flushed angrily.

"I ain't saying what I used to do, back when I couldn't get any fights. I don't see what business it is of yours, anyway."

His joviality was gone now; he was suspicious, narrow eyed.

"It's my business because I happen to have been one of your victims. You held up my carriage on the afternoon of June seventeenth, at about three o'clock. I can't be sure of the exact time because you stole my watch. You also tried to steal a ring from my finger, and when I resisted you, you knocked me down."

The Cyclone was incredulous.

"You ain't that man! He was a damn fiddoodler that hadn't the guts of a flea!"

"Nevertheless, I am that man. So take off your coat."

"You ain't thinking of daring to fight me!"

"That's it exactly."

"Why, I'm the best fighter in this country, probably in the world!"

"We'll determine that very soon."

The Honorable Sidney Bassin was divesting himself of most of his clothes. His hands trembled a trifle, but his voice was even and calm.

"I'm going to be matched to meet Tom Cribb!"

"If I don't break half the bones in your body first."

Jim Brent seemed less angry, less alarmed, than hurt. His feelings were injured. Until now he had been glowing with self-satisfaction, immeasurably proud of himself for winning the acquaintanceship of so fine a gentleman, and delighted with the prospect of toasting a brief but glorious battle with a bumper of champagne. And now, like a bombshell, had come a demand to fight again. He was not afraid; the man didn't know what physical fear was. But it was all very disconcerting, this cold blooded preparation for a finish fight. He cast one last, longing look at the wine, and made a final appeal for arbitration.

"Listen, matey, don't let's get huffy about this. I ain't saying I robbed you, and I ain't saying I didn't; but a fine gentleman like yourself should realize that lots of times men do things they're sorry for afterward and that they wouldn't do if they'd had some money in the first place. What say we shake hands and call it quits?"

The Honorable Sidney Bassin, stripped to the waist, said deliberately, with a sneer—

"Frightened?"

Jim Brent flushed with anger, and his eyes narrowed.

"All right, matey! All right!" He started to take off his coat and shirt. "But if I kill you," he warned seriously, "it'll be your own fault."

Buck Bassin made no comment on this. He was engaged in sizing up his enemy. Jim Brent was massive, thickset, with long, heavy arms. He had a bullet shaped head that set almost directly upon his enormous shoulders, scorning the mediumship of a neck; the hair on his chest was long and red, but the hair on his head was very short, almost shaved.

His eyes were little, dark blue, amiable and rather stupid when he was feeling good natured—as he usually was—but snake-like, bright, hard, when he was angry. His nose and mouth were enormous, and he needed a shave. He assumed an unorthodox stance, feet spread wide apart and somewhat toed in, head slightly forward, chin low. He looked both slow and awkward; but Sidney Bassin, who had seen him in the ring, knew that he was neither.

They faced one another in the center of the dim gymnasium.

"No holds barred?"

"Nothing barred," said the Honorable Sidney Bassin. "If you manage to finish me, good luck to you. Drink the wine and depart, with my blessing." He drew off the diamond ring he had said was a sentimental gift, and this he tossed on the table next to the champagne. "And take that along with you —if you manage to finish me."

"Oh, I'll finish you, all right."

Sidney Bassin moved in swiftly, unhesitatingly, like a man who knows exactly what he is going to do and is in a hurry to get it done. As a matter of fact, he could not decide how to attack the Cyclone, whose peculiar defense had baffled many a more experienced antagonist.

He feinted with a left and hooked a right for the ear. The Cyclone, stepping into it, so that the blow passed across his neck, closed promptly. Buck Bassin knew the instant he felt the fel-

low's bear-like embrace that he was in the grip of a man much stronger than he had estimated. He would be obliged to keep from closing, hit with his fists and stay away.

The Cyclone squeezed, squeezed furiously. Buck Bassin did not waste strength by resisting: he simply fell over backward, and the force of the fall caused an instant's loosening of the grip around him. He twisted, rolled, kicking up hard with his knees. He got loose, and sprang to his feet. The Cyclone was up at the same time, and they faced each other a few yards apart.

The Cyclone moved in, crouching a bit—then sprang suddenly, his arms outstretched. Buck Bassin hopped backward, landing on his heel; he jabbed twice, hard, with his left, cutting the Cyclone's mouth; then he hopped back again to avoid another rush.

"Stand up and fight like a man," the Cyclone muttered.

THE Cyclone advanced again. Buck Bassin brought up a right to the stomach; the Cyclone did not even grunt. A man of iron, this Jim Brent. The Gentleman Bruiser changed his attack, shifting to the face. His own ribs were aching still from the force of that horrible squeeze; and the Cyclone made no attempt to punch his jaw, but hammered persistently at his body. For full two minutes they stood toe to toe, pounding each other. The Cyclone tried repeatedly to get in closer, but Buck Bassin kept him away with straight, hard, clubbed blows in the face.

Then Buck Bassin's right wrist was caught, and he was jerked forward. He knew what was coming and tried to sidestep, but the Cyclone was too fast for him. He crashed to the floor, a stunning fall. He rolled instantly. But Brent, with amazing speed, jumped upon him, pinned down a shoulder, and started to pound his ribs with a huge right fist.

Buck Bassin did not try to hit back: in his position the blows could not have been hard enough to be practical. Instead he tried to pull Brent down closer and roll with him. His hands scrabbled across the bullet head, but there was not enough hair to grab. He took both the man's ears and twisted with all his strength; but the Cyclone did not stir, and the hammer-like blows against the ribs continued.

Buck Bassin, in an agony of pain, was sweating profusely now, and this fact saved him. One of the Cyclone's knees, planted on a Bassin shoulder, slipped a trifle. Instantly the Buck rolled in that direction, at the same time twisting his antagonist's head again by the ears.

The Cyclone, to quiet him, punched him squarely in the mouth, banging his head back against the board floor; but the Buck made good his escape and got to his knees. Brent leaped upon him again, but this time the Buck was better prepared. He caught both the Cyclone's wrists and pulled the fellow clear over his back, throwing him full length on the floor. It was a flying mare from a low position; and if the Buck had been standing instead of kneeling, some of the Brent bones must have been broken. As it was, Buck Bassin was too weak for lack of wind to follow up his advantage properly, and the Cyclone jumped to his feet, stunned but not seriously hurt.

There was no let-up. The Cyclone's strategy was to prevent his opponent from recovering his wind.

The only way to keep the man from closing seemed to be to punch his face. The Cyclone, his fists low, punching for the body and always intent upon getting his arms around his enemy once more, made no attempt to block these blows; when he could not roll his head to the punches he took them square; but because he kept his chin tight against his chest, it was difficult to hurt him.

Both men were bleeding now, Buck Bassin from his mouth, the other from his mouth and from cuts on both sides

of his face. The Buck's chest and abdomen were red with angry welts where the big fists had flailed them. Brent's body, on the other hand, was fair and fresh, and he was not breathing hard.

By now Buck Bassin was interested in only two things. One was keeping free of those immense, crushing arms; the other was getting a punch to that low, pumphandle chin. There must be a chink in this man's armor somewhere; he could not be all steel and whalebone. The jaw must be the weak spot, the Buck told himself. That was why Brent held it so low. It was a waste of time and strength battering the fellow's face, pounding at his cheekbones and mouth and nose and temples. He had managed to open a cut over Brent's left eye, but the blood flow was sluggish and it did not seem probable that he could punch Brent into blindness in this manner.

No, the jaw was his one hope. He watched it constantly, punching less, feinting more, and always avoiding the bull-like charges by means of which the Cyclone hoped to close with him.

Finally he got it. He had stepped in, instead of stepping backward, to meet one of the charges; and this movement so startled the Cyclone that, suspecting a trick, he halted suddenly, and his jaw went up for an instant. Buck Bassin dropped his heels to the floor and swung in a right-hander with every ounce of strength left in his body. The blow was perfectly timed, perfectly executed. The Brent head snapped up, the Brent legs collapsed, and the Red Cyclone, abruptly lax, slid to his knees and then toppled sidewise to the floor.

Right fist raised for the finisher, Buck Bassin sprang upon him. But the eyes were closed, the body was limp, and Buck stayed his blow. He could not hit an unconscious man. After all, he didn't hate this fellow—not any longer. It was finished now as far as he was concerned.

He realized his mistake when Brent's legs suddenly entwined his and he was almost thrown backward. He stumbled, recovered, made for the other man; but the Cyclone had used that instant to scramble to his feet.

But only a glorious animal spirit was keeping Jim Brent upright now. He no longer tried to pound the Buck's body, he no longer tried to close. His position now was the usual one, elbows high, palms turned toward his face. He was concerned only with blocking another such blow to the chin—blocking it, at least, until he could recover a fuller use of his senses, clear his head, regain control of his shocked nerves.

And Buck Bassin was concerned only with breaking down that defense. Mercilessly he battered at it, pounding the forearms, the elbows. Some of his punches got past it and crashed against the Cyclone's face, but as long as those arms were raised it seemed unlikely that the Buck would be able to finish the job he had begun on the Brent jaw.

He tried a trick. Simulating overconfidence, he himself closed in. The Cyclone, scarcely able to believe what he considered to be a rare piece of good fortune, dropped his arms and reached for the bear hug he so badly wished to get. Buck Bassin stepped back with lightning swiftness and launched a left-hander to the forehead. It threw the Cyclone's head back—and it was followed promptly by another straight, hard right to the momentarily unprotected jaw.

The Red Cyclone crumpled without a sound and pitched forward on his face. He was not shamming this time. He was out.

The Honorable Sidney Bassin glanced once at the man, then staggered to the table where the wine stood unopened. His right hand refused to grasp the bottle; he must have broken it on Brent's jaw, he reasoned. But with his left hand, perfectly steady, he poured himself a glass of champagne; and he raised this glass to his lips. In the dim, wavering light of the one candle he smiled upon his fallen foe.

"Here's to you, Jim Brent. You're a damn fine fighter!"

THE flutter that was caused when Sidney Bassin made his dramatic reappearance at White's was never forgotten by anybody who was present.

At first glance, you would have said that here was the old Buck back again. For his yellow Chesterfield and cream colored beaver were the very latest notes in fashion; his boots shone like polished glass and four diamonds glittered in his heavy silk cravat; any real tailor would have swooned with delight at his mulberry tailcoat and his silver flowered gray velvet waistcoat; any actor would have wept in jealous despair at the indescribable elegance of the man's manner when he took a pinch of snuff in the entrance hall.

And yet there was something decidedly changed about him. He walked still with studied negligence; but it was a firmer, straighter walk. His eyes were cold with contempt, as always, and there was the usual faint sneer on his mouth; but somehow these expressions no longer seemed affectations. The Buck was firm, hard, purposeful. Nobody who saw him could explain the nature of the change, but every one recognized its existence.

Besides, his cheeks were puffed and swollen, both his lips were cut, there was a bruise under his right eye; his right hand was swathed in bandages which enwrapped a plaster cast, and he walked with a limp.

Even more amazing was his companion. The Buck, a snob among snobs, was accompanied by a huge, coarse creature with a bullet shaped head, practically no neck, enormous red hands, very little hair, and a face naturally ugly but rendered the more so now by the fact that it was horribly cut, bruised and swollen.

Everybody in the place stared at them as they moved arm-in-arm for the famous bay window, and everybody gasped when the Buck, taking his accustomed chair, calmly seated his acquaintance in the chair at his right—the chair that had not been occupied by anybody since George Brummel fled to the Continent.

"Why do you like to sit in a place like this, Buck?"

"Because it's one of the best places in town to meet men who'll make really big bets. And I plan to take every penny I've got or can borrow and put it on you to beat Tom Cribb."

Brent flushed with pleasure.

"That's mighty kind of you, Buck. You ought to get good odds. You see, Cribb's never been beaten, while I have —once."

"But that will be the last time, Jim."

White himself, all a-twitter, summoned in haste from his upstairs office, finally drew the Buck aside and remonstrated with him.

"My friends, Mr. White, are my own. I'm a member in good standing, and I have the right to entertain here such guests as I choose. Isn't that so?"

The host was afraid, physically afraid. He had never before heard this perfumed dandy talk in such a fashion, and he had never before seen that hard, steel-like glitter in the Buck's gray eyes. Instinctively he took a step backward.

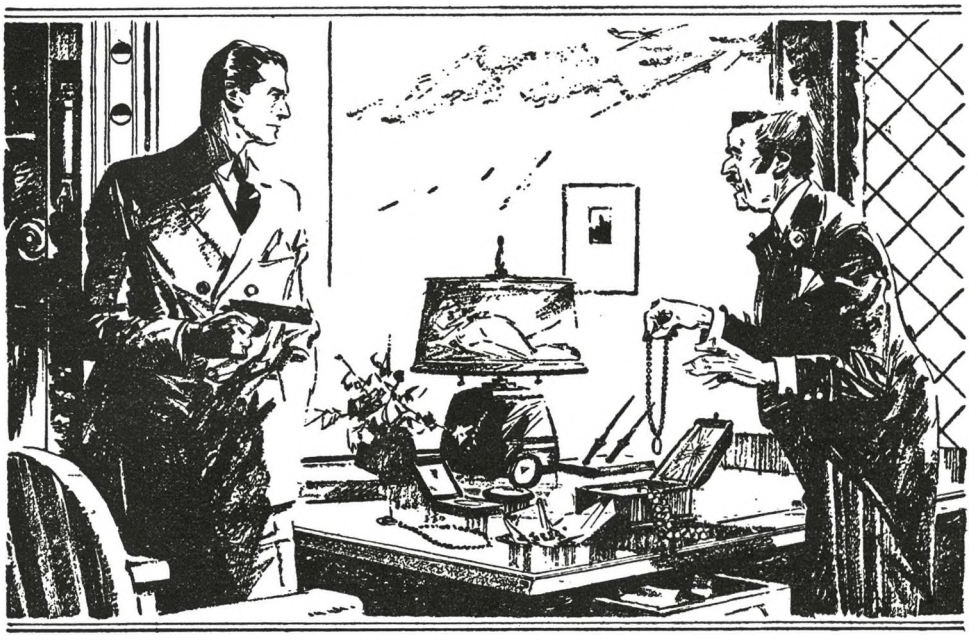
"Of course, Mr. Bassin. Yes, of course. Only—only naturally it's understood that you'd only bring gentlemen . . . "

"Mr. Jim Brent," the Honorable Sidney Bassin said firmly, "is, in my opinion, a true gentleman. If you or anybody else cares to dispute this fact with me, please leave a card to that effect with the doorman. At the present moment Mr. Brent and I both would resent any further interruption. Good day, White."

They were not disturbed again.

Continuing

The DEVIL'S PASSPORT



By GORDON YOUNG

THE STORY THUS FAR:

VERY few people, aside from J. K. James, the Washington under cover man, ever knew that Donald Richmond, alias Don Everhard, gambler and adventurer, was a relentless foe of the underworld which he knew so intimately. From James, Everhard first learned of La Tête de Mort—"The Death's Head"—a gang of international blackmailers who were terrorizing two continents.

James asked Everhard to go at once to Paris, where their headquarters were believed to be. Everhard accepted, and was told that the passport of the gang was a death's head ring, set with a miniature of the wearer; and, as a further clue, that Isobel de Nevers, a Parisian actress very clever at disguise, was known to be one of the blackmailers.

On the boat Everhard met a young woman who gave her name as Vilette Laramie. He became suspicious of her when she warned him against stopping in Paris. A few days after his arrival in the city he received an invitation to call upon Isobel de Nevers. At the address given, he discovered Vilette waiting to receive him.

She confidentially explained that she was a police operative; but, in the identity of Isobel de Nevers, was so much in the blackmailers' confidence that

her life was in danger. She also told him that the Prince Hovenden, whom he had met a short time before at the Horseshoe Club, was friendly because he was involved with the blackmailers, and wanted him—Everhard—to become one of them; warned him that the gang would try to frame him with the police so that he would have to turn to them for assistance.

Everhard had occasion to recall this last a few nights later when Charles Birk Kurlingen, a gambler, was murdered in the American's room while he was at the telephone. Forewarned, Everhard arranged the body to make it seem a case of suicide—before Monsieur Biradou of the police arrived—and removed from a pocket a death's head ring . . .

The police were satisfied and went away; but Everhard did some investigating. Accusing his servant, Mademoiselle Houlette, who had called him to the telephone just before Kurlingen was shot, he learned that she was a policewoman. Everhard dismissed her. Then, quite by chance, he saw Monsieur Guyot, who lived on the floor below him, going through the hall in the garb of a priest. Instantly suspicious, Everhard put a gun on him—and the man confessed to the murder of Kurlingen. "La Tête de Mort paid me—wanted to get you in Dutch with the police . . ."

At that Everhard decided on a bold stroke; he would win the confidence of this gang by sheer audacity.

He went to Fifi Guyot, the pretty, flashy sister of the murderer, and told her she would be imprisoned unless she took an apartment for which he would pay. Everhard kept a key. He then sent a message to Prince Hovenden, in the name of La Tête de Mort, ordering him to call on Mademoiselle Guyot for instructions. Everhard appeared a short time after the prince's arrival. As he expected, no one answered his knock.

He put his finger on the bell—and held it there.

"WHO'S there?" Fifi called, trying to sound timid. She sounded more than timid—frightened and panicky.

"Whom else did you expect, dear?"

"Oh, then it's you!"

She opened the door, giving him a quick, searching look and saying very rapidly:

"I have been asleep. I looked a fright and couldn't let you see me like that." She now had a lacy robe over a gossamer nightgown.

"No luck tonight, Fifi. That's why I didn't phone. I came. Thought we could be together a little while." He sauntered about, quite at home.

"I have such a headache." She was holding the door open, hopeful that he would go. "After it got so late I went to bed. If you'd only telephoned I would have told you I couldn't see you tonight. I'll be all right in the morning. You'll come back then, won't you, dear?" She pulled the door even wider.

"Anything you say, sweetheart." He ignored the door. Near the table he glanced into an ashtray. "Have you taken aspirin?" Everhard sat down.

Fifi Guyot sighed and pressed her head. She thoughtfully closed the door. Her hair, for the time she pretended to have taken not to look a fright, was tousled.

"Such a headache!"

She picked up a package of cigarets, scratched a match, threw the box at the table.

"Ought you to smoke with a headache?" Everhard got up and went to her. "Poor child." He ran his hand down along her arm, held her fingers, "Why, you are sick! Trembling. Fingers are cold. That won't do. Come, let me tuck you in and say good night."

Fifi squirmed from him and hurried to the door, opening it.

"No, no. I'll be all right. Please go!"

"Shut that door," he said, not gently, not angrily, but quite as if he meant to have his own way in this house.

She was afraid of him and closed the

door quietly.

He took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom. Her pretty dress, hastily thrown off, lay where it had fallen near a chair.

"Why don't you put things away?" he asked rebukingly. Silken underthings were scattered. He pointed. "They cost money," he said with proprietary thrift.

"You haven't paid for any of them yet!" she answered with flip indignation.

"No?" He raised his voice. "Who's paying for this apartment? Answer me."

"Oh, you, dear, of course. Don't be angry."

The bed covering was flung back, the pillows rumpled—the creases not pressed down. Everhard ran his hand along the cold sheet. She watched staringly.

"Just smoothing the wrinkles, darling." He patted her shoulder. "Poor child. I'll hang up your dress for you in the—"

"No, no!" At that he took his hand from the dress and looked at her. "I mean—" she tried to smile—"I'll do it."

He turned and eyed the closet door. She saw where he looked, how he looked and threw both arms at his neck.

"I do love you so!"

He pulled the arms away, held the wrists firmly, set her writhing on the bed.

"Stay there."

She jumped up, clutching at him.

"Please!"

"Sit down." His voice was quiet, but the look in his eyes was a if he had struck her.

She sat down helplessly, and her lips twisted, trembling without sound.

Everhard opened the closet door. He could .see nothing. The closet was black. He reached up, turning on the light. Hovenden stood huddled, half hidden among the dresses on hangers. Sweat trickled in streaks over his face.

"Well, I am damned!" said Everhard, not angrily, but not pleasantly.

Fifi Guyot groaned and rocked back and forth as if with cramps.

"This is not as you think, monsieur!" said Hovenden, indignant and attempting dignity; also he seemed somehow to be trying to convey a warning, but rather uncertainly.

Everhard laughed at him.

"Well, come out, Hovenden. Make your apologies where it is a bit cooler. And let us talk things over like men of the world. I, who so well know Mademoiselle Fifi's charms, can not reproach you for having succumbed to them. And since all women are faithless—if they have the chance—I can not reproach her for yielding to a superior attraction. Come out of there."

Hovenden came, angry, humiliated.

"Since you say it is not as I think, then what the hell is it?" Everhard's manner was not encouraging.

"I demand to be permitted to leave without being questioned. If you do not allow me to do so, then beware, Monsieur Richmond!"

"You talk that way to me, Hovenden, and you'll leave on a shutter."

Hovenden pulled nervously at a handkerchief. His dark eyes were troubled, and in trying to look menacing he merely showed fear. Sweat streaked his cosmetic gloss of skin. He drew himself up with a lordly air. His tongue sounded thick, and for all the hauteur of the words, his tone indicated that he really didn't hope to be convincing.

"I must ask you to believe what I say. It is not as you think. I will not explain—"

"Will not?" Everhard inquired, interested.

"Can not," Hovenden corrected readily. "Can not explain beyond saying that I had a matter of importance to take up with this woman. So now I bid you good night!"

"No, Hovenden, you are not bidding me good night—yet. In a way, I'm not blaming you. But for you I might have gone on thinking this lovely creature could be trusted. However, I need a million francs. Can you let me have it?"

"I shall send them to you tomorrow."

"But what security do you give me now?"

"My word, monsieur."

"Not so good."

FIFI GUYOT wanted to scream a warning. The idea of using extortion on one who carried a ring of La Tête de Mort terrified her. She begged, wildly:

"No, no, no! It *is* not as you think! Please do not ask for money from *him!* Ah, please—"

"You keep quiet, or you'll go into that closet," said Everhard; and she wadded lace and silk with both fists against her mouth and stared beseechingly at Hovenden. He did not look at her, but demanded of Everhard—

"You will not take my word?"

"No."

"After you know who I am? When I have introduced you to my club? To my friends?"

"And found you in the bedroom of my Fifi?"

"But I have told you it is not as you think!" Hovenden shouted.

"But until you tell me what I should think, I shall think as I damn please."

"The secret is not mine," said Hovenden, trying to appear honorable.

"All right. Take off your jewelry and empty your pockets. On the bed here. To one side, Fifi."

Fifi Guyot drunkenly got off the bed and dropped into a chair. She shivered.

Hovenden threw back his shoulders.

"I will submit to no such indignity!"

"A French jury would call it justifiable homicide," Everhard murmured. "Very sympathetic, French juries—when the woman is beautiful. Fifi is that, aren't you, Fifi?"

"The devil take you!" she moaned.

"This is robbery then?" Hovenden demanded.

"No, not at all. Extortion," Everhard explained composedly.

"I believe you knew I was here all the time!" Hovenden had the hazy glimmer of an idea.

"I knew damn well somebody was here. I heard voices before I knocked. I smelled a peculiar perfume—peculiarly disagreeable. I saw a gold tipped cigaret mashed in the tray. Fifi hurried to get me out of the door—with her headache. And as I happen to be paying for this apartment, I naturally am interested in who visits it. Empty your pockets."

Hovenden's handsome face had a tortured look. Reluctantly he took a wallet from his pocket and threw it on the bed.

"There," he said sullenly.

"You forget, my friend," Everhard suggested softly, "that if you are pitched out of the window and picked up with a broken neck, every one will think you jumped. But, of course, if I break your neck, I won't get my million francs. And if I don't get some worthwhile pledge off you, I won't get them either. Turn your pockets inside out. Every one of them."

"You will regret this!" shouted Hovenden, but drew out his watch.

His fingers shook as he unsnapped the chain. He tossed the watch to the bed. A penknife and handkerchiefs followed. "My key purse," he said, opening the small leather case to show that it contained keys, and returned it to his pocket.

"I said everything."

"But my keys!"

He tossed the keys to the bed. Then his cigaret case and a gold lighter. He threw down the coin purse. He took off his rings.

"There!" His eyes blazed.

"Start taking off your clothes."

"M-my clothes!"

"Since you won't empty your pockets, I'll go through them after you are gone. Dress shirts have long tails. That'll keep your legs warm."

Hovenden drew back. Curses choked him. His name, social position, wealth and a studied dignity had kept him from nearly every sort of affront; but

he had the uneasy feeling that this man would actually strip him of his trousers and send him into the chill night with shirt tail flapping. He disconsolately again poked fingers into his pocket and tried to palm some object.

Everhard tapped the hand.

"Open up!"

Their eyes met, Hovenden's hazy with baffled rage, murderous and helpless. Everhard's narrowed with little glints of fire near the pupils. The tightly closed fingers opened slowly. A platinum ring fashioned into a skull and crossbones lay there.

Fifi Guyot bit her lips to keep from shrieking.

Everhard examined the ring curiously.

"Kurlingen had one like this. I still have it. What does it mean, eh? Secret order or something?" His thumb pressed against the skull's chin. Everhard looked at the portrait, then at Hovenden. "Looks just like you—or as you will look to God on Judgment morn!" He threw the ring on to the bed.

Everhard reached quickly into Hovenden's vest pocket and drew out the watch charm.

"You've overlooked this." It too went on the bed.

"Now send the money to my hotel tomorrow morning. Not before eleven, or after twelve. If it isn't sent, I'll tell the story to the newspapers, and show this stuff—" he waved his hand at the bed—"to prove it. When I get the money, you get this back. Now tell little Fifi goodby. She's dreadfully upset."

Fifi jumped up and ran across the room.

"I wish both of you were in hell!" she screamed.

"Oh, one word more, Hovenden. Just to give you something to think about. Why the hell do you call yourself a prince of the House of El Kasyd?"

Hovenden, kicked in the belly, couldn't have looked more amazed and hurt. He tried to glower, but trembled. His mouth opened soundlessly.

He swung himself about and strode from the room with neck outthrust and the leather pads of his shoulders sticking up ludicrously. He banged the hallway door as if to jar down the wall.

Hat, stick and overcoat were left in Fifi's closet.

FIFI came at Everhard with lips drawn back and hands clenched. Oaths boiled in her mouth. Venomous French oaths. Hysterical, she screamed:

"You fool! Why didn't you go when I wanted you to! He is one who wears the ring of La Tête de Mort!"

"I don't care if he wears old La Tête's pajamas," said Everhard indifferently, and sat down on the bed, fingering the loot appraisingly.

He examined the curious watch charm. It was quite heavy, slightly larger than a franc and seemed inartistically and uselessly thick. He found that the two halves unscrewed.

"I believe you watched and followed him here!" said Fifi menacingly.

"And to save your own neck you'll say that, eh? Try it, Fifi. You can't lie well enough to make him believe you were not in on the game. Hustled him into the closet. Tore off your clothes and pretended to have just gotten out of bed—with a headache. I'll tell him you *didn't* do it the better to persuade me to go away. I'll say you did it to make it look that much worse for him. And he knows you are a badger, Fifi. So, lovely creature, you are in the devil of a mess. Ho-ho—see what I've found!"

The unscrewed watch charm disclosed the seal of La Tête de Mort. He showed it to her, but held it firmly. Her two hands closed on his wrist as she bent, peering. Her hands dropped as if from poison. She swayed back and spoke with awe:

"He is one of the highest. Nothing can save us. Oh, you stupid beast of a fool!"

"One of the highest, eh? I don't be-

lieve it. Not that chump. But pack up, Fifi. If I leave you alone they may do things to you."

"Oh," she cried tragically. "It is no use. He had just told me that Guyot is dead in prison. And—"

"That's what you get for failing, eh? But come on, Fifi—get into a dress."

"Where can I go? I must register, and they will learn from the police. I have no friends who will take me in and not tell where I am. Ah, monsieur, you do not know La Tête de Mort. There is no escape. It is death."

She fell into a chair with her head bowed to her knees and tore the filmy silk, clenching and jerking as she sobbed.

Everhard eyed her, an abject wreck of a woman, and thought of another woman; a girl not so old as Fifi, who also felt the shadow of the sword above her head; knew that it might fall at any hour, yet carried on without the quiver of an eyelid; and that very day, in the disguised tone of social trivialities, had, as she poured tea, pledged him to go on with the fight if she went down. He wasn't contemptuous of Fifi. She couldn't help it. He was admiring of Vilette, who carried the grace of courage with head up and smiling mouth. The gods had bestowed beauty upon both; bravery upon one, but withheld it from the other. Everhard found himself wondering why; then snapped his fingers, awakening himself, arousing Fifi.

"Come on, Fifi. I'll have you out of sight in an hour. Police nor Death's Headers will ever find you. Not if you behave yourself."

"Where, monsieur? Oh, where?"

"I don't know—yet." He began putting Hovenden's things into his pocket. "If you don't make plans, nobody can ever find out what you're up to. But go where I send you—do what I say—and you'll live to have a gay time fooling lots smarter men than I am."

"Oh, monsieur!" Hope leaped glowingly into her face. "You do mean it? Please, you are not angry with me? Ah, I—"

"I am never angry, Fifi. Just distrustful. But as far as you're concerned, it's the same thing. I'm leaving in ten minutes, and will take you along if you're ready."

They slipped down the stairs. Everhard put Fifi and her suitcase near the street entrance where she would not be seen, then called to the concierge—

"The door, if you please—"

When the electric latch slipped and the door unlocked, Everhard went to it with a heavy stride, pushed Fifi noiselessly through, pulled the door to, took her suitcase and began to look for a taxi.

It was almost 2 A.M. He changed taxis twice, the better to break his trail if inquiries were made. On the Rue Raspail he got out alone, ordering the taxicab to follow slowly at a little distance.

A woman, alone, presently glided through the shadows of the street lights, eyed him, saw that he eyed her, and so stopped.

"Monsieur is lonely?"

Everhard smiled.

"No; scared, mademoiselle."

"Ah, no, monsieur."

Everhard took her by the arm and said:

"Listen, pretty child. In that taxi is a friend of mine. A woman. Her wicked husband will turn this town upside down to find her. She must have a place to stay for a few days until I can arrange to take care of her. If she goes with you, she won't have to register. And with what I pay, you won't have to work. Will you take her?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, monsieur! I too once had a husband—"

"Bad things, husbands. I don't intend ever to be one. They never please. Come—I shall introduce you. And your address? Thanks. Be gentle with her. And when you quarrel, as you two surely will in a week, don't scratch her face. That belongs to me. Pull her hair and pinch her arms, but let her face alone. It's all she has."

THE next morning, promptly at eleven o'clock, a certain Monsieur Balzar was shown into Everhard's room at the Hotel Xerich.

He was a little old fellow with a bald head, a vulture's wrinkled neck, deep eyes and a frail, hooked nose. His yellowish skin was bleached; it was as if he, born of a sun colored race, had lived long in shadows. Monsieur Balzar spoke French perfectly, but looked very foreign. Everhard did not even try to guess at his nationality. Monsieur Balzar had yellowish, cat-like eyes. You felt that he could see in the dark. His clothes were well tailored, but he didn't seem used to them.

He and Everhard eyed each other appraisingly, and Monsieur Balzar's thin lips curled over shrunken gums in curiously enigmatic smiles; and Everhard thought, "I've never seen a crueler face."

"Monsieur," said Balzar in a curiously thin voice, "I have come about the matter you and Monsieur Hovenden discussed last night."

"Sit down, monsieur. I am glad he sent a gentleman instead of coming in person."

Balzar sat down. Everhard had the vague notion that this man would be more comfortable if he squatted cross-legged on the floor.

"Monsieur, permit me to inquire as to the reason for your dislike of my friend?"

"If he is worthy of your friendship, Monsieur Balzar, then he has told you that I found him in the bedroom closet of a friend of mine shortly after midnight."

"Let us be frank, monsieur, if you please. How did you know he was there? My friend has the feeling that his discovery was prearranged."

"No, he doesn't have that feeling at all. I shall tell you, Monsieur Balzar, the feeling that he does have. He thinks so highly of himself that he can't imagine himself being a fool—without the connivance of other people. For certain reasons that we need not enter into, unless you have much leisure, I found a certain lady charming. I was paying for her apartment. Last night I called—unexpectedly."

"Unexpectedly?" said Monsieur Balzar, with slight reproach. "Ah, most indiscreet of one who wishes to preserve his illusions about charming women, monsieur."

"True. But were even you wise at my age, monsieur? As I paused at the door I heard voices within. I knocked. There was a muffled scurrying. With much delay, I was admitted. I found the lady pretending she had been in bed with a headache. She suggested that I go away and return in the morning. Do I look so stupid, Monsieur Balzar? I found one gold tipped cigaret on the tray. She uses plain American. I made certain investigations. And, monsieur, I beg of you to imagine my feelings when the gentleman I found in the closet turned out to be Monsieur Hovenden, whose life I so recently had the honor of saving.

"He was really not at his best; not at all. He tried to tell me matters were not as they appeared. A statement, monsieur, that had nothing but effrontery to recommend it. And I inquire of you again, my dear Monsieur Balzar, do I look that stupid? I happened just at that moment to recall that I was in pressing need of money. He at once promised aid and, after some slight discussion, left me with certain pledges to indicate that he would not forget. I take it from your presence, monsieur, that punctuality is one of Monsieur Hovenden's many virtues."

Balzar grinned enigmatically. It was hard to tell whether his smile was one of amusement, or pleasure at the thought of seeing people tortured. He coolly suggested:

"Can you not see how very much the whole thing smells of a trap in which my friend was unwisely caught? The lady, I believe, is known to have used herself

as bait for just such traps."

"I see what you mean. But all I can say is that if the lady lured him on, she certainly did not admit me to her confidence. I merely took advantage of an opportunity."

"Where is she now, if you please, monsieur?" Balzar inquired smoothly.

"The devil knows. I gave her a beating she won't forget soon—"

"Ah!" Balzar's yellowish eyes brightened like up-turned wicks; it was as if he liked to hear of such things.

"—and left at once. She too seemed to think that if she lied long enough that I would believe her."

"You are a very clever man, monsieur," said Balzar slowly, and rubbed at his thin nose with a delicate forefinger, eyeing Everhard suspiciously. "But there is one thing more I would like permission to ask about."

"At your service, monsieur."

Then Monsieur Balzar arose, looked at the wall, walked directly to a framed print, lifted it and with a quick hand pulled loose the microphonic ear.

"I'll be damned!" said Everhard. "How did you know that thing was there? I didn't."

"I imagine, monsieur, you are unaware of many things which really concern you quite intimately. But one question, please, that I do not care to have any one overhear." Balzar returned calmly to his chair, seated himself, looked searchingly at Everhard and inquired with sinister meaning, "Just why, please, did you choose to infer that the noble Prince Hovenden is not a member of the royal family of El Kasyd?"

Everhard smiled.

"That got under his hide, eh? No particular reason, except to make him unhappy. I know nothing of his heredity. Care nothing." His tone became serious as he said, "Yet I do know this. Once as a child I was lifted above the heads of the crowd as old Prince Fered drove through the street. I have never forgotten the unconscious dignity, the piercing glance, the serene arrogance of the old gray bearded man. An unsheathed sword of a man. Cruel as hell, but made of iron! For one thing, old Prince Fered would never have sneaked into a lady's bedroom closet to avoid any man—except perhaps to shoot him dead the instant he opened the door. And if I had suggested to him that I needed money, he would have told me to go to the devil and walked out. I can't explain any better than that. All I really meant was that Hovenden, with his shoulder pads and actor's pose, looks and acts as if illegitimate blood ran in his veins. There you have it. All of it. What about it?"

SILENCE. Monsieur Balzar's yellow eyes peered unwinkingly. Everhard's stare met them. Balzar rubbed his thin nose and inquired—

"Are you as critical of all men?"

"Did you ever play poker, Monsieur Balzar?"

"No, monsieur."

"It is a game in which cards are used. But you win or lose by how well you know the look on men's faces. I play it well, monsieur."

"I believe you." Balzar nodded. He appeared really convinced. Then slowly, dangerously, "Monsieur, do you not understand that the rings of which you seem inclined to make a collection are the insignia of a powerful secret order? One it is not wise to offend? One that offers much security and many rewards to its members?"

"Is that so? You know, Mademoiselle Guyot must have known that. She went into hysterical capers over that ring, but I couldn't get anything out of her. We have secret orders in America too. There's Mooses and Owls and Elks and Woodmen. Ku Klux Klan and, of course, Masons. I've never been interested. I can't get enthusiastic over the idea of allowing people I don't know to call me brother just because we wear the same kind of jewelry."

"The order to which I refer," Balzar

murmured, "is somewhat different." He cocked his shell-like bald head to one side, gazed at Everhard, nodded just a little, murmured, "An unsheathed sword of a man." He reflected, then asked, "That was the only time you ever saw Prince Fered?"

"The only time."

"You judge men well, monsieur." Balzar straightened, then said quietly, "Monsieur Richmond, I shall be frank. I came here today with a very unfriendly attitude toward you. I am not yet quite sure what to think of you. But I do think that Prince Hovenden is a bad judge of character himself."

"Oh, but, monsieur, let us be fair. Hovenden was too irritated to be impartial."

"Not merely last night. Before. From the first meeting. After you so miraculously saved his life from the mad chauffeur. I comprehend the reason now. You were not wholly impressed by Prince Henri de Rougemont Hovenden El Kasyd—and he felt it."

"Well, Monsieur Balzar, you have guessed it. I tried to be pleasant and all that—until last night."

"But I must assure you that last night he did visit your friend for another reason than that you naturally insist upon believing."

"He chose a bad time," said Everhard.

"Yes," Balzar admitted. He paused, watching closely. "And he chose that time for reasons that we find difficult to understand."

Everhard played poker, saying nothing. Balzar scrutinized his face.

"She is a minor member of the same secret order. You, monsieur, are perhaps not interested in becoming more familiar with the order?"

Everhard said at once:

"Not if Hovenden's one of the heads of it. I should say not. I'd be out of luck."

"But perhaps," Balzar suggested encouragingly, as if trying to see how much eagerness Everhard would show, "matters can be arranged to your satisfaction, if you wish it?"

"I doubt it. Still, friends are a nice thing to have in my business."

"And your business, monsieur?"

Everhard grinned.

"Whatever pays well. Like accepting pledges from prosperous gentlemen, which they are to redeem."

"How did you know the value of those pledges?" Balzar asked smoothly.

"All I knew of what they meant to him is that he tried to hide them. Naturally, what he tried to hide was just what I wanted. I told him that if he didn't come through I meant to take the story to the papers. I wanted some of his personal stuff to make the papers believe my story."

"And you will take it to the newspapers if he refuses?" Balzar inquired with sinister menace; and the next instant he jumped as Everhard's fist struck the table.

"You're damned right I will! I'll show him up. Give him plenty. Then the next time I find any gentleman in an embarrassing situation and ask him to lend me money, he won't welsh on it."

"You are a very strange fellow, monsieur," said the scrawny Balzar, impressed but still doubtful. "Much more plainspoken than I had supposed. And I suspect, more clever. It is difficult to know what to think of you."

"I'll tell you one thing to think. If I don't have that money by twelve o'clock your friend Hovenden'll have to buy all the newspapers in Paris to stop the story. They'll jump for it. And if you don't think I mean it, don't pay me."

Balzar, who admitted that he had never played poker, did not reply. But apparently he was convinced. He drew a sheaf of notes from his inside pocket and without a word laid them on the table.

"Thank you, monsieur," said Everhard as politely as possible.

He examined the notes, suspecting counterfeit, and meticulously counted

the money. Balzar watched him and moved his tight lips a little nervously.

Everhard got up, opened a drawer, took out a handkerchief knotted into a small bundle and laid it on the table. Balzar carefully sorted the trinkets.

"If you please," he said imperiously, "the ring of Monsieur Kurlingen is not here."

Everhard tapped a pocket.

"It is here. Hovenden ransomed his own stuff. I didn't promise this."

"And your price on it?"

"That's hard to say." Everhard drew out the ring, looked at the portrait. "I found this. I'd like to keep it. It's a work of art. Whoever did the portrait is a genius."

Balzar stood up.

"Monsieur, you are strangely fortunate. Strangely clever, too. One must wonder which attribute dominates. Perhaps you never really considered the matter, but I have; and know that some men are born lucky. An unsheathed sword of a man. Yes, Prince Fered was that. I knew him well. And your admiration for the artist—" he murmured enigmatically. "Strange. Yet I am not quite sure. No, monsieur, not yet quite sure of you."

Everhard, with all the graciousness of early training in good manners, bowed him out of the door, spoke gently but with no humility. In Balzar's lingering glance there was still a puzzled look that shadowed his cat-like eyes.

Everhard returned within the room and sat quietly for several minutes so that no spying person in the hall, at the telephone switchboard, or in the lobby, could say that he had shown the least interest in having the movements of Monsieur Balzar traced.

Then Everhard called the hotel and made a big fuss over that microphone. The wiring was traced and found to have been fished through from the room directly overhead which had been occupied by a man and a woman who insisted upon having that particular apartment. They had arrived at the hotel but a few minutes after Everhard registered. They were gone. They had not checked out, but they never returned.

That afternoon Everhard moved back to the Isle Saint Louis.

Madame Thurot almost embraced him and introduced a fat, beaming young woman as her sister whom she had already put in as his housekeeper.

"She is really my sister, monsieur," madame said earnestly.

"I knew that at a glance," said Everhard. "She has the same lovely eyes and charm of manner, madame."

CHAPTER XVII

EVERHARD VISITS AN OLD FRIEND

MADAME THUROT'S fat, beaming sister brought tray and papers to Everhard's bedside. He tasted the coffee and told the expectant maid that it was very fine. When she left the room he arose stealthily and poured it out.

He propped himself upon the pillows and shook open *Le Matin*. There was a story of a murder at the Hotel Xerich. He read that one Joseph Kerman, an American who had just arrived in Paris a few hours before, had been mysteriously murdered late yesterday afternoon. A woman was known to have called at Kerman's room. He was described as a large, bony man. There were no personal papers, and the passport gave his occupation merely as that of actor.

Everhard felt a little weak at his stomach and lay motionless, trying to think. Neither of J. K. James' first names was Joseph or Kerman; but Joseph Kerman was a name that he used when up to something that required extreme secrecy.

The other papers told the same story. None hinted at Joseph Kerman's being more than the passport indicated.

The telephone rang.

"I'm not here!" Everhard called as he heard the bustling click-clack of the fat

maid's feet.

But when he heard her repeating the name of Dodalus as she took the message, he went to the telephone.

Dodalus, very eager, said that his birthday party would be in his apartment tomorrow night.

Everhard said:

"I've got the money for you. If I don't see you before, I'll surely drop in for a minute or two."

"That's a promise," said Dodalus.

"Right, Nick. 'By."

Everhard dressed at once. He took a taxi to the Hotel Xerich, and there learned where the body of the American, Joseph Kerman, had been removed. He drove to the *entrepreneur de pompes funèbres*—which means undertaker. The more elaborate dramatic feeling of the French toward funerals is reflected in the extensive phrase.

Everhard passed through a dark recessed doorway and entered a stale, sunless room where the shades of the dead seemed lingering invisibly.

He was at once met by a small, bald man wearing a long tailed coat; the man bowed sympathetically. The somber gaudiness of sorrow's trappings darkened the walls, and a dead smell was in the room.

The manner of the little man changed to uncertainty when he found what Everhard wanted. He said that the dead who had been brought to him for their last earthly care could not be exposed to the gaze of merely curious persons; but he asked—

"Were you a friend of Monsieur Kerman?"

"I once knew a man who did some acting under the name of Joseph Kerman. I'd like to see if this is the same person."

"Ah. And your name if you please, monsieur?"

"John Smith."

"Ah. If Monsieur Smith will be so kind as to sit here for a moment; just a wee little moment—" he measured off the length of the moment on his forefinger and bowed deeply.

Everhard sat down. The little man went away. The wee little moment grew considerably. Then the bald man returned with a kind of subdued bustling.

"Come, Monsieur Smith, if you please."

He led Everhard past a small, gloomy chapel, along a dim hallway and into a dark room where a covered coffin rested on velvet draped trestles. The room was more than merely gloomy. It was dark. Everhard stopped, not seeing his way clearly.

A heavy hand fell on Everhard's shoulder, and he spun away with catlike quickness, his fingers shoulder high under the double breasted coat. A heavy voice laughed and James' burly figure loomed in the dark.

"What's this?" Everhard snapped. "Rehearsal for the Follies?"

A dim globe, dangling from a long wire, was turned on. Two men with the look of French detectives about them stood against the wall, smiling a little; and the small, bald man grinned with pop-eyed beaming.

"Matter, Don? Disappointed?" James grinned at him, reaching for his hand. "So you *have* got nerves, huh?"

"Not half as much nerve as you, to try a trick like that."

"I'm just a ghost now. Come along. Let's have a talk. I took a peek at you, John Smith, while you waited. And was damn glad to see you!"

HE LED Everhard into a little room littered with trimmings of artificial wreaths and scraps of black cloth. A bundle of black beaded crosses dangled from the wall. James sat on the lid of a chest and motioned toward the only chair.

"What are you doing here?" Everhard asked.

"Playing dead."

"Who killed you?"

James took a cigaret from the package on the chest, tapped the tobacco down and groped about for a match.

"Smartest girl in Paris."

Everhard thought for a moment.

"To put her in solid with the skull and crossbones?"

"You never boggle an I.Q. test, do you?"

"All right. Tell me things."

"I'm supposed to be down in Mexico, studying ruins or something. Got a vacation. Left Laura with the family in Los Angeles, ditched the bunch of scientists, hopped back across the continent and took a fast boat over. Thought I'd sort of sit in the gallery and look on. Didn't mean for you to know I was here. But I'm not half as smart as a man ought to be in my work."

"Very true," Everhard murmured solemnly.

"You'd make a great detective, Don. You can see things so clearly—when they're pointed out to you. But listen. Truth is I didn't know I was being watched or spotted. And be damned if I'd been at the hotel two hours before Yvette walked in on me and—"

"Who?"

"Yvette."

"So that's her name, eh? I call her Vilette."

"Have I told something?"

"Tell the rest of it. Yvette what?"

"Go to hell. She said they knew I was here. And on account of the Wattison case they thought I'd come over to help hurt 'em."

"They work fast when you get into a hotel. I know, Jimmy."

"Well, sir, Don," said James, with a deepening of his voice, "they'd put it up to her flat that she was to walk in and kill me. No ifs about it. That was her job—or! You know the answer."

"She's already in Dutch somehow."

"Yeah, and wonders what the devil they've got on her. Can't be anything very definite, or—well, they don't hesitate, that crowd. The only way you can make good with 'em is to kill somebody. You've found out, haven't you, that they like blood?"

"'Um-hm. And you," Everhard suggested, "like a good fellow, said to Yvette, or Vilette, shoot."

"Don, you know what that girl wanted?"

"Would I be sitting here holding my breath if I did?"

"She asked me to shoot her, through the shoulder or somewhere, so it would look as if she'd made a try, and I'd beat her to it!"

Everhard eyed him.

"Think she meant it?"

"What d'you think?"

"She'd take it with a smile."

"You've said it. When God was handing out guts, she got as much as anybody. Well, there's a phone at the hotel that doesn't go through the switchboard. I went down and used it. Got through to her father. I'd thought he was the only one that knew I was over. I explained things. You know the French police. They like theatricals—and are not ashamed of liking 'em. We like 'em too, but pretend we don't. The old boy moves fast. I went back to the room. Twenty minutes later Yvette shot through an open window. Then bolted. I dropped in a bundle—just to be realistic.

"Well, a couple of porters just happened—understand?—to be heaving a trunk down the hall. They thought they'd heard a shot, and saw a woman leave. They jumped into my room. One stood guard at the door and the other called the office. There just happened—understand?—to be a couple of detectives in the office at the time. They took charge. Nobody that wasn't in on the play got a good look at me. And to put it over right, they brought me here. I slept in this damn place last night. Now I'm merely bait in a mouse trap. Anybody that comes in to see if I am really J. K. James is nailed in a hurry and hustled off to jail for questioning. Two have been caught already."

"And don't you think they can get word through to somebody that you aren't a corpse?"

"Gee, but you're a bright boy. You

just think of the strangest things. What I think about it is that they do get word through that I am dead. How's that?"

"Yeah?"

James grinned.

"We didn't put on the real show for you. I sneaked a look at you out there in the waiting room and said nothing doing. Thought it might make you weep if you saw me stretched out in a coffin—"

"Cheated me out of a good laugh, eh?"

"You wouldn't have laughed. You'd have broken down and cried. You see, nobody gets more than just one quick look at me, then the two detectives you saw there close in and start talking. Nice way to spend a vacation. Come across to see a good show and get dragged on the stage to play the corpse."

"When you going to be buried?"

"Tomorrow. Then a private airplane gets me across to Germany. And I have to sneak back home again. Get down to Mexico and find my scientists. I feel like a fool. It's up to you and Yvette to bust things wide open before my vacation is up. So do something, won't you?"

"What'd you suggest?"

"Whatever she tells you to do. And say, she wonders what the hell you've done to that fellow Hovenden? He's sick in bed, or pretends to be, and it seems you're to blame. What happened?"

"I caught him in the bedroom closet of a pretty friend of mine and shook him down for a million francs."

"Yeah?" James asked doubtfully. "Go on. Tell me just why that wasn't a bonehead play."

"Well, for one thing, having a fellow like you in the family is an awful handicap. They've got to think—the Death's Headers—that either I'm honest or you're crooked." Everhard grinned at him. "With their organization, they must know that we are on speaking terms."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And it was up to me to convince 'em that I wasn't your spy, trying to be coaxed to come in and learn their secrets. I gave Hovenden a going over that's knocked that spy idea clear out of their heads. Also, I wanted to show 'em I'd play a dirty game. There's nothing lousier than taking money off a man that hides in your lady friend's closet. Besides, I've had expenses. One million francs is $40,000—and I'm still in the hole."

James meditated, lighted another cigaret, rubbed his cheek with the palm of his hand, said absently—

"I need a shave." Then, reflectively, "The way you tell it, it sounds all right. But it was a damn strong play."

Everhard said nothing. Then James reached out with his toe and kicked Everhard's foot.

"Wake up. Go on, entertain me. Show some gratitude."

"Listen—do you know Biradou?"

James got up, turned his back and brushed the top of the chest.

"Pins, tacks, wire, and a bad smell all over this dump. No wonder people don't want to die if they're brought to a place like this . . . Yes, I know—that is, I've met Biradou. Why?"

"Is he as smart as he looks?"

"What's Biradou done?"

"Well, for one thing, he's in with that crowd."

"No!" said James.

"Vilette as much as says so."

"That kid knows," James agreed. "Pretty, don't you think?"

"Never noticed. But she's French. That's better than being merely pretty."

James grunted.

"I bet Biradou has noticed. They say he has a way with ladies."

"Well, I'll say he has a way with men too. Sometimes I wonder if he's not the bird I have to get by to be made welcome among the Death's Headers."

"Maybe so," James admitted thoughtfully.

"And see here; suppose they do find out you are not dead?"

James stepped on the cigaret, work-

ing his toe over it.

"They'd strangle her. Then say you did it—and prove it."

"Then why the hell don't you take some sleeping powders and stay in your coffin!"

"I'd take poison to save that kid."

"All right," Everhard suggested brightly, "I'll send some in for you."

When Everhard went out he began to look for a taxi; he saw a black, shiny car swing by with Biradou erect in the tonneau. The car pulled up at the curb. Biradou stepped out briskly and entered the undertaker's recessed doorway.

"Speak of the devil! The jig's up. He'll want to poke his fingers in the bullet hole," Everhard reflected unhappily.

He crossed the street and loitered. Biradou came out shortly with a quick military step. The black car started off.

Everhard stepped to the curb, looking after it. A cruising taximan, seeing him there, paused.

"Follow that black car," said Everhard. "Keep it in sight. I'll pay double—and a bonus."

The driver grinned and nodded. Some blocks later the cars huddled in a traffic jam and the taxi squirmed through until its driver had a good look at the man in the tonneau. The jam broke, but the taxi drew up at the curb.

"What's the matter?"

The driver shrugged his shoulders.

"It is the hour of my lunch, monsieur!"

"Lunch the devil! I'll report you to the first policeman."

Another shrug.

"Monsieur knows best, of course. But I know, if you please, that I do not care to be summoned to the prefecture to explain to Monsieur Biradou why I followed him. No, no, monsieur!"

"But if you'd done it skilfully he wouldn't have known."

"Ah, monsieur, you do not know Biradou. If monsieur will give me an address I shall be pleased to postpone my lunch."

"Do you mean Biradou has himself followed to see that he isn't followed?"

"I mean merely, monsieur, that those who know what is good for them let Monsieur Biradou go about his business and do not meddle. An address, if you please?"

"I'll walk," said Everhard.

He walked into the first café and used the telephone. He told the undertaker:

"This is Monsieur John Smith who called on you awhile ago. May I speak with the same person I met then?"

After a time a cautious voice said—

"Yes?" It was James.

"I saw who came in just after I left. How'd you make out?"

"He didn't learn anything he shouldn't." James was emphatic. "I'll stake my head on it."

"Your head's nothing much to risk. It's Yvette's you're gambling with—and mine."

"Be careful of it. The street's watched. They want to see who comes. Biradou was so glad to see me in the coffin he went away happy."

"I'd like to see you there too. I'm coming back."

"Stay away. Goodby."

THAT night Everhard went to a circus, more to feed sugar to the horses during the intermission than to watch the show. As he came out with the crowd he had the feeling that he was being followed, but there were too many people on the street for him to be sure. He drove to a café near the Madeleine, lingered until the after theater crowd was off the street, then set out to walk.

He followed the embankment of the Seine. The night charm of Paris is dangerously near sorcery. He kept a wary lookout for any sign of being followed. Here and there shadowy forms shuffled through the bright spots of street lamps and moved off invisibly into the gloom; but long before he reached the Parvis Notre-Dame he had said to himself:

"I must be getting jumpy. I'll bet all

Death's Headers are at home in bed, like good, honest fellows."

The Parvis is a wide, open space that fronts the cathedral. Napoleon cleared away some score of houses so there could be a larger crowd to cheer when he went to church. At night, after midnight especially, it is seldom that any one crosses it.

Everhard stopped near the statue of Charlemagne and paused with a look about to see whether any one were near. Then he leaned forward on his stick to enjoy the pleasing night scene. It happens that the cathedral is rather heavy in daylight, lacking the airy skyward surge of many cathedrals; but at night Notre-Dame seems veritably to leave the earth and float motionlessly. It is merely an optical illusion, but so are most miracles. He was thinking what prayers the evil gargoyles, perched halfway to heaven but leering earthward, must have overheard in the thousand years, or almost that, since Notre-Dame rooted its seedling stones in the soil of Paris and grew into a cathedral.

A voice at his elbow asked—

"Pardon, Monsieur Richmond, may I speak with you?"

Everhard turned sharply. It was very gloomy on the Parvis, but light enough to see the blot-like shapes of people at a distance, and a nearby face quite clearly enough to know what it was like.

The voice at his elbow was almost disagreeable, being a strong voice that spoke softly with something vibrantly sinister about it. Everhard knew that somewhere he had heard that voice before.

The man was bareheaded, slightly hunchbacked and wore a long cape. The face was gauntly angular. His eyes were deep in bony sockets and glistened. He had taken off his hat either as a gesture of politeness or to let Everhard have a full look at his face. At first glance, he seemed a man who had suffered—was suffering—but not resignedly.

"Monsieur, you admire the miniatures of the rings?"

"You're right I do. We've talked over the phone, haven't we? Yes, I recognize your voice. No finer work has ever been done in miniatures."

"Monsieur!" Pride flashed in the voice; the man bowed. "I am the artist."

"This is an honor," said Everhard, putting out his hand.

The artist tucked his hat under his arm, hastily stripped off a glove and offered as delicate a hand as ever a man presented. It was cold as a snake's belly, but there was no weakness in those delicate fingers; nor in the voice that replied calmly:

"More of an honor than you perhaps realize, monsieur. Men come to me. I do not go to them. Monsieur, you have heard of La Tête de Mort?"

"Yes—some. Why?"

"I am the artist of La Tête de Mort. It is I, monsieur, who look into the faces of the men in whom trust is reposed. There has been so much talk of you that tonight I gave way to curiosity. When you were in the café, I was called. You walked. I liked that. You have no fear. And I could tell that you too think Paris beautiful at night. I followed, and when you paused here I spoke."

"You are an artist at shadowing too."

"No one may see me except when I choose, monsieur. And now if you will please give me the Kurlingen ring, I shall perhaps some day soon return to you the portrait."

He held out the delicate hand. Everhard took the ring from a vest pocket and gave it over, saying—

"You paint under a magnifying glass?"

"No, no; not at all," the artist said quickly. "These eyes do not fail me. I search for brave men, monsieur. There are so few in the world. We perhaps shall meet again, soon."

He pulled at the brim of his hat, threw his long coat about him with a sweep of his arm and turned, going quickly toward the equestrian statue of Charlemagne. As he neared it he seemed really to vanish, so completely was the long black coat merged into the dark-

ness of the pedestal. Everhard saw a faint, shadowy movement pass round the pedestal and, watching, saw nothing more.

"That bozo," said Everhard moodily, "is worth all the rest of 'em that I've seen put together . . ."

EVERHARD climbed the three flights of tall stairs and let himself into his apartment.

As he closed the door behind him he stiffened alertly, watching, listening, sniffing. There was the unmistakable smell of perfume, like the wispy trace of a woman's presence.

He went into the front room.

"Hello, Vilette. Been waiting long?"

She smiled at him from the disarray of blankets that she had gathered about her as she sat in the big chair before the cold fireplace.

"Oh, hello—"

"Burnt up all the wood, I see. Where's my fat maidservant?"

"I sent her to bed. She was glad to to go."

"What are you doing here? Won't they think things?"

"Yes—perhaps that I am in love with you."

"I hope you aren't trying to fool them, Vilette."

She made a pretty face at him.

"Be quiet. They trust me again now that they think I killed—do you know?"

"Yes." Everhard sat down on the edge of the table, stripped the glove from his left hand and said casually, "I went to see the corpse. Looked very natural. Just after I came out, I saw Biradou go in."

"Ah—" She watched him intently.

"You know, Vilette, I think you and—" he tapped his breast— "Monsieur Richmond here, could possibly save themselves some annoyance if they jumped in the river together—now."

"You think he has learned something, eh?"

She asked it coolly, without alarm, but shook the blankets from her shoulders and sat up, interested.

"James says no—but James is human. And Biradou—every time I cut the trail of that crowd, there he is. Aloof, watchful, with a look about him that makes me think he knows more of what is going on than anybody."

"Oh, how can you say that!"

"I can say a lot more. Aren't you afraid of him?"

"No," she said, and fiddled with a ring. Without looking up, "Perhaps I am wrong, but I've felt he really liked me. I talked with him early this evening and—" her dark eyes lifted, smiling—"he has been terribly irritated, wondering what on earth you did with Fifi Guyot."

"Drag the Seine!"

"Ah, so?"

"I choked her. Tied a sack of cobblestones to her feet. Nice splash they made. Only way to handle some women."

"Poor Fifi. She does look sadly abused!"

"Hm!"

"She's in jail—now. The neighbors called in the police."

"Face scratched?"

"Terribly."

"Did she talk?"

"She did."

"Does Biradou believe her?"

"Oh, I hope not! The things she told of you, my dear Monsieur Richmond! She went to live with you because she was afraid of you; she ran away from you because she was afraid of you. And you wanted her to lure men to her apartment so you could rob them."

"That's awfully near the truth—for Fifi." Reflectively, "Biradou must have enjoyed himself."

"Yes, perhaps. He told her that the money you demanded of Hovenden was merely to repay what you had borrowed to give to me."

"Poor Fifi!" Everhard murmured, amused.

"And how did you know I wouldn't spend that money?"

"Good guesser, I am."

"That was wonderful of you. But do tell me, please, how *did* you get him into Fifi's closet?"

"Fifi put him there. I didn't. I just took him out."

"Monsieur Biradou," she said, peering into the mirror of her handbag, "is looking for a young artist-sort of fellow who talked with Hovenden at the Horseshoe."

"Hovenden tell him?"

"The club secretary, I think. He and Monsieur Biradou are close friends."

Everhard walked across the room with her amused glance following. He glanced at her quickly, but was not fast enough; she stared fixedly at the cold ashes of the fireplace. He went back to the table and sat on a corner of it, picked up the glove and tossed it aside.

"I don't like that fellow. He's cold, keen, cruel. He won't stop. He'd use any means to get what he wants. The first morning I was in Paris he jumped at me. The first week, planted a housekeeper on me here—"

"He did!"

"A fine cook, too. Made the best coffee in Paris."

"Did she tell you Monsieur Biradou put her in here?"

"No. Everybody's scared to death of him. I told her he did. She wouldn't admit it. Looks queer the way that fellow—"

"But, my dear boy, you forget who you are! You are really the terrible Don Everhard, you know. Pirate, gambler, and, oh, such a dreadful, terrible man! Naturally Monsieur Biradou would want to keep his eye on you—no?"

"You don't say that quite as if you meant it. Yet I suppose it is the truth, after all. But say the best that you can about him, and you still have to admit that he knows you are connected with La Tête de Mort. He's one of 'em—or, in your words, wants to be. And remember, Vilette, he'll throw you to the wolves, sure, when the shake-up comes. Or try to. He's on the payroll, too, isn't he?" Everhard asked matter-of-factly:

"I myself have given him money, if that's what you mean," she said, choosing a cigaret.

Everhard gave her a look, arose and again walked across the room, returned to the table's corner.

"There's something wrong, somewhere, Vilette. You're holding out on me. He knows damn well Kurlingen was murdered. He knew it the minute he stepped in. He knew it *before* he stepped in. Why doesn't he do something about it?" Everhard nodded. "He grabbed Guyot out of my closet and let 'em kill him in prison. Fifi's talked her head off, too."

"Why of course he knows Kurlingen was murdered!" she said admiringly. "And he knows that *you* must have done what you did do because—"

"What did I do?"

"—because there is no other possible explanation. So there! And if you want the truth, dear boy, he thinks the Death's Head would be very fortunate to get you in."

"Hm. I see. So they think a lot more of me, eh?"

"They do. And so does my father, too. If you went into the Death's Head as a murderer, they would have you under their thumb. And I don't think they are through trying either, so—"

"Oh, by the way, Vilette. I heard your name today. James told me"

She almost jumped from the chair, then sank back, laughing at him. He nodded, trying to be convincing; but she shook her head.

"Yvette—"

"Yes—what else?"

"All right. As usual, you win. However, Vilette is good enough for me . . . But how did you ever come to be Isobel de Nevers, child?"

"Ah." She sighed, looking down at her hands. "Very well. When it was known that my brother was dead, my father said, 'Come, Yvette. You are young, but that is an advantage since they will not suspect you of being also

wise.' So I was given a story to tell of my birth, of what village I came; and with what little money my father could give me, I began to appear in the cafés in a blond wig. I was frequently arrested, and men began to be interested in me. Did I spare their purses? No," she said defiantly, looking straight at him, "I did not! When my father had given of his poor savings, I took what fools offered and heartlessly discarded them. Then some poor boy of good family, worn out with drugs and dissipation, killed himself. It was announced to the papers that he had killed himself after spending all his fortune on Isobel de Nevers.

"And now that made me famous! Soon I had admirers of great wealth. Then I bought a wig that startled even Paris. And jewels, too. I soon was supposed to be the cause of other suicides. That is great fame—in Paris. The Death's Head became interested in me. And so far I have never failed them. That is all there is to tell. And what do you think of me—now?"

"A lot more than I did. Which was also a lot."

The girl smiled, gratified.

"By the way, Vilette, who is a vulture headed fellow named Balzar?"

"I never heard of him. Why?" Vilette's voice and manner changed instantly.

Everhard told her; then asked—

"And do you know anything about the artist who does those portraits for the rings?"

"No, but I've wondered. They are amazing."

"So is he," said Everhard, and described the meeting.

Vilette listened tensely. Then, with an admiring flash of her eyes—

"You are amazing, yourself, to stir up such big fish and bring them to the surface." Then, with the tinkle of teasing back in her voice, "Would you tell me, please, just who is one Monsieur Kiro—who is suspected of exporting drugs in soap?"

EVERHARD grinned at her. Kiro had been the name he used in the fake telephone call, pretending to be greatly in need of money, when he discovered a microphone had been installed in his room by La Tête de Mort. Evidently his trick had been entirely successful; and made doubly so by his subsequent shaking down of Hovenden.

"They have demanded that I get the secret out of you, somehow. They say you can not possibly have known that your conversation was overheard."

"You know, Vilette, they're not so smart after all. Just twenty words over the telephone, and they imagine that I've got a big, secret, dope running organization of my own, eh?"

"You are very, very, very clever!" the girl said commendingly in a low tone, a glow in her moist, dark eyes.

"This game's nothing but poker, with people for cards. And Biradou's the joker—wild."

"Why do you give Monsieur Biradou so much importance, please?"

"He's smart as the devil, and as dangerous. Look at the way he promptly punished Guyot."

Vilette shook her head, correcting him.

"I will tell you something interesting. In a hollow button on Guyot's coat was some powder. When these buttons are given you, you are told that if ever arrested you must say nothing because you need not worry. Just secretly take the little powder. You will then appear dead. No physician can tell that you are not really dead. Your body will then be removed from the jail and claimed by a friend."

"I see. So the little powder fooled Monsieur Biradou?"

"No, no, my dear boy. It fooled merely Monsieur Guyot!"

"Lord, how they like for people to die! But then I'll bet Biradou knew he had the button, didn't he?"

"Perhaps," she said calmly.

"Clever."

"And terrible!" Vilette's voice rose.

She stood up, brushed her dress and went to him, putting a hand on his arm. "And they are still determined to get *you* into a trap. So, please, there is something I want you to do. Will you? That is why I have come tonight. Promise?" Her arm moved coaxingly across his shoulder. "Promise?"

"I'll listen."

"You know De Rossi's—"

"The diamond shop?"

"Tomorrow evening, just after dusk, will you go in there and at the point of a gun make them give you—"

"Not I, sweet child!"

"But you must!" She shook him, insisting.

"Didn't I show 'em what I was willing to do when I shook Hovenden down? What more do they want?"

"They want you to be afraid of the police."

"I am. That's why I won't hold up De Rossi's."

"But please!" Vilette choked a little, then added emphatically, "Don't you understand? It is arranged!"

"For De Rossi to hand over a sack of diamonds—to a stranger?"

"No, no, no! Paste!"

"That's different."

"Then you will, won't you?"

"Your father has fixed it with De Rossi?"

Vilette nodded quickly.

"Yes—my father. Of course. Who else? You will? And tomorrow?"

"But suppose there is some sort of slip-up, and I am caught?"

"Oh, then, of course, La Tête de Mort will get you free, somehow. They will then have you in their power, but it will not be as if for murder. Don't you understand?"

Everhard eyed the glove, slowly pulled at each separate finger, tossed the glove away.

"You want them to think, I suppose, that I have stolen the diamonds for you?"

"Why, of course!" Her arm lay lightly about his shoulder, her wrist curved caressingly at his neck.

"Clever idea, in a way," he said, turning.

Vilette's arm fell. He put his own about her, drew her close, looked searchingly into her face—and pulled her nose. She pushed at his hand.

"Don't. But if you want to be nice, promise. Then you may kiss me."

"That a bribe?"

"No. A reward." She laughed.

Everhard kissed her.

"So you do promise?"

"Not yet. I just accepted some advance payment. Can always return it, you know."

"Deceiving wretch!" He sat on the table's corner, and she stood close. "Promise?"

"If so, then what?"

"You will just go in, level your gun, demand the diamonds and walk out. What could be easier?"

"Lots of things. Suppose I do it, get caught—or don't—and La Tête de Mort suddenly decides they don't want such a damn fool playing marbles on their side? I'm in jail, or have the police scouring Paris."

"But paste? It will be all right, dear."

"Diamond merchants have lost paste and jarred the insurance companies for the value of real stones."

"But De Rossi's! No, no, no! It will be all right if you will do the thing as if you meant it."

"No, no, no," he repeated, shaking his head. "Not so good."

Vilette asked—

"Then you won't?"

"Of course I will. But I want you to know that I'm not jumping up and down with glee. It's not up to what I think is your best, Vilette."

The girl sighed, closed her eyes, leaned against him as if resting after a long nervous strain. A moment later, with head still lowered, she suddenly clutched him and begged coaxingly—

"And please, whatever happens—at any time—please, please don't lose faith in me!" She raised her face; her dark

eyes glowed as if with fever. "You won't, will you—ever?"

"No, of course not," said Everhard, putting his arm around her. He watched her for a moment, then added quite gently, "Whenever a woman talks that way, Vilette, she's got something up her sleeve."

"Oh!" Her look was startled.

"It's all right—in a way. You're holding out on me. Yet if James is willing to do a vaudeville stunt in an undertaking parlor to give you a break, I can risk it. But I'll tell you right now—so you can change your plans accordingly—that you are going to be fooled in one thing."

Vilette looked at him, tense and questioning.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, with a pause between each word, the better to give emphasis to the softly spoken words, "that I am not going to get caught!"

"Why—why, you don't think—Please!"

"Not so good, Vilette. But I'm just trying to be frank with you. I don't know what's what, but—" he pulled her nose—"I'll play on your side. Only, wouldn't it be a lot nicer if you told me the truth?"

"Don't pull my nose! And the truth is, you stupid man, I do love you!"

Everhard got off the table, gently pushed her aside and walked away, taking the glove with him. He stood at the cold fireplace, with his shoulders against the mantel, fiddled with the glove, then tossed it to the floor.

"Vilette, why don't you play fair? Why try Fifi's game? You know I'm on your side. You don't have to pull that sort of thing on me—not as if you meant it—I mean, wanted me to think you meant it."

Vilette, from across the room, with her hands behind her holding to the table, looked at him with anxious eyes, questioning but not speaking.

"It was all right when you were trying me out. It's all right now as long as you don't pretend that maybe you mean it. Act serious about it, and you're not as smart as I thought. I know you do really like me. Of course. That's enough. The Fifi stuff is out. I'm telling you. Hell, you'd throw me, or any man, to the wolves to beat La Tête de Mort! And I don't blame you for it. In fact, I like you for it. You're a lot nicer that way, Vilette, than if you let a flutter in your heart make a fool of you. Make you forget they tortured your brother and murdered him. But don't try to make a fool of me, either. Understand, child?"

Vilette nodded tremblingly, and broken smiles came and went on her mouth. She looked at the back of her hand absently, gestured hopelessly and went to her chair. She sat down, picked up her handbag, opened it, lifted her head and raised the little mirror. Wandering fingers touched her hat and hair. She smiled at herself and murmured inaudibly—

"I told you once, didn't I, that I should feel sorry for you if you did end by loving him!"

She snapped the bag, dropped it to the floor, took up a cigaret.

Everhard came near, picked up the matches from the floor, struck one, held it for her, then shook it out. Smilingly she said:

"It is so nice that you do understand. Makes it easier."

He tossed the matches to her lap.

"Vilette, to play your game, go through what you've gone through—the strain of it! Any man would have caved in long ago. Only a woman can take it and smile."

CHAPTER XVIII

FIVE MILLIONS IN DIAMONDS

EVERHARD moved to the inner edge of the late afternoon crowd on the Rue de la Paix and paused before De Rossi's brightly lighted window.

Diamonds, as if diamonds were an inexpensive merchandise, lay twinkling on dark velvet. He leaned forward on his stick and scrutinized the gems with a seeming idler's interest; and, after a time, glanced at De Rossi's closed door, hung with opaque curtains. In the exclusive Parisian way, enticement was offered, but not invitation. The house of De Rossi had queens for customers, rich Americans, especially South Americans.

Everhard went in. It was a small shop with a dark, almost black, tone of simple decoration, relieved by traceries of gold. Diamonds are at an advantage against dark backgrounds in a bright light.

A dumpy, deep breasted woman and a full blown daughter were the only customers. Seldom more than one or two were in De Rossi's at a time. For long hours, none at all. The full breasted matron and her daughter sat in carved, high backed chairs before a low counter and were talking Spanish to a small young man who, without eagerness, but very attentively, was showing dinner rings.

A man with keen dark eyes came submissively toward Everhard and tried to conceal his effort at an appraisal of the stranger's financial resources and weaknesses. Princes incognito, hopeful of pleasing some impudent girl, and New York gangsters, meaning to make holiday expenses by smuggling home a pocketful of gems, came to De Rossi's; and all classes in between, except the fastidious aristocrats who feel that diamonds are garish, only pearls elegant.

"Monsieur?" said the salesman blandly, a polished fellow accustomed to pleasing rich persons.

"You speak English, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. You see," said Everhard, swinging open both topcoat and suit coat, disclosing a thick sheaf of franc notes that stood up in his inside pocket, "I've just won the Cuban lottery. And a friend tells me diamonds are going up in value. Better than stocks. Never be so low again. What do you think, hm?"

The salesman complimented the far sighted judgment of the worthy friend and studied Everhard's face, but he was confronted by one of the best poker faces that ever looked across green baize.

Everhard asked to see certain pieces in the window, including a collar, an elaborate thing of intense, solid brilliancy. A moment later he heard the low muffled buzz of a bell.

At once a well fed, small man with a half bald head and eyes more blandly keen than the salesman's came from the back of the shop. He wore a cutaway coat with bird winged tails that looked as if they might spread and flap. He addressed Everhard courteously.

Everhard started to answer laboriously in French, then gave it up and finished in English.

The salesman introduced the half bald man as Monsieur de Rossi himself, explained Everhard's interest in diamonds; and Monsieur de Rossi exclaimed admiringly at the perspicacious friend's good judgment in advising the investment. Sharp, tricky eyes, De Rossi had.

Everhard examined the collar while the two men talked together rapidly in French. The younger said:

"Of course, he is lying. He means to smuggle them into America. To say one is buying diamonds as an investment! That is the usual story. He has asked for the collar, but you will see what he buys are unset stones."

"Good," said Monsieur de Rossi. "We shall notify the American customs as usual, and gladly give him whatever he can pay for."

The American Government secretly rewards informers with one-third of the fine levied on undeclared goods, and never reveals the name of the informer—which is usually the foreign merchant who has sold the goods, though the merchants deny it.

Everhard let the collar lie across his fingers and watched the luscious Spanish girl. She noticed, tossed her head

with hauteur, and a moment later peeked hopefully. Merchant and salesman exchanged amused glances.

Everhard haggled, wanting a bargain. He said:

"I have a million francs with me and two more under the mattress in my room. Here, I'll show you." He laid the bundle of francs on the counter, indifferently. "Count 'em."

With that he turned away, waited, caught the Spanish girl's eye and winked. She returned a cold stare until sure that her mother was not noticing, then smiled shyly. Everhard casually picked up his francs and returned them to his pocket.

"I think I'll take this collar—perhaps. Let me see some rings. Oh, and unset stones, too."

Salesman and merchant exchanged bland glances. Moreover, they soon saw that the American knew diamonds pretty well, though he pretended to know nothing at all about them.

"A dealer," said Monsieur de Rossi to his salesman. "Very clever. We must look at his passport to be sure of his name. Learn where he is stopping."

The Spanish matron concluded her purchase and left, with her reluctant daughter glancing backward. Everhard then became more attentive to the bargaining.

He laid piece after piece aside; then—

"More unset stones, too."

Presently he waved his hand at the selection he had made.

"How much does all this figure out?"

They began to examine the jewelry and stones he had laid aside, and to write on a pad. Everhard shifted pieces and changed his mind, confusingly, and began to show some irritability, disputed quoted prices, putting salesman and merchant into a fret of anxiety.

"My friend," said Everhard, buttoning his coat, picking up his stick, "told me to come to De Rossi's or go to Landry's. I think I'll see what Landry's offer. I'm paying cash and buying diamonds—not costume jewelry. I don't like the way you muddle things up."

"Monsieur!" De Rossi protested with a sound of agony.

"Why can't we sit down alone and figure things out? He—" Everhard accused the helpful salesman—"keeps butting in."

"Ah, pardon!" said De Rossi with hopeful gleam in his eye. "Certainly! Just come into my private office. Bring monsieur's selection. The name, monsieur?"

"Jones," said Everhard. "William Harrington Jones."

"Bring Monsieur Jones' selection. Come, Monsieur Jones."

THEY went up a short flight of plush covered steps and entered a small office. Everhard glanced about. He had hoped for a back door. There wasn't any. A huge safe stood almost flush with the wall.

The salesman arranged the tray by De Rossi's elbow on the small table, and backed from the room, closing the door softly.

"Now, monsieur," said De Rossi, "let us begin. This collar—I have made you a very special price of three hundred and forty thousand francs. A bargain, monsieur! I lose money on it, but—"

"Pardon!" Everhard said in French, and leveled an automatic.

De Rossi gasped and started back.

"Don't give a signal—now—or later. If you have any doubts as to whether I will shoot, look at me more carefully, monsieur."

The look Everhard gave him was very convincing to Monsieur de Rossi.

Everhard gathered up the stuff off the tray by the handfuls and dropped it into his overcoat pocket.

De Rossi, after the first explosive astonishment, took the thing rather calmly. He said;

"Monsieur, I am insured. The heaviest part of the loss will not fall on me. But please permit me to explain, monsieur, that you can not possibly escape. There is no back exit; and the moment

you try to dash through the front—"

"Pardon, Monsieur de Rossi. I shall do no dashing. And since you are a gentleman, it will be a pleasure to have your company. I know that there are push buttons placed conveniently, which, if touched, will instantly lock the front door so that the ordinary thief has a poor chance to get away. Permit me to suggest that I am not an ordinary thief."

"Very true, monsieur," said De Rossi nervously.

"And may I ask if my presence here is wholly unexpected? You have no little package of paste—"

"Paste, monsieur? Never permitted in De Rossi's!"

"Thank you. I now see it all, perfectly. There has been a slight misunderstanding. It's quite all right. I am not wholly surprised. But now then, please, be very attentive to what I say, Monsieur de Rossi, for I shall tell you what to do and say, and how to act. You will escort me from your store, and accompany me. And I warn you, Monsieur de Rossi, that if either in the store or on the street, you give the least little faint suggestion of being displeased with my company—ah, monsieur, I should so dislike to give your family the sad pleasure of enjoying your life insurance. But," said Everhard, playing poker—"one false move and I'll kill you."

De Rossi gasped. He had never before realized in all of his life that looks and words could have so much the effect of a blow.

Everhard then gave De Rossi rather detailed instructions, with a gesture toward the safe. Monsieur de Rossi pushed a button. A man whom Everhard had not previously seen came in. De Rossi wiped his sweating forehead, but was otherwise almost composed, though rather tense.

"Monsieur Erold, I present you to Monsieur Jones. Monsieur Jones has just made a large selection of choice stones. I have put them, together with one million francs, in the safe here. And I am now going with him around to his apartment at the Hotel Crillon."

De Rossi then turned the key of a compartment in the safe, put it into his pocket and, with the help of Erold, got into his topcoat, took hat and stick. Erold accompanied them down the plush covered steps into the shop where both salesmen were now being attentive to a slim, dark woman whom De Rossi greeted unctuously as countess. He assured her that he would be right back and assist in any selection that she cared to make.

De Rossi and Everhard went through the front door together.

"Monsieur de Rossi," said Everhard with approval as they stood at the curb awaiting a taxi, "you are a fine fellow. Your manager, Erold, noticed that you are a little nervous, and wonders; but otherwise you are admirable. But remember, not a flicker out of you— Now what the devil?"

Monsieur Biradou was right there, very erect, with head up, and neat, square cut beard advanced like an insignia of rank. His dark eyes struck purposefully on Everhard's face, then struck demandingly on De Rossi's moist one as he moved from wall to curb through the shifting crowd.

"Play the game!" said Everhard warningly, with a hand on De Rossi's arm. The next instant he bowed a little, and said, "Ah, my friend Monsieur Biradou! Please, may I introduce you to Monsieur—"

"De Rossi and I are old friends," said Biradou crisply.

He looked at his old friend expectantly, and with imperative demand in his eyes.

"I have just explained to Monsieur de Rossi," said Everhard, "that I recently came into possession of a considerable sum of money. And since it is necessary for me to have certain diamonds this evening, we are now on our way to my apartment for the money and—"

"You are taking the diamonds with you, Monsieur de Rossi?" Biradou asked warningly.

Everhard's fingers furtively closed on De Rossi's arm, and the merchant said at once:

"Oh, no. Not at all! I—they are in the safe."

Everhard smoothly caught up the explanation—

"But as soon as I turn the money over to him, he will send them at once, as directed, to a certain very lovely person."

Biradou's slim, fine hand daintly stroked his beard. He peered more demandingly than ever at De Rossi; but De Rossi looked more determinedly than ever at passing cars, watching for a taxi.

"It would be pleasant to have you accompany us, if you like, Monsieur Biradou!" Everhard suggested, just a little mockingly.

Monsieur Biradou also, perhaps, had never played much poker. He gave Everhard a queer look of irritated and contemptuous disappointment, hesitated, then with crisp, bitter twitch of lips, "*Mouscailleur!*"—the same being, in jargon, an undependable fellow, fit only for cleaning sewers. With that, Biradou swung on his heel and marched off.

"Here is a taxi!" said De Rossi, and waved his stick, nervously signaling.

They got in.

"To the Concorde Metro," said Everhard; then to De Rossi, "Please accept my sincere appreciation for your courteous help. I see now that Monsieur Biradou was tipped off as to what I meant to do. Live and learn—never to trust a woman, Monsieur de Rossi. Personally, I believe that you have good reasons to assure the insurance companies that you will most probably recover your stones. Monsieur Biradou is a clever man, but for this once he couldn't imagine what the devil was happening, and so guessed wrong. But what he says to you when he learns the truth will be most painful to hear!"

The taxi stopped.

"You may now return to your store," said Everhard, getting out. Standing at the open door, he lifted his hat and held out his hand. "Goodby, and may I thank you, monsieur!"

De Rossi drew back into a corner and pulled his hands against him. He said nothing, but stared balefully. Then he leaned out of the cab to watch Everhard walk unhurriedly to the underground entrance and disappear down the stairs.

EVERHARD closed the automatic elevator, sent it down, stepped across the hall and rang the bell.

A slim, thin faced maid in high heels, lace cap, lace fringed apron, opened the door and stared uninvitingly. She had hot eyes and the mouth of a snake.

"Mademoiselle Colbert, if you please."

"Your name, monsieur, if you please?"

"Monsieur Richmond."

The maid stepped back, as if reluctantly.

Everhard entered the hallway. The maid cheerlessly held out her hand for hat and stick, and watched with disfavor as he removed his coat. Something was wrong somewhere. She led the way into the living room and said:

"Please be seated. Mademoiselle Colbert will come—presently."

There was a peculiar inflection on the word "presently"; and he soon began to understand why. He sauntered about the room, turning at every sound, but Vilette did not come. He sat down before the fire, meditating. He groped idly among the loose jewels that he had transferred to his dress coat pocket. He shifted to another chair and took up a magazine. He looked at his watch and noted that almost an hour had passed. Vilette chose to keep him waiting, and the maid had known that she would.

Vilette came in languidly, a cigaret in her fingers. She wore black; a plain black dress with high, tight, close fitting collar, black stockings, and there were large, plaited buns over her ears. She glanced at him with aloof disinterest, said, "Good evening" in a most casual way, and flipped the ashes from her cigaret. She lifted her eyes coldly, asked,

"Well?" and turned away, taking up a magazine as she sat down.

Everhard eyed her thoughtfully, but could not quite guess what it was all about.

"You don't look happy," he suggested.

"No?" She turned the magazine, not looking up.

"Who's dead?"

"Nobody that I know of." Vilette seemed interested in a perfume advertisement.

"Not so good, black—and buns."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm in mourning for an idea. It has died, completely." Without lifting her eyes from the magazine she reached out and crushed her cigaret on the tray.

Everhard was sadly puzzled. He glanced about the room. She had warned him of listeners, spies, microphones. He went near her, his hands in a coat pocket. The hand came out with the diamond collar. He dangled it before her, but she did not look up. He put it on the top of the magazine and let it slip down into her lap.

She would not lift her eyes, but groping fingers picked it up, felt it sensitively; then, reaching absently toward the table, she laid it beside the cigaret tray.

Her face lifted. Her eyes, straight and hard, looked at him.

"Of course, you can always return it and get your money back, you know."

She touched one bun, then the other, eyeing him. Her glance fell interestedly on a facial cream advertisement.

Everhard said:

"Now I know why nice boys are said to have blown their brains out on your doorstep. You'd make a polar bear shiver."

He pushed a small bronze elephant out of the way and sat on a corner of the library table, looking at her thoughtfully. The magazine rustled as she turned a page.

"I'm beginning to get it, Vilette. All of it!"

Her tone was cold, firm, and she studied the picture of a corset:

"You may take your diamonds and go. Never return."

"And I'd like something to read, too. A phone book," he said firmly.

Vilette, with languid insolence, reached for a push button. Somewhere a buzzer whirred faintly.

The maid appeared.

"You rang, mademoiselle?"

"The telephone book for monsieur."

The maid shot a glance at Everhard, went near the wall, pulled out a drawer, took a phone book, then pressed a button and brought the telephone into view. She crossed to Everhard and held out the book.

"Thank you," said Everhard. She turned. "One moment, please—"

The maid faced him. Vilette peeked furtively over the top of the magazine. Everhard took a handful of diamond trinkets and loose stones from the coat pocket, selected a ring with an oblong cluster of diamonds, and offered it, saying:

"Paste, of course, mademoiselle—so I was told! But such good paste that it will fool every one. May I? To you?"

The maid hesitatingly glanced at Vilette, but Vilette was reading, fixedly.

"No thank you, monsieur," the maid said, tempted, and started to turn.

Everhard tossed the ring. She caught it, peered at it, glanced wonderingly at him and went away, looking repeatedly at the ring.

He examined the telephone list, then went to the phone. In a moment he was saying:

"*Herald?* City editor, if you please ... City editor? If you please, I am Mademoiselle de Rossi's chauffeur, and mademoiselle has been trying in vain to get through to her father's store to learn if there is any truth in the report that—please, just a moment, and mademoiselle herself will speak to you."

"I have nothing to inquire about," said Vilette coldly, laying the magazine aside and taking up another.

Everhard put his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Come to this phone—" It was just as if he looked across a poker table and said, "Pay me!"

HIS tone lifted her eyes; and the look in his eyes lifted her out of the chair. She stared at him as she crossed to the phone, and she turned, following him with her glance as he walked away. He returned to a corner of the table where he sat swinging a foot and staring at the fire.

"This is Mademoiselle de Rossi— Ah —what do you say! Five million francs! Oh, how dreadful! And Monsieur Biradou himself saw—spoke— Oh!"

Vilette slowly replaced the telephone on its rack. Very slowly she pushed the instrument into the compartment and closed it. She looked across at Everhard's back and, with slow, lingering steps, went near him, and paused. Then she went around in front of him, stood there and gazed pleadingly. He did not see her, but opened a novel and fingered the pages.

"If I get down on my knees, will you?"

"Not if you crawled on 'em from here to Jerusalem and back!" Everhard looked at her; it was the look he would have given a friend caught cheating at cards.

"I'm sorry." Her slim, lithe body had a suppliant's humility. "Oh, I might have known you wouldn't— But I didn't! Oh, please!"

"I might have known some things too, but I didn't. Not till I saw your friend Biradou waiting to nail me."

"Can't I explain?"

"Go ahead and try."

"Oh, I know what you think!"

Everhard shook his head, smiling.

"Oh, no, you don't. No. I think Fifi Guyot a wise, trustworthy little virgin—comparatively, that is."

Vilette's face grew pale, as tense as when one suffers pain silently. The slim hands hung loosely. He liked it that she did not try to touch him, playing the woman's tricky game of coaxing. At least she took what was coming to her without a whimper.

A brocaded runner, intermingled with rich browns and dull gold, lay on the table. He pulled it, wadding it into a kind of nest. His hands dipped into the coat pocket. His fingers dripped glittering gems into the brocaded cup.

"Very good. Everything has been explained to De Rossi, eh? By my father, of course! Who else? Well, Vilette, here you are. I said I'd do it—so they'd think I did it for you. Here they are. But if you are wise, send 'em back to De Rossi."

His fingers scooped at the pocket. A few more unset stones fell glittering into the nest.

"That's all. All of them. And I warned you, didn't I, that I wouldn't get caught. But you thought—just because the great Biradou got to a telephone and said so—that I'd beat your little frame-up by spending Hovenden's million francs. Thought I'd lie and say I stole 'em, eh? Thought I'd four-flush on you!"

"Please."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you, Vilette. No. Cats scratch and women cheat. That's God's fault—not theirs. I said I knew you'd throw me or any man to the wolves. I didn't think the wolf would be Biradou. You've been holding out on me all along about that fellow. What devil's game you're playing with him, I don't know. But you win, Vilette. I'm caught. He knows whom to look for. This frame-up does get me. I can dodge for a day or two—maybe. Not longer. But I know now how he knew so well what passports I carried. You went through my things once upon a time—remember?—missed your lunch to do it—on the *Trivilia*."

Vilette made a trembling gesture with both hands, imploring him. Almost inaudibly, in a faint, agonized whisper—

"Every word you say is overheard!"

Everhard nodded, and with no change of tone went on—

"You wanted to please Biradou—"

"Shh-h-h!" It was scarcely more than a trembling gasp, and her body stiffened rigidly, with eyes pleading.

"Don't lie to me. You know it, and everybody else knows it. Can be no secret about that. And now if your pretty maid, or butler, or handsome chauffeur hasn't already notified the police that I am here, don't. I'm warning you. My price is four hours' start. And tell your friend Biradou to stay away from me. Somebody'll get me, all right. But I'll be damned if he gets the credit. And if he makes a try for it, he'll get hurt. Understand, Vilette?"

She nodded weakly, but her eyes implored.

"Goodby, Vilette."

"Don't go!"

"Yes, must. For one thing, I'm going to drop in at a little birthday party. Pay Dodalus back the money I sent you. Won't stay long. But I keep promises—to friends."

He idly ran his fingers among the jewels.

Vilette, with clenched fist to her mouth, shook her head, begging. Her dark eyes had a terrified stare. Through the audible breathing against her hand came the insistent, vague words:

"Don't! Don't go! Don't leave me! Please don't go—"

Everhard laughed at her quietly.

"Clever kid, Vilette. I missed college; but it doesn't matter, now that I've known you. One thing more. I'll be nabbed in a day or two, but don't interest yourself in how I make out. Understand? I'll plead guilty, and take it—maybe. But I'll not accept any help from strangers—like you!"

He turned his back on her, adjusted his coat, felt in his pocket to see if there was another loose stone, and patted it. He fastened the bottom button, then turned toward her again.

Vilette stood with one hand on the table as if supporting herself, the other sensitively toying with the small bronze elephant. Her face dropped too quickly for him to see the look with which she had been staring at him, and she stood with an air of half timid, furtive guilt.

Everhard put his palm under her chin and lifted her face. She looked at him steadily. Her eyes were tense, hot, and a thin glaze of fright seemed to overlay a look of desperate intent. He studied for a long minute; then—

"Don't try it, Vilette."

"Try what?" she gasped.

He shook his head.

"I'm not sure. You're up to something. But whatever it is, don't. And I'm getting a band of crape for my arm. Death of an idea, eh? Pretty thought, that. So delicate. Death of the idea that anybody is to be trusted. You look like hell with buns. That was another delicate way of telling me things, too, eh? Clever child." Everhard patted her bloodless cheek softly. "Goodby."

"But you said you would stay with me to the end of the game!" she said brokenly.

"Did I? How well you remember—some things. But you were through, all through with me. And made it plain. Anything that's tossed to the discards, Vilette, doesn't get back into the game until there's a new deal. Goodby."

He flipped his hand carelessly and turned toward the door.

Vilette's teeth shut, edge to edge, like a sprung trap. The desperate look blazed in her eyes. With no glance aside, her right hand, as if there were eyes in her fingers, closed on the little bronze elephant.

She took two noiseless steps. With a stiff arm swing that began below the hip and was carried up by a pivotal turn of her lithe body, she struck the back of his head as Everhard, noticing that she followed, was turning to look behind. An instant too late he had sensed rather than seen what was coming. As he fell, the automatic, drawn in an instinctive movement, clattered to the floor.

TO BE CONCLUDED

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

A READER called attention to a slip which Charles Peden recently made in his article, "The Ice Patrol" (December 1st issue). As the author says in his reply, he himself caught it before the issue appeared, but too late for us to change in proof.

U. S. S. Unalga,
Curtis Bay,
Baltimore, Md.

In your Dec. 1 issue of *Adventure* you published a story on "The Ice Patrol" by Charles Peden. He seemed to have considered his experiences somewhat of an ordeal, due in part to the frailness and unseaworthy condition of the ice patrol cutters. He also quoted the cutters as being old and wooden in construction. In the foregoing narrative he was very much in error. Both cutters, *Mohave* and *Modoc*, are modern steel constructed vessels, completed in 1921. They are two hundred and forty feet in length and are propelled by means of electric drive, which gives them a speed of sixteen knots. They are very seaworthy vessels and very comfortable thruout.

I spent three years on the *Modoc*, which included the ice patrol for the years 1922, 1923 and 1924. During my time at sea I have sailed in various types of ships, both steam and sail, but never have sailed in more seaworthy or comfortable craft than the ice patrol cutters. We used to spend about twenty days at sea, fourteen of which would be spent on patrol, and the other six days in making a rendezvous with the relieving cutter and returning to the base at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The ice patrol has been carried on by the U. S. Coast Guard since 1914. The cost of the patrol is borne by the leading maritime nations in proportion to their ratio of tonnage.

—HAROLD C. WATERS,
Chief Gunner's Mate,
U. S. Coast Guard.

Mr. Peden's reply:

New York, N. Y.

In answer to your letter, which has just reached me, yes, I know that the patrol boats are of steel.

Unfortunately, at the time the copy was sent to the magazine, I was under the impression that they were wood. If you recall, the story was told to me by another cameraman. He insisted that the ships were wooden, and you'd be surprised at the number of other folks that think the same way. I was not in a locality where I could check these facts at the time. However, a week or so after I sent in the story, I was assigned to the Coast Guard for pictures of the target practice off Montauk. Though having worked with the Coast Guard aboard "tin cans", "six-bitters", and the 125-foot boats, I had never sailed with the cutters.

Now in the ward room of the *Champlain*, over coffee one morning, I outlined the story I had sent in. The Exec howled and said that I'd probably have every loyal son that ever sailed on the *Mohave* after me for the remark that the ship was of wood. Unfortunately, there was no way I could get in touch with the printers until I finished my assignment. When I did manage to get to New York I visited the editor of *Adventure*, and told him of the error. He found, however, that the proofs had gone through and the book of December first already printed. It was too late to correct the error. Consequently I have expected complaints. Several have come in from ex-members of the *Mohave's* personnel to date.

I wrote a letter of apology to Commander Parker of the *Mohave* and asked that he post it on board the vessel, also one went to Staten Island Headquarters.

I DO, however, take exception to your observation that I considered riding in such a ship as an ordeal. Those were the words of Carey, the other cameraman, to me. It was his story and he still says it was an ordeal. Now though you made three tours of duty on the patrol, it doesn't mean that you caught the dirtiest weather the ship ever rode out. Carey's trip may have been a wow.

In the course of my varied duty I have sailed sampans off Kamchatka, Fijian cutters, Von Luckner's *Mopelia*, the *Olympic*, *Europa* and such liners, the *Texas*, *Indianapolis* and other Navy boats, and I think I've seen some pretty lousy seas; but I'll take my chances with boats in the two hundred foot class in any weather. I shouldn't call that an ordeal. Carey, however, felt that way about it, and when a man's first sea voyage is the North Atlantic in winter I daresay you or I can't very well argue with him.

My recollection of the worst beating I ever took was three days aboard a six-bitter adrift on Lake Erie, back in January of '29. That, mister, was an ordeal, especially the last part, where we had to clamber to a stretch of ice, fall in, then trek six miles to Buffalo with a camera over our shoulder. Even the warrant officer with us welcomed that station out on the seawall!

—CHARLES PEDEN

INCIDENTALLY, Mr. Peden's articles on the adventures of the Movietone cameramen, which have been appearing in our pages, have just been brought out in book form. The book is called "Newsreel Man", and is published by the Doubleday, Doran Co.

Other books by *Adventure* authors, currently to be had at the bookshops, are: "S-54", by Commander Edward Ellsberg (Dodd Mead Co.); "Memoirs of a Soldier of Fortune", by General Rafael de Nogales (Harrison, Smith Inc.); Smoky Pass, by Aubrey Boyd (E. P. Dutton & Co.) The latter two stories, as you will recognize from their titles, were first serialized in our pages. Commander Ellsberg's book, a collection of short stories and novelettes, is also composed, with one exception, of *Adventure* contributions.

AMERICAN veterans of the World War will be interested in this bit of history of the "Byng Boys", the Service men's outfit of our comrades to the north of us:

St. John, New Brunswick

As a reader of *Adventure*, I'd like to call your attention to a unique organization of Canadian war veterans, some of whose members are doubtless also readers of the magazine: the Byng Boys.

"Stretcher Cases Only"—such was the *sine qua non* of eligibility to membership in a club of ex-service men formed in St. John in the year 1919. This exacting condition naturally constituted an effective barrier to the swarm of "tin soldiers" who blossomed so luxuriantly at the close of the war. This strange club chose as its name "Ca N'a Fait Rien"—translate it if you can! The men who had served in France, illustrating the marvelous aptitude acquired there in adding French phrases to the vernacular, immediately read the title as "The San Fairy Ann."

According to tradition, this organization was really the genesis of the Byng Boys. In the evolutionary process the original rules were relaxed to include officers and men of the land, sea and air forces of the Empire armies who had experienced actual service as combatants in the Great War.

THE home of the Byng Boys, on the St. John River, is a veritable treasure-house of interesting war relics.

Prominent among them, and exemplifying the more than a century of peace between Canada and her big southern neighbor, are a musket and powder horn, captured at the battle of Bunker Hill, the gift of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Boston after the staff of that aristocratic organization had enjoyed the hospitality of the Club while visiting this city a few years ago. The powder horn bears a brass plate inscribed "A. & H. Art. Co.—1638."

OVER the fireplace in the messroom appears a human skull, electrically lighted, topped by a German guard's helmet; below it a suit of the steel armor worn by the Kaiser's shock troops. This unusual decoration is sympathetically referred to as "dear old Von Kluck." Flanking this, on one side, is a large papier-mâché model of the ruins of St. Eloi cathedral; on the other a similar representation of the cathedral at Albert showing the "leaning Virgin" as it appeared after an enemy projectile had struck it. These models, faithful to the originals and fine examples of true artistry, were the work of one of the Club members.

Another trophy of which the Club is very proud is a large Maltese cross, black on white linen, stretched on the ceiling of the reception room. This was salvaged from the wreck of the first Gotha bombing plane brought down in France, the victim of a former airman, now a member of this Club. A large bronze bell which had been used as a gas alarm at enemy headquarters and was discarded in the haste of evacuation; and a lamp taken from H.M.S. *Aurora* which was lost at the battle of Jutland, are two other greatly prized souvenirs among numerous others.

A BRIEF inspection of the Club library shows that here one could live the war all over again were one given the time to browse among the volumes. A glance at the guest book is quite sufficient to assure one of the standing of the Club. It opens with the signature of Byng of Vimy, the Club's distinguished patron. Other names among the hundreds inscribed therein are: Lord Allenby of Megiddon who, as General Allenby, led his army across the parched Sinai desert and wrested the Holy Land from the Turks; Sir Percy Lake; Lord Bessborough, the present Governor General of Canada; and scores of others high in military and official life in the Empire.

As for the name, "The Byng Boys Club" here is the story: There was running in London in 1916 a very popular musical comedy, "The Bing Boys are Here." When, during that year, Gen. Byng was given command of the Canadian Corps, some one christened the corps the "Byng Boys", and popular hits from the comedy were adopted as regimental marches for many units. They carried to the Somme banners with the inscription "Look Out, Fritz! The Byng Boys are Here."

Came the year 1922, the boys back home and their commander, now Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor General of Canada. Many who served under him, wishing to keep alive the old friendships of those days and to perpetuate the memory of the corps, advised Lord Byng of the formation of a club, asked his permission to use the name and invited him to become Honorary Officer Commanding. A gracious acquiescence to use the name was forthcoming, coupled with his Excellency's regrets that in his position he could not, for the time being, accept the honorary title. However, upon the completion of his term, he assented and on his return to England granted permission to use his crest.

THE Club is run on strictly military lines, the "Staff" consisting of O.C., Second in Command, Adjutant, Asst. Adjt., Paymaster, Quartermaster, Transport, Medical and Naval Stores Officers. During the Winter a mess night is held every other Saturday, while in summer there is a parade once a month.

This Club has consistently lived up to its ideals. Here the true spirit of camaraderie prevails. The interest of its members has never flagged. Thin attendance is very rare. While militarism is not encouraged—the horrors of war as well as its glories being evident here—yet it is impossible to visit it without again breathing the spirit which dominated all in the trying years of 1914-1918.

—FREDERIC L. ROGERS

ON breaking a horse of halter pulling:

San Diego, California

I see in Ask Adventure where a reader inquires about halter pulling horses. As I had lots of experience with them I give him my way of breaking any and every horse and stallion:

To start, have a sound strong post embedded deep in the ground. Next get a good ¾ inch rope about ten feet long. Make two knots 6 inches apart in the middle of your rope, so the knots will fit snug in the hollow right behind horse's ear. The knots must fit snug in the hollows. Pass the rope over horse's head, pass through halter ring and tie to post. When horse is tied, throw coat or something in horse's face, making him pull back. Repeat two or three times, and horse will be broken of this habit as long as he lives.

The fault lies not with the horses at all, but in the careless habit men have, in tying young or unbroken horses to anything handy. If a horse gets excited and pulls back and the object the horse is tied to gives way, then you have pull back forever, unless corrected by this method.

There is another thing I will state while I am at it: A man who does not love a horse really has no business handling or to be around one at all.

—FRANK FOURNIER

SHOOTING oil well with nitroglycerin —a reader comments on Victor Shaw's recent letter on the subject in Ask Adventure:

Skiatook, Oklahoma

I have read *Adventure* for many years and today received from my newsdealer the March 15th issue. As is my habit, I first turned to the Ask Adventure section. I there found an interesting article by Mr. Victor Shaw in reply to a query regarding the shooting of an oil well by nitroglycerin.

I would like to say that I have spent nearly all my life in the oil fields of both this country and of Mexico, and never yet have I seen a well shot as Mr. Shaw describes it. I would say that Mr. Shaw's experience and observations have been extremely limited. I note in the Ask Adventure index that Mr. Shaw is listed as a mining expert only, which perhaps explains his ignorance of the oil business, which is not, strictly speaking, related to mining as mining is understood by most people. Of course it is mining, but of an entirely different technique than that obtaining in the gold fields, which I take it, are Mr. Shaw's specialty.

One would conclude from Mr. Shaw's article that an oil well was shot with not more than six quarts of nitro at the most. As a matter of fact, wells are often shot with as high as six hundred quarts and as little as one pint, depending on the well. In the very hard Trenton rock oil sand of Ohio, a much larger shot is used than in other fields where the sand is softer. Too, the thickness of the oil sand determines the size of the shot. As a rule it is desirable to shoot all of the pay sand, which means that the size of the shot is determined by the size of the hole and the thickness of the pay. The tubes, or shells, as they are called, in which the nitro is lowered into the well, will hold twenty quarts each. Many years ago a "go-devil" was used to set off the nitro, but not now. Sometimes a "squib", a small tube containing perhaps a pint of nitro, with time fuse lighted, is dropped to explode the main charge. Usually, however, the shot is set off by means of an electric spark, which is conducted to the charge by means of an insulated wire; the spark being created by a hand operated magneto by the shooter.

AS FOR the destructiveness of nitro, I would like to say that it is mighty peculiar. I have known many men who were blown into nothing by a very small quantity. Again, I knew one man who three times escaped without a scratch when the factory which he owned and operated blew up.

On every occasion he was in the factory when it blew, and although a hole big enough to hold the factory was blown in the ground, he miraculously received no harm. He often said glycerin couldn't kill him. However, he was finally killed when his factory blew up the third time, but he was right in saying that he couldn't be killed by nitro. He was standing in the open door when the explosion came the last time and was uninjured, but some of the building fell on him and he was burned to death before help could get to him. This incident can be attested to by any old-timer at Bradner, Ohio.

AS FOR shooters not living long, I will say that the old time, hard drinking rootin'-tootin' shooter certainly didn't last very long. But nowadays efficient business methods obtain and one rarely hears of accidents. A man who depends on Dutch courage to keep up his nerve can not get a job as shooter. They're too expensive. The old-time shooter took pride in showing how reckless he was. I remember shooting a well at Lima, Ohio, many years ago; it was necessary to let down a high rail fence so the shooter could drive to the well. A bunch of seven or eight farmers, who had come to see the well shot, obligingly opened the fence for the shooter, but when they still lacked three rails of having the fence down, he yelled, "That's enough!" and drove over at a trot. The wagon bounced at least three feet into the air but luckily, didn't explode. This shooter was typical of them all at that time.

—E. A. BABCOCK

OUR Camp-fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance.

If you are come to our Camp-fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There are no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

Ask Adventure

For free information and services you can't get elsewhere

Indian Diet

PINOLE and pemmican for a modern outdoorsman.

Request:—"1. How can I make that old Indian emergency ration, 'pinole'?

2. Where can I buy pemmican, and about how much a pound is it?"

—J. KATZ, The Bronx, New York

Reply, by Mr. Paul M. Fink:—1. My own method of making pinole, or rockihominy, is to parch corn in an oven to a golden brown, then grind in an old fashioned coffee mill, putting it through the mill several times until the resulting powder is about like coarse meal. It can be eaten as is or mixed with a little water and drunk.

Don't make the mistake of taking too much at a time. A couple of tablespoonsful will be plenty.

2. You should be able to procure pemmican from Fiala Outfits, Inc., 47 Warren Street; Abercrombie & Fitch, Madison Ave. & 45th St.; or David T. Abercrombie Co., 311 Broadway, all New York. The last quotation I saw on this a couple of years or so ago was in the neighborhood of $1.00 per pound, as I recall it. Should be less now than then.

Jump

HOW to establish your take-off distance from the bar.

Request:—"1. What are some good exercises for the jumping muscles?

2. How far from the bar should I jump, and at what kind of angle?"

—I. BASS, Brooklyn, New York

Reply, by Mr. Jackson Scholz:—1. Two good exercises for high jumping are: (a) Deep knee bending, remaining always upon the toes. (b) Jump from the ground on to a low platform or table. In this manner you derive the benefit of the leap, but are spared the jar of landing.

2. To establish your take-off distance, stand facing the bar, and kick with your left foot so that the toe nearly touches the bar itself. Mark the spot where you are standing with your right foot, and take off from there.

Moths

THEY like their liquor, and are doubtless more difficult to catch since prohibition.

Request:—"What recipe for sugaring for moths have you found to be most effective?"

—ALVIN MEYER, Brooklyn, New York

Reply, by Dr. S. W. Frost:—I hesitate to give a formula, these days of prohibition, for sugaring. Most specialists recommend a mixture of brown sugar, water, stale beer and a little rum. However, every entomologist has his own formula. Brown sugar and vinegar is used sometimes, or brown sugar and rotten apples or other decaying fruit. Refiners' syrup also makes a good bait, especially if a little yeast is added to cause it to ferment. Different moths are attracted by different odors, and a change in the bait will be advantageous. Sufficient water is used in the baits to make a rather thick liquid that can be painted on the trees or objects to be treated.

Brakemen

SOME prefer freights; there's more pay.

Request:—"Could you give me some general information on the duties of a brakeman?"

—E. GARNETT, Brooklyn, New York

Reply, by Mr. R. T. Newman:—The duties of a passenger or freight train brakeman are many.

A passenger brakeman looks after the loading of passengers, does the flagging at rear when necessary, and, when there is only one brakeman, calls stations, helps the train baggageman when necessary, looks after the passengers' comfort, picks up and sets out cars when necessary, and the hundred other duties connected with the work.

A freight brakeman, if on through freight, has rather a good job, riding the train over his division, looking after his end of the train, picking up and setting out cars when necessary, fixing hot boxes when they occur, and many other duties connected with the operation of freights.

Passenger brakemen are mostly taken from the freight service, but many brakemen prefer to work on freight rather than passenger trains, as they make more money.

Gem

THERE are no flawless emeralds.

Request:—"1. Are flawless emeralds of any size ever found?

2. Which is valued most, ruby or emerald?

3. Where are the finest emeralds found? Rubies? Diamonds? Sapphires?"

—G. MEEK, Everett, Washington

Reply, by Mr. F. J. Esterlin:—1. There are no flawless emeralds.

2. Size for size and quality for quality the ruby is more valuable than the emerald.

3. At present the finest emeralds come from Colombia; the finest rubies from Burma; the finest diamonds (in color) from the Jagersfontein mine in Africa; and the finest sapphires from the Kashmir district in India.

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 envelope 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.

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing *Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting; bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.*—JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

Small Boating *Skiff, outboard, small launch river and lake cruising.*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, California.

Canoeing *Paddling, sailing, cruising; equipment and accessories, clubs, organizations, official meetings, regattas.*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, 536 S. Clark St., Chicago, Illinois.

Motor Boating GERALD T. WHITE, Montville, New Jersey.

Motor Camping MAJOR CHAS. G. PERCIVAL, M. D., care American Tourist Camp Assn., 152 West 65th St., New York City.

Yachting A. R. KNAUER, 2722 E. 75th Place, Chicago. Ill.

Motor Vehicles *Operation, legislative restrictions and traffic.*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care *Adventure.*

Automotive and Aircraft Engines *Design, operation and maintenance.*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care *Adventure.*

All Shotguns *including foreign and American makes: wing shooting.*—JOHN B. THOMPSON, care *Adventure.*

All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers, *including foreign and American makes.*—DONEGAN WIGGINS, R. F. D. 3, Box 75, Salem, Ore.

Edged Weapons *pole arms and armor.*—CAPT. ROBERT E. GARDNER, High-Seventh Armory, Columbus, Ohio.

First Aid on the Trail *Medical and surgical emergency care, wounds, injuries, common illnesses, diet, pure water, clothing, insect and snake bite; first aid and sanitation for mines, logging camps, ranches and exploring parties as well as for camping trips of all kinds.*—CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D. Box 322, Westfield, New Jersey.

Health-Building Outdoors *How to get well and how to keep well in the open air, where to go and how to travel, right exercises, food and habits.*—CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D.

Hiking CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D., Box 322, Westfield, New Jersey.

Camping and Woodcraft PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tennessee.

Mining and Prospecting *Territory anywhere in North America. Questions on mines, mining, mining law, methods and practise; where and how to prospect; outfitting; development of prospect after discovery; general geology and mineralogy necessary for prospector or miner in any portion of territory named. Any question on any mineral, metallic or nonmetallic.* —VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Precious and Semi-precious Stones *Cutting and polishing of gem materials; principal sources of supply; technical information regarding physical characteristics, crystallography, color and chemical composition.*—F. J. ESTERLIN, 210 Post St., San Francisco, Cal.

Forestry in the United States *Big-Game hunting, guides and equipment; national forests of the Rocky Mountain States. Questions on the policy of the Government regarding game and wild animal life in the forests.*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

Tropical Forestry *Tropical forests and products; economic possibilities; distribution; exploration, etc. No questions on employment.*—WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, care of Insular Forester, Rio Piedras, Porto Rico.

Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada *General office, especially immigration work, advertising work, duties of station agent, bill clerk, ticket agent, passenger brakeman, rate clerk, General Information.*—R. T. NEWMAN, P. O. Drawer 368, Anaconda, Mont.

Army Matters, United States and Foreign CAPTAIN GLEN R. TOWNSEND, Ripon, Wisconsin.

Navy Matters *Regulations, history, customs, drill, gunnery: tactical and strategic questions, ships, propulsion, construction, classification; general information. Questions regarding the enlisted personnel and officers except such as contained in the Register of Officers can not be answered. Maritime law.*—LIEUT. FRANCIS V. GREENE, U. S. N. R. (Retired), 442 Forty-ninth St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

U. S. Marine Corps CAPT. F. W. HOPKINS, 541 No. Harper Ave., Hollywood, Cal.

Aviation *Airplanes; airships; airways and landing fields; contests; Aero Clubs; insurance; laws; licenses; operating data schools; foreign activities; publications. Parachutes and gliders. No questions on stock promotion.*—LIEUTENANT JEFFREY R. STARKS, 1408 "N" Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

State Police FRANCIS H. BENT, Box 176, Farmingdale, N. J.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police PATRICK LEE, 189-16 Thirty-seventh Avenue, Flushing, New York.

Horses *Care, breeding, training of horses in general; hunting, jumping, and polo; horses of the old and new West.* —THOMAS H. DAMERON, 1709 Berkley Ave., Pueblo, Colo.

Dogs JOHN B. THOMPSON, care *Adventure.*

American Anthropology North of the Panama Canal *Customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions.*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Cal.

Taxidermy SETH BULLOCK, care *Adventure.*

Entomology *General information about insects and spiders; venomous and disease-carrying insects, etc.*—DR. S. W. FROST, Arendtsville, Pa.

Herpetology *General information on reptiles and amphibians; their habits and distribution.*—KARL P. SCHMIDT, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Illinois.

Ichthyology *Fishes and lower aquatic vertebrates.*—GEORGE S. MYERS, Stanford University, Calif.

Ornithology *General information on birds; their habits and distribution.*—DAVIS QUINN, 3548 Tryon Ave., Bronx, New York, N. Y.

Stamps H. A. DAVIS, The American Philatelic Society, 3421 Colfax Ave., Denver, Colo.

Coins and Medals HOWLAND WOOD, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th St., New York City.

Radio *Telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets.*—DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J.

Photography *Information on outfitting and on work in out-of-the-way places. General information.*—PAUL L. ANDERSON, 36 Washington St., East Orange, New Jersey.

★**Linguistics and Ethnology** *(a) Racial and tribal tradition; folklore and mythology. (b) Languages and the problems of race migration. (c) Individual languages and language families; interrelation of tongues.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Old Songs that Men Have Sung ROBERT W. GORDON. *Archive of American Folk-Song: Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.*

Football JOHN B. FOSTER, American Sports Pub. Co., 45 Rose Street, New York City.

Baseball FREDERICK LIEB, *The New York Evening Post*, 75 West St., New York City.

Track JACKSON SCHOLZ, P. O. Box 163, Jenkintown, Pa.

Basketball I. S. ROSE, 321 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.

Bicycling ARTHUR J. LEAMOND, 469 Valley St., South Orange, New Jersey.

Swimming LOUIS DEB. HANDLEY, 260 Washington St., N. Y. C.

✢**Skiing and Snowshoeing** W. H. PRICE, 3436 Mance St., Montreal, Quebec.

Hockey "Daniel," *The World-Telegram*, 73 Dey St., New York City.

Archery EARL B. POWELL, care of *Adventure.*

Wrestling CHARLES B. CRANFORD, 57 E. 56th St., New York City.

Boxing CAPT. JEAN V. GROMBACH.

Fencing CAPT. JEAN V. GROMBACH, 455 West 23rd St. New York City.

The Sea Part 1 *American Waters.* Also ships, seamen, wages, duties, addresses of all ocean lines and liners; shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, small boat sailing; commercial fisheries of North America.—LIEUT. HARRY E. RIESEBERG, 118 Uhler St., Mt. Ida, Alexandria, Va.

The Sea Part 2 *Statistics and records of American shipping: names, tonnages, dimensions, service, crews, owners of an American documental steam, motor, sail, yacht and unrigged merchant vessels. Vessels lost, abandoned, sold to aliens and all government owned vessels.*—LIEUT. HARRY E. RIESEBERG, 118 Uhler St., Mt. Ida, Alexandria, Va.

★**The Sea Part 3** *British Waters.* Also old-time sailoring.—CAPTAIN DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

The Sea Part 4 *Atlantic and Indian Oceans: Cape Horn and Magellan Straits; Islands and Coasts.* (See also West Indian Sections.)—CAPT. DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

★**The Sea Part 5** *The Mediterranean; Islands and Coasts.* —CAPT. DINGLE, care *Adventure.*

The Sea Part 6 *Arctic Ocean.* (*Siberian Waters.*)—CAPT. C. L. OLIVER, care *Adventure.*

Hawaii DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Philippine Islands BUCK CONNOR, Quartzsite, Arizona, care of Conner Field.

★**New Guinea** *Questions regarding the policy of the Government proceedings of Government officers not answered.*—L. P. B. ARMIT, Port Moresby, Territory of Papua, via Sydney, Australia.

★**New Zealand, Cook Islands, Samoa** TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand.

★**Australia and Tasmania** ALAN FOLEY, 18a Sandridge Street, Bondi, Sydney, Australia.

★**South Sea Islands** WILLIAM MCCREADIE, "Cardross", Suva, Fiji.

Asia Part 1 *Siam, Andamans, Malay Straits, Straits Settlements, Shan States; and Yunnan.*—GORDON MACCREAGH, Box 197, Centerport, Long Island, N. Y.

Asia Part 2 *Java, Sumatra, Dutch East Indies in general, India, Kashmir. No questions on employment.*—CAPT. R. W. VAN RAVEN DE STURLER, care *Adventure.*

Asia Part 3 *Anam, Laos, Cambodia, Tongking, Cochin, China.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

★**Asia Part 4** *Southern and Eastern China.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

★**Asia Part 6** *Northern China and Mongolia.*—GEORGE W. TWOMEY, M. D., U. S. Veterans' Hospital, Fort Snelling, Minn. and DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Asia Part 7 *Japan.*—OSCAR E. RILEY, 4 Huntington Ave., Scarsdale, New York.

Asia Part 8 *Persia, Arabia.*—CAPTAIN BEVERLEY-GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

★**Asia Minor** DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

★**Africa Part 1** *Egypt.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT.

Africa Part 2 *Abyssinia, French Somaliland, Belgian Congo. No questions on employment.*—CAPT. R. W. VAN RAVEN DE STURLER, care of *Adventure.*

Africa Part 3 (British) *Sudan, Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya. No questions on employment.*—CAPT. R. W. VAN RAVEN DE STURLER, care of *Adventure.*

Africa Part 4 *Tripoli. Including the Sahara, Tuaregs, caravan trade and caravan routes.*—CAPTAIN BEVERLEY-GIDDINGS, care *Adventure.*

★**Africa Part 5** *Tunis and Algeria.*—DR. NEVILLE WHYMANT, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 6 *Morocco.*—GEORGE E. HOLT, care *Adventure.*

Africa Part 7 *Sierra Leone to Old Calabar; West Africa; Southern and Northern Nigeria.*—N. E. NELSON, Firestone Plantations Company, Akron, Ohio.

Africa Part 8 *Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal, Zululand, Transvaal and Rhodesia.*—CAPTAIN F. J. FRANKLIN, Adventure Camp, Box 107, Santa Susana, Cal.

✠**Africa Part 9** *Portuguese East.*—R. G. WARING, Corunna, Ontario, Canada.

Madagascar RALPH LINTON, 324 Sterling Hall, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

Europe Part 1 *Jugo-Slavia and Greece.*—CAPT. WM. W. JENNA, West Point, New York.

Europe Part 2 *Albania.*—ROBERT S. TOWNSEND, P. O. Box 303, Damariscotta, Maine.

Europe Part 4 *Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Poland.*—G. I. COLBRON, East Avenue, New Canaan, Conn.

Europe Part 5 *Scandinavia.*—ROBERT S. TOWNSEND, P. O. Box 303, Damariscotta, Maine.

Europe Part 6 *Great Britain.*—THOMAS BOWEN PARTINGTON, Constitutional Club, Northumberland Avenue, London, W. C. 2, England.

Europe Part 7 *Denmark.*—G. I. COLBRON, East Avenue, New Canaan, Conn.

Europe Part 8 *Holland.*—J. J. LEBLEU, 51 Benson Drive, Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

Europe Part 9 *France, Belgium.*—J. D. NEWSOM, care *Adventure.*

Europe Part 10 *Spain.*—J. D. NEWSOM, care *Adventure.*

South America Part 1 *Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile.*—EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure.*

South America Part 2 *Venezuela, the Guianas, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil.*—DR. PAUL VANORDEN SHAW, 457 W. 123rd St., New York, N. Y.

✠**West Indies** *Cuba, Isle of Pines, Haiti, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico, Virgin and Jamaica Groups.*—JOHN B. LEFFINGWELL, Box 1333, Nueva Gerona, Isle of Pines, Cuba.

Central America *Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala.*—E. BRUGUIERE, 10 Gay St., New York City.

Mexico Part 1 *Northern Border States of old Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex.

✠**Mexico Part 2** *Southern Lower California.*—C. R. MAHAFFEY, Finca "Flores de Italia", San Juan, Benque, Atlantida, Honduras.

Mexico Part 3 *Southeastern Federal Territory of Quintana Roo and States of Yucatan and Campeche.* Also archeology.—W. RUSSELL SHEETS, 301 Poplar Ave., Takoma Park, Md.

Mexico Part 4 *Mexico south of a line from Tampico to Mazatlan.*—JOHN NEWMAN PAGE, Sureno Carranza 16, Cuautla, Morelos, Mexico.

Newfoundland.—C. T. JAMES, Box 1331, St. Johns, Newfoundland.

Greenland Also dog-team work, whaling, geology, ethnology (Eskimo).—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Canada Part 1 *New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.* Also homesteading in Canada Part 1, and fur farming.—FRED L. BOWDEN, 104 Fairview Ave., Binghamton, New York.

✠**Canada Part 2** *Southeastern Quebec.*—WILLIAM MACMILLAN, 24 Plessis, St., Quebec, Canada.

✠**Canada Part 3** *Height of Land Region, Northern Ontario and Northern Quebec, Southeastern Ungova and Keewatin.* Trips for sport and Adventure—big game, fishing, canoeing, Northland travel, also H. B. Company Posts, Indian tribes and present conditions.—S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), 339 Lewis St., Ottawa, Ont., Canada.

✠**Canada Part 4** *Ottawa Valley and Southeastern Ontario.*—HARRY M. MOORE, Douglas, Ont., Canada.

✠**Canada Part 5** *Georgian Bay and Southern Ontario.* Also national parks.—A. D. L. ROBINSON, 269 Victoria Road, Walkerville, Ont., Canada.

Canada Part 6 *Humers Island and English River District.*—T. F. PHILLIPS, Department of Science, Duluth Central High School, Duluth, Minn.

✠**Canada Part 7** *Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta.* C. PLOWDEN, Plowden Bay, Howe Sound, B. C.

Canada Part 8 *The Northw.Ter. and the Arctic, especially Ellesmere Land, Baffinland, Melville and North Devon Islands, North Greenland and the half-explored islands west of Ellesmere.*—PATRICK LEE, 189-16 Thirty-seventh Avenue, Flushing, New York.

✠**Canada Part 9** *Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and Northern Keewatin and Hudson Bay mineral belt.*—LIONEL H. G. MOORE, Flin Flon, Manitoba, Canada.

Alaska Also mountain climbing. THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 1015 W. 56th St., Los Angeles, Cal.

Western U. S. Part 1 *California, Utah and Arizona.* E. E. HARRIMAN, 854½ East 47th St., Los Angeles, Cal.

Western U. S. Part 2 *New Mexico.* Also Indians. Indian dances, including the snake dance.—H. F. ROBINSON, 1211 West Roma Ave., Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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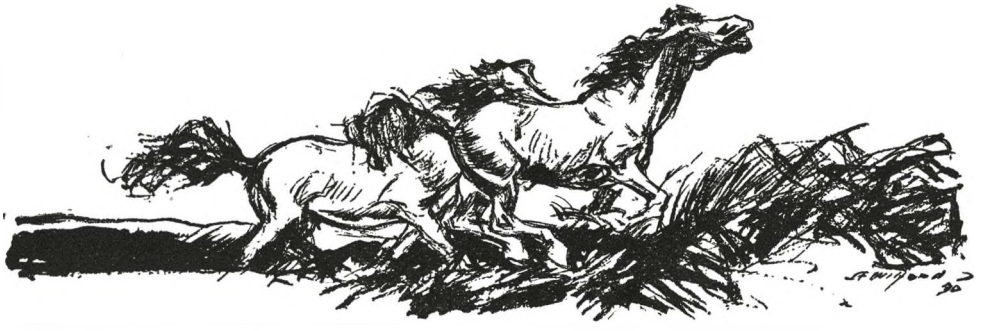

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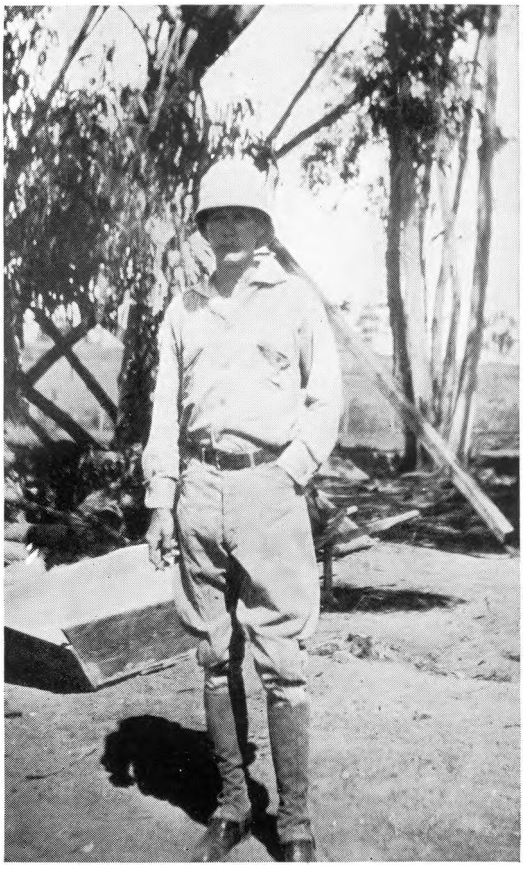

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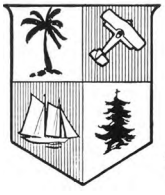

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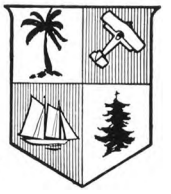

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