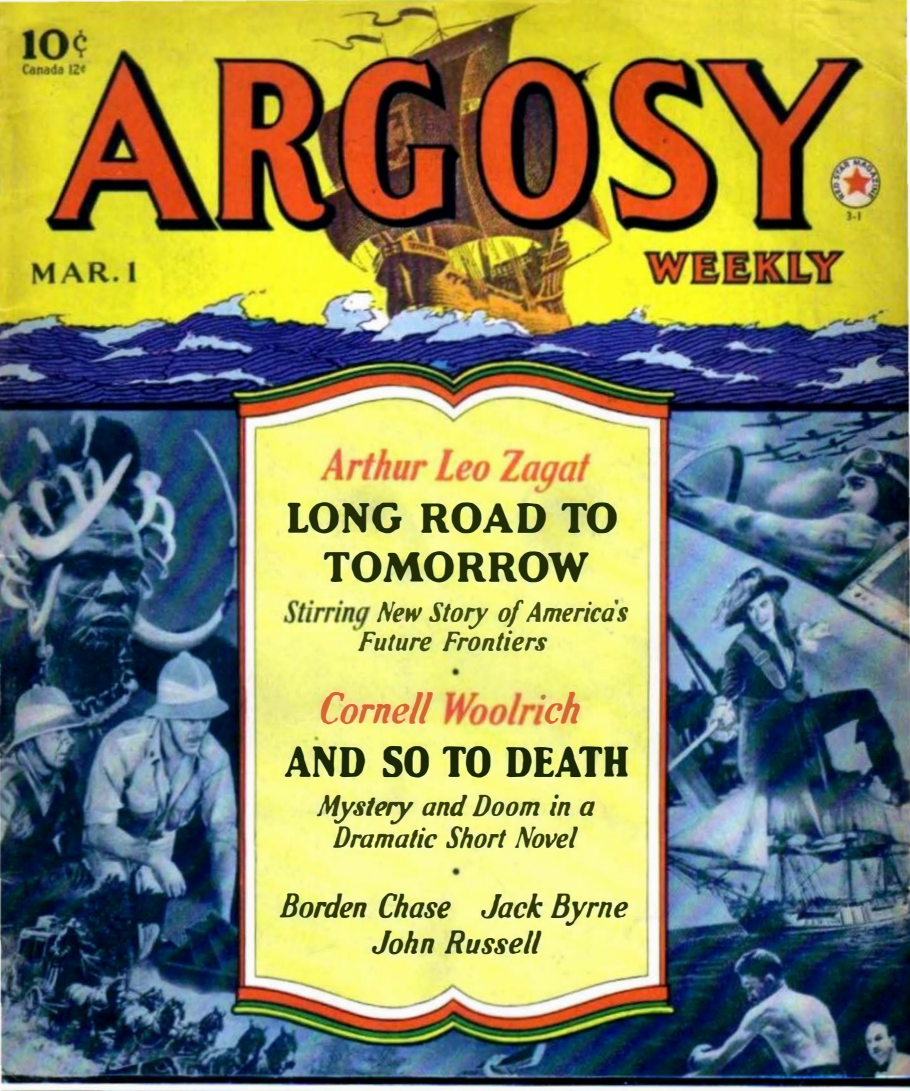

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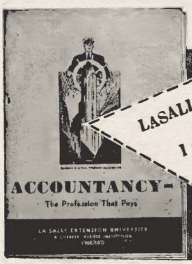

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Editorial

AGAIN we want to speak of Argosy's new format and of the readers' response to it. The fact that there has been a response is the important thing, for it enables us to chart the course of Argosy with new assurance.

We do not stand alone on the bridge of the ship; we have been joined there by the people who helped to build Argosy. And that is heartening.

To change without reason is absurd; but to fear the process of changing is equally ridiculous. Last week we told you briefly why we felt that a change in Argosy's appearance was justified.

We still believe in our aim, since none of your letters has disagreed with it. What some of you criticize is the method we have taken to attain our aim; and that is precisely the sort of comment we hoped to receive. We were willing to try new things because we knew the readers could be counted on to help us.

Consequently, when we launched the new format, we kept our minds open. We offered what seemed to us the best solution to our problem; but we were willing to admit that it was not perfect.

It was up to you, the readers, to tell us in what details we had erred. Many of you have already done that, and we hope to hear from many more of you. In any case, the comment we have received as well as the tremendous response we have gotten from newsstand sales has made it possible for us to give you an Argosy that will meet the highest standards.

See Next Week's Issue For Full Details.

THE EDITORS.

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You can hex even a Hindu hexer—providing you know his outstanding weakness

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'Tis the bends, my fine fighting friend. You're ready now to dance a jig or pluck a treasure from the ocean

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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST HORROR

FIRST all I could see was this beautiful girl's face; like a white, slightly luminous mask swimming detachedly against enfolding darkness. As if a little bluish spotlight of its own was trained on it from below.

It was so beautiful and so false, and I seemed to know it so well.

There was no danger yet; just this separate, shell-like face-mask standing out. But there was danger somewhere around; I knew that already, and I knew that I couldn't escape it.

I knew that everything I was about to do, I had to do; and yet I *didn't* want to do it. I wanted to turn and get out of wherever this was.

I even turned and tried to, but I couldn't any more. There had been only one door when I slipped in just now. It had been simple enough. Now when I turned, the place was nothing but doors —an octagon of doors, set frame to frame with no free wall-space between.

I tried one, another, a third. They were the wrong ones; I couldn't get out.

And by doing this, I had unleashed the latent menace that was lurking there around me all the time; I had brought on all the sooner the very thing I had tried to escape from. Though I didn't know what it was yet.

The flickering white mask slowly, before my horrified eyes, became malign, vindictive. It snarled: "There he is right behind you. Get him!" The eyes snapped like fuses, the teeth glistened in a grinning bite.

The light became more diffused: it was murky, bluish-green now, the kind of light there would be under water. And in it my doom slowly reared its head, with a terrible inevitability.

This was male.

First it--he—was just a black huddle, like solidified smoke, at the feet of this opalescent, revengeful mask. Then it slowly uncoiled, rose, lengthened and at the same time narrowed, until it loomed there before me upright.

It came toward me with cataleptic slowness. I wanted to turn and run, in the minute, the half minute that was all there was left now. I couldn't move, I couldn't lift a foot; I just wavered back and forth on a rigid base.

Why I wanted to get out, what It was going to do to me, wasn't clear. Only there was soul-shrivelling fear in it. And horror, more than the mind could contemplate.

The pace was beginning to accelerate now as it near its climax.

He came on, using up the small remaining distance between us. His outline was still indistinct, clotted, like a lumpy clay image. I could see the arms come up from the sides, and couldn't avoid their lobster-like conjunction.

I could feel the pressure of his hands upon my neck. He held it at the sides rather than in front, as if trying to break it rather than strangle me. The gouge of his thumbs, was excruciating, pressing into the tender slack of flesh right beside and under the jawbone.

I WENT down in a sort of spiral, around and around, following my head and neck around as he sought to wrench them out of true with my spinal column.

I clawed at the merciless hands, trying to pull them off. I pried one off at last, but it wrenched itself free of my restraint again, trailing a nail-scratch on my forearm just across the knob of the wristbone.

The hand clamped itself back where it had been, with the irresistibility of a suction-cup.

I beat at his arched body from underneath; then—as my resistance weakened —only pushed at it, at last only grasped at it with the instinctive clutch of a drowning man. A button came off loose in my hand and I hung onto it with the senseless tenacity of the dying.

And then I was so long dying, my neck was so long breaking, he tired of the slower surer way. He spoke to the macabre mask. ,I heard every word clearly: "Hand me that sharp-pointed bore lying over there, or this'll go on all night."

I raised mutely protesting hands, out and past him, and something was put into one of them. I could feel the short transverse handle. A thought flashed through my mind—and even one's thoughts are so distinct in those things— "She's put it into my hand instead of his!"

I fixed my hand on it more securely, poised it high, and drove it into him from in back. It seemed to go in effortlessly, like a skewer into butter. I could even feel myself withdraw it again, and it came out harder than it went in.

He went with it, or after it, and toppled back. After a moment, I drew near to him again, on hands and knees.

And now that it was too late his face became visible at last, as if a wanly flickering light were playing over it, and he was suddenly no formless mud-clotted monster but a man just like I was. Harmless, helpless, inoffensive.

The face looked reproachfully up at me, as if to say, "Why did you have to do that?"

I couldn't stand that, and I leaned over him, tentatively feeling for the position of his heart. When I'd located it, I suddenly drove the metal implement in with ungovernable swiftness from straight overhead, and jumped back as I did so.

The mask, still present in the background, gave a horrid scream, and whisked away, like something drawn on wires.

I HEARD a door close and I quickly turned, to see which way she had gone, so that I might remember and find my own way out. But I was too late: she was gone by the time I turned, and all the doors looked alike again.

I went to them and tried them one by one. Each one was the wrong one, wouldn't open. Now I couldn't get out of here, I was trapped, shut in with what was lying there on the floor. It still held fear and menace, greater even than when it had attacked me.

For the dread and horror was now more imminent than ever, seemed about to burst and inundate me. Its source was what lay there on the floor. I had to hide it, I had to shut it away.

I threw open one of the many doors that had baffled me so repeatedly throughout. And behind it, in the sapphire pall that still shouded the scene, I now saw a shallow closet.

I picked up what lay on the floor—and I could seem to do it easily; it had become light. I propped it up behind the closet door; there was not depth enough behind it to do anything else.

Then I closed the door upon it, and pressed it here and there with the flats of my hands, up and down the frame that bordered the mirror, as if to make it hold tighter. But danger still seemed to exude through it, like a vapor. I knew that wasn't enough; I must do more than that, or it would surely open again.

Then I looked down, and below the knob there was a keyhead sticking out. It was shaped a little like a three-leaf clover, and the inner rim of each of the three scooped-out "leaves" was fretted with scrollwork and tracery.

It was of some yellowish metal, either brass or iron gilded over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

I turned it in the keyhole and I drew it slowly out. I was surprised at how long a stem it had; it seemed to keep coming forever. At last it ended in two odd little teeth, each one doubled back on itself, like the single arm of a swastika.

I pocketed it. Then the knob started turning from the inside; the door started to open, slowly but remorselessly. In another minute I was going to see something unspeakably awful on the other side of it. Revelation, the thing the whole long mental-film had been building to, was upon me.

And then I woke up.

CHAPTER II

THE KEY

I'D lost the pillow to the floor, and my head was halfway down after it, dangling partly over the side of the bed. My face was studded with oozing sweatdrops.

I propped myself upon one elbow and blew out my breath harrowedly. I mumbled, "Gee I'm glad that's over with!" and drew the back of my pajama sleeve across my forehead to dry it. I looked at the clock, and it was time to get up anyway; but even if it hadn't been, who would have risked going back to sleep after such a thing? I might have reformed and started in again, for all I knew.

I flung my legs out of the ravaged coverings, sat on the edge of the bed, picked up a sock and turned it inside out preparatory to shuffling it on.

Dreams were funny things. Where'd they come from? Where'd they go?

A basinful of stinging cold water in the bathroom cleared away the last lingering vestige of it, and from this point on everything was on a different plane—normal, rational and reassuringly familiar. The friendly bite of the comb. The winding of the little stem of my wristwatch, the looping together of the two strap-ends around my—

They fell open and dangled down straight again, still unattached and stayed that way. I had to rivet my free hand to the little dial to keep it from sliding off my wrist.

I stared at the thing for minutes on end.

I had to let my cuff slide back in place and cover it at last. I couldn't stand there staring at it forever. That didn't answer anything. What should it tell me? It was a scratch, that was all.

Just as Cliff was swinging the chair, he froze. There was a man with a gun standing behind me

TALK about your realistic dreams! Well, I thought, I must have done that to myself, with my other hand, in the throes of it. That was why the detail entered into the dream-fabric.

It couldn't, naturally, be the other way around: because the other way around meant transference from the dream into the actuality of a red scratch across my wristbone.

I went ahead. The familiar plane, the rational everyday plane. The blue tie today. I threw up my collar, drew the tie-length through, folded it down again.

My hands stayed on it, holding it down flat on each side of my neck, as if afraid it would fly away. Part of my mind was getting ready to get frightened, fly off the handle, and the rest of my mind wouldn't let it, held it steady just like I held the collar.

But I hadn't had those bruises—those brownish-purple discolorations, faintly visible at the side of my neck, as from the pressure of cruel fingers—I hadn't had those last night when I undressed.

Well—I hadn't yet had the dream last night when I undressed either. Why look for spooks in this? The same explanation that covered the wrist-scratch still held good for this too. I must have done it to myself, seized my own throat in trying to ward off the attack passing through my mind just then.

I even stood there and tried to reconstruct the posture, to see if it was physically feasible. It was, but the result was almost grotesquely distorted. It resulted in crossing the arms over the chest and gripping the left side of the neck with the right hand, the right with the left.

I didn't know; maybe troubled sleepers did get into those positions. I wasn't as convinced as I would have like to be. One thing was certain: the marks had been made by two hands, not one.

But—more disturbing than their visibility—there was pain in them, soreness when I prodded them with my own fingertips, stiffness when I turned my neck acutely. It seemed to weaken the theory of self-infliction. How was it I hadn't awakened myself, exerting that much pressure?

I forced myself back to the everyday plane again: buttoned the collar around the bruises, party but not entirely concealing them, knotted the tie, shrugged on vest and coat. I was about ready to go now.

The last thing I did was what I always did last of all, one of those ineradicable little habits. I reached into my pocket to make sure I had enough change available for my meal and transportation, without having to stop and change a bill on the way.

I brought up a palmful of it, and then I lost a good deal of it between my suddenly stiff outspread fingers. Only one or two pieces stayed on, around the button. The large and central button.

I let them roll, not stooping to pick them up. I couldn't; my spine wouldn't have bent right then.

It was a strange button. I knew I was going to check it with every article of clothing I had, but I already knew it wasn't from one of my own things.

Something about the shape, the color, told me; my fingers had never twisted it through a buttonhole, or they would have remembered it.

That may sound far-fetched; but buttons can become personalized to nearly as great an extent as neckties.

And when I closed my hand over it—as I did now—it took up as much room inside my folded palm, it had the same feel, as it had had a little while ago in *that thing*. Oh, I could remember clearly.

It was the button from the dream.

I THREW open the closet door so fast and frightenedly it hit the wall and bounced. There wasn't anything hanging up in there that I didn't hold that button against—even where there was no button missing, even where its size and type utterly precluded its having been attached.

It wasn't from anything of mine; it didn't belong anywhere.

This time I couldn't say: "I did it to myself in the throes of that thing." It came from somewhere. It had four center holes, with even a wisp or two of black tailor's thread still entwined in them. It was solid, not a phantom.

But rationality wouldn't give in. *No, no. I picked this up on the street, and I don't remember doing it.* That simply wasn't so; I'd never picked up a stray button in my life.

Or the last tailor I sent this suit out to left it in the pocket from someone else's clothing by mistake. But they always return dry-cleaned garments to me with the pocket-linings inside out; I'd noticed that a dozen times.

That was the best rationalization could do, and it was none too good. I said out loud, "I better get out of here. I need a cup of coffee. I've got the jitters."

I shrugged into my coat fast, threw open my room door, poised it to close it after me. And the last gesture of all, before leaving each morning, came to me instinctively: feeling to make sure I had my key and wouldn't be locked out when I returned that evening.

It came up across the pads of my fingers, but it was only visible at both ends. The middle part was bisected, obscured by something lying across it. My lips parted spasmodically, and refused to come together again.

It had a head—this topmost one—a little like a three-leaf clover, and the inner rim of each of the three "leaves" was fretted with scroll work and tracery. It had a stem disproportionately long for the size of its head, and it ended in two odd little teeth bent back on themselves, like half of a swastika.

It was of some yellowish composition, either brass or iron gilded over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

IT LAY lengthwise in the hollow of my hand, and I kept touching it repeatedly with the thumb of that same hand. That was the only part of me that moved for a long time, that foolish flexing thumb.

I didn't leave right then, for all my preparations. I went back into the room and closed the door after me on the inside, and staggered dazedly around for a moment or two.

Once I dropped down limply on the edge of the bed, then turned around and noticed what it was, and got hastily up again, more frightened than ever.

Another time, I remember. I thrust my face close to the mirror in the dresser, drew down my lower lid with one finger, started intently at the white of my eyeball. Even as I did it, I didn't know what it would tell me. It didn't tell me anything.

And still another time, I looked out of the window, as if to see whether the outside world was still there. It was. The houses across the way looked just as they'd looked last night. The lady on the third floor had her bedding airing over the windowsill, just like every morning. There was nothing the matter out there. It was in here, with me.

I decided I'd better go to work; maybe that would pull me out of this. I fled from the room almost as if it were haunted. It was too late to stop off at a breakfast-counter now. I didn't want any anyway. My stomach kept giving little quivers.

In the end I didn't go to work either. I couldn't, I wouldn't have been any good. I telephoned in that I was too ill to come—and it was no idle excuse.

I roamed around the rest of the day in the sunshine. Wherever the sunshine was the brightest, I sought and stayed in that place, and when it moved on I moved with it. I couldn't get it bright enough or strong enough.

And yet the sunshine didn't warm me. Where others mopped their brows and moved out of it, I stayed—and remained cold inside. And the shade was winning the battle as the hours lengthened. The sun weakened and died; the shade deepened and spread. Night was coming on: the time of dreams, the enemy.

CHAPTER III

DEAD END

I

I WENT to Cliff's house late. The first time I got there they were still at the table; I could see them through the front window. I walked around the block repeatedly, until Lil had gotten up from the table and taken all the dishes with her, and Cliff had moved to another chair and was sitting there alone.

I did all this so she wouldn't ask me to sit down at the table with them; I couldn't have stood it.

I rang the bell and she opened the door, dried her hands, and said heartily: "Hello, stranger. I was just saying to Cliff only tonight, it's about time you showed up around here."

I wanted to detach him from her, but first I had to sit through about ten minutes of her. She was my sister, but you don't tell women things like I wanted to tell him.

Finally she said, "I'll just finish up the dishes, and then I'll be back."

The minute the doorway was empty I whispered urgently, "Get your hat and take a walk with me outside. I want to tell you something—alone."

On our way out he called in to the kitchen, "Vince and I are going out to stretch our legs. We'll be back in a couple of minutes."

She called back inunediately and warningly: "Now Cliff, only beer—if that's what you're going for."

It put the idea in his head, if nothing else, but I said: "No, I want to be able to tell you this clearly. It's going to sound hazy enough as it is; let's stay out in the open."

We strolled slowly along the sidewalk; he was on his feet a lot and it was no treat to him, I suppose, but he was a good-natured sort of fellow and didn't complain. He was a detective. I probably would have gone to him about it anyway even if he hadn't been, but the fact that he was, of course, made it the inevitable thing to do.

He had to prompt me, because I didn't know where to begin. "So what's the grief, boy friend?"

"Cliff, last night I dreamed I killed a fellow. I don't know who he was or where it was supposed to be. His nail creased my wrist, his fingers bruised the sides of my neck, and a button came off him somewhere and got locked in my hand.

"And finally, after I'd done it, I locked the door of a closet I'd propped him up in, put the key away in my pocket. And when I woke up—Well, look."

We had stopped under a street light. I turned to face him. I drew back my cuff to show him. "Can you see it?" He said he could.

I dragged down my collar with both hands, first on one side, then on the other. "Can you see them? Can you see the faint purplish marks there? They're turning a little black now."

He said he could.

"And the button, the same shape and size and everything, was in my trousers-pocket along with my change. It's on the dresser back in my own room now; if you want to come over, you can see it for yourself.

"And last of all, the key turned up on me, next to my own key, in the pocket where I always keep it. I've got it right here; I'll show it to you. I've been carrying it around with me all day."

IT TOOK me a little while to get it out, my hand was shaking so. It had shaken like that all day, every time I brought it near the thing to feel if it was still on me.

He took it from me and examined it. curiously but noncommittally.

"That's just the way it looked in—when I saw it when I was asleep," I told him. "The same shape, the same color, the same design. It even weighs the same, it even—"

He lowered his head a trifle, looked at me intently from under his brows, when he heard how my voice sounded. "You're all in pieces, aren't you?" He put his hand on my shoulder for a minute to steady it. "Don't take it that way, don't let it get you."

That didn't help. Sympathy wasn't what I wanted; I wanted explanation. "Cliff, you've got to help me. You don't know what I've been through all day."

He weighed the key up and down. "Where'd you get this from, Vince? I mean, where'd you first get it from, before you dreamed about it?"

I grabbed his arm with both hands. "But don't you understand what I've just been telling you? I didn't have it before I dreamed about it. I never saw it before then. And then I wake up, and it turns real!"

"And that goes for the button too?"

I quirked my head.

"You're in bad shape over this, aren't you? Well what is it that's really got you going? It's not the key and button and scratch, is 't? Are you afraid the dream really happened; is that it?"

By that I could see that he hadn't understood until now, hadn't really gotten me. Naturally it wasn't just the tokens carried over from the dream that had the life frightened out of me. It was the implication behind them.

If it were just a key turned up in my pocket after I dreamed about it, why would I go to him? The hell with it. But if the key turned up real, then there was a mirrored closet door somewhere to go with it.

And if there was a closet to match it, then there was a body crammed inside it. Also real. Real dead. A body that had scratched me and tried to wring my neck before I killed it.

I TRIED to tell him that. I was too weak to shake him, but I went through the motions. "Don't you understand? There's a door somewhere in this city right at this very minute, that this key belongs to! There's a man propped up dead behind it!

"And I don't know where, nor who he is, nor how or why it happened; only that —that I must have been there, I must have done it—or why would it come to my mind like that in my sleep? Why?"

"You're in a bad way." He gave a short whistle through his clenched teeth. "You need a drink, Lil or no Lil! Come on; we'll go some place and get this thing out of your system." He clutched me peremptorily by the arm.

"But only coffee," I said. "Let's go where the lights are good and bright."

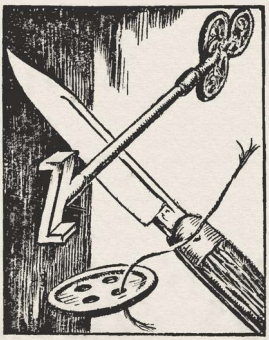
We went where there was so much gleam and so much dazzle even the flies walking around on the table cast long shadows.

"Now we'll go at this my way," he said, licking the beer-foam off his upper lip. "Tell me the dream over again."

I told it.

"I can't get anything out of that." He shook his head. "Did you know this girl, or face, or whatever it was?"

I pressed the point of one finger down hard on the table. "No, now I don't; but in the dream I did, and it made me broken-hearted to see her. Like she had doublecrossed me or something."



"Well, in the dream who was she, then?"

"I don't know; I knew her then, but now I don't."

"Cripes!" he said, swallowing more beer fast. "I should have made this whisky with tabasco sauce! Well, was she some actress you've seen on the screen lately, maybe? Or some picture you've seen in a magazine? Or maybe even some passing face you glimpsed in a crowd? All those things could happen."

"I don't know. I seemed to know her better than that; it hurt me to see her, to have her hate me. But I can't carry her over into—now."

"And the man?"

"No, I couldn't seem to see his face through the whole thing. I only saw it at the very end, after it was already too late. And then when the door started to open again, it seemed as if I was going to find out something horrible—about him, I guess. But I woke up. . . ."

"Last of all, the place. You say nothing but doors all around you. Have you been in a place like that lately? Have you ever seen one? In a magazine illustration, in a story you read, in a movie?"

"No."

"Well then, let's get away from the dream. Let's leave it alone." He flung his hand back and forth relievedly, as if clearing the air. "It was starting to get me myself. Now what'd you do last night, before this whole thing came up?"

"Nothing. Just what I do every other night. I left work at the usual time, had my meal at the usual place—"

"Sure it wasn't a welsh rabbit?"

"A welsh rabbit is not responsible for that key. A locksmith is. Drop it on the table and hear it clash! Bite it between your teeth and chip them! And I didn't have it when I went to bed last night."

HE LEANED toward me. "Now listen, Vince. There's a very simple explanation for that key. There has to be. And whatever it is, it didn't come to you in a dream. Either you were walking along, you noticed that key, picked it up because of its peculiar—"

I semaphored both hands before my face. "No, I tried to sell myself that this morning; it won't work. I'd remember the key itself, even if I didn't remember the incident of finding it. It's a unique key, and I never saw it before."

"All right, it don't have to be that explanation. There's a dozen-and-one other ways it could have gotten into your pocket without your knowledge. You might have hung the coat up under some shelf the key was lying on, and it dropped off and the open pocket caught it—"

"The pockets of my topcoat have flaps. What'd it do, make a U-turn to get in under them?"

"The flaps might have been left accidentally tucked in, from the last time your hands were in your pockets. Or it may have fallen out of someone else's coat hung up next to yours in a cloak-room, and been lying there on the floor, and someone came along, thought it belonged in your coat, put it back in—"

"I shoved my hands in and out of those pockets a dozen times yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. Where was it then? It wasn't in the pocket. But it was this morning. After I saw it clear as a photograph in my sleep during the night!"

Cliff rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a minute. "All right, have it your way. Let's say that it wasn't in your pocket last night. That still don't prove that the dream itself was real."

"No?" I shrilled. "It gives it a damn good foundation-in-fact as far as I'm concerned!"

"Listen," Vince, there's no halfway business about these things. Either you dream a thing or it really happens. You're twenty-six years old; you're not a kid.

"Don't worry; you'd know it and you'd remember it damn plainly afterward if you ever came to grips with a guy and he had you by the throat, like in this dream, and you rammed something into his back.

"I don't take any stock in this stuff about people walking in their sleep and doing things without knowing it. They can walk a little ways off from their beds, maybe, but the minute anyone touches them or does something to stop them, they wake right up. They can't be manhandled and go right on sleeping through it."

I said, "I couldn't have walked in my sleep, anyway. It was drizzling when I went to bed last night; the streets were only starting to dry off when I first got up this morning. I don't own rubbers, and the soles of both my shoes were perfectly dry when I put them on."

"Don't try to get away from the main point at issue. Have you any recollection at all, no matter how faint, of being out of your room last night, of grappling with a guy, of ramming something into him?"

"No; all I have is a perfectly clear recollection of going to bed, dreaming I did all those things, and then waking up again."

"Then that's all there is to it. Then it didn't happen." And he repeated stubbornly: "You either dream 'em or you do 'm. No two ways about it."

I shook my head. "You haven't helped me a bit, not a dime's worth."

He was a little put out, maybe because he hadn't. "Naturally not, not if you expected me to arrest you for murdering a guy in a dream. The arrest would have to take place in a dream too, and the trial and all the rest of it. What do you think I am, a witch doctor?"

"I'm going to sleep in the living-room at your place tonight," I said to him. "I'm not going back to that room of mine till broad daylight. Don't say anything to Lil about it, will you, Cliff?"

"I should say not," he agreed. "D'you think I want her to take you for bugs? You'll get over this, Vince."

"First I'll get to the bottom of it, then I'll get over it," I answered sombrely.

CHAPTER IV

THE EIGHTH IMAGE

I SLEPT bout an hour's worth, and it was like any other night's sleep I'd had all my life—until the night before. No better and no worse. Cliff came in and he stood looking at me the next morning. I threw off the blanket they'd given me and sat up on the sofa.

"How'd it go?" he asked half-secretively. On account of Lil, I suppose.

I eyed him. "I didn't have any more dreams, if that's what you mean. But that has nothing to do with it. If I were convinced that was a dream, I would have gone home to my own room last night, even if I were going to have it over again twice as bad.

"But I'm still not convinced. Now are you going to help me or not?"

He rocked back and forth on his feet. "What d'you want me to do?"

How could I answer that? "You're a detective. You've got the key. The button's over in my room. You must have often had less than that to work with. Find out where they came from! Find out what they're doing on me!"

He had my best interests at heart maybe, but he thought the thing to do was bark at me. "Now listen, cut that stuff out, y'hear? I dowanna hear any more about that key. I've got it, and I'm keeping it, and you're not going to see it again. If you harp on this spooky stuff any more, I'll help you all right—in a way you won't appreciate. I'll haul you off to see a doctor."

The scratch on my wrist had formed a scab; it was ready to come off. I freed it with the edge of my nail, then I blew the little sliver of dried skin off. And I gave him a long look, more eloquent than words. He got it, but he wouldn't give in.

Lil called in: "Come and get it, boys!"

I left their house—and I was on my own, just like before I'd gone there. Me and my shadows.

I STOPPED in at a newspaper office, and I composed an ad and told them I wanted it inserted in the real estate section. I told them to keep running it daily until further notice.

It wasn't easy to word. It took me the better part of an hour, and about three dozen blank forms. This ad:

> I am interested in inspecting, for lease or purchase, a house with an octagonal mirror-paneled room or alcove. Location, size and all other details of secondary importance provided it has this one essential feature, desired for reasons of a sentimental nature. Communicate Box 37a, *World-Express*, giving exact details.

On the third day there were two replies waiting when I stopped in at the advertising office. One was about a house with a mirror-lined powder room on the second floor; only foursquare, but wouldn't that do?

The other told of an octagonal breakfast nook of glass bricks. . . .

There wasn't anything on the fourth day. On the fifth there was a windfall of about half a dozen waiting for me when I stopped in. Five of them were from real estate agents offering their services; the sixth from an individual owner who was evidently anxious to get a white elephant off his hands, for he offered to have a mirror-paneled room built in for me at his own expense, if I agreed to take a long-term lease on the property.

They started tapering off after that. One or two more drifted in by the end of the week, but they obviously weren't what I was looking for. And after that the ad brought no further results; apparently the supply of mirrored compartments had been exhausted.

The advertising office phoned to find out if I wanted to continue it. "No, kill it," I said, disheartened.

Meanwhile Cliff must have spotted it and recognized it. He was a very thorough paper-reader, when he came home at nights. Or perhaps he just wanted to see how I was getting along. At any rate he showed up good and early the next day, which was a Sunday. He was evidently off, for he was wearing a pullover and slacks.

"Sit down," I told him.

"No," he said, with some embarrassment. "Matter of fact, Lil and I are going to take a ride out into the country for the day, and she packed a lunch for three. Cold beer, and . . ."

So that was it. "Listen, I'm all right," I said dryly. "I don't need any fresh-air jaunts, to exorcise the devils in me, if that's what the strategy is."

He was going to be diplomatic—Lil's orders, I guess—and until you've seen a detective trying to be diplomatic, you haven't lived. Something about the new second-hand Chev hat he'd just gotten in exchange for his old second-hand Chev. And just come down to the door a minute and say howdy to Lil; she was sitting in it.

So I did, and he brought my coat out after me and locked up the room, so I went with them.

THE thing was a hoodoo from the beginning. He wasn't much of a driver, but he wasn't the kind that would take back-seat orders on the road from anyone either; he knew it all.

We never did reach where they'd originally intended going; he lost it on the way, and we finally compromised on a fly-incubating meadow, after a thousand miles of detouring.

Lil was a good sport about it. "It looks just like the other place, anyway," she said. We did more slapping at our ankles than eating, and the beer was warm, and the box of hard-boiled eggs had disappeared from the car at one of those ruts he'd hit.

And then, to complete the picture, a big bank of jet clouds piled themselves up the sky and let go all of a sudden, and we had to run for it.

The storm had come up so fast we couldn't even get back to the car before it broke, and the rest was a matter of sitting in sodden misery while Cliff groped his way down one streaming, rain-misted country road and up another, getting more thoroughly off our bearings all the time.

Lil's fortitude finally snapped short. "Stop at the first place you come to and let's get in out of it!" she screamed at Cliff. "I can't stand any more of this!" She hid her face against my chest.

"I can't even see through my windshield much less offside past the road," he grunted. He was driving with his forehead pressed against the glass.

I scoured a peephole on my side of the car and peered out. A sort of rustic arch sidled past in the watery welter. "There's a cut-off a little way ahead, around the next turn," I said. "If you take that, it'll lead us to a house with a big wide porch; we can get in under there."

They both spoke at once. He said, "How did you know that?" she said, "Were you ever up around these parts before?"

I couldn't answer his question. I said, "No" to hers, which was the truth.

Even after he'd followed the cut-off for some distance, there was no sign of a house. "Are you getting us more tangled up than we were already, Vince?" he asked in mild reproach.

"No, don't stop; keep going," I insisted. "You'll come to it—two big stone lanterns; turn the car left between 'em—"

I shut up again, as jerkily as I'd commenced, at the peculiar back-shoulder look he was giving me. I poked my fingers through my hair a couple of times. "Gee, I don't know how I knew that myself," I mumbled half-audibly.

He became very quiet from then on; I think he kept hoping I'd be wrong, there wouldn't be any such place.

But it was Lil who tapped him on the shoulder and said, "There they are, there they are! Turn, Cliff, like he told you!"

You could hardly make them out, even at that. Faint gray blurs against the obliterating pencil-strokes of rain. You certainly couldn't tell what they were.

He turned without a word and we glided between them. All I could see was his eyes, in the rear vision mirror, on me. I'd never seen eyes with such black, accusing pupils before; like buckshot they were.

A minute passed, and then a house with a wide, sheltering veranda materialized through the mist, phantom-like, and came to a dead halt beside us. I heard his brakes go on.

I WASN'T much aware of our dash through the curtain of water that separated us from the porch roof, Lil squealing between us, my coat hooded over her head.

Through it all I was conscious of the beer in my stomach; it had been warm when I drank it back at the meadow, but it had turned ice-cold now, as if it had been put into a refrigerator.

I had a queasy feeling, and the rain had chilled me—but deep inside where it hadn't been able to wet me at all. And I knew those weren't raindrops on my forehead; they were sweat turned cold.

We stamped around on the porch for a minute, the way soaked people do.

"I wish we could get in," Lil mourned.

"The key's under that window-box with the geraniums," I said.

Cliff traced a finger under it, and brought it out. He put it in the keyhole, his hand shaking a little, and turned it, and the door went in. He held his neck very stiff, to keep from looking around at me. That beer had turned to a block of ice now.

I went in last, like someone toiling through the coils of a bad dream.

It was twilight-dim around us at first, the rainstorm outside had gloomed up the afternoon so. I saw Lil's hand go out to a china switch-mount sitting on the inside of the door-frame, on the left.

"Not that one; that's the one to the porch," I said. "The one that controls the hall is on the other side."

Cliff swept the door closed, revealing the switch; it had been hidden behind the door until now. He flicked it and a light went on a few yards before us, overhead. Lil tried out hers anyway, and the porch lit up; then blackened once more as she turned the switch off.

I saw them look at each other. Then she turned to me and said, "What is this, a rib? How do you know so much about this place anyway, Vince?" Poor Lil, she was in another world.

Cliff said gruffly, "Just a lucky guess on his part." He wanted to keep her out of it, out of that darkling world he and I were in.

THE light was showing us a paneled hall, and stairs going up; dark polished wood, with a carved handrail, mahogany or something. Cliff said, pointing his call up the stairs: "Good afternoon. Anybody home?"

I said, "Don't do that," in a choked voice.

"He's cold," Lil said. "He's shaking."

But she could not know the origin of my strange chill.

She turned aside through a double doorway and lighted up a living room. We both looked in there after her, without going in; we had other things on our mind than warmth and comfort.

There was an expensive parquet floor, but everything else was in a partial state of dismantlement. Dust covers made ghostly shapes of the chairs and sofa and a piano.

"Away for the summer," Lil said knowingly. "But funny they'd leave it unlocked like that, and with the electricity still connected. Your being a detective comes in handy, Cliff; we won't get in trouble walking in like this . . ."

There was a black onyx fireplace, and after running her hands exploringly around it, she gave a little bleat of satisfaction and touched something. "Electric."

It glowed red. She started to rub her arms and shake out her skirt before it, to dry herself off, and forgot us for the time being.

I glanced at Cliff, and then I backed away, out of the doorway. I turned and went up the staircase, silently but swiftly. I saw him make for the back of the hall, equally silent and swift. We were both furtive in our movements, somehow.

I found a bedroom, dismantled like downstairs. I left it by another door, and found myself in a two-entrance bath. I went out by the second entrance, and I was in another bedroom.

Through a doorway, left open, I could see the hallway outside. Through another doorway, likewise unobstructed, I could see—myself.

Poised, quivering with apprehension, arrested in mid-search, white face staring out from above a collar not nearly as white. I shifted, came closer—dying a little, wavering as I advanced.

Two of me. Three. Four, five, six, seven.

I was across the threshold now. And the door, brought around from its position flat against the outside wall and pulled in after me, flashed *the eighth image of myself* on its mirror-backed surface.

CHAPTER V

INQUISITION

I TOTTERED there, and stumbled, and nearly went down—all nine of me. Cliff's footfall sounded behind me; and the eighth reflection was swept away, leaving only seven. His hand gripped me by the shoulder, supporting me.

I heard myself groan in infinite desolation, "This is the place; God above, this is the place!"

"Yeh," he bit out in an undertone "Have you got it?" I said.

He knew what I meant. He fumbled. He had it on a ring with his other keys. I wished he hadn't kept it; I wished he'd thrown it away.

The other keys slithered away, and there it was. Fancy scroll-work—a key such as is no longer used or made . . .

One glass was a door, the door we'd come in by. Four of the remaining seven were dummies, mirrors set into the naked wall-plaster. You could tell that because they had no keyholes. They were the ones that cut the corners of the quadrilateral. The real ones were the ones that paralleled the walls, one on each side.

He put the key into one, and it went in smoothly. Something went cluck behind the wood, and he pulled open the mirror door.

A ripple coursed down the lining of my stomach. There was nothing in there, only empty wooden paneling. That left two.

Lil's hail reached us. "What are you two up to, up there?" From that other world, so far away.

"Keep her downstairs a minute!" I breathed desperately.

He called down: "Hold it. Vince has taken off his pants to dry them."

She answered, "I'm hungry, I'm going to see if they left anything around to—" And her voice trailed off toward the kitchen at the back.

He was turning the key in the second door; and when he said, "Look!" I saw a black thing in the middle of the closet, and for a minute I thought—

It was a built-in safe, steel painted black but with the dial left its own color. It had been cut or burned into.

"That's what he was crouched before, that—night, when he seemed just like a puddle on the floor," I heard myself say. "And he must have had a blow-torch down there on the floor in front of him; that's what made that bluish light. And made her face stand out in the reflection, like a mask—"

A sob popped like a bubble in my throat. "And that one, that you haven't opened yet, is the one I propped him up in."

He straightened and turned, and started over toward it.

I turned to water, and there wasn't anything like courage in the whole world; I didn't know where other fellows got theirs. "No, don't," I pleaded, and caught ineffectively at his sleeve. "Wait just a minute longer; give me a chance to—"

"Cut that out," he said remorselessly, and shook my hand off. He went ahead; he put the key in, and turned it. . . .

He opened it between us. I mean, I was standing on the opposite side from him. He looked in slantwise first, when it was still just open a crack, and then he widened it around my way for me to see. I couldn't until then.

That was his answer to my unspoken question, that widening of it like that for me to see. Nothing fell out on him; nothing was in there. Not any more.

He struck a match, and singed all up and down the perpendicular woodwork. There was light behind us, but it wasn't close enough.

When the match stopped traveling, you could see the faint, blurred, old discoloration behind it. Old blood, dark against the lighter wood.

There wasn't very much of it; just about what would seep through a wound in a dead back, ooze through clothing, and be pressed out against the wood.

He singed the floor, but there wasn't any down there; it hadn't been able to worm its way down that far. You could see where it had ended in two little tracks, one longer than the other, squashed out by the blotter-like clothed back before they had gotten very far.

The closet and I, we stared at one another.

The match went out, the old blood went out with it.

"Someone that was hurt was in here," he conceded grimly.

Someone that was dead, I amended with a silent shudder.

LIL dozed off right after the improvised snack she'd gotten up for us in the kitchen, tired out from the excitement of the storm and of getting lost. The two of us had to sit with her and go through the motions, while the knowledge we shared hung over us like a bloody ax, poised and waiting to crash.

He could hardly wait to tackle me. All through the sketchy meal he'd sat there drumming the fingers of his left hand on the table top, while he inattentively shoveled and spaded with his right.

My own rigid wrist and elbow shoved stuff through my teeth; I don't know what it was. And then after it got in, it wouldn't go down anyway; stuck in my craw.

"What's the matter, Vince? You're not very hungry," Lil said one time.

He answered for me. "No, he isn't!" He'd turned unfriendly.

We left her stretched out on the covered sofa in the living room, the electric fireplace on, both our coats spread over her for a pieced blanket.

As soon as her eyes were safely closed, he went out into the hall, beckoning me after him with an imperative hitch of his head without looking at me. I followed.

"Close the doors," he whispered gutturally. "I don't want her to hear this."

I did, and then I followed him some more, back into the kitchen where we'd all three of us been until only a few minutes before. It was about the furthest you could get away from where she was. It was still warm and friendly from her having been in there.

He changed all that with a look. At me. A look that belonged in a police-station basement.

HE LIT a cigarette, and it jiggled with wrath between his lips. He didn't offer me one. Policemen don't, with their suspects. He shoved his hands deep in pockets, like he wanted to keep them down from flying at me.

"Let's hear about another dream."

His voice was flat, cold.

I eyed the floor. "You think I lied, don't you?"

That was as far as I got. He had a temper. He came up close against me, sort of pinning me back against the wall. Not physically—his hands were still in pockets—but by the scathing glare he sent into me.

"You knew which cut-off to take that would get us here, from a dream, didn't you?

"You knew about those stone lanterns at the entrance from a dream, didn't you?

"You knew where the key to the front

door was cached from a dream, didn't you?

"You knew which was the porch switch and which the hall—from a dream, didn't you?

"You know what I'd do to you, if you weren't Lil's brother? I'd push your lying face out through the back of your head!" And the way his hands hitched up, he had a hard time to keep from doing it then and there.

I twisted and turned as if I was on a spit, the way I was being tortured.

He wasn't through.

"You came to me for help, didn't you! But you didn't have guts enough to come clean. To say, Cliff, I went out to such-and-such a place in the country last night and I killed a guy. Such-and-such a guy, for such-and-such a reason.

"No, you had to cook up a dream.

"I can look up to and respect a guy, no matter how rotten a crime he's committed, that'll own up to it, make a clean breast of it. And I can even understand and make allowances for a guy that'll deny it flatly, lie about it; that's only human nature.

"But a guy that'll come to someone, trading on the fact that he's married to his sister, making a fool out of him, like you did me—!

"He's lower than the lowest rat we ever brought in for knifing someone in an alley! 'Look, I found this key in my pocket when I got up this morning; how'd it get in there?' 'Look, I found this button—'

"Playing on my sympathies, huh? Getting me to think in terms of doctors and medical observation, huh?"

One hand came out of his pocket at last. He threw away his cigarette. "Some dream that was, all right! Well the dream's over and baby's awake now." His left came out of the pocket and soldered itself to my shoulder and stiff-armed me there in front of him.

"We're going to start in from scratch, right here in this place, you and me. I'm going to get the facts out of you, and whether they go any further than me or not, that's my business. But at least *I'm* going to have them!"

HIS right had knotted up; I could see him priming it. How could that get something out of me that I didn't have in me to give him?

"What were you doing out at this place the night it happened? What brought you here?"

I shook my head helplessly. "I never was here before. I never saw it until I came here today with you and Lil."

He shot a short uppercut into my jaw. It was probably partly pulled, but it smacked my head back into the wall. "Who was the guy you did it to? What was his name?"

"I'm in Hell already, you blundering fool, without this," I moaned.

He sent another one up at me; I swerved my head, and this time it just grazed me. My stubbornness—it must have seemed like that—inflamed his anger. "Are you gonna answer me, Vince? Are you gonna answer me?"

"I can't. You're asking me things I can't." A sob of misery wrenched from me. "Ask God—or whoever it is watches over us in the night when we're unconscious."

He kept swinging at me. "Who was the guy? Why'd you kill him? Why? Why? Why?"

Finally I wrenched myself free, retreated out of range. We stood there facing one another for an instant, puffing, glaring.

He closed in again. "You're not going to get away with this," he heaved. "I've handled close-mouthed guys before. I know how to. You're going to tell me, or I'm going to half kill you with my own hands—where you killed somebody else."

He meant it. I could see he meant it. The policeman's blood in him was up. He could put up with anything but what he took to be this senseless stubbornness in the face of glaring, inescapable facts.

I felt the edge of the table the three of us had peacefully eaten at so short a time before grazing the fleshy part of my back. I shifted around behind it, got it between us.

He swung up a rickety chair; it probably wouldn't have done much more than stun me. I don't think he wanted it to. He didn't want to break my head. He just wanted to get the truth out of it.

And I—I wanted to get the truth into it.

He at least had someone he thought he could get the truth out of. I had no one to turn to. Only the inscrutable night that never repeats what it sees.

He poised the chair high overhead, and slung his lower jaw out of line with his upper.

I heard the door slap open. It was over beyond my shoulders. He could see it and I couldn't, without turning. I saw him sort of freeze and hold it, and look over at it, not at me any more.

I looked too, and there was a man standing there eyeing the two of us, holding a drawn gun in his hand. Ready to use it.

CHAPTER VI

THERE WAS A MURDER

HE SPOKE first, after a second that had been stretched like an elastic band to cover a full minute had snapped back in place. "What're you two men doing in here?"

He moved one foot watchfully across the threshold.

Cliff let the chair down the slow, easy way, with a neat little tick of its four legs. His stomach was still going in and out a little; I could see it through his shirt.

"We came in out of the rain, that suit you?" he said with left-over truculence that had been boiled-up toward me originally and was only now simmering down.

"Identify yourselves—and hurry up about it!" The man's other foot came in the room. So did the gun. So did the cement ridges around his eyes.

Cliff took a wallet out of his rear trousers pocket, shied it over at him so that it slithered along the floor and came up against his feet. "Help yourself," he said contemptuously.

He turned, went over to the sink, and poured himself a glass of water to help cool off, without waiting to hear the verdict.

He came back wiping his chin on his shirtsleeve, holding out a hand peremptorily for the return of the credentials. The contents of the wallet had buried the gun muzzle-first in its holster, rubbed out the cement ridges around his owner's eyes.

"Thanks, Dodge," he said with noticeably increased deference. "Homicide Division, huh?"

Cliff remained unbending. "How about doing a little identifying yourself?"

"I'm a deputy attached to the sheriff's office." He silvered the mouth of his vest-pocket, looked a little embarrassed. "I'm detailed to keep an eye on this place. I was home having a little supper, and—uh—"

He glanced out into the hall behind him questioningly. "How'd you get in? I thought I had it all locked up safe and sound."

"The key was bedded in a flower box on the porch," Cliff said.

"It was!" He looked startled. "Must be a spare, then. I've had the original on me night and day for the past week. Funny, we never knew there was a second one ourselves—"

I swallowed at this point, but it didn't ease my windpipe any.

"I was driving by just to see if everything was okay," he went on, "and I saw a light peering out of the rear window here. Then when I got in, I heard the two of you—"

I saw his glance rest on the chair a moment. He didn't even ask what we had been scrapping about. Cliff wouldn't have answered it if he had, I could tell that by his expression. His attitude was plainly that it was something just between the two of us.

"I thought maybe 'hoes had broken in or something," the deputy added lamely, seeing he wasn't getting any additional information.

Cliff said, "Why should this house be your particular concern?"

"There was a murder uncovered in it last week, you know."

Something inside me seemed to go down for the third time.

"There was," Cliff echoed tonelessly. There wasn't even a question-mark after it. "I'd like to hear about it." He waited a while, and then he added, "All about it."

HE STRADDLED the chair, legs to the back. He took out his pack of smokes again. Then when he'd helped himself, he pitched it over at me, but without deigning to look at me.

Like you throw something to a dog. No, not like that. You like the dog, as a rule.

I don't know how he managed to get the message across; but in that simple, unspoken act I got the meaning he wanted me to, perfectly. Whatever there is between us, I'm seeing that it stays just between us—for the time being, anyway. So shut up and stay out of it. I'm not ready to give you away to anybody—yet.

"Give one to the man," he said in a stony-hard voice, again without looking at me.

"Much obliged; got my own." The deputy went over and rested one haunch on the edge of the table. That put me behind him, which maybe was just as well. He addressed himself entirely to Cliff.

He expanded, felt at home, you could see. This was shop talk with a big-time city dick, on a footing of equality. He haloed his own head with comfortable smoke. "This house belonged to a wealthy couple named Fleming—"

Cliff's eyes flicked over at me, burned searchingly into my face for a second, whipped back to the deputy again before he had time to notice.

How could I show him any reaction, guilty or otherwise? I'd never heard the name before myself. It didn't mean anything to me.

"The husband frequently goes away on these long business trips. He was away at the time this happened. In fact we haven't been able to reach him to notify him yet. The wife was a pretty little thing—"

"Was?" I heard Cliff breathe.

The deputy went ahead; he was telling this his way.

"—kind of flighty. In fact, some of the women around here say she wasn't

above flirting behind his back, but no one was ever able to prove anything.

"There was a young fellow whose company she was seen in a good deal, but that don't have to mean anything. He was just as much a friend of the husband's as of hers; three of them used to go around together. His name was Dan Ayers."

This time it was my mind that soundlessly repeated, "Was?"

THE deputy took time out, spat, scoured the linoleum with his sole. It wasn't his kitchen floor, after all. It was nobody's now. Some poor devil's named Fleming that thought he was coming back to happiness.

"Bob Evans—he leaves the milk around here—he was tooling his truck in through the cut-off that leads to this place, just about daybreak that Wednesday morning, and in the shadowy light he sees a bundle of rags lying there in the moss and brakes just offside.

"Luckily Bob's curious. Well sir, he stops, and it was little Mrs. Fleming, poor little Mrs. Fleming, all covered with dew and leaves and twigs—"

"Dead?" Cliff asked.

"Dying. She must have spent hours dragging herself flat along the ground toward the main road in the hope of attracting attention and getting help. She must have been too weak to cry out very loud; and even if she had, there wasn't anybody around to hear her.

"She must have groaned her life away unheard, there in those thickets and brambles. She'd gotten nearly as far as the foot of one of those stone entrance lanterns they have where you turn in. She was unconscious when Bob found her.

"He rushed her to the hospital, let the rest of his deliveries go hang. Both legs broken, skull fracture, internal injuries; they said right away she didn't have a chance, and they were right. She died early the next night."

Breathing was so hard; I'd never known breathing to be so hard before. It had always seemed a simple thing that anyone could do—and here I had to work at it so desperately.

The noise attracted the deputy. He turned his head, then back to Cliff with the comfortable superiority of the professional over the layman. "Kinda gets him, doesn't it? This stuff's new to him I guess."

Cliff wasn't having any of me. How he hated me right then! "What was it?" he went on tautly, without even giving me a look.

"Well that's it; we didn't know what it was at first. We knew that a car did it to her, but we didn't get the hang of it at first, had it all wrong.

"We even found the car itself; it was abandoned there under the trees, off the main road a little way down beyond the cut-off. There were hairs and blood on the tires and fenders. And it was Dan Ayers' car.

"Well, practically simultaneous to that find, Waggoner, that's my chief, had come up here to the house to look around, and he'd found the safe busted and looted. It's in an eight-sided mirrored room they got on the floor above, I'll take you up and show you afterwards—"

"Cut it out!" Cliff snarled unexpectedly. Not at the deputy.

I put the whiskey-bottle back on the shelf where it had first caught my eye just now. This was like having your appendix taken out without ether.

"Why don't he go outside if this gets him?" the deputy said patronizingly.

"I want him in here with us; he should get used to this," Cliff said with vicious casualness.

"WELL, that finding of the safe gave us a case, gave us the whole thing, entire and intact. Or so we thought. You know, those cases that you don't even have to build, that are there waiting for you—too good to be true?

"This was it; Ayers had caught on that Fleming left a good deal of money in the safe even when he was away on trips; had brought her back that night, and either fixed the door so that he could slip back inside again afterwards after pretending to leave, or else remained concealed in the house the whole time without her being aware of it.

"Some time later she came out of her room unexpectedly, caught him in the act of forcing her husband's safe, and ran out of the house for her life—"

"Why didn't she use the telephone?" Cliff asked unmovedly.

"We thought of that. It wasn't a case of simply reporting an attempted robbery. She must have seen by the look on his face when she confronted him that he was going to kill her to shut her up. There wasn't any time to stop at a phone.

"She ran out into the open and down the cut-off toward the main road, to try to save her own life. She got clear of the house, but he tore after her in his car, caught up with her before she made the halfway mark to the stone lanterns.

"She tried to swerve offside into the brush, he turned the car after her, and killed her with it, just before she could get in past the trees that would have blocked him.

"We found traces galore there that reconstructed that angle of it to a T. And they were all offside, off the carpath; it was no hit-and-run, it was no accident; it was a deliberate kill, with the car chassis for a weapon.

"He knocked her down, went over her, and then reversed and went over her a second time in backing out. He thought she was dead; she was next door to it, but she was only dying."

I blotted the first tear before it got free of my lashes, but the second one dodged me, ran all the way down. Gee, life was lovely! All I kept saying over and over was: *I don't know how to drive, I don't know how to drive.*

CLIFF took out his cigarettes again and prodded into the warped pack. He threw it at me, and looked at me and smiled. "Have another smoke, kid," he said. "I've only got one left, but you can have it."

And I lit it and smiled too, through all the wet junk in my eyes.

"He rode the car a spell further down the main road away from there, and then he thought better of it, realized there must be traces all over it that would give him away even quicker than he could drive it, so he ran it off a second time, ditched it there out of sight where we found it, and lit out some less conspicuous way.

"I don't want to spend too much time on it. This is the case we *thought* we had, all Wednesday morning and up until about five that afternoon.

"We sent out a general alarm for Dan Ayers, broadcast his description, had the trains and roads and hauling-trucks out of here watched at the city end.

"And then at five that afternoon Mrs. Fleming regained consciousness for a short time—Waggoner had been waiting outside there the whole time to question her—and the first thing she whispered was, 'Is Dan all right? He didn't kill Dan, did he?' And then she talked.

"What she told us was enough to send us hotfooting back to the house. We pried open the various mirror panels we'd overlooked the first time and found Ayers' dead body behind one of them. He'd been stabbed in the back with some kind of an awl or bit.

"He'd been dead since the night before. She died about eight that next evening. There went our case."

Cliff didn't ask it for quite a while; maybe he hated to himself. Finally he did. "Did you get anything on the real killer?"

"Practically everything but the guy himself. She was right in the alcove with the two of them when it happened. She got a pretty good look by torchlight, and she lasted long enough to give it to us. All the dope is over at my chief's office."

Cliff smacked his own knees, as if in reluctant decision. He got up. "Let's go over there," he said slowly. "Let's go over and give it the once over." He stopped and looked back at me from the doorway. "C'mon, Vince, you too. I'll leave a note for Lil."

He stood out there waiting, until I had to get up. My legs felt stiff.

"C'mon, Vince," he repeated. "I know this is out of your line, but you better come anyway."

"Haven't you got any mercy at all?" I breathed, as I brushed past him with lowered head.

CHAPTER VII

WRONG WAY OUT

CLIFF trod on my heel twice, going into the office from the deputy's car, short as the distance was. He was bringing up behind me. It might have been accidental; but I think without it I might have faltered and come to a dead halt. I think he thought so too.

Waggoner was a much younger-looking and trimmer man than I had expected. The four of us went into his inner office, at the back of the front room, and the three of them chewed the rag about it—the case—in general terms for a while.

Then he said "Yes," to Cliff's question, opened a drawer in one of the filing cabinets and got out a folder.

"We do have a pretty good general description of him, from her. Here's a transcription of my whole interview with her at the hospital. I had a stenographer take it down at her bedside."

From the folder he removed a typescript on onionskin.

"All that," I thought dismally.

The room had gotten very quiet. "Our reconstruction of the car assault on Mrs. Fleming was perfectly accurate, as was our motivation of the safe looting and its interruption.

"The only thing is, there's a switch of characters involved; that's where we went wrong. Instead of Mrs. Fleming being killed by Ayers, Mrs. Fleming *and* Ayers were killed by this third person.

"She saw the awl plunged into Ayers' back, fled from the house for her life, was pursued down the cut-off by the murderer in Ayers' car and crushed to death. The murderer then went back, completed his interrupted ransacking of the safe, and concealed Ayers' body.

"He also relocked the house, to gain as much time as possible . . ." His voice became an unintelligible drone. "And so on, and so on."

He turned a page, then his tracing finger stopped. "Here's what you want, Dodge. The killer was about twenty-

five, and fairly skinny. His cheekbones stood out, cast shadows in the torch-light as it wavered on his face—"

I cupped my hand lengthwise to my cheek, the one turned toward the three of them, and sat there as if holding my face pensively. I was over by the night-blacked window and they were more in the center of the room, under the cone light Waggoner had turned on over his desk.

His tracing finger dropped a paragraph lower, stopped again. "He had light-brown hair. She even remembered that it was parted low on the left side—take a woman to notice a thing like that even at such a moment—and an unusually long forelock that kept falling in front of his face."

My hand went up a little higher and brushed mine back. It only fell down again like it always did.

"His eyes were fixed and glassy, as if he was mentally unbalanced—"

I saw Cliff glance thoughtfully down at the floor, then up again.

"He had on a knitted sweater under his jacket, and she even took in that it had been darned and rewoven up at the neckline in a different color yarn—"

Lil had made me one the Christmas before, and then I'd burned a big hole in it with a cigarette spark, and when I'd taken it back to her, she hadn't been able to get the same color again. It had left a big star-like patch that hit you in the eye.

It was back at my room now. I looked out the window, and I didn't see anything.

HIS voice went on: "It took us hours to get all this out of her. We could only get it in snatches, a little at a time, she was so low. She went under without knowing Ayers had been killed along with her."

I heard the onionskin sheets crackle as he refolded them. No one said anything for awhile. Then Cliff asked, "They been buried yet?"

"Yeah, both. Temporarily, in her case; we haven't been able to contact the husband yet. I understand he's in South America."

"Got pictures of them?"

"Yeah, we got death photographs. Care to see them?"

I knew what was coming up. My blood turned to ice, and I tried to catch Cliff's eye, to warn him in silent desperation: Don't make me look, in front of them. I'll cave, I'll give myself away. I can't stand any more of it, I'm played out.

He said off-handedly, "Yeah, let's have a look."

Waggoner got them out of the same folder that had held the typescript. Blurredly, I could see the large, gray squares passing from hand to hand. I got that indirectly, by their reflections on the polished black window square.

I was staring with desperate intensity out into the night, head averted from them.

I missed seeing just how Cliff worked it, with my head turned away like that. I think he distracted their attention by becoming very animated and talkative all at once, while the pictures were still in his hands, so that Waggoner forgot to put them back where he'd taken them from. I lost track of them.

The next thing I knew the light had snapped out, they were filing out, and he was holding the inner office door for me, empty-handed. "Coming, Vince?" We passed through the outside room to the street.

The deputy said, "I'll run you back there; it's on my own way home anyway." He got in under the wheel and Cliff got in next to him. I was just going to get in the back when Cliff's voice warded me off like a lazy whip.

"Run back a minute and see if I left my cigarettes in Mr. Waggoner's office, Vince."

Then he held Waggoner himself rooted to the spot there beside the car by a sudden burst of parting cordiality. "I want you to be sure and look me up anytime you'd down our way . . . "

His voice dwindled behind me and I was in the darkened inner office again, alone. I knew what I'd been sent back for. He didn't have any cigarettes in here; he'd given me his last one back at the Fleming house. I found the still-warm cone, curbed its swaying, lit it. They were there on the table under my eyes; he'd left them out there for me purposely.

The woman's photograph was topmost. The cone threw a narrow pool of bright light. Her face seemed to come to life in it, held up in my hand. Sight came into the vacant eyes.

I seemed to hear her voice again: "There he is, right behind you!" And the man's came to life in my other hand. That look he'd given me when I'd bent over him, already wounded to death, on the floor. "What did you have to do that for?" . . .

THE cone light jerked high up into the ceiling, and then three pairs of feet were ranged around me, there where I was, flat on the floor. I could hear a blur of awed male voices overhead.

"Out like a light."

"What did it, you suppose, the pictures? Things like that get him, don't they? I noticed that already over at the house, before, when I was telling you about the case."

"He's not well, he's under treatment by a doctor right now; he gets these dizzy spells now and then, that's all it is." The last was Cliff's. He squatted down by me on his haunches, raised my head, held a paper cup of water from the filter in the corner to my mouth.

His face and mine were only the cup's breadth away from one another.

"Yes," I sighed soundlessly.

"Shut up," he grunted without moving his lips.

I struggled up and he gave me an arm back to the car. "He'll be all right," he said, and he closed the rear car-door on me. It sounded a little bit like a cell grating.

Waggoner was left behind, standing on the sidewalk in front of his office, in a welter of so longs and much obligeds.

We didn't say anything in the car. We couldn't; the deputy was at the wheel. We changed to Cliff's car at the Fleming house, picked Lil up, and she was blazing sore.

She laced it into him halfway back to the city. "I think you've got one hell of a nerve, Cliff Dodge, leaving me alone like that in a house where I had no business to be in the first place, and going off to talk shop with a couple of corny Keystone cops."

Once, near the end, she said: "What's matter, Vince, don't you feel well?" She'd caught me holding my head, in the rear-vision mirror.

"The outing was a little bit too strenuous for him," Cliff said bitterly.

That brought on a couple of post-scripts. "No wonder, the way you drive! Next time, try not to get to the place we're going, and maybe you'll make it!"

I would have given all my hopes of heaven to be back in that blessed everyday world she was in—where you wrangled and you squabbled, but you didn't kill. I couldn't give that, because I didn't have any hopes of heaven left.

We stopped and he said, "I'll go up with Vince a minute."

I WENT up the stairs ahead of him. He closed the door after us. He spoke low, without fireworks. He said, "Lil's waiting downstairs, and I'm going to take her home before I do anything.

"I love Lil. It's bad enough what this is going to do to her when she finds out; I'm going to see that she gets at least one good night's sleep before she does."

He went over to the door, ready to leave. "Run out; that's about the best thing you can do. Meet your finish on the hoof, somewhere else, where your sister and I don't have to see it happen.

"If you're still here when I come back, I'm going to arrest you for the murder of Dan Ayers and Dorothy Fleming. I don't have to ask you if you killed those two people. You fainted dead on the floor when you saw their photographs in death."

He gave the knob a twist, as if he was choking the life out of his own career. "Take my advice and don't be here when I get back. I'll turn in my information at my own precinct house and they can pass it on to Waggoner; then I'll hand over my own badge in the morning."

I was pressed up against the wall, as if I was trying to get out of the room where there was no door, arms making swimming-strokes. "I'm frightened," I said, in a still voice.

"Killers always are," he answered. "—afterwards. I'll be back in about half an hour." He closed the door and went out.

I stayed there against the wall, listening to his steps grow fainter and fainter and finally fade away.

I didn't move for about half the time he'd given me. Then I put on the light over the washstand, and turned the warm water tap. I felt my jaw and it was a little bristly. I wasn't really interested in that.

I opened the cabinet and took out my cream and blade and holder, from sheer reflex of habit. Then I saw I'd taken out too much, and I put back the cream and holder.

The warm water kept running down. I was in such pain already I didn't even feel the outer gash when I made it. The water kept carrying it away down the drain.

It would have been quicker at the throat, but I didn't have the guts. This was the old Roman way; slower but just as effective. I did it on the left one too, and then I threw the blade away. I wouldn't need it anymore to shave with.

. . . I was seeing black spots in front of my eyes when he tried to get in the door. I tried to keep very quiet, so he'd think I'd lammed and go away, but I couldn't stand up any more.

He heard the thump when I went down on my knees, and I heard him threaten through the door, "Open it or I'll shoot the lock away!"

It didn't matter now any more. He could come in if he wanted to; he was too late. I floundered over to the door knee-high and turned the key. Then I climbed up it to my feet again. "You could have saved yourself the trip back," I said weakly.

All he said, grimly, was: "I didn't think of that way out"; and then he ripped the ends off his shirt and tied them tight around the gashes, pulling with his teeth till the skin turned blue above them. Then he got me downstairs and into the car.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CANDLE FLAME

THEY didn't keep me at the hospital, just took stitches in the gashes, sent me home, and told me to stay in bed a day and take it easy. I hadn't even been able to do that effectively. These safety razor blades; no depth.

It was four when we got back to my room. Cliff stood over me while I got undressed, then thumbed the bed for me to get in.

"What about the arrest?" I asked. "Postponed?" I asked it just as a simple question, without any sarcasm, rebuke or even interest. I didn't have any left in me to give it.

"Canceled," he said. "I gave you your chance to run out, and you didn't take it. As a matter of fact I sent Lil home alone; I've been downstairs watching the street door the whole time.

"When a guy is willing to let the life ooze out his veins, there must be something to his story. You don't die to back up lies. You've convinced me of your good faith, if not your innocence.

"I don't know what the explanation is, but I don't think you really know what you did that night."

"I'm tired," I said. "I'm licked. I don't even want to talk about it any more."

"I think I better stick with you tonight." He took one of the pillows and furled it down inside a chair and hunched low in it.

"It's all right," I said spiritlessly. "I won't try it again. I still think it would have been the best way out . . . "

OUR voices were low. We were both all in from the emotional stress we'd been through all night long. And in my case, there was the loss of blood.

In another minute one or both of us would have dozed off. In another minute it would have eluded us forever. For no combination of time and place and mood and train-of-thought is ever the same twice.

He yawned. He stretched out his legs to settle himself better; the chair had a low seat and he was long-legged. The shift brought them over a still-damp stain, from my attempt. There were traces of it in a straight line, from the washstand all the way over to the door. He eyed them.

"You sure picked a messy way," he observed drowsily.

"Gas is what occurs to most people first, I imagine," I said, equally drowsily. "It did to me, but this house has no gas. So there was no other way but the blade."

"Good thing it hasn't," he droned. "If more houses had no gas there'd be fewer—"

"Yeah, but if the bulb in your room burns out unexpectedly, it can be damn awkward. That happened to the fellow in the next room one night, I remember, and he had to use a candle—"

My eyes were closed already. Maybe his were too, for all I knew. My somnolent voice had one more phrase to unburden itself of before it, too, fell silent. "It was the same night I had the dream," I added inconsequentially.

"How do you know he had to use a candle? Were you in there at the time?"

His voice opened my eyes again, just as my last straggling remark had opened his. His head wasn't reared, but his face was turned toward me on the pillow.

"No, he rapped and stuck his head in my door a minute, and he was holding the candle. He wanted to know if my light had gone out too; I guess he wanted to see if the current had failed through the whole house, or if was just the bulb in his room. You know how people are in rooming houses."

"Why'd he have to do that? Couldn't he tell by the hall?" Cliff's voice wasn't as sleepy as before.

"They turn the lights in the upper halls out at eleven-thirty, here, and I guess the hall was dark already."

His head had left the pillow now. "That's still no reason why he should bust in on you. I'd like to hear the rest of this."

"There isn't any rest. I've told you all there is to it."

"That's what you think! Watch what I get out of it. To begin with, who was he? Had you ever seen him before?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "We weren't strangers. His name was Burg. He'd been living in the room for a week or ten days before that. We'd said howdy passing each other on the stairs.

"We'd even stood and chatted down at the street door several times in the evening, when neither of us had anything to do."

"How is it you never mentioned this incident to me before, as many times as I've asked you to account for every single minute of that evening, before you fell asleep?"

"But this has nothing to do with what came up later. You've kept asking me if I was sure I didn't remember having the room at any time, and things like that. I didn't even step out into the hall, when he came to the door like that.

"I was in bed already, and I didn't even get out of bed to let him in. Now what more d'you want?"

"Oh, you were in bed already."

"I'd been in bed some time past, reading the paper like I do every night. I'd just gotten through and put out my own light a couple minutes before, when I heard this light knock—"

CLIFF made an approving pass with his hand. "Tell it just like that. Step by step. Tell it like to a six-year-old kid." He'd left the chair long ago and was standing over me. I wondered why this trifling thing, this less than an incident, should interest him so.

"I turned over, called out 'Who is it?' He answered in a low-pitched voice, 'Burg, from next-door.'"

He wrinkled the skin under his eyes. "Low-pitched? Furtive? Cagey?"

I shrugged. "He didn't want to wake up everyone else on the whole floor, I suppose."

"Maybe it was that. Go on."

"I can reach the door from my bed, you know. I stuck out my arm, flipped the key and opened the door. He was standing there in his suspenders, holding this lighted candle in front of him. So he asked if my room light was okay. We tried it, and it was."

"Then did he back right out again?"

"Well, not instantly. We put the light right out again, but he stayed on in the doorway a couple of minutes."

"Why'd he have to stand in the doorway a couple of minutes once he'd found out your light was okay?"

"Well—uh—winding up the intrusion, signing off, whatever you'd want to call it."

"In just what words?"

Gee, he was worse than a school teacher in the third grade. "You know how those things go. He said he was sorry he'd disturbed me; he wouldn't have if he'd realized I was in bed. He said, 'You're tired, aren't you? I can see you're tired.'" I looked up at Cliff's face. "With the light out." It was a commentary, not a question.

"THE candle was shining into my face. He said, 'Yes, you're tired. You're very tired.' And the funny part of it was I hadn't been until then, but after he called it to my attention, I noticed he was right."

"Kind of repetitious, wasn't he?" Cliff drawled. "You've quoted him as saying it four times, already."

I smiled tolerantly. "I guess he's got kind of a one-track mind, used to mumbling to himself maybe."

"All right, keep going."

"There's no further to go. He closed the door and went away, and I dropped right off to sleep."

"Wait a minute; hold it right there. Are you sure that door closed after him? Did you see it close? Did you *hear* it? Or are you just tricking your senses into believing you did, because you figure that's what must have happened next anyway?"

Was he a hound at getting you mixed up! "I wasn't so alert any more," I told him, "I was sort of relaxed."

"Did it go like this?" He opened it slightly, eased it gently closed. The latch-tongue went *click* into the socket. "Did it go like this?" He opened it a second time, this time eased it back in place holding the knob fast so the latch-tongue couldn't connect. Even so, the edge of the door itself gave a little thump as it met the frame.

He waited, said: "I can see by the trouble you're having giving me a positive answer, that you didn't hear either of those sounds."

"But the door must've closed," I protested. "What was he going to do, stay in here all night keeping watch at my bedside? The candle seemed to go out, so he must've gone out and left me."

"The candle seemed to go out. How do you know it wasn't your eyes that dropped closed and shut it out?"

I didn't say anything.

"I want to ask you a few questions," he said. "What sort of an effect did his voice have on you, especially when he kept saying, 'You're tired'?"

"Sort of peaceful. I liked it."

He nodded at that. "Another thing: Where did he hold that candle, in respect to himself? Off to one side?"

"No; dead center in front of his own face, so that the flame was between his eyes, almost."

He nodded again. "Did you stare at the flame pretty steadily?"

"Yeah, I couldn't tear my eyes off it. You know how a flame in a dark room will get you."

"And behind it—if he was holding it up like you say—you met his eyes."

"I guess—I guess I must have. He kept it on a straight line between my eyes and his the whole time."

HE WORKED his cheek around, like he was chewing a sour apple. "Eyes were fixed and glassy as if he was mentally unbalanced," I heard him mutter.

"What?"

"I was just remembering something in that deathbed statement Mrs. Fleming made to Waggoner. One more thing: when you chatted with him downstairs at the street door like you say you did once or twice, what were the topics, can you remember?"

"Oh, a little bit of everything, you know how those things go. At first general things like the weather and baseball

and politics. Then later more personal things—you know how you get talking about yourself when you've got an interested listener."

Cliff said: "Mmm . . . Did you ever catch yourself doing something you didn't want to do, while you were in his company?"

"No. Oh wait, yes. One night he had a box of mentholated coughdrops in his pocket. He kept taking them out and offering them to me the whole time we were talking. Gosh, if there's one thing I hate it's mentholated cough drops. I'd say no each time, and then I'd give in and take one anyway. Before I knew it, I'd finished the whole box."

Cliff eyed me gloomily. "Testing your will power . . . "

"You seem to make something out of this whole thing," I said helplessly. "What is it?"

"Never mind. I don't want to frighten you right now. You get some sleep, kid. You're weak after what you tried to do just now." I saw him pick up his hat.

"Where you going?" I asked. "I thought you said you were staying here tonight."

"I'm going back to the Fleming house —and to Waggoner's headquarters too, while I'm at it . . . "

"And Vince," he added from the doorway, "don't give up yet. We'll find a way out somehow; don't take any more short cuts."

CHAPTER IX

KILL ME AGAIN

IT WAS noon before I woke up; and even then he didn't show up for another two or three hours yet. I didn't dare leave my room, even for a cup of coffee; I was afraid if I did I'd miss Him, and he'd think I'd changed my mind and lammed out after all.

He finally showed up around three, and found me worriedly coursing back and forth in my stocking feet, holding one bandaged wrist with the opposite hand. Stiffening was setting in, and they hurt plenty.

But I was fresh as a daisy compared to the shape Cliff was in. He had big black crescents under his eyes from not getting to bed all night, and the first thing he did was sprawl back in the easy chair and kick off his shoes. Then he blew a big breath of relaxation that fanned halfway across the room.

"Were you up there all this time?" I gasped.

"I've been back to town once, in between, to pick up something I needed and get a leave of absence."

He'd brought a large flat slab wrapped in brown paper. He picked it up now, undid it, turning partly away from me, scissored his arms, and then turned back again.

He was holding a large portrait-photograph in a leather frame against his chest for me to see. He didn't say anything; just watched me.

It took a minute for the identity to peer through the contradictory details, trifling as they were.

The well-groomed hair, neatly tapered above the ears instead of shaggily unkempt; the clean-shaven upper lip instead of a sloppy walrus-tusk mustache . . .

And, above all, a look of prosperity, radiating from the perfect fit of the custom-tailored suit-collar, the careful negligence of the expensive necktie, the expression of the face itself—instead of the habitual unbuttoned, tieless, slightly soiled shirt-collar, the hangdog look of middle age inevitably running to seed.

I said, "Hey, that's Burg! The man that had the room next to me! Where'd you—"

"I didn't have to ask you that; I already know it, from the landlord and one or two of the other roomers here I've shown it to."

He reached under it with one hand and suddenly swung out a second panel, attached to the first. It was one of those double-easel arrangements that stand on dressers.

She stared back at me; and like a woman, she was different again. She'd been different on each of the three times. This was the third and last time I was to see her.

She had here neither the mask-like scowl of hate at bay I had seen by torchlight, nor yet the rigid ghost-grin of death. She was smiling, calm, alive, lovely.

I made a whimpering sound.

"Burg is Dorothy Fleming's husband," Cliff said. "Waggoner gave me this, from their house."

HE MUST have seen hope beginning to flicker in my eyes. He snuffed it out, with a rueful gnawing at his under lip, a slight shake of his head.

He closed the photofolder and threw it aside. "No," he said, "no, there's no out in it for you. Look, Vince. D'you want to know now what we're up against, once and for all? You've got to sooner or later, and it isn't going to be easy to take."

"You've got bad news for me."

"Pretty bad. But at least it's better than this weird stuff that you've been shadow-boxing with ever since it happened. It's rational, down-to-earth, something that the mind can grasp.

"You killed a man that Wednesday night. You may as well get used to the idea. There's no dodging out of it, no possibility of mistake, no shrugging off of responsibility.

"It isn't alone Mrs Fleming's death-bed description, conclusive as that is; and she didn't make that up out of thin air, you know. Fingerprints that Waggoner's staff took from that mirror door behind which Ayers' body was thrust check with yours. I compared them privately while I was up there, from a drinking glass, I took out of this room here and had dusted over at our own lab."

I looked, and my glass was gone.

"You and nobody but you found your way into the Fleming house and punctured Dan Ayers' heart with an awl and secreted his body in a closet."

He saw my face blanch. "Now steady a minute. You didn't kill Dorothy Fleming. You would have, I guess, but she ran out of the house and down the cut-off for her life.

"You can't drive, and she was killed by somebody in a car. Somebody in Ayers' car, but not Ayers himself obviously, since you had killed him upstairs a minute before yourself.

"Now that proves, of course, that somebody brought you up there—and was waiting outside for you at a safe distance, a distance great enough to avoid implication, yet near enough to lend a hand when something went wrong and one of the victims seemed on the point of escaping."

THAT didn't help much. That halved my crime, but the half was still as great as the whole. After being told you'd committed one murder, where was the solace in being told you hadn't committed a dozen others?

I held my head. "But why didn't I *know* I was doing it?" I groaned.

"We can take care of that later," Cliff said. "I can't prove what I think it was, right now; and what good is an explanation without proof? There's only one way to prove it: show it could have happened the first time by getting it to happen all over again a second time."

I thought he was going crazy—or I was. "You mean, go back and conunit the crime all over again—when they're both already buried?"

"No, not quite-that. Don't ask me to explain until afterward; if I do, you'll get all tense, keyed up; you're liable to jeopardize the whole thing without meaning to. I want you to keep cool; everything'll depend on that."

I wondered what he was going to ask me.

"It's nearly four o'clock now," he said. "We haven't much time. A telegram addressed to Mrs. Fleming was finally received from her husband while I was up there; he's arriving back from South America today.

"Waggoner took charge of it and showed it to me. He's ordered her reburied in a private plot, and will probably get there in time for the services."

I trailed him downstairs to his car, got in beside him limply. "Where we going?" I asked.

He didn't start the car right away; gave me a half-rueful, half-apologetic look. "What place would you most hate to go to, of all places, right now?"

That wasn't hard. "The eight-sided mirrored alcove—where I did it."

"I was afraid of that. I'm sorry, kid, but that's the very place you're going to have to go back to, and stay in alone tonight, if you ever want to get out from under the shadows again. Whaddye say, shall we make the try?"

He still didn't start the car, gave me lots of time.

I only took four or five minutes. I slapped in my stomach, which made the sick feeling go up into my throat, and I said: "I'm ready."

* * *

I'D BEEN sitting on the floor, outside it, to rest, when I heard him come in. There were other people with him. The silence of the house, tomblike until then, was abruptly shattered by their entrance into the lower hall. I couldn't tell how many of them there were. They went into the living room, and their voices became less distinct.

I stood up and got ready, but I stayed out a while longer, to be able to breathe better. I knew I had time yet; he wouldn't come up right away.

The voices were subdued, as befitted a solemn post-funerary occasion. Every once in a while, though, I could make out a snatch of something that was said.

Once I heard someone ask: "Don't you want to come over to our place tonight, Joel? You don't mean you're going to stay here alone in this empty house after —after such a thing?"

I strained my ears for the answer—a lot depended on it—and I got it. "I'm closer to her here than anywhere else."

Presently they all came out into the hall again, on their way out, and I could hear goodnights being said. "Try not to think about it too much, Joel. Get some sleep."

The door closed. A car drove off outside, then a second one. No more voices after that. The tomblike silence almost returned.

But not quite. A solitary tread down there, returning from the front door, told that someone had remained. It went into

the living room and I heard the clink of a decanter against a glass.

Then a frittering of piano notes struck at random, the way a person does who has found contentment, is eminently pleased with himself.

Then a light switch ticked and the tread came out, started unhurriedly up the stairs. It was time to get in.

I put one foot behind me, and followed it back. I drew concealment before me in the shape of a mirror panel, all but the ultimate finger's breadth of gap, to be able to breathe and watch.

The oncoming tread had entered the bedroom adjacent to me, and a light went on in there. I heard a slatted blind spin down. Then the sound of a valise being shifted out into a more accessible position, and the click of the key used to open it.

I could even glimpse the colored labels on the lid as it went up and over. South American hotels.

I saw bodiless hands reach down, take things out: striped pajamas and piles of folded linen, that had never seen South America. That had probably lain hidden on a shelf in some public checkroom in the city all this time.

My heart was going hard. The dried blood on the woodwork at my back, of someone I had killed, seemed to sear me where it touched. It was the blood of someone *I* had killed, not this man out there. No matter what happened now, tonight nothing could absolve me of that.

There was no possibility of transfer of blame. Cliff had told me so, and it was true.

A light went up right outside where I was, and an ice-white needle of it splintered in at me, lengthwise, from top to bottom, but not broad enough to focus anything it fell on—from the outside.

I could see a strip of his back by it. He had come in and was squatting down by the damaged safe, mirror-covering swung out of the way. He swung its useless lid in and out a couple of times. I heard him give an almost soundless chuckle, as if the vandalism amused him.

Then he took things out of his coat pockets and began putting them in. Oblong manila envelopes such as are used to contain currency and securities, lumpy tissue-wrapped shapes that might have been jewelry.

Then he gave the safe door an indifferent slap-to. As if whether it shut tight or not didn't matter: what it held was perfectly safe—for the present.

Then he stood, before turning to go out. This was the time. Now.

CHAPTER X

THE SPARK WENT OUT

I TOOK the gun Cliff had given me, his gun, out of my pocket, and raised it to what they call the wishbone of the chest and held it there, pointed before me. Then I moved one foot out before me, and that took the door away, in a soundless sweep.

I was standing there like that when he turned finally. The mirror covering the safe-niche had been folded back until now, so he didn't see the reflection of my revelation.

The shock must have been almost galvanic. His throat made a sound like the creak of a rusty pulley. I thought he was going to fall down insensible for a minute. His body made a tortured cork-screw-twist all the way down to his feet, but he stayed up.

I had a lot to remember. Cliff had told me just what to say, and what not to say. I'd had to learn my lines by heart, and particularly the right timing of them.

That was even more important. He'd warned me I had a very limited time in which to say everything I was to say. I would be working against a deadline that might fall at any minute; but he didn't tell me what it was.

He'd warned me that we both—this man I was confronting and I—would be walking a tightrope, without benefit of balancing poles. Everything depended on which one of us made a false step first.

It was a lot to remember, staring at the man whom I had only known until now as Burg, a fellow rooming-house lodger; the man who held the key to the mystery that had suddenly clouded my existence.

And I had to remember each thing in the order it had been given me, in the proper sequence, or it was no good.

The first order was: Make him speak first. If it takes all night, wait until he speaks first.

He spoke finally. Somebody had to, and I didn't. "How'd *you* get here?" It was the croak of a frog in mud.

"You showed me the way, didn't you?"

I could see the lump in his throat as he forced it down, to be able to articulate. "You're— You remember coming here?"

"You didn't think I would, did you?"

His eyes rolled. "You—you couldn't have!"

The gun and I, we never moved. "Then how did I get back here again? You explain it."

I saw his eyes flick toward the entrance to the alcove. I shifted over a little, got it behind me, to seal him in. I felt with my foot and drew the door in behind me, not fast but leaving only a narrow gap.

"How long have you been in here like —like this?"

"Since shortly after dark. I got in while you were away at the funeral services."

"Who'd you bring with you?"

"Just this." I righted the gun, which had begun to incline a little at the bore.

HE COULDN'T resist asking it; he wouldn't have been human if he hadn't asked it, in his present predicament. "Just how much do you remember?"

I gave him a wise smile, that implied everything without saying so. It was Cliff's smile, not mine, but formed by my lips.

"You remember the drive up?" He said it low, but he'd wavered on the wire, that tightrope Cliff had mentioned. "You couldn't have! You had the look, the typical look—"

"What look?"

He shut up; he'd regained his equilibrium.

"I was holding a thumb tack pressed into the palm of each hand the whole way."

"Then why did you do everything I—you were directed to, so passively?"

"I wanted to see what it was leading up to. I thought maybe there might be some good in it for me later, if anyone went to all that trouble."

"You purposely feigned? I can't believe it! You didn't even draw back, exhibit a tremor, when I let you out of the car, put the knife in your hand, sent you on toward the house, told you how to get in and what to do? You mean you went ahead and consciously—"

"Sure I went ahead and did it, because I figured you'd pay off heavy afterwards to keep me quiet. And if I'd tried to balk then, I probably would have gotten the knife myself, on the way back, for my trouble."

"What happened, what went wrong inside?"

"I accidentally dropped the knife in the dark somewhere in the lower hall and couldn't find it again. I went on up empty-handed, thinking I'd just frighten them out the back way and get a chance at the safe myself.

"But Ayers turned on me and got me down, he weighed more than I do, and he was going to kill *me*—to keep it from coming out that he and your wife were cheating, and had been caught in the act of breaking into your safe in the bargain.

"Only by mistake, she put the awl that he cried out for into my hand instead of his. I plunged it into him in self-defense."

He nodded as if this cleared up something that had been bothering him. "Ah, that explains the change of weapon that had me mystified. Also how it was that she got out of the house like that and I had to go after her and—stop her myself.

"Luckily I was crouched behind the hood of Ayers' car, peering at the open door, when she came running out. She couldn't drive herself, so she didn't try to get in but ran screaming on foot down the cut-off.

"I jumped in without her seeing me, tore after her, and caught up with her. If I hadn't, the whole thing would have ended in a ghastly failure. I might have known you were under imperfect control."

HE'D fallen off long ago, gone hurtling down. But I still had a deadline to work against, things to say, without knowing why.

"Your control was perfect enough; don't let that worry you. You haven't lost your knack."

"But you just said—"

"And you fell for it. I didn't know what I was doing when you brought me up here and sent me in to do your dirty work for you that night.

"Haven't you missed something from your late wife's bedroom since you've been back? There was a double photo-folder of you and her. The police took that.

"I happened to see both pictures in one of the papers. I recognized you as Burg. I'd also recognized my own description, by a darned sweater I wore that night, and had a vague recollection—like when you've been dreaming—of having been in such a house and taken part in such a scene.

"You've convicted yourself out of your own mouth to me, right now. I haven't come back here to be paid off for my participation or take a cut in any hush money. Nothing you can give me from that safe can buy your life.

"You picked someone with weak willpower, maybe, but strong scruples. I was an honest man. You've made me commit murder. I can't clear myself in the eyes of the law—ever.

"You're going to pay for doing that to me. Now. *This* way."

His face was working, his voice hoarse as he said:

"Wait, don't do that. That won't help you any. Alive, maybe I can do something for you. I'll give you money, I'll get you out of the country. No one needs to know."

"My conscience'll always know. I've got an honest man's conscience in a murderer's body, now. You should have let me alone. That was your mistake. Here you go, Fleming."

He was almost incoherent, drooling at the mouth. "Wait—one minute more! Just sixty seconds." He took out a thin gold pocket watch and snapped up its burnished lid. He held it face toward me, open that way.

I SAW what he was trying to do. Cliff had warned me to be careful. I dropped my eyes to his feet, kept them stubbornly lowered, brow furrowed with resistance, while I held the gun on him. Something kept trying to pull them up.

A flash from the burnished metal of the inside of the watch-lid wavered erratically across my chest-front for an instant, like when kids tease you with sunlight thrown back from a mirror.

"Look up," he kept pleading. "Look up. Just one minute more. See—the hands are at six to. Look, just until they get to here."

Something was the matter with the trigger of the gun; it must have jammed. I kept trying to close the finger that was hooked around it, and it resisted. Or else maybe it was the finger that wouldn't obey my will.

I kept blinking more and more rapidly. The flash slithered across my shuttering eyes, slid off, came back again. They wanted so bad to look up into it; it prickled.

There was a slight snap, as if he had surreptitiously pulled out the stem-winder, to set the watch back. That did it.

I glanced up uncontrollably. He was holding the watch up, brow-high—like he had the candle that night—as if to give me a good, unobstructed look at its dial. It was in about the position doctors carry those little attached head-mirrors with which they examine throats.

I met his eyes right behind it, and all of a sudden my own couldn't get away any more, as if they'd hit glue.

A sort of delicious torpor turned me into wax; I didn't have any ideas of my own any more. I was open to anyone else's. My voice control lasted a moment longer than the rest of my functions. I heard it say, carrying a left-over message that no longer had any willpower behind it, "I'm going to shoot you."

"No," he said soothingly. "You're tired; you don't want to shoot anybody. You're tired. The gun's too heavy for you. Why do you want to hold that heavy thing?"

I heard a far-away thump as it hit the floor. As far away as if it had fallen right through to the basement. Gee, it felt good to be without it!

I felt lazy all over. The light was going out, but very gradually, like it was tired too. The whole world was tired.

Somebody was crooning. "You're tired, you're tired—you dirty bum *now I've got you!*"

THERE was a white flash that seemed to explode inside my head, and it hurt like anything.

Something cold and wet pressed against my eyes when I tried to flicker them open. And when I had, instead of getting lighter as when you're slowly waking up, the world around me seemed to get darker and weigh against me crushingly, all over.

The pain increased, traveled from my head to my lungs. Knives seemed to slash into them, and I couldn't breathe.

I could feel my eyeballs starting out of their sockets with strangulation, and my head seemed about to burst. The pressure of the surrounding darkness seemed to come against me in undulating waves.

I realized that I was under water and was drowning. I could swim, but now I couldn't seem to. I tried to rise and something kept holding me down.

I doubled over, forced myself down against the surrounding resistance, groped blindly along my own legs. One seemed free and unencumbered; I could lift it quite easily from the mucky bottom.

About the ankle of the other there was a triple constriction of tightly-coiled rope, like a hideous hempen gaiter. It was tangled hopelessly about a heavy iron cross-bar.

When I tried to raise this, one scimitar-like appendage came free, the other remained hopelessly hooked into the slime it had slashed into from above. It must have been some sort of a small but weighty anchor such as is used by launches and fishing craft.

I couldn't release it. I couldn't endure the bend of position against my inner suffocation. I spiraled upright again in death-fluid. My jaws kept going spasmodically, drinking in extinction.

A formless blur came down from somewhere, brushed lightly against me, shunted away again before I could grasp it, shot up out of reach. I couldn't see it so much as sense it as a disturbance in the water.

There were only fireworks inside my skull now, not conscious thoughts any more. The blurred manifestation shot down again, closer this time. It seemed to hang there, flounderingly, upside down, beside me.

I felt a hand close around my ankle. Then a knife grazed my calf and withdrew. I could feel a tugging at the rope, as if it was being sliced at.

Self-preservation was the only spark left in my darkening brain. I clutched at the hovering form in the death-grip of the drowning. I felt myself shooting up through water, together with it, inextricably entangled.

I wouldn't let go. Couldn't. Something that felt like a small ridged rock crashed into my forehead. Even the spark of self-preservation went out.

CHAPTER XI

LAST ORDEAL

WHEN I came to I was lying out on a little pier or stringpiece of some kind, and there were stars over me. I was in shorts and undershirt, wringing wet and shivering, and water kept flushing up out of my mouth.

Somebody kept kneading my sides in and out, and somebody else kept flipping my arms up and down.

I coughed a lot, and one of them said: "There he is; he's all right now." He stood up and it was Cliff. He was in his underwear and all dripping too.

A minute later Waggoner stood up on the other side of me. He was equally sodden, but he'd left on everything but his coat and shoes. There hadn't been any time by then, I guess.

He said, "Now get something around him and then the three of us better get back to the house fast and kill the first bottle we find."

There was light coming from somewhere behind us, through some fir trees that bordered the little lake. It played up the little pier. By it, I could see my own outer clothes neatly piled at the very lip of it.

There was a paper on top of them, pressed down by one of my oxfords. Cliff picked it up and brought it over and read it to us.

I'm wanted for the murder of those two people at the Fleming house, they're bound to get me sooner or later, and I have no chance. I see no other way but this.

Vincent Hardy

It was in my own handwriting; the light was strong enough for me to see that when he showed it to me. I was silent.

He looked at Waggoner and said, "Do we need this?"

Waggoner pursed his lips thoughtfully and said, "I think we're better off without it. These coroner-inquest guys can be awfully dumb sometimes; it might sort of cloud their judgment."

Cliff took a match from his dry coat and struck it and held it to the note until there wasn't any to hold any more.

I was feeling better now, all but the shivering. I was sitting up. I looked back at the glow through the trees and said, "What's that?"

"Fleming's car," Cliff answered. "He tried to take a curve too fast getting away from here, when we showed up on his tail, and he turned over and kindled."

I grimaced. That was about all that could have still stirred horror in me after the past ten days: a cremation alive.

"I shot him first," Cliff said quietly.

"One of us did," Waggoner corrected. "We all three fired after him. We'll never know which one hit him. We don't want to anyway. The machine telescoped and we couldn't get him out. And then I had to give Dodge a hand going down after you; he's no great shakes of a swimmer."

"We had to hit him," Cliff said. "It was the only way of breaking the hypnosis in time. You were drowning down there by your own act, and there was no time to chase him and force him at gun-point to release his control, or whatever it is they do.

"We only found out about the anchor after we'd located you."

A figure was coming back toward us from the glow, which was dwindling down now. It was the deputy. He said, "Nothing left now; I wet it down all I could to keep it from kindling the trees."

"Let's get back to the house," Cliff said. "The kid's all goose pimples."

We went back and I got very soused on my third of the bottle. I couldn't even seem to do that properly. They let me sleep it off there; the four of us spent the night right there where we were.

IN THE morning Cliff came in and had a talk with me before the other two were up. I knew where I was going to have to go with him in a little while, but I didn't mind so much any more.

I said, "Did that help any, what I did last night? Did it do any good?"

"Sure," he said. "It was the works; it was what I wanted and had to have. What d'you suppose I was doing around here all day yesterday, before he got back? Why d'you suppose I warned you to make him stay right there in the alcove with you and not let the conversation drift outside?

"I had it all wired up; we listened in on the whole thing. The three of us were down in the basement, taking it all down. We've got the whole thing down on record now. I'd emptied that gun I gave you, and I figured he'd be too smart to do anything to you right here in his own house.

"Only he got you out and into his car too quick, before we had a chance to stop him. We darned near lost you. We turned back after one false start toward the city, and a truckman told us he'd glimpsed a car in the distance tearing down the lake road That gave us the answer.

"We wouldn't have even been able to hold your suicide against him. You did all that yourself, you know, even to shackling your foot to that boat-anchor and dropping it over ahead of you. A person who is afraid of the jump into water but determined to go through with it might have taken such a precaution as that.

"I had a hunch it was hypnosis the minute you told me that candle incident. But how was I going to prove it? So much of that stuff is fake that most people don't want to believe in it.

"Now I've got two other police officers, beside myself, who saw--or rather heard—the thing happened all over again.

"You were in a state of hypnosis when you committed this crime; that's the whole point. You were simply the weapon in the actual murderer's hands. Your own mind wasn't functioning; you had no mind."

He stopped and looked at me. "Does that scare you?"

"Does it?" I must have looked sick.

"It would me too. I'd better begin at the beginning. Joel Fleming used to be a professional hypnotist in vaudeville years ago. I found enough scrapbooks, old theater programs, and whatnot in trunks here in this house to testify to that. Stage name, 'Dr. Mephisto.'

"He undoubtedly possesses a gift of hypnotic control--over certain subjects. (With my wife Lil, for instance, I'm afraid he'd come a complete cropper—and wind up helping her dry dishes.)"

He was trying to cheer me up; I grinned appreciatively.

HE WENT on, more seriously: "Well, he got out of vaudeville years ago while the getting out was still good, and he went into another line of business entirely, which doesn't need to concern us here, and he made good dough.

"Then he made the mistake of marrying someone years younger than him, a hat-check girl he met at a nightclub.

"It wasn't only that she married him simply for his money and to be able to quit handling people's sweatbands at four bits a throw; she was already the sweetie of a convict named Dan Ayers, who was doing time just then for embezzlement.

"You get the idea, don't you? Ayers got out, found a ready-made situation crying to be profited by--so he profited by it. He cultivated Fleming, got in solid with him; he didn't have to get in solid with Dorothy, he was already.

"All right. Fleming did make these trips to South America, all but the last time. It's obvious that he found out what was going on quite some time back, somewhere between the last real trip he made and the fake one just now.

"It's equally obvious that he brooded and he planned revenge. It wasn't just a case of marital disloyalty involved either: he found out they were planning to make off with all his available funds and securities the next time he was away, just strip him clean and goodbye.

"You notice he didn't entrust her with the safe combination here in the house.

"That's conjecture: the three principals are dead now and can't give evidence. I'm not trying to defend Fleming, but I can see why he wanted Ayers dead--and wanted Dorothy dead too.

"But he picked a low, lousy way of getting it done. He wasn't going to endanger himself. No, he started off for 'South America', dropped from sight, holed up in a rooming house in the city under the name of Burg.

"Then he picked an innocent kid, who had never done him any harm, who had just as much right as he had to life and the pursuit of happiness, to do his murdering for him.

"He tested you out, saw that you were a suitable subject, and—well, the rest we got over the dictaphone last night. To give him his due, he wasn't deliberately trying to have you apprehended for the crime either. He would have been just as satisfied if you were never caught.

"But if they ever caught the man the clues pointed to, if they ever caught the killer, it would always be you, not him.

"True, he had to drive you up there, because you don't drive. It was just as well he did, from his point of view. You lost the knife, only killed Ayers by a fluke in struggling with him, and Dorothy would have gotten away if he hadn't been lurking outside to lend a hand himself.

"If she had lived to raise the alarm, you probably would have been nabbed then and there, before you could make a getaway--which would have brought the investigation back to the rooming house too quickly to suit him. So he crushed her to death and whisked you back to immunity."

I'D BEEN thinking hard through all of this. "But Cliff," I said, "how is it I remembered the whole murder scene so vividly the next morning? Especially their faces--"

"His control wasn't one hundred percent effective; I don't know if it ever is. The whole scene must have filtered dimly through to your conscious mind, and remained in your memory the next morning after you woke up—just the way a dream does.

'And other particles, that remained imbedded in your subconscious at first, also came out later when they reproduced themselves in actuality: I mean your memory of the stone entrance lanterns, the cut-off, the spare door key, the hall light-switch, and so on.

"All that stuff is way over my head; I'm not qualified to pass expert judgment on it. I'd rather not even puzzle too hard about it; it scares me myself."

"Why did I seem to know her, when I didn't? Why was I so sort of hurt, heartbroken, at the sight of her face?"

"Those were Fleming's thoughts, not yours, filtering through your mind. She was his wife, about to desert him, helping another man to rob him."

I was sitting down on the edge of the bed, lacing my shoes. That reminded me of something else. "It was drizzling in town that night when I went to bed, and the streets were only starting to dry off when I woke up the next morning.

"Yet the soles of my shoes were perfectly dry. How could they be, if I followed him even across the sidewalk to where he had a car waiting."

"I remember you mentioned that to me once before, and it's puzzled me too. The only possible explanation I can think of is this--and that's another thing we'll never know for sure, because that point didn't come up when he was giving himself away in the alcove last night.

"Can you remember whether you got your shoes off easily that night, when you were undressing in your own room; or as sometimes happens with nearly everyone, did the laces get snarled, so you couldn't undo the knot of one or both of them?"

I tried to remember. "I'm not sure, but I think a snag did form in the laces of one of them, so I pulled it off the way it was without opening it properly."

"And in the morning?"

"They both seemed all right."

"That's what it was, then. You couldn't undo the knot in time while you were hurriedly getting dressed under his direction. You followed him out and around to wherever the car was in your stocking feet, shoes probably shoved into the side pockets of your coat. He got the knot out for you at his leisure in the car, before starting.

"It wasn't raining up here that night, and by the time you got back to town again the sidewalks were already starting to dry off, so your shoes stayed dry."

"But wouldn't my socks have gotten wet?"

"They probably did, but they'd dry off again quicker than shoes."

I WAS ready now. Waggoner and his deputy went over ahead without waiting for us. I guess he figured I'd rather just go alone with Cliff, and he wanted to make it as easy as he could for me.

He said, "Bring the kid over whenever you're ready, Dodge."

Cliff and I started over by ourselves about half an hour later. I knew I'd have to go into a cell for a while, but that didn't worry me any more; the shadows had lifted.

When we got out in front of the office Cliff asked: "Are you scared, kid?"

I was a little, like when you're going in to have a tooth yanked or a broken arm reset. You know it's got to be done, and you'll feel a lot better after it's over. "Sort of," I admitted, forcing a smile.

"You'll be all right," he promised, giving me a heartening grip on the shoulder. "I'll be standing up right next to you. They probably won't even send it all the way through to prosecution."

We went in together.

THE END

The Devil's Garden

By Robert Arthur

Author of "Afternoon of a Faun," "Postmarked for Paradise," etc.

The ancient fakir labbed again, and my friend flinched with pain

Presenting another chapter in the improbable reminiscences of Murchison Morks—an eerie tale of Hindu revenge

"IN CALCUTTA I saw the most amazing sight," said Henderson, the stout paint manufacturer who is a member of our club. He had just returned from a world cruise and was telling about it in detail. "I saw a Hindu fakir, naked except for a loin cloth, lying on a bed of sharpened nails with a fifty-pound rock on his chest, and never even murmuring! He—"

"In Bombay," a melancholy voice interrupted him, "I saw a sight much stranger than that."

Henderson turned, a little purple. It was Morks who had interrupted. Murchison Morks his full name is, and it is always he who interrupts. It is quite impossible for anyone else to narrate an experience when Morks is around, for Morks invariably has done something more exciting or dangerous along the same lines.

I was technically responsible for Morks, for it was I who had given him the guest card to our club. But I was hardened by now to receiving black looks for that error in judgment. There were even times when I took a perverse pleasure in inviting Morks to the club for luncheon and a drink, in the hopes someone would say something that would start him off.

Morks cost me quite a bit, one way and another, for he is not a man to pay for his own meals or his own drinks, but I have a way of recouping. I take down the tales he occasionally tells, and when they are not too improbable, sell them. In the end, though I've never made a careful check, I believe that Morks, annoying though he is, returns me a profit.

Now he had gotten started, I knew it would be impossible to head him off until he had told whatever tale was forming in his memory—or his imagination. But Henderson tried valiantly.

"This fakir, I say," he went on, raising his voice, "was lying on needle-sharp nails with this rock on his chest. Then two assistants got up on the rock and began to jump up and down!"

"The fakir that I saw, in Bombay," Murchison Morks interposed, in his voice a note of quiet insistence like the dripping of a leaky faucet, "was sitting in a little garden, surrounded by toads, snakes, lizards, rats, and filth indescribable. From time to time he took a long sharp pin and stuck it completely through his hand, his foot, his arm, his leg, deep into the flesh of his thigh, and other portions of his anatomy.

"Every time he did it, he laughed. And every time he laughed, I saw another man, a friend of mine, wince with pain as if the pin had gone into him instead."

"And then," Henderson said loudly, "just when I thought nothing more could—"

"I learned later,"—Morks' voice had a carrying quality that beat down Henderson's words as if they were the pipings of a child—"that this filthy old man, never stirring out of his garden of muck, or from among his nest of snakes and rodents and other horrible crawling creatures, had killed at least three men—white men, I mean—just as he meant to kill my friend. By sticking pins into himself, pouring slime upon himself, and by stroking, fondling, and otherwise touching his dreadful pets."

Henderson let out a deep breath. His face was furious, but he saw it was no use. Morks had gotten the attention of all the club members within earshot. When he was sure of that, he let himself sink into a large, well-padded chair, absently picked up a drink that had been left there for someone else, and surveyed us, his long solemn face sober.

"But I know you won't believe me unless I tell you the whole story," he murmured deprecatingly, "so—"

THE story does not start in Bombay, though, (Morks began). At least, my part of it doesn't, and I'm only going to tell you the part I know about for myself, since that is the only one I can vouch for as being completely and unquestionably true.

My share of the story begins half around the world from India, in the quiet, peaceful atmosphere of Surrey, England. Where I was visiting an old friend of mine, John Paget, recently succeeded to the title of Earl of Quimberly, and engaged to Lucy Horrocks, one of the loveliest girls ever to have an income of twenty thousand a year in her own name.

Being in London, I had dropped down to see Jack Paget for just a weekend. But finding him nervous and distraught,

not at all his old self, I determined to remain until I could discover what was wrong. For that something was, was evident.

It was several years since I had seen Jack. On the occasion of our last meeting, he had been a bronzed, powerful young fellow, a little over tense, perhaps, but as fine a specimen as England was ever likely to turn out.

Now, just when he should have been bubbling over with happiness at the prospect of marrying Lucy and restoring the family estates to their old glory, he was pale and wan, jumpy as a nervous old woman, his eyes sunken and haunted. He was given, too, to starting unexpectedly and violently—a gesture he tried to check, but never could.

It was only after an incident happening on the third day of my visit that he broke down and told me what lay behind the change that had come over him.

We were having a spot of tea in the library of ancient Quimberly Hall and Jack was adding a dash of soda to mine when his hand jerked, he dropped the siphon, and involuntarily he clapped his wrist to his mouth.

Then, pale and shaking, he tried to murmur something about nerves, but I knew better. I made him hold out his hand. There was a tiny puncture on his wrist, from which a drop of blood was oozing. Exactly as if a pin had jabbed him. An invisible pin wielded by unseen hands.

And looking closely, I saw half a dozen marks that represented similar pricks, healed or healing.

For one wild instant I suspected him of having become a dope fiend. But common sense quickly told me, whatever was wrong with Jack it was not that. For he had actually been squirting the soda into my glass when the pin prick—if that was what it was—occurred. And there had been nothing to cause it. Nothing whatever.

Sheepishly, when he saw that I had noticed the other marks, Paget showed me his left hand. It was marked in the same way.

"I'm covered with them from head to foot," he told me then, huskily, the look in his eyes that of a hunted animal. "I've been to a doctor. Harley Street chap. Told him about it. He thought I was dotty. I could tell by his face. Thought I was one of these fellows who stick things in themselves for the fun of it. Listened to me with a straight face, and then gave me some nerve tonic. Nerve tonic!"

He laughed bitterly.

"As if I was imagining—these."

WELL, to shorten the story, I dragged all the facts out of Jack without more nonsense. They were scanty enough. It seemed that he had gotten back from India only about six months before. When his uncle died, leaving the title to him, he had been working in Bombay in a bank. He'd chucked the job up to come back and be Earl of Quimberly, and this—well, this thing that was happening to him had begun the day he stepped off the boat.

Since then, day and night, he had suffered at unexpected moments from these pin pricks—these invisible, unseen pin pricks coming any place, without any warning whatever. Real pin pricks that drew blood. Like the one I had seen. And hurt. Naturally.

"But it's not that," Jack told me, his face drawn. "I mean, being stuck by a pin isn't pleasant, but it doesn't hurt that much. If you told me I was going to have one jabbed into me a dozen times a day, at regular intervals, I wouldn't mind it so much. Not fun, of course, but a man could stand it. It—it's the never *knowing*."

His lips twitched and his eyes were appealing.

"I mean, aside from never daring tell anybody you're being stuck with pins that don't exist, by some force that can't be seen—and the wondering what it is that's after you, of course—aside from that, it's the uncertainty.

"I get up, I eat, I tend to business, I talk to people, I go to bed—and I never know but that the next instant it is going to happen. I can't help jumping when it does, and of course people notice. And I can't explain.

"All the time I'm tight as a spring, waiting for it, eternally waiting for the next time. Can't let myself go, can't forget myself, can't put my mind on anything else. Can't even talk coherently to Lucy—old Horrocks is beginning to wonder if I'm not a bit off. Can't blame him. I wonder myself.

"The Lord knows I'm not sleeping, and I can't eat, and—well, if it doesn't stop soon, I will be crazy. There've been times already when I was so edgy I wanted to jump off a high building."

He passed his hand over his forehead and took the drink I handed him. Of course I could see what he was getting at. After all, when one is likely to have an invisible pin jabbed into one any minute of the day or night, a man is bound to get jumpy and overstrung.

And Jack was getting worse, I could see. Unless I was able to help, something desperate might happen. That remark about wanting to jump off a high building wasn't like Jack. Not in the slightest. But I confess I was baffled. I didn't begin to understand until Jack's next remark.

"AND the queer thing," he said, having finished off the drink (Morks did likewise) "is that every time it happens, a picture comes into my mind. A beastly, sickening picture I'd give a lot to be able to forget completely. But I can't. It keeps coming back, and every pin prick recalls it to me.

"It's a picture of an old Moslem fakir I saw in Bombay, just the day I was sailing for home. I was wandering around in the native section, looking for a present for Lucy, when I got somehow into a little alley that led into a kind of square, where a low wall marked off a garden.

"At least, I suppose you could call it a garden. Plants grew in it—sickly, vicious looking plants that had their roots in slime and muck inches deep. The stench was enough to gag a man, and even the natives who used the alley went by quickly, with their noses up. And they weren't the fastidious kind, those natives.

"But worst of all was the chap sitting in the middle of the garden, on a low rock. A fakir he was, I suppose, making his living by begging. Anyway, he had a brass bowl, and I noticed that the natives who passed, even if they did hurry, never missed tossing something into the bowl.

"But I didn't see the bowl at first. Because, although it turned my stomach to look at him, I couldn't take my eyes off this beggar in the middle of his diabolical garden. He was a wizened old scarecrow, wrinkled like a wadded up glove. His eyes were just gleams of blackness behind half slitted lids. He was quite bald, and wore nothing but a rag around his middle.

"And in the garden with him he had—pets. Rats! Lizards! Snakes! Toads! All of them crawling and writhing and hopping around in the muck and slime that surrounded him.

"From time to time he would reach out and pick up one of the rats, or a snake, or a toad, and fondle it. Sometimes he'd stick out a bare foot and let it rest on the wriggling back of a serpent, or on the warty, wet, cold skin of a toad. Occasionally he'd pick up one of the cobras and let it wriggle across his thighs, or his stomach, or one of the rats would scamper over his legs.

"When he wasn't doing that, he was paddling his hands and feet around in the muck about him, splashing it onto his body and letting it harden there, to add another layer to a crust that must have been inches thick.

"But his final trick, and the one that was too much for me, was to take pins and stick them into himself—into his arms, his legs, his hands, his feet, his thighs. And laughing when he did it! Grinning at me with toothless gums exposed.

"Of course, I've seen fakirs drive pins and needles into themselves before. Who in India hasn't? But never as if they enjoyed it. Never with the rare and hellish relish this old devil seemed to get out of it.

"Then, while I stood there, gagging but unable to tear my gaze away, the chap lifted his bowl suggestively, inviting a contribution. I was going to give him something, just to get away, but I couldn't. I was too ill. I tottered a little ways off and —well, I *was* sick.

"As soon as that was over, I fled for clean air, feeling his eyes jabbing into my back like burning glasses. But I couldn't do anything else. It wasn't until my ship was well at sea that I was able to get the stench out of my nostrils.

"And now"—Paget wiped his forehead —"whenever it happens, there I see the old fakir again, sitting in his garden of filth, making a pin cushion out of himself. And that's almost worse than the being stuck part. Tell me, Morks—do you think I *am* off my head?"

Well, I told him he wasn't. Far from it. For the time being, I contented myself with saying that something very real and substantial lay behind what was happening to him. And I added that if he could only stick it out a few days longer, I wanted to run up to London to have a talk with a man I knew there, who was rather an expert on matters like this.

He took heart, and in the morning his chauffeur drove me to London.

I DIDN'T go to Harley Street, though. I went to Soho. Soho, you know, is in the slums. Near the docks. And there, in a dark little room overlooking a smelly stretch of water, I saw the man I had in mind.

I put Jack's story up to him, and he nodded as I told him my conclusions. "I know the man," this friend of mine said. "He has killed many. Of white men, at least three whom I knew myself, or knew of.

"One was an English lord, a man of the utmost cleanliness. The slightest disarray of his clothing, or the faintest soiling of his person, was unbearable. He also viewed this fakir whom your friend saw and unfortunately failed to give money to.

"The filth of the scene nauseated him. He likewise hurried off, failing to make a contribution to the begging bowl.

"He was making a cruise about the world at that time. Scarcely had he reached his ship before he began to feel distressed. He had the sensation that his body was unwashed, as if he had not bathed. He bathed, in hot water, and donned fresh clothing.

"An hour later, at dinner, again the feeling of being unwashed came over him. He struggled against it, but in the end could not help bathing once again, and again changing his clothes. To no avail. The sense of having dirt adhering to his body and hands, even to his face and hair, persisted.

"He tried to ignore it. It became worse, until he was half beside himself. Finally he consulted the ship's doctor. The doctor suggested that he had a touch of the sun, and prescribed sedatives. They helped for a time, but when the effect wore off, the sensation of being dirty returned. The unfortunate man struggled against it as long as he could. In time, however, it became an obsession that quite undermined his self control, and before the boat docked once more in London, he threw himself overboard.

"The second whom I knew," he said, "was an American, a countryman of yours, but not fond of beggars. He stumbled upon this same fakir, and turned aside his eyes, refusing baksheesh.

"A short time later, he began to be troubled in the night by sensations of unseen creatures, some soft-furred, some scaly, some cold and damp, running across his legs. He would wake up and feel the scaly dryness of a snake upon his skin. Or the furry body of a rat would scamper across his chest.

"I need not say, there was nothing there at any time. He began to have a horror of the night time, and of the necessity for sleeping. He tried sleeping by day, and still suffered. In the end, the unnerving horror of forever touching unseen and revolting creatures drove him to madness. He was killed while trying to escape from them in an asylum.

"THE third"—and my friend shrugged "his story is similar. Except that he, unexpectedly, would feel that he had just stepped in his bare feet into a puddle of slime. Or had placed his hand in one. Or at night, as he tried to sleep, would be overcome by the sensation that he was lying in mud and water.

"He too sought relief from the doctors, and he too was told nerves. In the end, he too killed himself. With a revolver. Your friend's case is not different, save that he feels himself pricked by pins. He too will either go mad in the end, or kill himself to escape madness. There is nothing that can be done."

My friend shrugged, in the fatalistic manner of the Easterner, but I was not to be discouraged so easily.

"You mean there's no way to fight this thing?" I asked.

My friend shook his head.

"There is none. It is a matter between the man Paget and the one in Bombay. No one else may intervene. If the man Paget were a priest, or a fakir too, he could work an equal spell upon the one in Bombay and force a truce. As he is not, he is doomed. Unless he kills that one—which might be dangerous, even if he would do it."

"Jack wouldn't kill anyone," I told him, vexed. "And he certainly isn't a priest. But I'm going to get him out of this devil's grip somehow, by hook or crook!"

My friend refilled my glass (Morks paused and waited expectantly. Someone shoved a fresh glass into his hand, whereupon he continued.) and after I had drained it, my brain began to humm and buzz a bit.

"Listen!" I exclaimed. "From what I know of these things, they aren't strictly one-way propositions, are they? I mean, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander?"

My friend agreed.

"That is true," he told me. "But the Holy One is immured by long years of self control to all sensations. There is nothing that anyone could do that would disturb him."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I had learned what I wanted, and already a scheme was forming in my mind. So I said goodbye, and hurried back to Quimberly Hall.

I FOUND Jack all in a stew, waiting for me with the pathetic hopefulness of a small boy expecting a present, but dreading he wouldn't get it. I didn't promise anything definite, but intimated that I had hopes I could help matters a bit, anyway. Then I ordered him into the highest, stiffest, tightest stand-up starched collar that could be procured.

The one we finally dug out was a relic of the nineties, and had a true saw-tooth edge. Jack kicked like a wild horse at putting it on, but I was adamant. In the end he wore it, although I must admit the staff of servants looked at him very strangely, and hurried out of his way whenever he ventured out of his rooms for a stroll.

Hopefully then I waited. Jack suffered, of course, especially since I made him wear the collar both night and day, even to bed. But he was an Englishman, and he stood the ordeal well. It would have killed a man of any other nationality, I'm sure.

And for a time it worked. There were a few pin pricks the day he put the collar on, but they ceased rather abruptly. The next day there were a couple more, of a tentative nature. Then for several days they ceased altogether.

I was jubilant, and Jack actually was beginning to eat heartily again, when the great disappointment came. He began to be jabbed by the invisible pins twice as savagely as before—as if the force at work were getting even with him for something.

And before I had concocted another plan, he was almost out of his mind.

But I never count too much on the first idea working, and I always try to have an alternative if it doesn't. In this case I was as resourceful as ever.

"Jack," I asked, after long thought, "what kind of fakir did you say this chap in Bombay was? Hindu? Moslem? Sikh? Buddhist?"

"Moslem," he groaned. "What am I going to do, Morks? In heaven's name, what?"

"I'll tell you what you're going to do!" I asserted with decision. "You're going to get packed. We've got to go to India."

THREE days later we were in Bombay. The Empire Airways service got us there. We skimmed above thousands of miles of sea and mountain and jungle, but I hardly noticed it. Jack was too miserable to pay much attention to scenery either. I was still making him wear the high collar, which attracted a lot of attention from the other passengers. And he was worrying about the contents of the valise he was carrying.

The valise had a pet in it, a mascot I had bought for Jack in London.

"You'll probably be leading it around on a leash wherever you go for a good many years to come," I told him, "and so you might as well have a trained one. Besides, that way it'll be easier to explain to Lucy why you have to keep it in the bedroom with you nights."

"Easier!" Jack choked—for the collar was tighter than ever. "*Easier!* To explain to Lucy why—"

Then he had to stop to get his breath. With that collar on, he couldn't speak more than a couple of words at a time. But it was working. It had gained us a couple of days respite again. But of course I couldn't go on indefinitely, making him wear a collar tighter and ever tighter, for eventually he would have strangled. So I was pinning a lot of hope on this trip.

We reached Bombay in mid-morning. Before noon we had set out to find that fakir squatting in his puddle of slime, surrounded by his toads and rats and serpents.

Jack still did not know why we had come, and I had not explained, knowing that his English resistance to new ideas would have made it impossible for him to believe me, and might have made him refuse to cooperate.

We had to search most of the afternoon, but in the end we found the fellow, by bribing a naked street boy two cents to take us to him. The boy led us there and fled. And the ancient fakir in his nauseous garden looked up, met Jack Paget's eye, and smiled hideously.

Then he deliberately took up a long pin and jabbed it into the flesh of his wrist.

Beside me, Jack winced, and almost dropped the valise. I saw a spot of blood ooze out on his wrist, at the exact point where the beggar had jabbed himself.

Still grinning, the old devil took half a dozen more pins, and one by one thrust them into his own flesh.

And every time he did it, Jack winced and jumped, and the blood oozed at the same spot on his body.

IT WAS the old fakir's vengeance on him, of course, for failing to pay him his baksheesh. And it was horribly effective—effective and simple. It was what I had suspected when I went to my friend in Soho, and though I had guessed how it worked, in general, he confirmed my guess.

I don't know the mechanics behind it, but in some way the old beggar was able to establish a psychic twinship with anybody he wished evil to. You've all read how when one of the two twins becomes ill, the other often gets sick too, though miles away? It was something like that. Except that in this instance the fakir was able to make his victims feel exactly what he was feeling at the moment he put himself in contact with them.

You might say he managed to broadcast his own sensations, and forced his subjects to pick them up and feel them too. There was more to it, of course, and that's putting it very roughly, but that gives you an idea of how the thing worked.

So there he had been in Bombay, all these months, occasionally remembering Paget and getting in tune with him as he stuck a pin into himself. With the result that Jack, thousands of miles away, winced and jumped and was slowly going mad until I came along.

That was how he had operated on the other chaps, too, naturally, that my friend had told me about. He had intuitively known their own special weaknesses, and had played upon them.

Of course, he was inured to it. But you can perhaps get the feelings of his victims just by imagining . . .

Now, as we faced him, he was sticking pins into himself, and Jack was wincing at their thrust. But as I had learned, it wasn't all one-sided. If he made Jack feel what he was feeling, he felt what Jack was feeling too. You follow me? If Jack had thrust a pin into *his* arm then, the old fakir would have felt it also. Tit for tat. Only he wouldn't have minded, and Jack did.

Now you begin to see why I made Jack wear the high collar. If there is anything civilization has perfected more uncomfortable than a high starched collar with a sawtooth edge, I don't know what it is. And if anything could make the hideous old beggar stop and think twice, I reasoned, it would be the sensation of wearing a high collar, much too tight, that he would get from Jack every time he set out to torment him.

Well, as you know, it had worked for a while. Now, every time he stuck himself, the old fakir's eyes popped out a little and the smile he wore faded, as if he was being half-strangled by an unseen collar about his scrawny throat. But he was game. He could take punishment. He was used to being uncomfortable, and he would last a lot longer than Jack could.

SO NOW, before Jack had more than realized what was happening, I played our trump card. "Open the valise, Jack," I ordered coolly. "Take Elsie up in your arms and pet her."

Elsie was the mascot I had bought in London. Jack obeyed mechanically. He opened the valise and lifted Elsie out. Elsie was white and clean and very cute. She was highly trained, and could walk on her hind legs, spell out her name, and turn somersaults. I had become much attached to her, but for some reason Jack couldn't seem to share my fondness. However, he obeyed orders. He held Elsie tightly in his arms and stroked her.

And then I knew we had won. That old beggar stopped abruptly in the very act of driving home a pin into his thigh. He shuddered and flung out his arms. He paddled his hands frantically in the muck, as if to remove the sensation he was getting from Jack of stroking Elsie.

He gagged, and gobbled something to himself, and then fell over backward getting off his rock. He gurgled something frightful at us, and I leaned over the low fence that held his toads and snakes penned in.

"See?" I asked. "And remember, if there's any more monkey business, my friend is simply going to pick her up and pet her. And you'll feel her. Every time you try to torment him with your infernal pins, *you'll* feel *her*."

I don't know if the old wretch understood or not, but howling, he dashed into his hut—the first time in twenty years he'd gone inside, I heard later. And carrying Elsie, Jack marched off with me in triumph. Nor was he ever bothered again by those invisible pins, I can inform you.

Although, otherwise, there was one little hitch. Lucy Horrocks broke off their engagement, and he finally married a nice little girl from somewhere in Sussex, who didn't object so strenuously to the idea of Elsie going every place with them on leash, as well as sharing their bedroom nights.

• • •

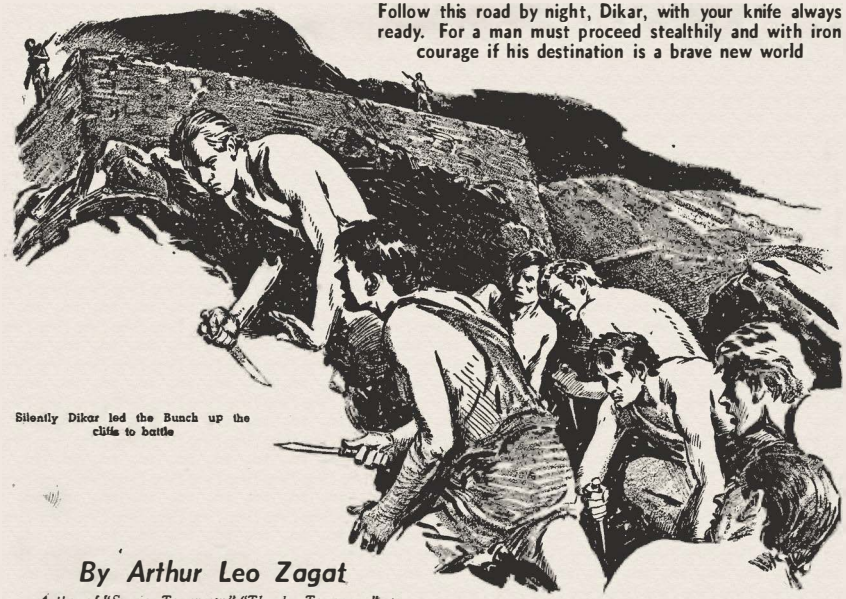
Morks, finished, looked about him with a searching eye. Silence followed the conclusion of his tale—a silence that Henderson's voice broke brutally.

"And just what was this Elsie whose touch, even at second hand, gave the old fakir such a case of jitters?" he demanded in a grating tone. "That's something you've neglected to tell us."

"Oh, have I!" Morks asked innocently. "Well, of course, I thought you'd guessed. You see, the old fakir was a Moslem, very strict and devout, and though rats and snakes were all right with him, Elsie was quite another story. Elsie was a very pretty little—at least, I thought so—trained pig.

"Did I hear someone suggest another drink?"

Follow this road by night, Dikar, with your knife always ready. For a man must proceed stealthily and with iron courage if his destination is a brave new world



Silently Dikar led the Bunch up the cliffs to battle

By Arthur Leo Zagat

Author of "Sunrise Tomorrow," "Thunder Tomorrow," etc.

Long Road to Tomorrow

From: A History of the Asiatic-African World Hegemony, Zafir Uscudan, Ph. D (Bombay) Ll. D (Singapore) F. I. H. S., etc. Third Edition, vol. 3, Chap. XXVII, pp 983 ff.

The night before the Asafrics captured New York, completing their conquest of the Western Hemisphere and thus of the entire Occidental World, an attempt was made to evacuate several thousand children from the doomed city.

The motorcade was discovered by a Yellow airman who, in the report discovered by the writer among the charred archives unearthed beneath the ruins of the Empire State Building, claimed to have entirely destroyed it by machine-gun fire and a few judicious bombs.

He was mistaken, however, in that one truck of the hundreds escaped. Among its load of children between the ages of four and eight was a youngster then known as Richard (or Dick) Carr, the very individual celebrated in legend as *Dikar*.

The aged couple who were the only adults with the group contrived somehow to bring the children unobserved to an uninhabited mountain deep within the forested recreation area that at the time stretched for some miles along the west bank of the Hudson. No more ideal sanctuary than this height could have been found.

Not only did thick woods screen its surface from aerial reconnaissance, but quarrying operations had ringed its base with a precipitous cliff so that the only practicable approach was by a narrow viaduct of rock that the stoneworkers had left for their trucks.

Barely, however, had the party begun to orient itself when an Asafric platoon appeared on the plain below, with the evident intention of scouting the mountain. In this desperate emergency the two old people blew up the narrow ramp heretofore mentioned, burying under tons of riven boulders the green-uniformed soldiers—and themselves.

The children, afterward to be known as *The Bunch*, were now completely isolated from an inimical world. As to how they survived the primitive environment in which they found themselves we can only guess. Survive they did, for a dozen years later we find a band of youths bronzed, half-naked, and armed with only bows and arrows, descending on an Asafric motorized column to snatch from his chains the man called Norman Fenton.

THIS amazing foray is conceded to have been the first skirmish of the Great Uprising, but it was the capture of the Asafric stronghold at West Point, for which General Fenton's memoirs give full credit to Dikar and his Bunch, that set ablaze the fires of rebellion throughout a heretofore cowed American nation.

In preceding chapters we have seen how a ragtag and bobtail mob rallied around Norman Fenton at West Point, how the Second Continental Congress came into being here and elected Fenton President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armies of Liberation, how here was evolved the brilliant strategy with which Viceroy Yee Hashamoto found it so difficult to cope.

The reader doubtlessly recalls the essential elements of these tactics; the feinted raid on some sparsely garrisoned outpost, the real assault on the stronghold weakened by the dispatch of reinforcements to the point first threatened, the looting of the fortress of its guns, ammunition, all its portable munitions, the Americans' swift dispersal before the Asafric planes and tanks could return to annihilate them.

They split up into roving groups, well armed now and ferocious as only men can be who bear on their backs the scars of cruel whips, in their hearts the memory of homes in flames.

All across the continent these guerilla bands harassed Hashamoto's far-flung, thin lines. They ambushed and slew the small detachments through which he had maintained his subjection of his white slaves.

It is apparent how well Dikar and his brothers were fitted for such a cam-

paign. Silent brown shadows never more than half-seen, they stalked men now instead of deer, and all the woodcraft they had learned on their Mountain, their tireless endurance, even their naive ignorance of fear, came to their aid in their new pursuit.

Is it any wonder that about the hidden campfires the tales of their prowess should grow to sagas of supernatural feats? Is it remarkable that it should be whispered that they were not flesh and blood at all but, risen out of long-forgotten graves, the same lean-flanked forest rangers who once seized Ticonderoga from the scarlet-garbed mercenaries of an earlier oppressor?

FROM the writings of Walt Bennet, Fenton's devoted aide, we learn how tremendously the growing myth bolstered the patriots' morale, but it does not appear that during that first memorable winter the Bunch otherwise greatly influenced the course of the Uprising to which they had given its great Leader.

By the beginning of spring, the Asafrics, while still nominally in command of the entire country, had for all practical purposes been compelled to relinquish their hold on vast stretches of territory.

Save for the fortified strongholds to which they had retreated, they had virtually abandoned the great central plain north of the Panhandle of Texas, from the Rockies to the Missouri-Iowa-Minnesota border. East of the Mississippi they had fared somewhat better, but a map colored black where Hashamoto was still in full control would have shown two enormous patches of lighter hue.

The larger of these had spread northward from the Americans' first foothold at West Point to include virtually all New England, south to Georgia. New York City itself remained the Asafric Headquarters and a hundred-mile wide strip all along the seacoast lay under the shadow of their fleet's big guns. But the Americans commanded the central half of Pennsylvania, and Piedmont Virginia and the Carolinas to the western slope of the Blue Ridge Range.

On the other side of the Appalachians, Fenton's forces had retrieved the southern three-quarters of Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee as far east as the Cumberland River.

These latter two liberated regions approached each other most nearly in the neighborhood of the Great Smokies, and the strip separating them contained Norris Dam and other works at the head of the Tennessee Valley development.

If General Fenton could close this gap, not only would he cut in half the Asafric Army of the East, but he would be enabled to shut off the supply of electric energy to the industries of the deep South. This, in the last week of April, he moved to attempt.

But Viceroy Yee Hashamoto was fully aware of the strategic importance of this region, and he held the mile-high Smokies in force. . . .

CHAPTER I

WORLD OF THUNDER

SINCE the day when the Asafric Planes first came into the sky over Wespoint, Dikar had heard their thunder many times. Many times he had heard the black eggs scream earthward out of the planes' opening bellies, heard the eggs burst in terrible sound.

But this was something even more terrible—a noise too great to hear. Dikar felt it rather, like an enormous hammer that never lifted but only got heavier and lighter and heavier again as it pounded him into the ground on which he lay face down.

The thunder was a hammer pounding him and a hammer somehow inside of him, pounding outward against the walls of his body till it seemed his body must burst like a bomb.

Outside him and inside him was the thunder and Dikar was a part of the thunder, the thunder a part of Dikar. Dikar was one with the thunder, one with its terror.

Yet one thought remained with him, in spite of the hammers beating his body and his brain—the thought that some where near him lay Marilee.

He had caught her up in his arms when the sky suddenly darkened with the black planes and he'd half-jumped, half-fallen into this gully. She had pulled from his arms to lie beside him as the thunder of the Asafric guns pounded down on them from the smoking tops of the mountains.

Was Marilee still here beside him? Or had some bit of flying iron, some sharp arrow of splintered wood, taken her from him forever?

Dikar got hands under his great chest. The muscles of his broad shoulders tightened. The muscles in his arms bulged. His arms quivered, straightened, lifted the weight on his shoulders. He raised his face from the red earth, and he looked to where Marilee should be.

Dikar saw nothing but green brush, green leaves, beaten down as no storm had ever beat down the brush on the Mountain. He stared, a huge fear rising in him; and then he gave a choked cry. For now he saw a white sarong that clung to the graceful young body of a Girl. He saw an arm, a shoulder, rounded, silken-skinned. In the hollow of a beloved throat he saw a pulse fluttering.

Some gust of sound brushed aside a spray of quivering leaves and Dikar saw the firm little chin, the delicate oval of Marilee's face.

WITHIN the shadow of their long lashes, Marilee's gray eyes were big with terror. They saw Dikar and into them came a sudden smile.

A beam of sun was somehow in the thunder-shaking gully. It made little glints of red in the rippling cascade of brown and shining hair on which Marilee lay as on a bed. It made a shining in Dikar's blue eyes; and now the thunder that beat at Dikar was noise only, no longer terror.

Dikar smiled at Marilee, and he came up on his knees and looked over and past Marilee for the Boys and the Girls he had led so far from their Mountain.

The gully was narrow and its side

steep, and it was filled by a tangle of bushes with long, thick leaves and great purple and white flowers like none Dikar had ever seen before. Peering into that thunder-tossed tangle, Dikar saw a little white bundle of fur, a long-eared rabbit crouched flat to the ground, its eyes glazed with terror. It crouched there right next to Franksmith, and did not fear him.

Franksmith's arm was flung out to one side and his hand clasped tight the hand of a black-haired Girl, Bessalton, Boss of the Girls. The sight of that brought a sudden warmth to Dikar's heart. Although most of the older Girls of the Bunch had found themselves mates, Bessalton had walked alone, since Tomball had died, and it was good that she would be alone no longer.

Past those two were more of the Bunch, flat to the ground, but even Dikar's sharp eyes could hardly make them out.

The Girls of the Bunch in their white sarongs were a little easier to see than the Boys who wore dappled fawn-skins that melted them into the shadows. All of them lay very still the way they'd fallen when they jumped into the gully, as still as the rabbit there by Franksmith.

The creatures of the woods lie very still when there is a danger too strong for them to fight and too swift for them to run from. This was a thing the Boys and the Girls had learned from the animals and the birds.

The gully was narrow and deep, and just as the leaf-roof of the Mountain's woods had hidden the Bunch from the Asafric planes, its thick brush tangle might hide them here. Dikar looked up to make sure that the green tangle was thick enough overhead—and his breath caught in his throat.

There was no hiding roof over him. The wind of the thunder had stripped the leaves and the great purple flowers from the branches of the brush and was stripping the very bark from the branches. Dikar could look right through what had been a safe covert. He could see clods of earth flying over the gully on the breast of the thunder-wind, and bits of wood that had been trees. And there were flying red fragments that could be human flesh.

NOT only the Bunch had been caught here when the black planes came into the sky and the guns started to thunder from the mountain-tops. Hundreds of other Americans had moved down into this valley. From far away they had marched by night, slept by day, to gather here in answer to the orders General Normanfenton had sent out over the Secret Net.

Never before had so many Americans marched together. An Army, Dikar's friend Walt had called them. Never before had an army of Americans moved so far, so slowly, and this had worried Dikar, worried him all the more because till today the Asafrics had made not the least try to stop them.

Yesterday Walt had laughed when Dikar told him about his worry and begged him to tell Normanfenton to be careful.

"Hashamoto has no idea of what we're up to," Walt had said. "All the Shenandoah Valley down which we have come, and this northwest corner of North Carolina, was swept clear of his Blacks a month ago, and no white man or woman would betray us.

"We have one more night to march, my boy, and one more day to sleep. Tomorrow night, we'll surprise the Asafrics in their mountain stronghold while our friends in Tennessee storm the Cumberland Gap from the other. By sunrise, two days from now, the Smokies will be ours."

"The Smokies?" Dikar had repeated.

"Look." Walt had pointed, and Dikar had seen that what he'd thought a blue cloud low in the sky was really an up-tossing of the earth such as he'd never seen before. "Mountains," Walt had answered the question in Dikar's face, "so high that you could put your Mountain on top of one like itself, and another on top of those, and still not have them as high as the lowest of those. They're so high that there's always mist about their summits, and that's why the Indians called them the Smoking Mountains."

A shadow had darkened Walt's face. "General Fenton was telling me, only last night, how when he was very young he heard over the radio Franklin Roosevelt's speech dedicating a great National Park there, to the enjoyment and pleasure of our people for all time."

"For all time," he had repeated, bitterly, and then had said, "Up there is an Asafric army, Dikar, but its officers don't know we're anywhere within hundreds of miles of them."

He'd been so sure of that, it had been no use for Dikar to tell him about the tracks he'd seen in soft ground, of feet turned in at the toes the way the feet of the Blacks turn in. It had been no use for Dikar to tell him how the breeze had brought him, now and again in the past week, the smell of Blacks very near. Walt had been sure everything was all right, and Walt was lots smarter than Dikar. Hadn't Normanfenton picked Walt to be always close to him?

So the army had marched all last night. This morning, before the sun rose, they had found sleeping places in barns and houses, under bushes, in woods like this one where the Bunch had slept. Almost as good as the Bunch at hiding themselves were the other Americans. They had learned to be, this last winter.

But Dikar, lying by Marilee on a sweet-smelling bed of ferns, had not slept. Through the boughs of the tree over him he'd watched the sky grow pale with the coming dawn. He'd seen the red blush of sunrise touch the tops of the mountains, close now and so high his breath was taken away looking up and up. He'd seen the brightness spread up there.

And he had seen a black speck come into the sky from behind those mountain tops, and another, and another, while a distant low thunder of planes growled in his ears. Before he could cry out there had been a bright flash from the mountain top, and with that the first black egg had dropped screaming from the belly of the first black bird—

A burst of flame swept over Dikar's head, blinding him. The gully side heaved. Its green was cracked with earthy redness. It was all red earth and it was falling down upon him.

"Marilee!" Her name burst from his throat in a great shout he himself could not hear, and Dikar threw himself across his mate, just as the earth came down and buried them both.

CHAPTER II

THE BOSS AND THE BUNCH

THE blackness was a solid thing against Dikar's down-bent face. On Dikar's back was a terrible weight of dark earth, so that his straddled thighs, his thrust-down, aching arms, shook.

Dikar's chest heaved, desperately pulling in dank air out of the black space that was roofed by his back, walled by his arms, his thighs and the earth crushing against his sides.

"Dikar!" From the black space out of which Dikar's failing strength still held the earth came Marilee's cry. "Dikar. Where are you?"

"Here." Hard to talk as to breathe. "Right above you. You—all right?"

"All right, Dikar. My legs—I can't move my legs but—but I think that's because of the dirt on em. Oh Dikar!" A sob caught at her voice. "What are we goin to do?"

"Do?" How long could he hold up this awful weight on his back hold it from crushing Marilee? "Get out of this." But how was he to get Marilee out of this living grave?

"It's movin, Dikar! The dirt's comin in over me!"

"Just settlin, Marilee. I'm holdin it."

"If I could only see you, Dikar. If I could only feel your arms around me, only once more."

Only once more! She knew he'd lied. "I'm holdin it," he lied again, because he could not think what else to say. The earth was alive with movement, alive with its blind will to crush them. Dikar could hear the soft, dreadful rub of the earth as it moved in under him.

Where it moved, Marilee was talking, but not to Dikar. "Now I lay me down to sleep." She was saying the Now-I-Lay-Me the Girls Ones taught the Bunch to say each night when Bedtime came. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep. An if I die before I wake—"

"No," Dikar groaned into the dark. "No, Marilee. You're not goin—to die." But the terrible weight of earth was growing, it was pressing the strength out of his arms and back.

"Quick, Dikar! It's comin over my face." It was sliding in under his belly. "Quick! Before—"

Marilee's voice choked off. Dikar's arms let him down. Dikar's arms found Marilee's warm body. Earth, following down, crushed Dikar's body to Marilee's. Somehow his lips found hers.

All of a sudden the thunder was loud in Dikar's ears again, and he could breathe! "Dikar!" a near voice jabbered. "Dikar, man!" Dikar's head flung back and he blinked earth from his eyes as the voice cried, "Dikar, old fellah." There was light in Dikar's eyes again and upside down in the light was a hollow-cheeked, earth-smudged face he knew.

The face of Walt, his friend.

"Thank God!" Walt gasped, his hands scraping earth away from around Dikar. "Thank God you're alive! When I saw the bank cave in on you—"

Dikar heaved up and was on his knees, and his tight-clenched arms brought Marilee up out of the red earth. She clung to him, and he could feel her quick breathing.

WALT was still jabbering, and now there were hurrays around them. Dikar saw that it was Franksmith hurraying, and Bessalton and pimply-faced Carlberger. And there were others of the Bunch here too, and they were all red with earth, their hands red and shapeless with earth.

"It fell on us, too," Franksmith burst out. "But not deep, and when we shoved up out, we saw Walt here diggin with his hands so we came an helped him."

Dikar wondered that he could hear them all so plain in spite of the thunder and then it came to him that the thunder was much less loud than it had been before. He looked up into the sky. There were no planes in it now.

"Bomb loads don't last forever," Walt

answered Dikar's look, "and they'll have to fly so far back to get more that they'll hardly be able to return before nightfall. But the guns are still at it."

Bessalton and Alicekane took Marilee from Dikar's arms and started to clean the earth from her. "Walt!" Dikar went cold all over with a sudden thought. "Why're you here? Is Normanfenton—"

"The President's in a deep cave up ahead; I took him there." Walt's gray-blue uniform, from the stores they'd found at Wespoint, hung in rags about him. "What you said yesterday had me jittery." There was stiff hair on his face and the hair on his head was clotted.

He looked almost the way he'd looked when Dikar first found him, a starved Beast-man in the woods below the Mountain. "You were right, Dikar. The Asafrics laid a trap for us and we marched the army right into it."

"The army, Walt! All killed?"

"Many. Too many. But according to the reports I've been gathering, not nearly as many as we thought at first. Our men dispersed as soon as it began, found gullies like this one, caves, other shelter. Even those who could not find better cover than the woods were so scattered that each bomb or shell caught only two or three.

"We've lost only about six or seven hundred men. That still leaves us nearly five thousand effectives, but we can no longer count on surprising the Asafrics, so a frontal assault on those natural ramparts cannot possibly succeed."

Dikar didn't understand all Walt's words, but he knew what he meant. "Then we've given up. We're licked."

"Not quite." The back of Walt's hand scraped at the stiff hair on his chin. "There's still one slim chance. That's why Fenton sent me through that hell-fire to look for you."

"Why for me?"

"Because if anyone can make good that chance, it's you and your Bunch. Look!" Walt pointed up and up to where Dikar had seen the guns flash this morning. "You see that fold in the mountains, right there?"

"Yes." The flashes were still there, bright against the dark green of the high woods, and the thunder of the guns still rolled down from there. "Sure I do."

"That's Newfound Gap, the highest point on the highway that goes over these mountains. When the Smokies were made a National Park, the engineers built a wide, level place there where hundreds of cars could park while their passengers looked over the view.

"The Asafrics have emplaced their biggest guns there, monsters with a fifty-mile range, commanding not only all this valley, but the whole length of the highway up which we'd planned to steal tonight, to make our surprise attack."

"I know," Dikar broke in. "But now the Asafrics will be watchin for us an kill us all if we try it."

"EXACTLY. They have the range of every inch of it. On the other hand, if we can capture those guns we can still snatch victory from defeat. You see, Dikar, we could swing them around and shell the enemy out of the reaches between the Smokies and the Cumberland Plateau. That would make it possible for our Army of the Tennessee to break through, join up with us and clean up the rest of the enemy forces in the mountains."

"How're we goin to capture those guns if we can't get up to em?"

"Look there to the left." Dikar's eyes went along the line of soaring, dark green peaks up from which drifted a blue-gray haze like smoke from hidden fires. "There. That's Clingman's Dome."

So high was the mountain Walt pointed to that, far above, a cloud blanked out its middle half and its top seemed a monstrous, impossible island floating in the sky.

"It rises a thousand feet above Newfound Gap," Walt was saying, "and there is another battery emplaced there, of automatic air-craft guns, like the archy you fired from the roof when we captured West Point. They're toys compared to the ones at the Gap, but they're placed just right to annihilate the crews of the big ones."

A chill prickle ran up and down Dikar's backbone, but he only said, very quiet, "All right, Walt. We'll go up there an—"

"Wait!" Walt's voice was sharp. "Wait till I finish." Dikar had a queer feeling that his friend didn't want him to go up there with the Bunch. "General Fenton wants you to understand exactly what the job means."

"I don't care—"

"Listen, Dikar," Marilee's clear, sweet voice interrupted. "Listen to what Walt has to say." She was standing close to them, and the others of the Bunch were gathered around. The Boys' eyes were shining and eager but the Girls' eyes, watching Walt, were shadowed.

"A ridge, along which runs an automobile road, connects Newfound Gap, to the north-east of it, with Clingman's Dome. Its eastern slope, the one toward us, and the southern are comparatively gentle and easy to climb, and so are certainly carefully watched. The Dome's western side, however, is a steep cliff almost as unscalable as that around the base of your Mountain—"

"And you think they won't be watchin that side. But they'd be crazy not to, if they know we're around."

"If they know our army is in the vicinity they'll certainly be on the alert. But suppose we pretend to withdraw? Suppose, now that the planes have left, we send numbers of men to expose themselves on roads visible from the mountain-tops, apparently fleeing from the valley—"

"The Asafrics will think there's lots more runnin away, in the woods where they can't see em. An they'll get a little careless—"

"Exactly. If the ruse should succeed it might barely be possible for a little band of men to reach the summit of Clingman's Dome unobserved under cover of the night.

"*Might* be, Dikar," Walt repeated. "But if you try it, you will be climbing in darkness along ledges so narrow that they will barely give you foothold, ledges clinging to the side of precipices that slant outward to push you off.

"Above you will be Blacks and their hearing is as keen as an animal's. An exclamation, the clink of metal against rock, even a stone dislodged would warn them of your approach. If you're shot at and only wounded, if you make a single misstep, you will fall three thousand feet or more into what they call hereabouts a Rhododendron Hell, a tangled and trackless thicket."

Walt pulled in breath, put a hand on Dikar's arm. "The chances are a thousand to one against your ever reaching the top, my boy, and even if you do, the odds are almost as great that you'll die up there."

Again he stopped talking for a moment, lines cutting deep into his gaunt cheeks. "That's why General Fenton will not order you to make the try, but has sent me only to ask if you will?"

DIKAR looked up again at the misty island in the sky, looked down at Walt. The sun was warm on his skin. The smells of the woods were warm in his nostrils and he knew in that moment how good life was.

He said slowly, "You know what my answer would be if I had to answer only for myself. But this is somethin you ask of the Bunch, the Boys to climb up there an the Girls to wait here below, wonderin what is happenin to us up there in the dark. And so I cannot answer, but only the Bunch can answer, in Council."

Dikar saw in Marilee's eyes that what

he was saying was the right thing to say. He wet his lips and said, a little louder: "I call a Council. Right here an now, I call a Council of the Bunch."

Walt pushed back out of the crowd, and the Bunch crowded in close. Dikar looked around him at the Boys and Girls whom the Old Ones had made him Boss of a long time ago. He thought of all their years on the Mountain, and how happy their life on the Mountain had been, and how he'd led them down off the Mountain because of his dream that in them was the hope of a new tomorrow for America.

In that moment between breath and breath, Dikar thought of all the Councils he had called on the Mountain, and all the Councils he'd called in the Far Land after he'd led the Bunch down off the Mountain. This was the strangest Council he'd ever called, here on this torn, red earth with the thunder of the Asafric guns rolling overhead, the Asafric shells bursting all around.

And then Dikar had taken his breath, and was talking again. "You have all heard Walt. You know what it is we are asked to do. You know what it means to America if we can do it, an you know what it means to us if we fail. What answer do we give Walt to take back to the President of America?"

"What answer could we give?" Johnstone, black-haired, black-bearded, came back at once. "We do it, of course. What say, Boys? Am I right?"

"Right!" yelled Carlberger and Patmara and hook-nosed Abestein. "Right." yelled the Boys, every one of them, and then Franksmith, thin and tall and red-bearded was saying: "Settled, Dikar. We do it. And you knew all the time that's what we'd say."

Dikar saw Bessalton's hand start out to catch hold of Franksmith and then pull back inside her cloak of black hair, and he saw the look that had come into Bessalton's eyes. "Yes, Franksmith," Dikar said. "I knew what you Boys would say. But the Girls have full voice in the Council of the Bunch, an I have not heard from em. What do the Girls say, Bessalton?"

Bessalton's hair was black as night in the deep woods, but her face was white as new snow with the sun on it. Her lips were gray as they moved and no sound came from them, and then words came from them.

"The Girls say there is only one answer to what is asked, Dikar. The Girls say that it must be done."

And the faces of all the Girls were white and drawn, their eyes dark with agony, but not one Girl spoke up to say that Bessalton did not talk for her.

CHAPTER III

CLIMB TO JEOPARDY

DIKAR held tight to a knob of rock, just over his head. His weight was all on the ball of his right foot, clinging to a two-inch shelf of rock. His left leg swung free over emptiness.

If Dikar looked down, he would see the night-filled emptiness fall away from him, down and down to a black sough of wind in trees and brush. If Dikar looked down, he would let go. He would follow his look, down into the black depths.

The muscles of his neck tightened to keep his head from turning to look down. All his strength was in his neck, and there was no strength in him to move his left leg, which swung back and out over the awful depths.

For an endless time Dikar hung like that, between the depths and the overhang of the terrible cliff above him.

There was no moon, but when Dikar had climbed up out of the brush tangle that was so terribly far below now, when he'd climbed up above the black whisper of wind in the treetops, starlight had glimmered on the face of the high sheer cliff. Just enough light there had been for Dikar, climbing first, to find a ledge, a slope of earth, ledge again and slope of broken, rotted bits of stone.

Slowly, painfully, Dikar had led the Boys up the western face of Clingman's Dome. Ledge, and slope, ledge and slope again, they had climbed, starlight laying their shadows black on the glimmering rock. Slowly they'd climbed, hardly daring to breathe, almost not daring to move lest the next reach of hand or foot send some little stone rattling down the mountainside and give them away to the Asafrics above.

Death waiting above, death waiting below, Dikar had led the Boys up until this last ledge suddenly had narrowed to give hold only to the balls of his feet, and then had melted into an out-thrust of rock, like a rounded wall corner.

Dikar could see nothing beyond the outthrust of rock. Above him the cliff slanted outward, as if to push him off, and there was no foothold on it, only the one little knob which his right hand clutched. There was no way to go but back.

Before Dikar could get the Boys back to where there was a choice of path, the dawn would be here to show them to the Asafrics. To go back was to give up.

Holding on to the knob of rock, Dikar groped with his left hand along the rocky outthrust, around its bulge and he found a tiny crack into which his fingernails could catch. Pulling in breath, Dikar swung his left leg back, off the two-inch ledge, to get it around the bulge.

In that moment the pull of the black depths took hold of Dikar and his strength ran out of him. He hung against the side of the cliff, and along the ledge beyond him, the Boys waited, unable to help him.

THE cold of the high places lay icy against Dikar's skin. To make the climb, the Boys had taken off their fawnskins; they wore only the little aprons of plaited twigs they'd worn on their Mountain, and thrust into the belts of the aprons were long, sharp knives sheathed by leather.

Rifles would have been too clumsy to carry on that climb. The little guns called revolvers would have been too heavy. Knives were better, anyway, for what they had to do at the end of the climb.

But this was the end of the climb, Dikar thought with a quick surge of fear For slowly, surely, against his strength, against the tight cords in his neck, his head was turning!

For a moment Dikar kept his head from slanting down to look into the black depths. For a last, fleeting instant he looked, instead, into a velvet-black sky.

They were so close, the stars, that Dikar had only to reach out to touch them. They were the same stars that had been close and friendly when he'd gone up to the tall oak on the very top of his Mountain, to dream how some day he would lead the Bunch down off the Mountain to free America.

This was the end of his dream, this fall into the black depths.

No! Suddenly Dikar had strength to break the pull. His head snapped back to the cliff. His left leg swung against the outthrust of rock, groped around it. His toes found something, an edge of stone, slid over and found a hold, a place for his foot as far in as it would go with his thigh hard against the rocky bulge.

Dikar's weight went from right foot to left. The nails of his left hand pried into the crack. His right hand let go. Somehow Dikar was around the corner. He was safe on a wide, almost level shelf of rock. Held breath went out of him and he dropped to his knees, clammy with sweat in spite of the cold.

Dikar looked up. Above him, not twenty feet, was a wavering red glow of firelight and against the glow a sharp-edged black mass.

That was the top of Clingman's Dome. Up to it sloped clean rock on which bare feet would make no sound, an ascent that would be like a level road after what Dikar had climbed tonight.

Like a level road, but it was clean of brush or grass or even boulder to hide behind, and it was pale in the starlight. The smallest creature moving on it would stand out plain, and nothing could live in the sweep of gunfire from up there.

A FAINT rub of flesh on stone turned Dikar to the fold of rock around which he'd come. A hand groped into sight. Dikar's fingers grabbed its wrist, held tight. A bare foot crept around the stone. Dikar had hold of that, was guiding it to firm hold. Franksmith came around the rock corner into Dikar's arms.

Franksmith's pale face twitched and his gray lips started to open, but Dikar's palm was on his mouth, stopping the words. Dikar pointed to the glow of the Asafrics' fire above to show Franksmith why it was not safe to speak.

And then another hand came around the rock-corner; Dikar helped Alfoster to safety. One by one they came around the bulge, Abestein, Louvance, Patmara, one by one, till Dikar was gesturing the sixteenth, Johnstone, to lie flat and silent on the rock beside the others.

Dikar was down on the rock, his fingers were on the hilt of the knife to make sure it was loose in its sheath. He was stealing up the starlit slope, the Boys following behind.

They made no more sound than the bat makes, flitting through the gray dusk, but in Dikar's ears the drum of his blood was so loud that he was sure the Asafrics must hear it, and where he crawled the stone was ruddy with firelight.

All of a sudden it was black with a shadow. Dikar froze. The shadow was thrown by a sort of low wall of rocks to which he'd come.

He waved for the Boys to come up into the shielding blackness, knew that they obeyed because he could see the blackness take them. He moved to the wall, was motionless again except for his head and shoulders, which lifted, very slowly.

Dikar's eyes came above the top of the wall and his head stopped lifting.

The fire was a big pile of red-glowing logs in the middle of a broad space of level ground. The wall ran all around the edge of the space, but on Dikar's left it was broken by a gap through which he could see the beginning of the road to Newfound Gap. Near this a low stone house slept, door closed, windows glinting with reflection of the fire.

Beyond the fire, long and slim and black, the barrels of the eight anti-aircraft guns slanted up against a vast and empty sky. Then there was the long, low line of the wall.

Now something blotched the sharp line of the wall. It was the head and shoulders of a man. The firelight did not reach him, so he was just a black shape to Dikar, but the little hairs at the back of Dikar's neck bristled as his nose caught the smell of him.

The smell of Hashamoto's Black soldiers.

Dikar made out another, and another, and their backs were to him. Each leaned on the wall, peering down over it. Dikar saw that each held a rifle on the wall in front of him, his hands on it. There were twelve and they stood all along three sides of the wall, but there were none on this fourth side. As Walt had thought, they were sure that the terrible west side of the Dome would keep anyone from coming up here.

DIKAR'S lips twisted in a humorless smile. He beckoned the Boys up to him. He let them get a glimpse of the Asafrics, waved them down below the wall again, pointed to each of the Boys, pointed for each in the direction of an Asafric. Nods told him that they understood.

Dikar pulled his knife from its sheath, and drew a long breath. He came up straight, leaped the wall. He was running silent-footed across the space within. From the corner of his eye he saw the silent, shadowy shapes of the Boys running across the space, fanning out, the firelight glinting on the blades of their knives.

Dikar went past an archie, was close on top of the Asafric he'd picked for himself. His right arm swung up, down. The blade of his knife slid into flesh, scraped bone. Without a sound, the Black pitched over the wall.

Dikar's knife was crimson, but the firelight didn't make it so. A scream, like a trapped rabbit's shrilled in his ears. Dikar twisted to it, saw an Asafric wheeling around to Carlberger, saw the Asafric's rifle swinging like a club.

As Dikar leaped, there was a cracking sound. Carlberger, dropping, had a misshaped something where his head had been. The Asafric screamed again, eyes white in the shiny black round of his face, teeth white between thick, purplish lips. Dikar's knife sliced across the black throat. A new, bright light was all around Dikar as the Black fell.

The new light came from the door of the stone house, open now. It framed a squat yellow man in uniform of Asafric green, with undressed Blacks crowding behind him. The slant eyes saw Dikar in that same moment and the officer's revolver spoke. Dikar dropped, hit the ground with a thud.

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF THE NIGHT . . .

THE Yellow officer yelled something and came out of the door, his revolver barking. A Black came out behind him, rifle to shoulder. Another, and another.

Dikar had dropped behind the iron bottom part of an archie in the eye-wink before the officer had shot. He saw a bronzed shape lunge for the Yellow, saw the Boy knocked down by a red streak from the rifle of one of the Blacks. There was something hard under Dikar—the rifle of the Asafric whose throat he'd cut. Dikar grabbed it up, saw the Blacks spreading out from the door of the little house, got the butt of the gun to his shoulder, sighting the Yellow officer, and pulled the trigger.

The officer dropped. "Rifles!" Dikar yelled. "Grab the rifles of the Asafrics you've killed." He brought down a Black, plain against the bright light from the house-door. A bullet spanged on the iron of the archy—another.

Then suddenly the bright light was gone. The door had slammed closed on the Blacks who'd dived back into the house.

"Hurray!" A clear, high voice cried. "Hurray, fellers. We've won," Louvance came out from behind an archy, and an instant later he was knocked down by a red streak from the dark wall of the stone house.

"Cover!" Dikar yelled. "Keep your cover! They're shootin through holes in the wall of the house! They can see us an shoot us, but we can't get at em. Hold your shooting till you have a mark."

All of a sudden it was quiet there on top of Clingman's Dome, so quiet that Dikar could hear the hard breathing of someone who'd been hurt. He saw that the breathing came from the first Boy who'd been shot.

But the Boy wasn't where he'd fallen when the Yellow officer had shot him. He'd dragged himself much nearer the house, and there was a dark, glistening path on the ground from where he had fallen.

Shots sounded dully inside the house, but the Boy hung against the wall, and he was doing something with his knife. He was cutting wires, Dikar saw, that ran up along the wall to the roof and then straight out from the roof, overhead, to a pole on the road to Newfound Gap.

More dull shot-sounds, but no red flashes. That meant they were coming from a hole in the wall right up against the Boy's body. The Boy slid down along the wall and lay still at its foot. But the wires hung loose now, cut through.

"WHAT—what did he do that for?" a sick-sounding voice asked, right behind Dikar. "What did he do that crazy thing for?"

Dikar looked back, saw that Johnstone had crawled to him in the black shadow of the wall that ran around this space. "Not crazy," Dikar said. "Not crazy at all. Don't you see what kind of wires those are?"

There was a queer sound in Johnstone's throat, and then, "Yeah. They're tel'phone wires—"

"To the Gap. He cut em to keep the Asafrics here from callin for help from there. We can't get at em in that house, an they can't get at us as long as we hide behind these big guns, but they could have held us here till soldiers from Newfound Gap came. Whoever that was, he could have laid still an maybe been safe, but he gave his life to save the rest of us. It was a brave thing. Who was he?"

"Franksmith." Johnstone said, low-voiced.

Dikar thought of the way Bessalton's hand had come out to take hold of Franksmith. He thought of the look in Bessalton's eyes as her gray lips had made the words, "The Girls say it must be done."

"What do we do now, Dikar?" Johnstone was asking. "We're pretty safe as long as we stay behind these archies, but we can't shoot em at Newfound Gap unless we go out in front of em, an we don't dare do that so long as there are any Asafrics left in that house."

"Right. So we've got to get em out of there." Dikar made up his mind. "Listen, Johnstone. You crawl back along the wall an tell all the Boys to start shootin at the house the minute I whistle."

Johnstone was gone and Dikar, crouched behind the archy, started counting. While he counted to twenty he carefully thought over all that Walt had told him about shooting off the archies. Then he made himself not think at all while he counted to thirty, to forty, only watch how a faint grayness was coming into the sky, how the stars were paling. But as he counted forty-five, Dikar thought about Marilee. . . .

"Fifty," he counted and whistled, loud and shrill. The Boys' rifles crashed, their red fire streaking the night. Dikar darted out from behind the cover of the gun and jumped up into the little iron seat fastened to it, right in full view of the Asafrics in the house. He grabbed a wheel and turned it, and the gun started to move, but a bullet spanged on the gun's iron, another sang over his head, and a third fanned his cheek.

The gun was turning on its mount, but it was turning slowly, and Dikar was a fair mark from the stone house. He pulled at an iron stick which made the gun's barrel start coming down as it turned. Something plucked at his left arm, and something burned across his thigh. The gun had turned so that it was between Dikar and the little stone house, and its barrel was all the way down now, so that it pointed right at the little house.

Dikar pulled another little iron stick. The archy jumped under Dikar. Thunder deafened Dikar, blinded him. The archy jumped again, and again. Dikar pulled the stick again. The little house wasn't there any more. All that was there was a few tumbled stones, and a big hole in the wall.

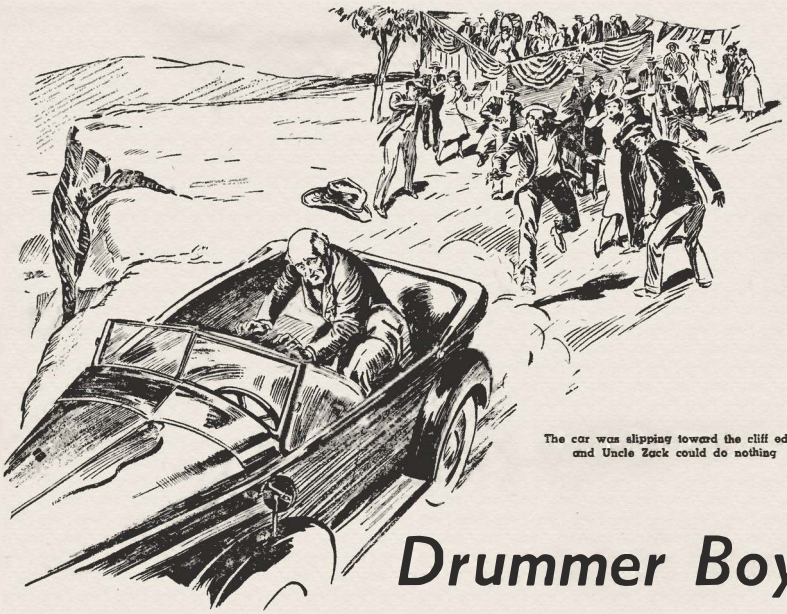
"All right, Boys!" Dikar yelled, and he was still so deaf that he couldn't hear himself yell. "All right. Gun crews to your places, quick! Aim down that road to Newfound Gap." Then quietly, as if he were falling asleep, he leaned sidewise and fell out of the little iron seat, fell smiling into the dark.

(To Be Continued Next Week)

COMING NEXT WEEK:

A special announcement about ARGOSY—

WATCH FOR IT!



The car was slipping toward the cliff edge, and Uncle Zack could do nothing

Drummer Boy

Salute Uncle Zack! Today he marches in the proud company of his memories, for yesterday is not dead

By John Russell

Author of "Bombs Over Cairo," "No Medals Tonight," etc.

THE whole Mack family party was packing up for the grand day's picnic: three cars full of them—a joyous hurroosh of children and grand-children; and their uncles and their cousins and their aunts.

They were a hardy lot, the Macks, and there were lots of them. And this would be a special celebration; because the bachelor brother, Elmer, who was a big business man in the city and hadn't attended for many years, he had driven down to make the reunion complete.

"Which marks this indeed a glorious Fourth in our history," as Pa so aptly put it. But Pa had been rehearsing bits of his oration all morning to the asters and the poppies and the geranium-beds. And now when he addressed the honeysuckle vine over the porch with a grandiose flourish, everybody joined in the general laugh—which seemed to echo gently in a quiet chuckling from the very vine itself.

"Now Pa," said Mama Mack, "you keep that speech off your mind till you have to make it. Then it'll come out all fresh, like."

"D' you think so?" asked Pa, rubbing his bristly gray poll. He was a nice little man with a nice round tummy; and he was going to be second speaker of the day at the Big Meadow grand-stand, where the Sons of Veterans and their famous band were taking charge this year. He never had "spoken" before, and he was somewhat dazed by the coming ordeal. "Maybe if I could try it over for Elmer—"

"No, sir," said Mama Mack, firmly. "No more tryin' till the time. You go off and help the children with the lunch baskets."

"C'm on, Gramp!" yelled his eldest grandson Benny, a grinning imp of eleven. Very trim he looked in his small blue cap and uniform, white belt and real bayonet. Benny was one of half a dozen in his Scout troop who were going to march as a Civil War color guard in the afternoon parade.

"C'm on, now," he ordered. "You know what you promised, Gramp."

"What did I promise?" asked Pa, warily.

Benny was firm:

"You said you could carry three watermelons all at wunst. Le's see you do it!" Whereupon the whole gang of kids hurried Pa away to the kitchen quarters.

ELMER stood smiling after them affectionately. "It's good to be back," he murmured, breathing the well-remembered, summer-scented air of peace and plenty and contentment that cradled the ancient farmhouse: his birthplace and his boyhood home.

The old village road was paved, now, and somewhat unfamiliar with its row of neat new cottages along the block. "You've done pretty well here, George," he told his elder brother. "Didn't have to wait for prosperity around the corner, eh? You've got the corner yourself!"

"Yes," said George, complacently. From his lean, indolent height he had always been able to look down by about six inches on the chunky, energetic Elmer. That was his advantage; and he did not mean the other to start any big business ways over him.

"Yes, we've held the old property, okay. Never sold anything, you know, and the rents are good. Best thing about it is how we been able to hold everybody together. Everybody but you, you ol' rouster! And it's sure fine to have you with us today."

'Everybody'? The word lingered in Elmer's ear. "Why!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Why, where's Great-uncle Zack?"

"Uncle Zack? He's right here. Of course! Ain't you visited with him yet? Sitting yonder in the porch, where he always sits. Well, well—step right up and see him!"

Elmer stepped up and saw him, and there surely was an old man to see. Gaunt but unbowed in his spruce Grand Army serge, with his shock of pure-white hair and his spot of pure-white beard, he sat there in his rocking-chair. And when he smiled, it was like a glint of sun on a granite cliff.

Elmer took the gnarly, big-boned fist in his own with real feeling. "How are y', Uncle Zack?" he asked.

"How ya, Cap'n?" piped Uncle Zack, prompt as an automaton. "How's all the Company? All present and accounted for, sir. Correct!"

"He—he remembers I was a captain?" said Elmer, rather simple about it.

"Not you. Not your war," returned George. "That's what he says to everybody. It's just about all he does say," George explained.

BUT Elmer was upset, rather, until he peered down into the eyes of the veteran. They were the clear, good-natured eyes of all the Macks—only a trifle vague, unnoticing, not quite focused.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Ever since that auto accident. You know seven, eight years ago. I wrote you all about it."

"Yes—but I haven't seen him in eight years," said Elmer. "What's Doc Eyloff say?"

"Oh, he's sound as a nut," said George. And the word sounding somehow not quite right, added hastily: "I mean, he's physically fit for his age. Only he got pretty badly shook-up, y' know. Kind of like he got jammed out of gear, y' know."

"I know," said Elmer, with a gathering intentness. "What do you do for him?"

"Well, nothing much; there's nothing to do. He's no trouble to us. Not a bit."

"Why, I should just say he's not!" chimed Mama Mack, who had come bustling up in time to overhear. "He's just an old dear. He's just my old precious around the house—ain't you, Uncle Zack?" She bent to kiss the aged man.

"Whatever you say, Cap'n. All present for duty, ma'm!" he chirped, cheerfully enough.

"That's okay. But don't he ever have any enjoyment? Don't he ever get to do anything for himself?" persisted Elmer.

"Guess not. What would he do? He used to potter around the garden. But after he came back from the hospital, seemed he never thought of it again. Nor nothing else. You remember how he used to crave his t'bacco? Never seems to miss it now."

"And he don't notice anything particular—any special friend, or such?"

"We kinda thought—little Benny. Whenever he played his drum, it looked like it stirred him up some. So then we had to send Benny out in the back lot for his practicing."

"Well, the poor old boy!" blurted Elmer. "Well, he's certainly going to enjoy his picnic along with me today!"

THEY stared at him, Ma and George. "Elmer! We never take Uncle Zack along. Not anywhere. He knows nothing about cars—it might scare him, after that smashup of his. He'll be all comfy here at home. Maggie can always keep an eye on him, you see. And ever since the hospital—"

"I know," interrupted Elmer, curtly. "I've been in the hospital, myself . . . Why, what's the matter with you people?" he broke out. "Good gosh, don't you realize that this day was made for Uncle Zack? It was made by men like Uncle Zack, *for* men like Uncle Zack. It belongs to him! Why, didn't he fight on this very battlefield—just where we're going today? . . . How old is he?" Elmer demanded.

"Uncle Zack? Must be—eighty-six. Eight."

"Eighty-eight. Right. He was a drummer boy; youngest in the Union Army. He was 'the drummer boy of Big Meadow.' He helped to save the guns in the second day's fighting. It's in the books, even. Good gosh; and you want to keep him home on the Fourth of July!"

Elmer was a bit stormy by now; and Elmer's bursts of eloquence had always power to move Mama Mack far more than anything of Pa's. "Elmer, you—you don't think we've been unkind to Uncle Zack, do you?" she faltered.

"No, Mother, of course. Now don't you worry," he reassured her. "I'll take charge of this. I'll manage everything. Just you run along and see that Pa don't drop those watermelons!"

That sent Ma scurrying obediently with a corner of apron to her eyes.

WHEN the two brothers were alone together: "I don't just get what you're aiming at, Elmer," said George.

"What I'm aiming at is this," said Elmer. "Here it's the third generation after the Civil War. Here are you and all your folks living on Uncle Zack's land, which he won for freedom. It is his land, you know. And you treat him like a vegetable in his own garden!"

"I don't like you to say so. The court decided, after his accident; said he was incapable. Even Doc Eyloff, that's treated him all these years—son of his old regimental surgeon—Doc testified he was finished, couldn't recognize anybody no more. Doc signed the papers for a wardship. And so did you, Elmer. You signed yourself!"

"I did, yes. I signed for you to take care of him. But I never signed him *dead*, did I? Why, jiminently, his father lived to be over a hundred! All I'm thinking, he's entitled to at least one good break!"

George flushed darkly. "Sure you ain't thinking of your share of his estate when he is dead?"

It was the old issue that had stirred up every quarrel between them since they were boys; and it had always roused the ruthless streak in Elmer. 'That'll do, George!" he warned, in his parade rasp. "I'm taking Uncle Zack with me today if I have to carry him off by hand!"

"The responsibility, too?" asked George.

"You betcha!" said Elmer. He ended the dispute, as he always had managed to do, by having his own way; which as usual quite restored his natural good-temper.

"Uncle Zack! A-re you ready? Atten—shun?" he boomed, exaggerating like a play-actor.

It was not play to Uncle Zack. He stood up straight as an unfolded joint-rule. "All ready, Cap'n. Present and accounted for. Aye, aye, sir!" He saluted; he gave the old Civil War salute—up, out, down—with a snap that delighted Elmer.

ELMER took charge of the entire caravan. First, he installed Uncle Zack in his own big city car and packed him around with Macks and lunch-baskets. Then likewise with the other cars: piling them up like commissary lorries for an army on march—with plenty of room for Benny with his drum and Pa with his melons.

Proudly Elmer drove at the head of his little procession, and he was specially proud that he could steer the route to the old battlefield. In spite of unlearned twists and turnings and a jam of traffic, he brought them out through an almost deserted lane to the steep edge of Devil's Glen and a strip of shaded lawn.

They had a perfect view down over the historic ground, where thousands of men had locked in deadly combat exactly seventy-seven years ago this day. Below, to their right, lay the peaceful valley; animate with the bands and flags massing around the speakers' stands and with the gay holiday crowds strolling to visit the monuments.

Elmer got the cars neatly parked at the dead end of the lane. He decanted all able-bodied helpers onto the sward. He dismissed Pa and Benny straightway—the one to his Big Meadow grandstand, the other to his Scout troop rendezvous at Little Meadow, nearer by. Pa was rather fretful that no member of the family would be coming along to hear his famous speech. But Ma was wiser. "It would only make you nervous, dear. And besides, you'll enjoy telling us so much what a wonderful hit you made!"

ELMER decided it would be better to keep Uncle Zack high-throned in the auto seat. "Swell sight from up here, isn't it, Uncle Zack? How do you like being back here again—on the very spot?" he asked, curiously.

The veteran nodded, but made no answer. He looked down over the scene of that great event in which he had shared, so far in the past; over the throngs bright-dotted with summer frocks and assorted uniforms. He heard the drifting murmur and mirth of many voices, the discordant thumpings of martial units, the crepitation of fire-crackers as crisp as mimic musketry, with now and then the bark of a toy cannon.

Whatever memories, whatever renewal of humor or irony or sadness might have echoed deep within his consciousness, he showed no sign in his placid eyes. And Elmer was disappointed, rather: he could not help thinking how much more dramatic he could have made this moment if he had the full ordering of it.

"It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced . . . "

It was the blatting of a loud-speaker, giving out some radio reading of the immortal Address. Elmer noted its source as a little refreshment booth, away at the further end of the lane.

"Oh, damn!" he muttered. "If I didn't go and forget to stop for ice and sody pop! . . . . George!" he bawled. "Front and center. We gotta buy the drinks. Come on now—double quick!" Obediently George trotted off with him toward the refreshment shed.

They had covered perhaps half the distance, maybe sixty yards, when the thing happened. The appalling, awful thing: the result of another oversight on the part of Elmer. His car, his big car parked back there, began to move.

Stealthily, slowly, it began to slip on its brake and creep on the slope of the dead end. Nobody noticed it at first. Nobody was near enough. Until some fellow in a neighboring picnic group let out a yell. "Hey! Lookit that car. Stop it!"

THE yell brought Elmer and George spinning around in their tracks. The car was moving—not actually released, but continuing to move inch by inch inexorably toward the verge. Of the few persons who had begun to run toward the car, not one could reach it in time.

Nobody could possibly save it except Uncle Zack himself, if he had only known how. But Elmer and George were both aware—and gripped by the terror of it—that Uncle Zack knew nothing whatever of motorcars.

No. Uncle Zack knew nothing about cars. Yet he must have known something about gadgets, vehicles, contraptions on wheels. Because they saw him give a sudden convulsive start and scramble clear overside. And then, instead of staying clear, he threw himself directly in front of that crawling, resistless mass and try to check it!

They had to watch that, powerless to do a single thing.

It was like the vision of a fabled agony—of Sisyphus, or Laocoön; the figure of that ancient man, worn, gnarled, far stricken in years, but holding back against defeat and death. Just under him lay the pit of Devil's Glen, a sheer depth of broken boulders. He cared nothing for it; but absurdly, hopelessly he fought. And now he gave his old battle-cry, like a cracked brass, but still ringing out as it must have done, indomitable.

"The guns!" he whooped. "Come on, men—all you sons! Get in here and help, all hands, all hands. Save the guns, dag'nab ye! Save y'r blasted guns!"

Perhaps he delayed the catastrophe by a split second; perhaps not. At any rate, the front wheels of the car lost support, let down with a crash just as the yelling neighbor get there, hopped on the runningboard and pulled and locked the emergency. Just too late, for Uncle Zack had pitched over.

ELMER retained sense enough to snatch George in to a side-path without wasting time in useless peering over the brink. "This way! No good there. Got to find him below!"

Desperately, they pelted down the winding way that threaded through rocks and shrubbery of the Glen. Then George could run better than stout Elmer; and he had breath for a bitter reproach. "Responsibility!" he flung over his shoulder. "Management. You're the great manager!"

Elmer stumbled and fell up against a tree, and clung. The breath wheezed in his lungs; his limbs, his heart had gone weak, fainting. All his mastery, his assurance, his pride had ebbed out of him. He gasped: "George! Wait—minute. All in! George I'm a fool—damn fool. My fault. But not altogether my fault, d' you think?"

It was a pitiful appeal, and it struck through every latent hostility, back to the true warmth and understanding between these two.

"No; of course not," said George, quickly. "It happened, that's all. I'm just as much to blame, I guess. You were right—us neglecting the old boy like we did. Come on!"

They were both shaken. "Wait another minute," breathed Elmer. "If he's dead, George—if Uncle Zack is dead—listen. I'll take no penny from his estate. Never wanted it. You believe me, George?" he begged.

"That's all right. Me neither, Elmer," said George. "It goes to Benny. Fourth generation, ain't it?"

And curiously, though perhaps not so curiously, the two brothers exchanged a hand-grip that made them both wince.

"Come on!" said George, curtly. "We got to find Uncle Zack!"

THEY found him; oh, they found Uncle Zack, right enough. As they staggered out into the open meadow, right underneath the Devil's Glen, here came marching a musical contingent from the Battlefield.

A Boy Scout troop, with half a dozen at their head dressed in the semblance of Civil War uniforms; blue caps and blue suits complete; with real bayonets swinging. Here they came thumping and fifing:

When Johnny comes marching home again:
Hurrah! Hurrah!
When Johnny comes marching home again:
Hurrah! Hurrah!

All little tads they were, of the newest generation. All except one. One grand, tall, gaunt, tremendous figure of an old man. Rather dusty, rather battered; but there he marched, between the flag and the fife. And he was beating on a drum.

The procession broke up around Elmer and George, who stood bewildered. And Pa arrived, even more bewildered. And Doc Eyloff, the Scout master, not at all bewildered, but quietly watching. And little Benny, shrilling out the news:

"Gramp—Gramp: lookit! It's Uncle—it's Uncle—it's Great-great-Uncle Zack! He come bustin' fr'm the bushes just now here. And he borried my drum. And cripes, if he can't just beat hell out of a drum!"

Both the brothers were plucking at Doc Eyloff. "Is he all right? Is he all right, Doc?"

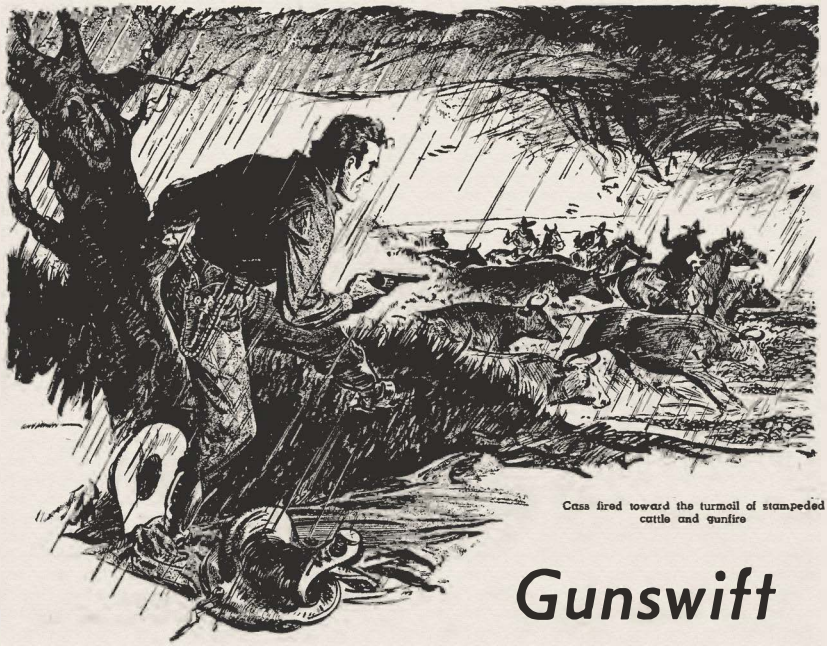
"All *right?*" repeated the Doc. "You two guys had better get ready to chuck up your wardship. He's got back in gear. that's all. He's himself.

"You're a hardy lot, you Macks!" he added. "Guess the country won't have to worry much as long as we got folks like his folks left around. Look at the eyes of him, will you?"

The eyes of Grand-uncle Zack were clear and keen as he came casually up to them.

"Hello, George. Hello, Elmer." He nodded. "Say, anybody got a chaw of t'bacca round here?"

. . . "which marks this *indeed*," stuttered Pa, "a glorious Fourth in our history!"



Cass fired toward the turmoil of stampeded cattle and gunfire

Gunswift

CASS GENTRY, coming to Triangle Town with his partner SWIFTY OGDEN, is expecting trouble, for trouble is his business. A professional gun-hand, Gentry has been summoned to Triangle; but he has no knowledge of the mystery and disaster ahead of him. Triangle's sinister puzzle centers around the death of

MATT MCHALE, owner of the Rocker-M ranch, who was shot down and robbed a year ago. Since his death the Rocker-M herd has been severely raided by rustlers, and nesters have over-run the range, taking advantage of the new homestead law. The inheritance of

MARY ELLEN MCHALE, the old rancher's daughter, had dwindled almost to nothing, and her efforts to plumb the mystery of her father's death have been unsuccessful. Deserted by her legal counselor and fiancé, smooth young MARTIN BURDETTE, Mary has found refuge in the home of one of her few remaining friends,

DR. GEORGE FARABAUGH, whose wife, ADA, is a crippled and embittered woman. But the doctor can do little for Mary Ellen. In part he agrees with BEARPAW, the grizzled veteran of the Rocker-M, that the only way to clear the tangled web is to start some shooting. Old Bearpaw is the one who summoned Cass Gentry and Swiftly to Triangle.

OLLIE SHAND, cattle-thief, is the man most generally suspected of Matt McHale's murder, for McHale and his men strung up Shand's rustler father. Yet Ollie Shand saves the lives of Gentry and Ogden when they ride into an ambush by Kettledrum River. Shand kills

TEX CORDILL, formerly the ramrod on the Rocker-M, who has been sent out to eliminate these two strangers. He has been sent by WASH PARSONS, the mayor of Triangle and a man with plenty to hide. But Parsons' ally in skullduggery,

DEPUTY VIC BARTH, is furious at this error in strategy, and he rides after Cordill—to reach Kettledrum River shortly after the killing of the ambusher. Unseen, Gentry, Ogden and Shand watch the deputy take a fat roll of bills from the body and then ride away.

IT IS with this information that Cass Gentry confronts BEN QUIGG, the weasel-like sheriff of Triangle, the next day. To show that he means business, Cass thoroughly thrashes the DUTCHMAN, Quigg's strongarm man, when that worthy starts to give Gentry a going-over at the sheriff's order. Cass Gentry's next stop in his investigation of Triangle's mystery is the bank—to see

FRANK IRISH. This small, shrewd man cannot explain why Matt McHale's estate turned out to be so poverty-stricken; he had thought the rancher a wealthy man. McHale, he says, saw that the range was doomed because of the homesteaders and had considered an offer for the Rocker-M. But he refused to sell when he suspected that his old rival,

ABEL BANNISTER, was behind the deal. Long an enemy of McHale's, Bannister might have had a hand in the murder; but Frank Irish thinks not. He tells Cass Gentry to take it slow and careful in his probing. There's sense in that, Cass agrees, but he is determined to set off a little quiet dynamite . . . .

CHAPTER XI

DARK AND LONELY MOUNTAIN

THE business blocks were well lined now with wagons and buggies from the out-country. Foot traffic flowed both sides of Wampum Street. A work team pulled out from the freight depot, hauling a mixed load, and Cass noted heavy spools of wire piled over with bulging grain sacks. Bar-wire and crop-seed—trouble twins in any rangeland.

He strode briskly. Outside the Mercantile Store a young man was handing a girl into her carriage. An older man, lean in rusty black, his lank hair stringing like a preacher's, was directing the disposal of bundles that a laden youngster carried. This would be Eli Lombard, owner of the Mercantile, and Cass was pleased that chance had included the merchant in the little public scene he planned to stage.

"Mornin', Mr. Burdette," Cass called. He touched his hat most politely to the

By Jack Byrne

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girl in the carriage seat. "My name is Gentry, and I'd like to talk to you a minute."

"Drive on, Fanny!" Eli Lombard cried. "Get on home, girl!"

Martin Burdette had turned quickly, jerking his foot from the side iron and facing Cass with stiffened jaw. A welt along his cheek was the mark of his encounter at Dan Venable's.

"I was talking to a lady," he said. "See me at my office if you've any business to transact. I don't make a habit, Gentry, of conducting my affairs on the public highways."

"I beg the lady's pardon," Cass said, "but I'm crowded for time a little. There's just one-two questions I got to ask about the Rocker ranch. I'd be much obliged if you'd set me right on 'em."

"Get along, Fanny!" Lombard cried shrilly. "You, Martin---don't let 'im coax you into trouble! That's what he's aimin' for."

The girl refused to rouse her team. She held the reins lax, staring at Cass with a sort of fascination. The bundle boy looked on with round eyes, his mouth hinged open. Martin Burdette stubbornly stood his ground.

"See me at my office," he repeated. "I refuse to discuss the subject here. If you think your reputation can bully me—"

"You start any hell-raisin' here, Gentry," Eli Lombard said sharply, "and I'll make it my business to see you pay for it. There's still some people in town who respect the decencies, and we won't stand for rowdies of your stripe, common killers, pushing into our affairs."

"It's you who begun the hollerin'," Cass said. "If there's any ruckus come up it won't be one I started." His eyes glinted. "It might be easier all around if Burdette would tell what I want to know. I take it he's got nothin' he wants to hide."

"Nothin' at all," the lawyer said quickly. "Every paper in the McHale case has been bundled up in my office. Take 'em, and welcome! Submit the case to any attorney you can find and I will defy him to show a single flaw in the handling."

"I NEVER accused you of a thing," Cass drawled. "I chiefly wanted to know who it was that throwed the Rocker into the courts. Who brought the suit against the property?"

"There are three actions," Burdette snapped. "The Exchange Bank has a claim for a ten-thousand-dollar note of hand. The Midwest Cattle Company holds a lien in respect of advances on beef shipments that were undelivered.

"Various smaller claims for equipment and supplies have been bulked in a single item. The order of injunction was jointly obtained in order to conserve the existing assets. Because of the circumstances under McHale's will it was necessary to appoint an administrator—"

"Whoa," Cass said. "Let's stick to a trail I can follow. How much does the Rocker owe?"

"Forty thousand would cover it, including costs. Certain proceeds of the liquidation, including sums obtained from the livestock sale, reduce this figure somewhat. The court is holding these funds in escrow—"

Cass shook his head. "How much is the Rocker worth, as things stand? Enough to cover the debts against it?"

The lawyer shrugged. "I hoped to be able—"

"Poppycock!" Eli Lombard exclaimed. "A thing's worth its market value. What it might have brought a year ago butters no parsnips today. I was fool enough to take over the Midwest claims at sixty cents on the dollar, and right now I figure I'm well stuck. It ain't worth anything.

"What good is land with a locust swarm of rustlers, squatters, hired killers infestin' it? It's your breed, Gentry, that runs a country to the dogs. There'll be no honest values here, no decent living, until we get our laws enforced."

"It's about time, Gentry," Martin Burdette interrupted, lifting his voice to reach the audience of six or eight who had halted nearby, "that people realized the difficulties in organizing simple justice here. The loud-mouth talkers who've criticized my handling of the Rocker affairs would sing a different tune if they stopped to consider what I've been up against. I defy a single one of them—"

"You makin' a stump speech?" Cass drawled. "There's no need to apologize to me."

"I'm not apologizing! I'm stating facts. They've established state courts and allotted no funds to set them up. We have county judges with no place to function, no authority to back their decrees. We take our cases to Plateau City, or into Federal jurisdiction, and crowded dockets shunt us aside, postpone our pleas. Is it any wonder that lawlessness is rampant?"

Cass saw the purpose behind the lawyer's words. Martin Burdette had been quick to declaim his justification in public. He spoke with impressive sincerity, and Cass realized the disadvantages he would face in a continuing debate.

"I just wanted the straight of things," he said. "Thanks very much. I'm a law-abidin' man myself, and I never taken a case to old Judge Colt unless it came to last resource." His eyes traveled slowly from Burdette to Eli Lombard. "Like it seems to be here in Triangle."

He touched his hat to the girl in the carriage moving on.

SWIFTY and Bearpaw were at the bar when he entered the Wheel of Fortune. He nodded at them, then stood with hands thumbed at his belt to peer around the shaded interior.

He was well aware that his presence was noted. The scattering of drinkers and loiterers gave him the same attention that had followed his passage along the street. Even such an eminent citizen as wattle-jowled Wash Parsons turned around gaze toward him, a startled look that was hastily averted as Cass came striding.

Hop Randolph was the man Cass wanted to see. The slight-figured gambler sat at an isolated table, a bottle and glass at his elbow and a solitaire layout spread before him. He did not disturb his concentration on the cards as Cass approached, and not until Cass halted did he lift his gaze.

"My name's Gentry," Cass said. "I looked you up—"

"I know who you are and why you're here," the gambler said. "What can I do for you?"

"I heard you had trouble with Matt McHale," Cass said, matching his voice to the other's cool tone. "They tell me you had reason to want him killed, and that you never accounted for where you might been on the evenin' he was murdered. That's what I wanted to ask about."

"I see." Randolph nodded. "And what did you aim to do, Gentry, in case I said that was my own affair and you could go to hell?"

"I hadn't made up my mind," Cass replied. "I expected to handle you a little different from the others."

A flicker moved the watchful eyes. Hop Randolph put his hands together, interlacing the fingers. "That was smart," he drawled. "Sit down, Gentry, if you've a mind to. I reckoned you'd seek me out as soon as I heard how you handled Ben Quigg. It's a neat little scheme you're cookin' up."

"What scheme's that?"

"Your notion of stirrin' McHale's old troubles and enemies and harnessin' 'em onto yourself. You've made no bones of your purpose, so far as I can see."

"Could you point a better way?" Cass asked.

"Not offhand," said the gambler. "If you want to take that long a risk it's all right with me. It even might work out, Gentry, if you was up against a lesser proposition.

"If you want my opinion, though, the trail's too cold and the fox is too sly and the woods are too thick. You'll find yourself outslicked and outgunned all along the line, mister."

"So another man hinted," said Cass. "Was there anybody or anything you meant in particular?"

RANDOLPH shook his head. "There's one opinion in town that holds that McHale was killed for personal reasons by somebody like Ollie Shand or me. A few of us figger, though, that his murder and the wipe-out of the Rocker was engineered for bigger reasons, and was planned by a clever, far-lookin' combine. Don't ask me who or how or why, for I've got no real notion."

"Then it wasn't you that killed 'im?" Cass asked.

"No, it wasn't me. I had my flare-up with the peg-legged old devil, and I did talk pretty tall at the time. I never really blamed 'im, though, when I come to think of it. I had no decent right—"

His lips twisted. "I got no proof where I was the night he was shot. The truth is a thing I wouldn't believe if another man told. I ain't proud of it, Gentry, and I don't quite savvy why I choose to speak it to you, but here she is—

"I rode out to Squawman's Knob that afternoon," he said huskily. "Six miles she lies, wild and lone, with a little lookout clearing at the crest there. I carried along a friend, the best friend I got—the good old friend that gurgles in the bottle. It didn't take long to empty my friend inside me.

"I got blind drunk," he said. "I rolled in the grass and laughed out loud. I made a speech to a stump, sayin' what I'd never speak in front of people. I had me one hell of a time. For a little while I was as good a man as I used to be, before that bronc fell on my leg. I was the man I should have been, as good as anybody, instead of a damned, cheap—"

His hand swept out furiously, scattering a storm of cards.

"You needn't go on," said Cass Gentry, grim-jawed. "I know what it is. I climbed the same mountain."

He tugged the brim of his hat, turning. His hand rubbed the edge of his jaw, swiped across his mouth, as he angled toward Swifty and Bearpaw.

"Ready to eat?" he asked. "I've tossed enough rocks for one day, I reckon. I'll take a smart man's advice and ride from town until the pool's had a chance to settle."

"Where?" Bearpaw asked.

"I can't quite say," Cass told him. "The two next things that need stirrin' up are Abel Bannister's Snaketrack crowd and the homestead outfits north in the Valleys. I'll flip a coin between 'em."

CHAPTER XII

THE HOOPAW BOYS

HE WAS still undecided, however, when he turned his roan horse into Wampum Street a little later. It didn't matter much in which direction he rode. The im-

portant point was that Triangle Town should see him heading forth on some mysterious errand, with a bedroll strapped behind him and a rifle in his saddle-boot.

He sat straight, pacing the roan by the pressure of his knees, scanning the street with restless scrutiny. His right hand rested upon his thigh, convenient to the butt of his Colt. He wanted the watchers to read his challenge plainly. He wanted his unknown foes among them to know he was ready for any game they chose.

The back-country wagons had already thinned out, but the saddle horses at the racks had increased in number. The saloons were beginning to hum with the payday trade, and sundown would find this section of town all primed to cavort and holler.

At the intersection of Council Street he checked the roan. Three range-garbed horsemen cantered past, one of them flinging an empty bottle that skittered the dust. A group on the opposite corner eyed him with the same guarded interest that had trailed his passage along the block. Cass glanced down the aisle of trees, vaguely frowning, then shrugged as he kneed around.

Now where in the world did he get the notion to ride past the doctor's house?

He had to admit that Mary Ellen McHale had been in his thoughts. By thinking of her, by pretending a kinship to her problems, he had injected a new quality into the situations he faced.

There wasn't any point, though, in looking for her now. Despite the notes some jughead had sent, she'd be safe enough here in town, especially with Bearpaw posted to keep an eye on her after nightfall. Supposing he did meet her, what would he have to say?

No, the thing to do was to ride up the main drag again, as if he might have his eye peeled for some certain hombre. He would toss one more pebble before he headed out. If Triangle Town was led to believe that he knew more than he did—well, that might rouse 'em to action.

"The sooner the quicker," he muttered, leaning his weight in signal to the roan.

And that was the way it happened, swift and unexpected. The scene was set at the corner of Division Street, brief minutes later, and half a hundred scattered witnesses saw Cass Gentry ride into it to climax the conflicts of the day.

HE WAS ten yards from the corner when a northbound carriage turned left in front of him. He recognized the team of bays and the feathered elegance of Madame Mustache. He heard a shout, saw the carriage swerve and halt just beyond the crossways. A man laughed loudly, a harsh voice called some remark, and figures along the walk turned to observe the happenings.

The incident was not exactly unusual. Such horseplay was common enough on pay-night in places like Triangle Town. The three punchers who had passed Cass previously, flinging their bottle aside, had been approaching the mouth of Division Street as the carriage turned into it. They greeted the driver with shrill yelps, reining their horses to force the bays to the curb.

When Cass rode up, the argument was getting noisy. One of the riders was holding the head of the off bay, and the other pair were hoorawing the driver.

The nearest rider, heavy-built and hawk-nosed, was doffing his hat, grinning widely:

"Mebbe you don't recall us," he said, "without our silk hats and walkin' canes. Howcome we're barred at yore house? They closed the doors so fast on us we couldn't even leave our callin' cards."

"Stop it, boys!" the woman said. "Let go that horse! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, carrying on in the street. I've told you already—"

"There'll be ten more along in another hour," the second horseman said. "You can't treat us thisaway. We named your place for our headquarters."

The woman lifted the carriage whip from its socket. "But I told you Stella's sick. The doctor said I'd better close until he's sure what ails her. You can hunt your fun elsewhere."

The hawk-nosed man chuckled, crowding his horse closer. "We got money," he announced. "We'll pay the damage of that roughhouse last time—"

Cass saw the brand on the rump of his mount—the wavy line of Abel Bannister's Snaketrack iron—and his decision was instantly made. Here was circumstance playing into his hand, and his lips were grinning as he pushed the roan forward.

"Turn loose of that horse!" he called sharply. "Stand back there, you, and let this lady pass!"

HIS bold approach brought abrupt silence. Instinctively the forward man had dropped his hand from the head of the carriage horse. The other pair turned in their saddles to face the challenge.

"Who says so?" barked the hawk-nosed man. "What gives you leave to prod in here, stranger? Who in hell do you claim to be?"

"Gentry's the name," Cass said. "I work for the Rocker ranch, what's left of it, and I don't appreciate the smell of any three polecats who push their fun on a lone woman. You scared to tackle somethin' more your caliber?"

With his first words he realized that he was not dealing with drunken men. He saw their faces harden as he spoke, walking the roan into them. The hawk-nosed man let his clenched fist relax, posing his spread fingers above his holstered revolver.

Cass knew they wouldn't back down. They were hesitating briefly, uncertain how to move, and this was the slight advantage he had to whittle down the triple odds. Cass Gentry knew exactly what he must do to hold the jump on them.

And he did it. He carried the fight, striking hard and sudden.

The bite of his spur on the roan's flank lunged the animal in a cat-hop straight toward the hawk-nosed man, the leader of the three and the most dangerous. Hawk-nose was pawing for his gun when the roan rammed his mount backward, and he tried frantically to dodge the slashing blow that Cass was launching. He lurched sidewise in the saddle, and Cass' gun barrel slapped above his ear. He was spilled beneath the hoofs of his rearing, snorting pony.

The second man said later that he never even saw the move with which Cass Gentry slapped his gun out. The whole thing happened too fast for him. There was the jump of Gentry's horse that unseated Blackie, and before a man could collect his senses his own pony was jammed back against the madame's carriage and Gentry's fist had hit out a lick that made the whole street flutter. It didn't help much, either, when the madame laid her whip across his pony's rump, and then slashed her own team so hard that they liked to run poor Bud plumb under.

She hadn't wasted any time.

The spectators who came hurrying from Wampum Street saw the happenings just as disjointedly. One man had been downed by the time the late-comers surged within sight. This fellow's boot had caught in his stirrup, and his crab-stepping horse was anchored by the weight of him.

Cass Gentry was punching a second Snaketrack rider, and the third man was trying to steer his pinto-faced black into the ruction. This third one had his gun out but his hands were too full of horse to make any use of it.

Then Miz Rambo went into action. A swish of her whip lunged the horse out from under the man Cass Gentry was fighting. A second swish set fire to her hard-held bays, and she reined the team toward the last of the Snaketrack trio in a charge that he narrowly avoided.

He kicked loose of his stirrups, hopping down to the solid roadway as the carriage careened beyond. He was turning to face a dusty confusion, his gun lifted to seek out the stranger who had climbed them so quick and complete, and then an explosion kicked up yellow dirt at his feet.

"Drop it, brother!" Cass Gentry shouted. "Drop it—or I'll lift the next one higher!"

The Snaketrack puncher let his revolver fall. Through a dusky golden haze he saw the looming figure on horseback and the steady jutting arm that trained a heavy Colt to cover him.

"You tell Abel Bannister," Gentry called out in a voice that the street could hear, "that I aim to look him up as soon as I can manage. I want to know why he hires such as Tex Cordill on his payroll. He'll explain to me, you tell him, howcome the Skunktrack loses so little stock to the rustlers!"

CHAPTER XIII

WAKE UP TO A NIGHTMARE

CASS rode westward from town, as he had planned. He followed the wagon road to the foothill breaks, then turned north across rolling prairies. In his pocket was a rough map that Bearpaw had painstakingly sketched and explained, and Cass scouted the landmarks that would point him into the Six Valleys.

The wind was freshening and the sun deepened in color as it settled toward the blue-hazed mountain peaks. A low-hanging drift of sullen clouds held the threat of showers later. Cass made no special effort to conceal himself, holding his mount at a steady gait through lonely country.

He had no notion of any real purpose that this jaunt might serve. All indications were that the heart of the mystery, the actual danger, was somewhere in the town he had quitted. Yet judgment told him that the wisest course was to let that danger grow. Let Triangle Town stew in its juices while he took a look-see at what had been the Rocker layout.

Three men had warned him that McHale's murder was a deeper concern than personal spite. Ollie Shand, Frank Irish, Hop Randolph, an ill-assorted trio—yet each had voiced the same suspicions. Tex Cordill's unlucky attempt at bushwhacking was the factor which inclined Cass to agree with them.

It seemed obvious that Cordill had played the renegade, working hand-in-glove with the men who looted the Rocker. But was the ambush his own idea—a panicky effort to hide his own tracks—or had he followed orders? Those yellow-back bills in his pocket—would they tally with the crisp new twenties robbed from Matt McHale? If so, how and where had Cordill come into them?

The logical man to answer these queries was the hard-faced fellow who had followed Cordill to the ambush, who had searched a dead body with such eager purpose—the sheriff's deputy, Vic Barth.

And yet, in the circumstances, Cass was just as well satisfied that Barth had tailed from town. His single glimpse of the deputy's lean, dark features had been enough to mark the man as tough and capable. A showdown with him, Cass had the feeling, would end in kill or be killed, and Barth was more valuable on the hoof than in a coffin.

THE roan carried Cass into a rock-walled gully, and through the notch he could see the timbered slopes of Squawman's Knob, marking six slow miles he had covered in an hour's journey. He still had more than another hour of full daylight, however, and there would be a half-moon later if the storm should blow away. He expected to camp the night in the near vicinity of the Valleys.

He was still in no great hurry, but he shook up the roan a little as he neared the gulley's end. They rounded a laurel clump where the rutted trail resumed, and suddenly Cass yanked the bit, pulling in toward a thicket of concealment.

His position gave an extended view of the traveled track that hairpinned along the base of the table hill. A few hundred yards beyond, near a place where a dry wash slashed the wooded flank of the knob, a horseman came in sight.

Cass climbed from the saddle. His fingers clamped the nose of the roan as he peered from his shallow covert. The Young 'Un had reported that Vic Barth rode a white-stockinged chestnut from town, and this was explanation of the sudden halt. The horse below tallied with that description.

But the rider wasn't Barth, as Cass soon saw. The binoculars from the saddlebag proved him a stranger. He slouched in his saddle, long and lean, and a speckled face was enlarged in the eye glass sights as Cass worked the adjustment. The blotches might have been freckles or pockmarks. A stringy mustache above buck teeth gave him a fair resemblance to a gopher. The distinguishing item of his slovenly dress was a tall-crowned black hat with a rattlesnake band. A glint of the fading sun touched a fire-spark to the silvered stud that joined the hatband.

Cass lowered the binoculars and a frown creased his brows. Now where had he seen such an ugly face before? Who was it this brown-ticked gopher reminded him of? He watched the horseman turn into the mouth of the wash.

In less than five minutes he reappeared, having gained a companion in the meantime. They rode off in opposite directions, the chestnut cantering north and the second rider setting out toward Cass Gentry's hideout.

For the sake of curiosity and common prudence Cass sought a deeper concealment. He managed to find a lookout that gave him sight of the road, and his lips formed a soundless whistle as he identified the bulky rider who had met with Buck-tooth in such remote and hasty rendezvous.

What mysterious urgency had saddled this sweaty, dusty journey upon such an eminent citizen as Mr. Wash Parsons, the mayor of Triangle Town?

CASS pondered that question as he rode. Bearpaw had spoken the verdict: "Wash Parsons—he don't amount to much," and Cass had accepted the judgment upon first sight of the wattled jowls, the shifty eyes, the paunchy awkwardness of the man. That estimate might be wrong, of course. It would do no harm to check up on Brother Parsons at the next opportunity.

Though he attached no importance to the incident, he was careful to give the buck-toothed stranger a respectable start before trailing in the same direction. He traveled slowly, his watchfulness increasing as dusk came on, and nightfall caught him near the banks of a narrow, shallow stream that might be Copper Creek or Foxfire Run, depending on which way he read Bearpaw's map-making.

Either one, it made no difference. He was still a short ride from the one-time Rocker layout, but that could wait for morning.

He had marked a spot to spread his bedroll, and before he broke out his cold grub he arranged his tarp as a shelter against the rain that might come later. The storm was still hovering up there, clouding the roof, but a slackening wind hinted it might roll on. The darkness fell thick and black, fencing a silent emptiness close about him, and he stretched out at ease with his good-night cigarette.

It had been a good day, Cass Gentry thought.

He had hit a few licks, he had earned his pay. Colonel Tom Raynor had got his money's worth. Staring into the blank darkness, though, into the sleepy void where only hazy images moved, he admitted that this wasn't quite his meaning. It was something else—a sort of feeling he had—which made today different from other days.

There was nothing new in the situation. It was the same old business of these past few years—Cass Gentry trouble-shooting, risking his scalp at so much per day to pull other men's irons from the fire.

And yet he had felt an ease today, and she was responsible for it—Mary Ellen. He could picture her as she stood that morning, leaning at the doctor's gate with the dawn's brightness upon her. He could see blue mystery in her eyes, and he remembered the touch of her hand upon his own, the gentleness. . . .

HE SLEPT. He slept deeply, dreamlessly, and he had no clear impression of the source of the vague disturbance that wakened him. He opened his eyes to the same utter darkness, feeling a windswept sprinkle of rain upon his face.

It might have been an hour later—or six hours, for all he knew. The storm was spraying a thin drizzle, and he thought it might have been a rumble of distant thunder that roused him.

His hand had fallen instinctively to his gun-butt, and he tilted the weapon as he sat up, listening. The roan moved with brushy sound that was suddenly lost in a sharper, deeper, more resounding noise. It was man-made thunder Cass heard, and the echoing boom of it came from near at hand.

Gun-blasts through the night, harsh voices shouting tumult that the wind carried close. The air had a heavier pungence, too, that Cass scented as he rose. Along with the rain it bore a waft of distant fire, the bite of smoke.

There was an interval of sleep-drugged confusion in which it seemed to Cass that sudden noises hemmed him in on every side. The wind swirled the sounds, the night magnified them, and they came crowding on from near and far, from every scattered direction.

He had scant time to straighten them out, for the rushing storm of them rolled toward him quickly. Through the fringe of trees he glimpsed a glow that lightened the black sky toward the south.

The heaviest gunfire came from this direction, a firecracker fusillade of pistols that was punctuated by the harsh-toned slam of rifles, slower paced. A sporadic shooting whanged from the roadway east, and there was a thrash of nearer movement, a lift of voices, a rumble-pound that was hard to locate.

Such were his hasty impressions.

The roan was fighting his night rope, and Cass was moving toward the animal when the full hullabaloo of excitement came along the rocky bed of the shallow creek. In the black storm shadows he could see no more than a charging flood of shapes, hulking ghostlike, coming on at splashing speed. It was chiefly instinct that identified them as spooked cattle, twenty or more in the bunch, running on the prod.

Cass had pitched his cold camp on the shelving bank of the stream. The watercourse ran through a ravine that stretched some twenty feet across and was probably dry except in the rainy season. The stampede came on so fast that the leaders were plunging past, ten feet below, before Cass could find the roan's tie-rope. The horse danced and lunged, snorting loudly, and Cass spoke a steadying command.

His voice could not have been heard in the welter of other sounds, but almost instantly it was answered with a flash of flame from the gulley, the slam of a revolver shot.

As Cass figured out later, that shot had no intention of finding him. One of the men who were driving that pell-mell bunch of horns and splashing hoofs had probably risked a bullet's blast in order to keep the critters on the jump a little longer. It was just poor luck all around that the dark rider happened to choose that certain moment for cutting loose with his hardware.

But that was second guess. At the time it happened, Cass naturally supposed that someone had spotted him as a target, and he was quick to reply to the shot in kind. He was turning instantly, firing toward the confusion of sounds and shadows below, knowing that no honest man would be moving cattle in such a fashion. The hasty shots that pounded back at him were further proof of that, if proof was needed.

He shot again, aiming toward the middle flash of the three explosions from the ravine. The riders were beyond him now, spurring fast on the tails of their crazy drive, and he fired a third time after them, a haphazard bullet to speed them along.

In the rain-sprayed gloom there was no chance for accurate shooting, and he held his fire thereafter. He crouched at the lip of the bank until the sounds of stampede had dwindled, aware that the other distant noises had abruptly faded as well. He could still see the glow against the southern sky, less than a mile away, he judged, but the drumming warfare had petered out.

He stood erect, turning his head to peer and listen, and the coughing grunt of the roan was his first warning that the horse had been hit. The animal was down, sprawled on its flank, and the legs thrashed in the last convulsive throes as Cass jumped toward the huddled shape. One of those three wild bullets from below had found a broader target than Cass Gentry.

Cass locked his teeth together, and a senseless surge of anger jerked him half a stride toward the twisting tunnel of darkness that had swallowed the three stampeders. Marooned by night in a strange country where queer business prowled afoot and astride! It was a crazy finish to a totally crazy proceeding.

Fire in the sky, gun-fights near and far, and wild-shooting night riders chasing the tag of a herd hell-bent through the ragged roughs! What kind of sense could a man puzzle out of such a nightmare?

CHAPTER XIV

THE RATTLESNAKE BAND

CASS swabbed the smear of rain from his face with a wel!-dampened sleeve, and returned to the shelter of the tarp to think it over. There were several possibilities he could surmise, but he quickly concluded that what had happened was not so important as what might *still* happen.

This little stretch of country wouldn't be exactly healthy for strangers prowling the night, if he was any judge. For the next little while, these nearby folks would probably be inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. Cass realized, too, that he wouldn't find it easy to account to suspicious men for his presence in the vicinity.

His wisest move, he decided, was to get himself gone from this neck of the woods before sun-up.

He waited an hour or so, smoking occasionally and keeping his ears cocked for anything that might be happening around. He heard one passing hail of voices from the south, and later a trooping clop of hoofs went along the main road. The fire-glow had faded from the sky by the time he thought it safe to travel.

The roan would be found and most likely identified, but that would be a later concern. He descended the bank of the creek, aiming to cache his saddle and bedroll at a little distance, and curiosity prompted him to scout the spot where he had blasted down those first two bullets. He was pretty sure he had thrown a pair of misses, but it did no harm to take a look.

As it happened, it did some good. His sight was accustomed to the gloom by now, and he caught the glint of silver, like a round eye staring, as he moved along the opposite bank. It was a polished stud he saw, bending closer. He picked up a black hat--a hat with a snakeskin band, and with a bullet-gouge slanted through the upper crown of it.

He slipped the snakeskin band in his pocket, remembering . . .

The buck-toothed man!

The image of that gopher-face recalled the hazy resemblance that Cass couldn't quite put his finger on. There was something about that speckled countenance which escaped his memory. But the more important angle was the man who had met Mr. Buck-tooth so briefly and mysteriously at Squawman's Knob that afternoon. How did fat Wash Parsons tie in with these dark-riding stampeders?

Cass hid his roll and saddle, and the carbine, too. He draped the saddlebags over his shoulder, and skirted the road for a slow mile or two, walking north. The drizzle kept slacking, then starting up again, and Cass began to cuss. His clothes were soaked, a sore spot was wearing on his heel, and he had just about decided to stop at the first place he came to—suspicious or not—when he made out a bobbing light that approached.

Cass stepped back to watch it come. It was a plodding buggy, curtained against the rain, and Cass moved forward again, lifting one arm in signal. He called out a hail, and the driver pulled up beside him.

"Can you give a man a lift to the nearest shelter?" Cass said.

The side-curtain was unfastened. A head poked out, and in the shine of the riding lamp Cass saw familiar bearded features.

"Is that you, Gentry?" Dr. Farabaugh exclaimed. "What in the devil's name are you doing afoot on such a night in this forsaken country?"

THERE were explanations as they drove along. A natural caution made Cass withhold any mention of Wash Parsons, nor did he speak of the snake-banded hat. The doctor listened intently to the outline of the other events. Cass could feel tightening muscles in the arm that touched his own, and Farabaugh's voice was harsh with anger.

"Stirring trouble!" he said. "Raiding and shooting, damn their souls! Last night it was the Anchor, and they come right back for a crack at the LIG next door. No wonder men are talking of pulling stakes out of such a crazy country."

"If you ask my opinion," Cass said, "it's a little too crazy. A clever thief, like they claim Ollie Shand to be, would know enough to spread his operations. What good is it to cut out a bunch of stock and start 'em on the jump if the ranch hands are close on your tail? It's the damnedest kind of rustlin' I ever heard of."

"I suppose it is," the doctor said thoughtfully. "The more I see of this so-called human race—yes, and myself included—the more I think we're all born with one sort of insanity or another."

He laughed briefly. "I'm dog-tired, which is why I talk this way. It was one of those fellows at Burnt Mills. Knife wounds—I couldn't pull him through. He was no more than twenty-five, a magnificent specimen, and the woman he'd fought for—Queenie, they called her—came to hold his dying hand.

"If that poor young fool could have had his choice then, I kept wondering, would he have traded one day of the fifty years he might have lived for a hundred such women as Queenie?"

The buggy swayed the mucked road while Cass thought that over. "Most likely yes," he said presently. "He'd have traded a hundred years if he wanted her bad enough. There's some things that can't be figgered out by common sense. Men just ain't built that way."

The doctor's head turned toward him. Cass heard the whisper of a deep breath, then a chuckle.

"I see we're another pair," said Farabaugh, "who share the same insanity. I guess I'd better stop at the Dot to see if my services are needed. They'll take my guarantee for you, I imagine, if you want to pass the night, and lend you a horse in the morning."

"Well—" Cass hesitated. "What time is it, anyhow?"

His own impressions counted the hour as late. The doctor's watch, however, still lacked minutes of midnight.

"Some of the men at the Mills," the doctor said, "were telling around that you raised considerable excitement this afternoon. One fellow who rode from town reported that Abel Bannister was hunting you along Wampum Street with blood in his eye. You seem to be getting results, Gentry, but I hope you've considered the dangers of pushing things too fast."

"Your little banker mentioned that," Cass said. "The point is that I want 'em roused. The handiest thing that's happened so far was that ambush Tex Cordill laid out for me and Swifty. A little more of the same, and mebbe we can start to cull out the sheep from the billygoats."

"But Ollie Shand might not happen along the next time. The next bushwhack bullet might not miss. That wasn't exactly what I meant, though. I was thinking of Mary Ellen. If anything should happen to her— Wait a minute! Is someone swinging a light along the road?"

A YELLOW lantern moved in the darkness ahead. He always lighted his buggy, the doctor explained, to identify himself on his dark journeys. There was never any telling around what turn of the trail the need for him might be waiting.

He pulled up beside a slicker-coated horseman who greeted him by name. It was no emergency summons. The man was a hand from the LIG, one of an angry cordon scattered through the vicinity.

"Doggondest business I ever heard of," he said. "They come down bold as brass on thirty-forty head of market stock we'd gathered in the home pasture. The night and the rain was with 'em, of course, and they fired some winter sheds and feed ricks over towards the timberline to draw us off.

"Before we was half-started, though, they'd begun to move the beef. Three-four of 'em was stationed to hold us off, and we had a lively time there, poppin' back and forth, whilst the rest of the crew headed the bunch up Foxfire Run. They never had a chance to get away, though. They gave 'er up in less'n half a mile, scatterin'."

"Anybody hurt?" the doctor asked.

"O'ny the boss. He worked his temper up so high it blew his hat off. Man, was he on fire! He was primed to storm Devil's Notch all by his lonesome if that would put Ollie Shand's neck into his hands. He rode for town a while ago to see what hell he can prod out of Abe Bannister and his vigilantes."

"How could you tell it was Ollie's crowd?"

"They headed out straight west when we took after 'em. Who else would it be? Who'd brazen a job like that, exceptin' Ollie?"

The doctor looked at Cass. "You want to stop?"

"I seem to've changed my mind," Cass said. "I'll sit where I am into town, if you don't mind company."

"If you'll take the reins and let me catch a nap," the doctor told him, "you'll be more than welcome."

When they were moving again, Cass returned to the previous conversation. "You mentioned Mary Ellen. What was you drivin' at?"

"I was thinking she might be safer out of town. Those troubles you're bringing back to life might lash at her, you know. That can't be risked, Gentry. She's—well, I refuse to chance it."

"You mean that note she got?"

The doctor made a nervous growling sound. "The notes—yes, and other things. I can see now that I was selfish, perhaps, in urging her to stay. She has done so much for Mrs. Farabaugh—well, I find myself in a peculiar position. I could hardly suggest that she go elsewhere for a while, but I thought that you might persuade her—"

He moved his hands in sweeping gesture. "Damn it, I don't know what to say. I don't know what's to be done, Gentry."

The buggy poked on. Cass stared through rain-splashed isinglass into a dim world pressed thick and close. He could see no more than the shape of the horse and the outline of the road. The single sound he heard was the plock of hoofs, monotonous.

How long they rode in silence he did not know. His thoughts were vague, aimless, and he did not realize where they were trending until he heard the sound of his own dull voice:

"You think she's still in love with this Martin Burdette?"

The words had been spoken unconsciously, and he glanced in swift embarrassment toward his tall companion. The doctor's head lolled on his shoulder. His weariness must have wooed sleep instantly, for he gave no answer.

Cass licked his dry lips. In the back of his mind was a bothersome little detail

he'd have to discuss with Swifty. "Ollie Shand might not happen along the next time." So the doc had spoken. In recounting the tale of the Kettledrum attack even to Bearpaw, Cass had been careful to eliminate any reference to the yellow-haired man. Where, then, had the doctor gained his information?

CHAPTER XV

TO HATE, OR TRUST

THE rain had spluttered out and the night was clearing when they came to Triangle Town. At the upper end of Wampum Street the lights glowed in a yellow row, and the sounds of pay-night, the music and merriment, increased as the buggy rolled on. The doctor massaged his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"You'll do me a favor," he said, "if you'll put this horse in my stable. I was called to Burnt Mills unexpectedly, and there's a sick girl at Mrs. Rambo's I should see again. I'm afraid it's pneumonia. If there's a downstairs light in the house you might leave word that I'll be along shortly."

Cass said he'd be glad to. He had done considerable thinking on the last shank of the ride and had come to see that Triangle Town was where he belonged right now. Any action that developed would probably start from here. There was the business of Wash Parsons to be looked into, for one thing, and it might be a ripe time, too, to hear what Abel Bannister had to declare.

Looking for Cass Gentry, was he, with blood in his eye? Well, Cass had a little of the same in his own. He'd had his horse shot from under him, you could almost say, and he was wet and cramped and bedraggled and footsore. He'd never be better primed for a skirmish.

Council Street was dark, and he saw no light in the doctor's house. When he turned into the side passage along the fence, however, he noticed glowing windows at the rear. A light still burned in the kitchen, though he could mark no movement there as the buggy squeaked past.

There was a good-sized stable beyond. Cass found a lantern on a shelf, and its rays revealed an extra buggy as well as two stalled horses. He drew some water, and his lips framed a whistle as he set to work. He owed a debt to the mud-splashed animal in the traces, he considered, and this was one way of paying it.

HE HAD the horse rubbed dry when he heard the outer scrape of footsteps. He stepped out of the circle of light, instantly wary, but some foreshadowed instinct told him who it was even before he saw her at the entrance.

Mary Ellen halted. "Oh—" she said. "I thought it was—"

She looked at him queerly, and for a few seconds Cass Gentry couldn't find a word to say. He stood like a gawk, watching the way she held herself, light and shapely, and the slant of her head and the half-smile that slowly came.

"Why, Bearpaw said you'd be gone for a day or so. I heard the buggy pass, and I wanted to tell Dr. Farabaugh—" She brushed at her skirt. "I was sitting upstairs in the dark, and I thought he'd want to know that Martin Burdette sent the—the bundle over. A boy delivered it. Sometimes I have a cup of coffee with the doctor if I'm still awake when he comes in."

"He picked me up on the road," Cass said. "I kind of lost my horse in an accident. I was—uh—well, I went—"

"Never mind," she said. "You have your plans and I don't intend to interfere. You still haven't anything definite, have you?"

"Not exactly, no. We got some leads that may work out, though."

"Maggie says the whole town's talking about the way you lit into everybody. There were so many times I wanted to kick Ben Quigg out of his chair that I made Bearpaw tell that story twice. He was prowling outside—said he'd been ordered to keep an eye on me. Do you think that's necessary?"

"Well—" Cass shrugged. "There's no harm in it."

She had come across toward him. A narrow bench was backed against a beam-support, and she sat with pink-pulled slippers touching the lighted circle that the lantern painted upon the floor.

"Sit down a minute," she said, and she looked at him with wise eyes. "I want you to know—"

Cass sat.

"I guess you have reason to call me afraid," she said. "I was afraid—dreadfully. These troubles had gone on so long, they had piled on so thickly, that I—oh, I don't know how to say it! It was the fact that I didn't know what to fear that made me afraid."

"Sure," Cass said. "Like a noise in the dark. You're scared until you know what made it."

"That's it—that's what I meant. And then, besides, I had no one to depend on. There was no one" —she compressed her lips— "I could count on for *sure*.

"One said this and one said that until I wasn't even sure of myself sometimes. But all that's over now. I'm not afraid any more please believe me. I've been very, very sure of myself—"

She met his gaze steadily. "Since this morning."

Was that what had happened to him, Cass wondered. Was self-assurance the new ease which rode him lightly through the day?

He gave up that thought, for Mary Ellen was talking again.

"I've found someone I can trust, Cass Gentry," she said. "I've put my troubles in your hands, and I—well, maybe I've put myself in them. I've borrowed your confidence, your strength—"

Her lips were trembling. There was a wet shine in her eyes as she turned her head away.

THE best Cass had to offer was a stiff grin. Long ago he had toughened his hide against soft emotions. In the world he had made for himself each man developed a shell for the rest of that world to see. He had a swift sense of guilt, of shame, that was partly due to seeing her so, and partly to the response in him that needed such a heavy hand to curb.

"I certainly appreciate—" he said haltingly. "I'll do the best I can—"

"It's hard to explain," she went on softly, her face still averted. "It's something I saw in you from the first moment. You're like the man I loved the most and hated the most—my father.

"I fought against him. I opposed the things he stood for, just as I opposed you yesterday. While he lived, though, I never had to doubt my protection, my safety."

"Sure, sure," Cass said hastily. "I kind of been thinkin' about that. This letter somebody sent, and with trouble apt to crop out any day, it might be best if you'd travel out somewheres until we know how we stand. If your friends could count you safe it would relieve their responsibility."

"What friends?"

"Well, Bearpaw—the folks in town you know—"

She faced him. "My friends—" she said softly. "I've had to learn a new way of counting my friends, Cass Gentry. I'm not afraid. I tell you. Are *you* running off to find a hideaway?"

Cass shrugged. He turned his frowning glance from the lantern's glow, fumbling for answer, and the movement he saw in the darkness beyond the stable door was no more than a flutter, a shifting shadow among the shadows, a ghost-face blob of gray. It was wind, it was mist, it was nothing—

He smashed at Mary Ellen with the wide sweep of his arm, with a backhand jerk that struck the base of her throat and toppled her from the teetering bench. In the same abrupt move he was thrusting his own body backward, grasping his holstered pistol as he fell.

He thought he could feel the burn of the bullet, across his cheek in the instant of the gun's explosion from the outer darkness.

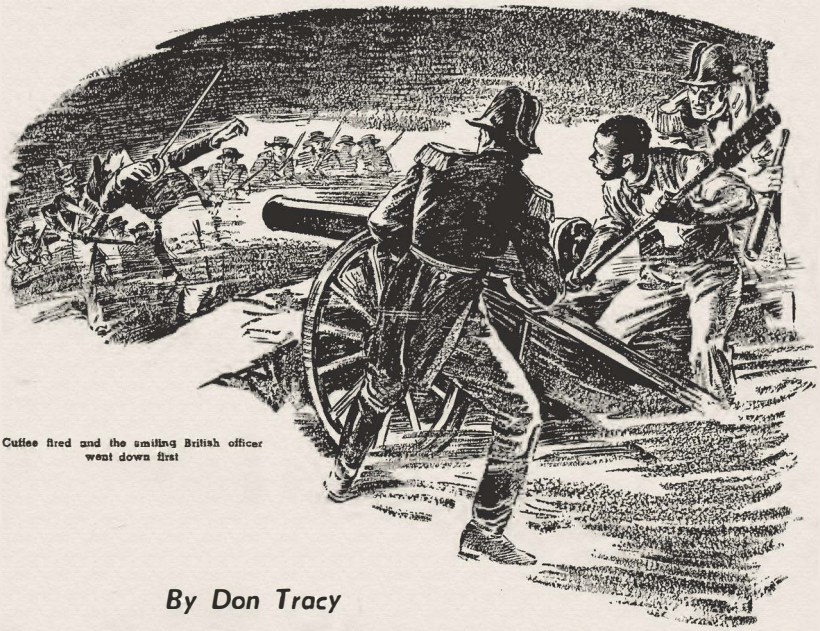
(To be continued next week.)

MURDER GOES TO SEA

The dramatic story of a Navy hospital ship on which Death was a stowaway

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Beginning in Argosy soon



Cuffee fired and the smiling British officer went down first

By Don Tracy

I Got No Sword

Cuffee was a black boy, and he had his mind sot on being warfolks. He went at it so hard you couldn't tell whether he was a traitor or a hero

THERE was a boy, one time, and his name was Cuffee. At first, he was Cuffee Stevens because then he belonged to Mr. Lucius Stevens of Kent Island, in the Chesapeake Bay.

Mr. Lucius Stevens was a right good man to belong to; never putting out a task that was too hard and making sure that his slaves didn't eat terrapin more than twice a week, even if the Law said a man could feed his slaves terrapin three times a week but no more.

That's why a lot of folks couldn't agree with Cuffee when he begged Lieutenant Richard Kennemont to buy him from Mr. Lucius Stevens. Because Lieutenant Kennemont didn't have the hogs or the house or the harvest that Mr. Stevens had.

But Cuffee, he always was sot in his ways and when he saw Lieutenant Kennemont in his uniform, riding his high-stepping black horse with the white blaze over its eyes he said to himself: "I got to belong to him!" And he begged so hard, both Mr. Lucius Stevens and Lieutenant Kennemont, that finally the lieutenant, he bought Cuffee.

Most times, Lieutenant Richard Kennemont was riding around the country on his high-stepping black horse, Afrique, with his boot white with dust and his teeth like ivory in his dark face when he smiled at folks as he rode past, touching the peak of his hat with one finger, like a salute.

Folks said Lieutenant Kennemont would never have a shilling while there was a king to beat a knave in a pack of cards, but he was a smiling man and everybody loved him. And after Lieutenant Kennemont bought Cuffee from Mr. Lucius Stevens, Cuffee always rode behind his new master on a mule that pointed the path with its ears with every step it took. And Cuffee got downright proud.

I guess Lieutenant Kennemont got fonder of Cuffee than he was of anything except his high-stepping horse, Afrique, and Mistress Mary Dodson, who was the daughter of the biggest military man on the whole Eastern Shore of Maryland in them days. That was in 1813.

Mistress Mary Dodson's father, he was Captain William Dodson and he was short and fat, with a red face and a set of false teeth that somebody in Baltimore had made for him, but they never fit just right.

But Captain Dodson was a brave man and the most military man I ever see. He might remind you of a little red rooster but there come a time, later, when he showed how brave he was against Mr. Admiral Cockburn's men. Him and Lieutenant Richard Kennemont and Cuffee.

I REMEMBER Captain Dodson strutting up and down in front of the dragoons, and he was hollering.

"Men, the enemy is at our gates!" he yelled. "The despicable Cockburn"—that was Mr. Admiral Cockburn, the Englishman that everybody hated because he burned and stole—"is moving up the Bay with eight sail, three brigs and five armed barges."

Then the dragoons mumbled and shifted their feet, like they were anxious to get at the British. Them dragoons!

"Lieutenant Kennemont," the captain said, "will review the company. Captain Smith and I are going to retire to plan our defenses."

Well, I knew what plans they were going to fix up because I was Mr. Mitchell Taylor's man and Mr. Taylor owned the ordinary, right off the Square. And Captain Dodson and Captain Smith, they

were both gentlemen that liked a drink and, anyways, the British were down below Hooper's Island and they wouldn't be at Saint Michaels for another couple of days.

But Lieutenant Kennemont—Lord, how he worried! He wanted the dragoons and the light infantry from Miles River and the sharpshooters from Royal Oak to dig ditches and put logs down and haul cannons and things like that, for fear the British would catch them with their buttons undone. But the Dragoons, they was mostly quality and they didn't want to be working like field hands.

I remember this one day when I was watching the dragoons drill in the square, out of step and laughing and talking and Lieutenant Kennemont serious, with a thin mouth, up ahead on that high-stepping black horse.

Cuffee was over to one side, out of the way of the white folks, on his mule and watching Lieutenant Kennemont. But I was watching Mistress Mary Dodson and I could tell that as far as she was concerned there wasn't anybody else in the square but the lieutenant.

Later, I saw Cuffee and I told him, I said:

"Pretty soon, the lieutenant will be getting married, the way Mistress Mary Dodson looked at him. And then you'll have to work like the rest of us instead of riding around on a mule, pulling faces at us that has to walk."

Cuffee shook his head and looked like I'd said there wasn't no Lord God. He couldn't think of his master married. Cuffee always thought that Lieutenant Kennemont belonged to him and the high-stepping black, Afrique.

"We're war folks," he told me. "We got to whup the British before we do anything else."

"Yuh!" I said to him. "White folks I've known don't let war or nothing else stand in the way, once they look at each other like Mistress Mary Dodson looked at Lieutenant Kennemont."

Just then, Mister Taylor, my master, fetched me a clip on the ear for talking about quality and for not doing some task I forgot to do, so I left Cuffee and went about my work. But I could see that what I said worried that boy. He was a slow-thinking man but once he got something in his head, nobody could get it out without they used a bung-starter.

THAT'S howcome Cuffee got in trouble. Somehow, he got it into his head that if Mistress Mary Dodson married his Lieutenant Kennemont, the lieutenant would quit fighting the war. And if the lieutenant wasn't war folks, Cuffee would have to handle a plow or tend the front door. He worried so much he forgot who he was and he spoke up like he shouldn't have.

He told Lieutenant Kennemont that he, Cuffee, didn't want the lieutenant to marry Mistress Mary Dodson.

Now, the lieutenant was a smiling man that killed the rockfish he caught when he was fishing, right off, instead of letting them gasp themselves to death in the bottom of the boat, but he couldn't let Cuffee say that.

He looked at Cuffee with his eyes getting bigger and bigger and then he hauled off with his riding whip and he cropped Cuffee across the face with it. You got to remember that in them days a white gentleman didn't even speak the name of a lady, without she or one of her kinfolks was there, and for a boy to talk up like that was downright disgraceful.

So a gentleman like Lieutenant Richard Kennemont, he really *had* to crop Cuffee for that, even if he was sorry for it the minute after the whip laid a red streak across Cuffee's chocolate face. But the Lieutenant couldn't tell Cuffee he was sorry because that wouldn't be right, either, so instead he turned and walked out of the room.

Now there are children and there are dogs and there are horses that won't take a whip and there are slaves, too, that won't. They don't cry or bite or kick but they'd be better off if they did.

A whip stings and you can holler and carry on and yell the sting right out of your skin. But if you grab your lip with your teeth and swallow the yell, the hollering stays inside you, always somewhere back of your ears. You've seen a horse drop its head and shiver when somebody crops it too hard and you've said to yourself: "That's going to be a bad horse some day." Lieutenant Kennemont, he knew horses and he should have looked back at Cuffee and maybe things wouldn't have happened like they did, if he had.

Cuffee stood there, looking after the man he thought was the nearest thing to God Almighty; the man that had just cropped him across the face. He was a slow-thinking boy and he couldn't think things out very good. He only knew that he was full of sorrow and Mistress Mary Dodson had something to do with it. So he decided that Mistress Mary Dodson was no friend of his. And that was bad, bad!

CUFFEE was sot in his ways. He sot his mind on getting bought by Lieutenant Kennemont and he did it. He sot his mind on brass buttons for his coat and he got them, only Lieutenant Kennemont made him take them off because nobody but quality was supposed to wear brass buttons.

Cuffee sot his mind on the thought that he had to keep Mistress Mary Dodson from marrying his Lieutenant Kennemont and there wasn't going to be any jump too high for him to take to do that.

Cuffee figured out that if Mr. Admiral Cockburn and his Britishers came to Saint Michaels, then Lieutenant Kennemont would be so busy whupping the British that he wouldn't have time to pay suit to Mistress Mary Dodson and he would forget he was in love with her and he would forget that his boy, Cuffee, ever spoke out of turn, he would be so busy riding around on his high-stepping black with Cuffee on his mule behind him. Now you know that don't make sense, but it made sense to Cuffee and that's why he ran away.

Yes sir, ran away from his master. Lieutenant Kennemont, on the mule the lieutenant buyed for him, knowing he was likely to be a notch-eared man the rest of his life. Even a smiling man like the lieutenant would be bound to notch Cuffee's ears because that was the Law, like shooting a sheep-killing dog and paying taxes.

Lieutenant Kennemont, he was good and mad when he come around to Mr. Taylor's ordinary one morning and I heard him talking to Mr. Taylor.

"I've lost my boy," the lieutenant said, and his face was red, he was so mad. "He ran away some time during the night. I've seen him talking a lot with your boy, Sol, and maybe Sol knows where he headed to."

So Mr. Taylor summoned me into the room and I told Lieutenant Kennemont I didn't know where Cuffee had gone, honest I didn't. But I did say I saw Cuffee, riding south on his mule, soon after daybreak, just after I got up and started my early tasks. And that was true. I saw Cuffee but Cuffee, he didn't see me.

"That fool boy," the lieutenant said, "don't even know how to run away right. Setting off on his mule in the daylight! If he was smart, he'd go at night and travel on foot."

Mr. Taylor, he spoke up, slow and thoughtful.

"You'd better get that boy, Lieutenant," he said. "If the Britishers happen to grab him, he could tell them a lot about that ten-gun battery off Deep Water Point."

The lieutenant, he looked madder, but then he laughed.

"That boy," he said, "hates Britishers worse than I do. He wouldn't tell them anything."

And then he jumped on his high-stepping black and set out after Cuffee, but he never found him. That day he didn't because that was the day the Britishers started raiding the islands just south of Saint Michaels and the lieutenant was too busy to hunt long for Cuffee.

MR. Admiral Cockburn must have got tired of salt pork and fish for his dinner table because he sent his men out to get some fresh meat. And they got it, them Britishers, by stealing it from the plantations they raided.

Now in those days there were Federalists and Democrats and Republicans in the Assembly at Annapolis, where they made the Law. The Federalists were all against the war, but the Republicans and Democrats were all for whupping the British.

And it was a funny thing, but the sailors and marines from Mr. Admiral Cockburn's fleet picked on plantations owned by Federalist gentlemen more than they did on the places owned by Republican and Democrat gentlemen. That was because the Federalists, they were the rich folks and I've heard Mr. Taylor say the Federalists didn't want the war because it was bad for their business.

"So long was their dirty gold safe," Mr. Taylor used to say, "and they would not care if we went back to being a crown colony."

Well, the Federalist gentlemen changed their mind quick enough when the British snuck up on their islands and stole and burned and sometimes spoiled things they didn't want, out of downright meanness. Then you should hear the Federalists holler for a bigger militia and more cannons and even warships.

Even the dragoons forgot to strut around and talk big, after those first raids. They got busy and they finished Fort Stoakes in a hurry, with two six-pound cannon that Mr. Jacob Gibson had just given them.

While the lieutenant was riding around, gathering up men, that day of the raids, Cuffee was with the British. Yes sir, that boy had got himself captured scarcely three hours after he left Saint Michaels at dawn, riding on his mule.

He run smack into a patrol of British marines raiding a place about ten miles south of Saint Michaels and they grabbed him quick because Cuffee was a big boy and the British needed strong men to do the hard tasks.

CUFFEE didn't mind being captured, not at first. It was what he wanted to tell the truth, because he had his plan he thought was going to make Lieutenant Richard Kennemont forget he was in love with Mistress Mary Dodson. He was going to inform to the British and tell them there wasn't any ten-gun bat-

tery near Deep Water Point, like the British thought there was.

Now this was bad, but Cuffee didn't mean it as bad as it sounds here. Cuffee knew that there wasn't a British fleet that could whup Lieutenant Kennemont and what he wanted was for the British to attack Saint Michaels so the lieutenant wouldn't have any time to pay suit to Mistress Mary Dodson.

When the British raiders grabbed Cuffee, he told them he wanted to go with them because he had something to tell their Mr. Admiral Cockburn.

"What do you want to talk to the admiral for, boy?" they asked him. Cuffee grinned and shuffled his feet.

"I know about the guns at Saint Michaels," he told them. "And I figure if I tell Mr. Admiral Cockburn what I know, he'll see that I goes free."

"Yes," they told him, lying to Cuffee and he knew it, "the admiral will set you free, all right. He'll likely buy you a big house in London with a red coach with gilt."

"That's fine," said Cuffee, acting like he was believing everything they were saying, "I'd sure like a red coach with gilt."

The sailors and marines, they laughed, taking Cuffee for a weak-minded boy—and he was a slow-thinking boy, at that—and they put him in a boat and rowed him out to the brig *Saint Domingo* that was Mr. Admiral Cockburn's flagship. Besides the *Saint Domingo*, there was the brig *Contest* and the brig *Marlborough*, and six or seven barges that I don't know the names of.

Cuffee told me later the ships were the biggest things he ever saw, rising up out of the water like mountains when the boat got close to them, with guns sticking out like a hedgehog's spines and officers in elegant uniforms with white lace and gold-hilted swords, and the boatswain's whistle piping, thin as a railbird's cry, most of the time.

Well, Cuffee never did get to see Mr. Admiral Cockburn, but he saw the captain of the brig *Saint Domingo* and that was pretty good for a runaway slave. The captain, he was a tall man with a long nose, Cuffee told me, and he had a mean mouth, like a turtle's. But standing beside the captain was a young man that Cuffee liked right away because he was a smiling man, like Lieutenant Kennemont, and about the same age as the lieutenant.

"What do you want to tell the admiral?" the mean-looking captain asked Cuffee. "You'd better tell me before I put a cat to you that will make you talk."

Cuffee looked at his feet a while and then he told the captain:

"I aimed to tell Mr. Admiral Cockburn what I got to tell. I don't know as I can rightly tell you, sir."

Then the young man spoke up. "I'm the admiral's nephew," he told Cuffee. "You can tell me and I'll tell the admiral."

WELL, Cuffee thought about that a while and he decided that would be all right; that it would fit in with his plan. And he liked the young gentleman with the smile.

"It's about Saint Michaels," he said. "They ain't got any ten-gun battery like you think they got. I belong to Lieutenant Richard Kennemont and I know what I saw. Those things that look like cannons from a ways off ain't but wood logs. I helped plant those logs and I know they can't shoot any more that a stick of wood can shoot."

The young man, Mr. Admiral Cockburn's nephew, looked at the captain of the *Saint Domingo* with his eyebrows up and he whistled sort of low. But the turtle-mouthed gentleman, he didn't believe Cuffee.

"It's a damn Yankee trick," the captain said. "Those rebels have sent this boy here in the hopes of getting us to attempt a landing at the town with a small force."

Cuffee shook his head at that. "No sir," he said. "Lieutenant Kennemont don't know where I am, even. I ran away because he whupped me."

Well, they busied Cuffee with questions and he told them what he knew, telling the truth all the time because he knew his Lieutenant Kennemont would whup the British easy, even without cannons. You see, Cuffee didn't know about Mr. Jacob Gibson giving the dragoons those two six-pounders.

The admiral's nephew, he believed Cuffee but the captain of the *Saint Domingo* didn't and the two British gentlemen got in an argument until the young gentleman slammed out of the room and said he was going to see his uncle.

They kept Cuffee for three days and they busied him with questions every day, trying to catch him in a lie that would show this up for a trick, but they couldn't. And then one day the young gentleman came into the captain's room, waving a paper.

"I got it!" He laughed. "I got Uncle's order to lead a force on Saint Michaels!"

"You'll move your men into a ten-gun battery," the captain said, like he was tasting a green apple, "because you believe a runaway slave. And then the blame will be on my head, when you don't return."

The young gentleman laughed in that free and easy way of his.

"I'm taking my dancing pumps," he told the captain. "I'm going back to England next week and I'll have a dance with some lovely Yankee in Saint Michaels tomorrow night to celebrate my victory and my leave-taking."

Cuffee was there, grinning and feeling good because this was what he wanted. He could fair see his Lieutenant Kennemont whupping the British now, with him right there beside the lieutenant. He turned to the captain of the *Saint Domingo* and he said:

"Can I go free now, sir? I was promised I would go free."

He wanted to get back to Lieutenant Kennemont, you understand, so he could tell his master the British were coming, finally, and they could begin to fight the war. But the captain, he scowled and shook his head.

"You'll be in the first boat that goes under those guns, you say aren't there," the captain told Cuffee. "And I hope the first charge of grape puts holes in your black hide."

WELL, that wasn't the way Cuffee had planned it. Not because he was afraid of the ten-gun battery because he knew the cannons were wood logs, but he wanted to get back to Lieutenant Kennemont right away, so he could explain everything and get forgiven for running away. He tried to argue with the captain, but all he got for his trouble were ten licks with the cat for talking out of turn.

Those licks hurt and Cuffee ached that night when they made him get in the first boat full of sailors and marines that were going to attack Saint Michaels. The three brigs had moved up the Bay that day and they were standing offshore, out of sight of Saint Michaels but inside easy rowing distance from Fort Stoakes.

That was August 9, 1813, about four o'clock in the morning with a wet drizzle falling and the night as black as the inside of a pocket. Cuffee, he handled an oar like they told him to, but he had trouble in his heart. If he didn't get away pretty quick he was going to be on the wrong side when Lieutenant Kennemont whupped the British.

The British gentleman in the stern of Cuffee's boat, Mr. Admiral Cockburn's nephew, was all right and Cuffee was sorry he was going to get whupped and wouldn't be able to use the dancing pumps he was carrying with him. But he wasn't Lieutenant Kennemont. There was nobody like the Lieutenant to Cuffee.

Those British boats rowed right under the wood guns at Deep Water Point and the outpost there was sound asleep, like always, and he didn't give the alarm. They kept getting closer and closer to Fort Stoakes, using muffled oars and nobody talking above a whisper, and Cuffee kept getting more worried and more worried. Finally, it got so bad he could not stand it any longer and he just dropped his oar and went over the side of the boat.

Well, the British couldn't shoot at Cuffee for fear of giving the alarm but they couldn't afford to have Cuffee telling the dragoons that they were coming. They rowed around, searching Cuffee, but that boy could swim under water better than anybody I ever saw. He went down and stayed down and swam pretty near to shore without once showing his head. And when he hit the shore he started to run.

HE had to make a circle because if he went running up to the front of the fort he'd get shot, like as not. Making a circle to get behind the fort was the long way around but Cuffee kept running, never minding the briars or the swamp holes he fell into or anything. He run himself clear out of breath and then he lay on the ground for a couple of minutes and he began running again.

His breath was coming like an old dog's on a hot day when he finally got to the fort but he had enough wind left to start yelling for Lieutenant Richard Kennemont. The lieutenant, he tumbled out of his blankets mighty quick when he heard Cuffee's shout. He reached for Cuffee and grabbed him. He was mad clear through.

"You stole a mule and you ran away," he said. "I'm going to notch you deep and then I'm going to sell you clear down to Louisiana for the salt mines."

"Lieutenant Kennemont, sir," Cuffee panted. "The British are coming! They are almost here now. I came as fast as I could but they must be right outside the fort, sir!"

"British?" asked the Lieutenant. "How do you know where the British are?"

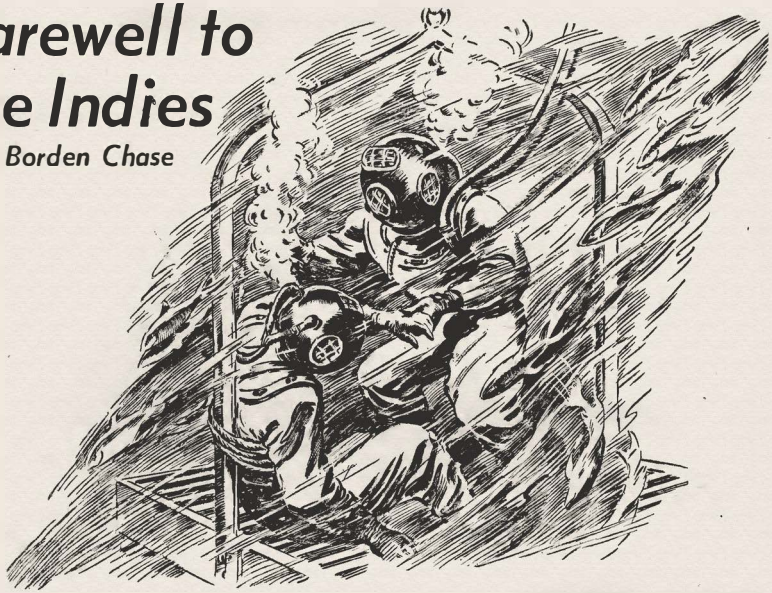
"I been a prisoner," Cuffee said, "and I was on the brig *Saint Domingo* and there's a young gentleman with dancing pumps you got to whup and one hundred, two hundred sailors and marines. They quieted their oars and they talked low and they aim to surprise us war folks."

Well, Lieutenant Kennemont, he didn't wait to question Cuffee any more but he gave the alarm and the drums gave a long roll and Captain Dodson, he came running with his false teeth all which way in his mouth. But before the dragoons got fair waked up, the British come over the front of the fort, yelling and hollering and making a terrible noise for a man that's hardly waked up.

(Please turn to page 48)

Farewell to the Indies

By Borden Chase



The pressure on the stage mounted, as Mark fought the fire in his limbs

RED FLANAGAN has at last come in sight of the treasure he is seeking, and a dangerous treasure it is: two Great Tropical Fleet freighters, laden with cement, steel, and mining machinery, which dropped from sight off the West Indies.

Fearing that the Panama Canal may in some way be involved, United States Naval Intelligence has assigned ADMIRAL STACKLEY to direct an investigation. For those freighters were consigned to the Caceres Mining Company of Brazil; and that outfit is German controlled.

On the *Laughing Lady*, the sailing ship he outfitted for the search, Red has taken a group of mates who are a delight to his naturally gay heart:

Old HUGO LUNQUIST, friend of Admiral Stackley's and owner of the Great Tropical Fleet;

CONNIE, his beautiful young niece;

MARK HALLAM, handsome young industrialist who has found a new zest for living in this search. Though in love with Connie, he has refrained from telling her about it because he believes that Red has first choice.

AT VANITY POINT in the Indies they stop in MADAM TULON'S place and question seafaring men known to Red: BURKE, PEDERSON, VELASQUEZ—and get a cue to the location of the "treasure" they seek. But before they can leave, a new and sinister element enters the picture:

TANYA PADILLA, who has struck oil at Vanity Point, stops at Madam Tulon's for supplies for her yacht, the *Sphinx*, and announces that she is leaving.

Recognizing this shimmering, blue-eyed woman of the Argentine as a vision he saw once on the Bund in Shanghai—and whom he has sought ever since—Flannagan is at once fascinated, curious—and suspicious. With Mark Hallam he visits Tanya's yacht at night, fouls the engine with sand, and carries two German seamen away to Pederson's boat, the *Dancer*.

For Red Flanagan is convinced that he and his party must reach the lost freighters before Tanya gets there; that her presence on the spot will mean peril for those on the *Laughing Lady*.

And when they reach their goal—two hundred miles of water between the American Naval bases of Antigua and Santa Lucia—it looks as if they have won the race. Red dives, and comes up to report that he has found the wreck of an old wooden galleon.

THEN Mark dives. Staying down longer than is wise, he finds the two lost freighters; but the discovery almost costs him his life. Coming back to the surface much too rapidly, he lands in the midst of an engagement with Tanya and her crew, who have reached the spot in a ship stolen from Velasquez.

Tanya rams her ship into the *Laughing Lady's* side; Red lashes the two boats together; and the fight is on. Still weighted down with his diving suit, Mark fights with the only weapon he has: the knife at his side.

And he acquits himself well—until a wave of sickening blackness overcomes him. . . .

CHAPTER XX

STARS TONIGHT

PAIN woke him. It was a live thing now. It held his arm like the jaws of some monstrous beast. It was gnawing at his legs, too.

Mark opened his eyes and the haze was gone. He was ill but he could see.

The decks were cleared of the fighters. There were no shouts. Two men rigged a diving stage to a boom fall. Others were working about a pump.

Mark tried to sit up and found he was bundled in blankets. They were under him and over him and wrapped tightly about him. One touched his chin; it was hot.

He coughed. Brandy fumes caught in his throat. His legs were driving him mad.

"Stay as you are, mate," said Flanagan's voice.

Mark turned his head. "What happened?"

"You've picked up a touch of the bends; the staggers, as well," said Red. "'Twas a cruel thing to haul you out of fifty pounds with no time for decompression, but I had no choice."

"The fight?"

"Over and done. We own the *Wanderer*."

"The *Laughing Lady?*"

"Gone to join her sisters below."

Mark saw Connie coming along the deck. Her arms were heavy with blankets. She walked to the hatch where Mark was stretched, smiled and piled the additional covers about him.

"Just out of the oven," she said. "I'll heat some more and bring them along in a moment."

Red shook his head. "Enough, Connie. You'll smother the man before the stage is rigged. He'll do as he is till I get him below."

"Below?" said Mark, and the word sent streaks of pain through his body.

"Aye. Back under pressure again,

This story began in the Argosy for February 1

Mark. 'Tis the only cure for the bends."

"My legs—hurt!"

"I know," said Red. "The willies are born of the devil."

"The—willies?"

"'Tis what we old-timers call the bends. You're one of us now, Mark; remember the name." He nodded his head slowly. "Aye, a deep-sea man who has worked the Indies. A man who can step to the dance of the bends; you'll brag of that some day."

"Why?" whispered Mark.

Red chuckled. "Because it is a rare group you've joined: men who dive in old equipment and take their chances with staggers and chokes and paralysis as well. West Indiamen, and men of the Gulf, and South Sea pearlers, too. Their schooners are wood and built to hold shell; no room for decompression chambers."

He took a flask from his hip and tilted it against Mark's lips.

"Along the Gulf, and in other ports where the deep-sea workers meet, there comes a night when the schooners put out for shell and sponge and treasure. And just before the lines are cast off you'll find men grouped in a waterfront tavern.

"Divers, they are, who have gathered together to step the dance of the bends. 'Tis a private affair: no women are there.

"And no man may dance to the music that night unless he has felt the bite of the air and the pain that's built from pressure."

RED glanced at the men who worked at the stage and motioned to them for speed. Then he looked at Connie and dropped a slow lid as if to tell her she must help with a well-placed word or two.

"I'd like to see that dance," she said quietly. Her hands drew the blankets about Mark's throat. "It—it must be a strange sight."

"A brave sight, Connie," said Red. "'Tis danced by men with courage to burn, and they mock the thing that twists their joints and dare it to strike them down."

He turned to look at Mark and a grin touched his mouth. "And speaking of courage, you might like to know that Connie, the darling, saved you from taking the point of a marlin spike in your back. As nice a shot as ever I've seen, it was. She caught the beggar just—"

"Red, stop it!" said Connie.

"As I was saying," Red continued, "when the bends dropped you during the fight, Connie did a lovely job with her rifle. The rest of us were too busy to stop but we hurried the work as best we could and cleaned the decks completely."

"Old Hugo's bad hurt; he's in his bunk, but as happy as ever a man could be. We've lost two men, and good ones, Mark. But we've more than evened the score.

"The rest of the crew who stole this ship are safely locked in the brig. They were men of the *Sphinx*, turned pirate, no less. They took the *Wanderer* from Velasquez when he came to answer their call for help."

"And don't forget Tanya," said Connie sharply. "Why on earth she isn't in the brig is more than I can figure."

"Ah, now," laughed Red. "Twould not be seemly to do such a thing. A rare devil, she is, I'll admit. But me lady has courage aplenty."

He winked at Mark and nodded his head. "Like a lion no less; she stood at the wheel and laughed in me face when I told her the party was over."

"Not until she'd tried to kill you," added Connie. "She fired a half dozen shots at your head and only the luck of an Irishman kept you alive."

"And why not?" cried Red. "Did you expect her to toss me posies?"

A CALL came from the men on deck and Red started to unwind the blankets. The canvas had been cut away and Mark found he was wearing three heavy suits of long underwear. A seaman brought a diver's dress and Red bent to lift Mark's legs.

"'Twill hurt like the devil but there's no other way, and it's lucky we are to find these rigs on the *Wanderer*. If Velasquez were broke he'd have pawned them."

He motioned to Connie. "Lift his shoulders, girl, and shut your ears if he curses you out. The willies are enough to drive a man mad."

Connie crouched behind Mark on the hatch and did as she was told. He tried not to groan but it didn't work. The pain was creeping toward his groin and bringing his breath in gasps.

Others came to the hatch and one brought a helmet. No ear-phones this time. The bronze bowl went over his head and Red looked in through the forward light.

The sound of the air was loud in his ears and he opened his mouth to gulp. They carried him quickly across the deck, placed him on the stage and made him fast.

It seemed an age until Mark saw another helmet above his. Red lifted an arm and the stage went up, cleared the rail and started down.

The touch of the water sent another spasm through Mark's body. He tried not to scream but couldn't help it. The noise of his voice spun about his head.

Then another sound came into the helmet. A thin sound. Metallic and cold. It was the click of Red's helmet against his own. A voice followed it, and the voice was equally cold and thin. For a moment Mark thought he'd lost his senses.

"'Tis I," said Red. "With our helmets together we can talk quite nicely. How are you feeling, mate?"

"Bad," said Mark. It was all he could manage.

"Mind your ears and keep them open. Call if they should get blocked. I'll take care of your valve"

Mark looked up at the green world above him. He could feel the water moving past as the stage went steadily down. At times Red asked a question and Mark answered with a single word or a grunt.

The trip was long and the pressure mounted. Mark fought to keep his mind alert in spite of the fire in his limbs. Then the stage stopped and he turned his head.

He was back again in an ocean garden surrounded by tendrils of fern. The touch of the stage had disturbed the sand but soon it settled and the water grew clear. Mark heard the click of Red's helmet.

"Try to straighten one arm, but do it gently," said Flanagan. "I'll take your hand and help."

Mark felt Red's fingers touch his. He moved an arm slowly. The muscles were taut but answered the effort. The pain had dropped to an ache.

RED caught the elbow between his hands, rubbed it gently and moved the joint. A moment later the work was repeated on each of Mark's legs. It was slow business, but Mark felt as if he had been born anew when the pain dropped away from his body and left him free.

"How's that?" asked Red. "Does it help at all?"

"Plenty," said Mark. "I feel as if I'd been beaten with a club but that's a pleasure after the other."

"It is," Flanagan agreed. "And when you're asked what the willies are like, just do as the rest of us divers do: turn your head and shake it slowly. Don't search for words to describe it, mate. They haven't been invented."

"I agree with you, Red. But how long must we stay here?"

"A few moments. Then we go up to sixty feet."

"Couldn't we have a look at the freighters now?"

"Are you mad? If you tried to stand you'd fall on your face. Stay where you are and let the freighters wait. I'll have a peek at them later."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Oh, nothing," said Red. "And that's exactly what I expect to hear from Tanya. She's an unhung devil, that one."

"You don't say that as if you meant it."

"But I do! 'Tis that which makes me love her. And speaking of devils, mate, you should have seen your Connie work that rifle when you went down."

"*My* Connie?" said Mark.

"Aye—*your* Connie. She loves you, lad, or I'm mad as a monkey."

"It's a good thing she can't hear you," said Mark. He tried to laugh and did fairly well.

"Isn't it, though?" answered Red. "And what would you be thinking of her? Is it liking or loving, may I ask?"

Mark didn't answer for a time. He turned his head in the helmet to look off across the garden of fern and colored plants. A round-mouthed fish came to nibble a frond, then flicked its tail and headed for Mark. Its eyes looked in through the heavy glass and the round mouth wabbled foolishly.

Mark laughed in spite of his aches.

"What sort of an answer is that?" asked Red. He moved his helmet to look at Mark, and his eyes were round as those of the fish. "I asked if you loved Connie Lunquist."

"Of course I do," answered Mark.

"Then why don't you tell her so?"

"Because I'm not good at making pretty speeches. If I tried to tell her the blue of her eyes was sweeter by far than the shade of the heavens, I'd probably stutter and stumble all over the place."

"No doubt you're right," agreed Red. "But suppose you could, then what would you say if she asked you about her hair?"

"I'd say it is beautiful."

"No more than that?"

"I can't match words with you, Red, but if I had to describe Connie's hair I'd say it had stolen the rich red color that is found in molten gold. And it isn't the color alone that counts; it's the softness of each strand.

"Wonderfully soft, Red. I felt it against my cheek this morning when she talked through the phone to you."

Red's chuckle was low. "Nicely done, mate. Now wait until we go up a bit, then tell me of her hands."

ALMOST as he spoke the stage lifted and the movement eddied the water. The ferns nodded slowly and a procession of fishes darted off into the depths of the surrounding green.

A minute passed, and then another. The stage drew to a stop and Mark made a final adjustment of his valve. His arm was still stiff but he could move it with an effort, and Red had made no attempt to help.

Again there came the click of the helmets.

"You were about to tell me of Connie's hands," said the big man. "Are they soft and smooth to the touch?"

"I wouldn't call them soft," said Mark slowly. "Smooth—yes, they're all of that. But each is firm as twisted hemp and equally pliant as well. Good hands, Red. Capable hands.

"It's part of a dream that's hard to recall; but I seem to remember the touch of her fingers against my face as I stretched on the *Wanderer's* deck."

"Do you, now?"

"Yes."

"Did she speak to you?"

"I think she did."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, it's probably a wish instead of a memory," said Mark. "But I—thought she called me darling."

"And if it were true?"

"Then I haven't made this trip in vain, Red. All of these aches and all of these pains are a little price to pay. I'd double a lot and add ten percent to hear her say it again."

"Will you stop talking figures when you speak of love!" cried Red. "Now tell me of her lips."

"I wish that I could, but I can't," said Mark. "Not in the way I'd like to, at least. They're as far away as the *Laughing Lady* and equally hard to reach."

"Are they, now?" said Red and he chuckled. "Then you've little cause for worry. The *Laughing Lady's* very close to the man with the courage to reach her. Ten fathoms down and a bit to the south, she waits for Judgment Day.

"But I warn you, Mark, the red-headed girl will never wait that long. Best lose no time when we go aboard: tell her the things you've told me and we'll see what your lady answers."

"I'm afraid it's no use, Red. She'd laugh and I'd run away."

THERE was silence then and time limped past. Soon Mark was able to stand. Red helped him erect and he grabbed the lines that met above the stage. He moved his legs and doubled his arms in spite of the aching muscles.

Slowly, the stage was lifted in steps, and always Red warned against chill. He must bend and flex and bend again. He must fill his lungs till they hurt.

And at long length the surface was reached and the boom swung them over the side.

A seaman stood by to remove the helmet. Another stripped off the suit. A third brought blankets and bundled him tightly while Olsen, the cook, poured steaming coffee. Mark gulped it down in spite of the burn, then glanced toward the rail.

Connie was there. At her side was the box that held the telephone. She was coiling the wires and stowing them snugly.

At last she put down the head-set. She stood erect and rubbed her ears while she looked at Mark and smiled.

Red had come to sit on the hatch and drink his cup of black coffee. His eyes looked over the rim at Mark, then turned to look at Connie. She wrinkled the end of her shapely nose and showed him the tip of her tongue. Red sputtered and choked and dropped the cup. Mark pounded him on the back.

"Ah, me!" cried Red. "I've burned me throat, but that's better than burning one's ears. I wonder how I ever forgot that Connie could hear your voice in the phone with your helmet to mine?"

"Connie—heard—"

"She did if she listened," said Flanagan. "And by the color of her cheeks I'd say that she liked it."

He looked at the sky and rubbed his hands. "There'll be stars tonight and a quarter moon, and a silent ship in a tropic bay. A lazy man might go to his bunk, but I'd call him a fool if he did."

CHAPTER XXI

COLD STEEL RULES

THE afternoon had almost gone before Mark was able to stand alone. Red had insisted he strip to the waist and stretch at length under the tropic sun to open wide the pores in his skin.

For a time Mark dozed; then an itch set in that made him squirm and scratch. Red joined him on the hatch, watched him wriggle, and nodded approvingly.

"A good sign," he said. "The itch is a welcome nuisance to divers. 'Tis better to scratch than ache."

"What's it from?"

"The air: tiny bits of pressure working clear. When that happens you need have no fear of the bends." He rubbed his hands together and glanced at the sun.

"Ah, me! Time to go down and visit the freighters to see if me hunch is right. What will you bet me they're empty, mate?"

"Empty?"

"Aye—empty's the word."

"Did Tanya tell you?"

"Not a word," said Red. "Me lady is taking her beauty nap and has locked the door to me cabin. She'll join us at supper, she says, and not a moment sooner. A willful person, that one."

He walked to the rail and called to the crew. Mark watched him dress and climb to the stage. Five minutes later he was on his way down and the tell-tale bubbles broke the surface.

Mark leaned back on the hatch and folded his arms to rest his head upon them. He closed his eyes and tried to doze; but his mind refused to let him sleep.

Those freighters—why did Red think they were empty? And if they were, what had happened to their cargoes? Mark played with the questions and got nowhere. He drew a deep breath and sighed.

Then he breathed again, more slowly this time. A deep and heavy odor of tropic flowers had come to his nostrils—from the island, perhaps. But that seemed odd. The breeze set in from the sea.

Mark tried again, breathing slowly and deep. The perfume was stronger, now. A strange scent, heady and filled with a nostalgic charm. Mark liked it. He tilted his nose and sniffed.

There was a laugh at his elbow—one he remembered. Mark opened his eyes and turned his head. Tanya was seated on the hatch and she was looking at him.

The laugh still fingered the corners of her lips. Beautiful lips that were slightly fuller than Connie's. A trifle too full, Mark decided. And Tanya's smile was so very wise.

"Did I wake you?" she asked quietly.

"No."

She offered a cigarette and Mark refused. Tanya made a mouth. "Angry with me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mark. "Let's call it puzzled, instead. You're a strange woman, Tanya."

"And you're a strange man." She shrugged and touched a match to her cigarette. "Your friends in the Dufresne Industries would have been surprised to see you a few hours ago. Frankly, I was surprised myself. You handled that knife as if you enjoyed it."

"Perhaps I did," said Mark. He sat erect. "But would you mind telling me how you happen to know anything about the Dufresne Industries?"

"Oh, I have no intention of telling you that," said Tanya quickly. "Besides, it is very uninteresting."

"Not to me."

"But it is to me, so we will not talk about it."

"Would you rather talk of the men who were killed today? Or about Hugo Lunquist? Two of his ribs were broken when you rammed the *Laughing Lady*."

Tanya's eyebrows lifted. "Did you expect me to let you cripple the *Sphinx* and get away with it?"

"Is that the reason you followed?"

"One of the reasons."

"What are the others?"

"They, too, are uninteresting." She looked from the corners of her eyes and puffed a ring of smoke at Mark. "So—we will not talk about them, either."

"Red Flanagan may want you to talk about them."

"And if he does?"

"You'll talk; I promise you that!"

TANYA studied the ash that grew on her cigarette. "He is a hard man, this Flanagan. He should never have been allowed to reach Vanity Point."

"Oh, definitely," said Mark. He waved a casual hand as he mimicked the shadow of accent that distinguished Tanya's speech. "A few incidental murders—a mere trifle to a lady who works so diligently to earn her pay."

He faced Tanya and his voice grew an edge. "I've heard Red Flanagan tell of you, heard him sing your name as if it were a song, heard him match the flame of your eyes with the gleam of a rich red ruby. To hear him tell it, the Lord made you and then destroyed the mould."

Mark's laugh was short. "Well, perhaps he was right without knowing it. There's hardly room in the world for two of your kind."

"My kind?"

"Yes—a woman born in a land that is free who sells her beauty and sells her brain to a ruthless tribe of savage beasts whose only thought is to chain the world to an age of slavery.

"A German agent—hired for pay! A woman born in the Argentine! How do you face the eyes that look back at you when you dress your hair in a mirror?"

"Are you quite finished?"

"I could keep on for an hour," said Mark sharply. His anger had grown as he talked.

"Suppose I told you I was born in Granada—that my people were people of Spain?"

"What difference?"

TANYA'S voice was cold. "A great difference, my smug American. We of Spain were living in peace and we asked nothing of the world. But out of the North came the Russians with their story of brotherhood. Because we were free we let them talk. We let them gather and build their webs like poisonous black widow spiders.

"And as they built, they multiplied. Soon they made our laws.

"Then another group came out of the East: Italians who called themselves Fascists. They promised to drive the Communists out and goaded us on to civil war. Then came the Nazis to help us fight."

Her laugh was brittle as breaking glass. "Yes—they helped! They tested their war machine over the bodies of our sons, bombed our homes and destroyed

our cathedrals. But it was all in the name of justice and truth. The Communist devils would destroy the world; the Fascists alone could stop them!"

"Go on," said Mark quietly. "I'm listening."

Tanya shrugged. "You know the rest: how England and France and the rest of the world stood by and said 'How dreadful!' Yes, it was dreadful, but they didn't care so long as the Fascist and Nazi tore at the throat of the Communist Russian. If Spain must die, then let it die; the cause will justify the end!"

She held the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, then flipped it over the rail. "They didn't know the hour would come when Russian and German would drop their masks and stand as two blood-brothers. But Tanya Padilla knew it!"

"And so now you help them destroy the rest of the world?" said Mark.

"Why not?" cried Tanya. "I hate them all—German, English, Russian, French; let them die as Spain died. Let them tear their throats apart trying to kill each other!"

"And my country, too?"

Tanya stood up. "Your country will live, Mark. Today it is weak, just as you were weak that night in Madam Tulon's place. But that will change."

She looked off over the blue water of the Caribbean. "Sometimes I think God loves America; it must be so. He's put the feel of cold steel into the hands of her sons. He's taught them how to use it. And today, Mark, cold steel rules this world of ours."

She walked to the rail and Mark got to his feet. He crossed the deck and stood beside her to watch the wavering stream of bubbles that told where Red was walking . . . .

CHAPTER XXII

LOST CARGOES

THE *Wanderer's* cabin was a comfortable place, built somewhat like that of the *Laughing Lady*. There were the broad table and heavy chairs, and carved oak beams in the overhead.

Velasquez liked wine and the locker was filled: but Olsen, the cook, complained of the stores.

There were tins of oil and strings of garlic and peppers enough to stock a grocery; but Olsen swore no tow-headed cook could contrive a supper fit to eat with what he had found in the galley.

But he did his best with what he had; and supper was served at six. Red had been up an hour or more but he made no comment on what he had found. Instead, he dressed carefully in one of Velasquez' linen suits and took his place at the head of the table.

Tanya faced him and Mark sat at his right. Connie sat next to Mark, leaving the port side of the table clear for a view of the adjoining cabin.

Old Hugo was here, propped up in his bunk, insisting he could eat a steer.

There was little talk during the meal and a tenseness grew in the cabin. Connie was much too polite when she spoke with Tanya. Mark noticed this, but Red seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts.

When the coffee was served he emptied his cup, called for a second and twisted it slowly between his wide fingers.

"The freighters are yours, Hugo," he said at length. "They're as sound as the day they left the dock but their seacocks have been opened."

"What about the cargo?" asked the old ship owner. He was peering at them.

"Gone," said Red. "The hulls are as empty as a pauper's pocket. It seems that someone was badly in need of cement and steel and mining machinery. I wonder just who it would be."

Connie's smile was sugary sweet. "Perhaps Tanya could tell us. She gets around quite a bit—in spite of her age."

Red chuckled. "Mind your manners, Connie. Tanya is company and we mustn't be rude to our guests. Still, it would save a bit of time, I'll admit, if she would tell us the answer."

"Yes, it might help," Tanya agreed. She smiled at Connie. "But don't scold Connie because of her manners, Red. She's a sweet child, and rather good-looking."

"How nice of you," snapped Connie.

"Ah, me!" said Flanagan. "When two red-headed girls sit down to table 'tis well to count the knives But time flies as well as words and we've little enough to spare."

He turned to Tanya and his grin was wide. "Now suppose you tell us who got the cargoes that used to be in the freighters."

"Are you sure that I know?" she asked.

"Very sure."

"And do you expect me to tell you?"

Red lifted a hand and scratched his head ruefully. "A fine thing!" he said. "This is supposed to be an inquisition but me lady is asking all the questions!"

Tanya laughed. "At least my questions make sense."

"Don't mine?"

"Of course not. You know I won't tell you anything."

Connie's voice had a sing-song lilt. "Oh, yes you will."

Tanya glanced at her in amusement. "What makes you so sure?"

CONNIE put one finger to her cheek thoughtfully. "It's a long story but I'll make it as short as possible. You see, I found a waffle-iron in the galley, Miss Padilla. A large, round waffle-iron.

"And it reminded me of a Broadway show I saw a few years ago. I can't remember the name of it, but it seems the plot had something to do with a missing heiress. A dozen girls tried to claim the fortune but none of them succeeded because the real missing heiress could easily be identified."

Mark had seen the show. He pushed back his coffee cup and rested one elbow on the table. Then he rested his chin against the palm of his hand and tried to smother his laughter.

Tanya's eyebrows had lifted and she was looking at Connie curiously. So was Red Flanagan.

Old Hugo knew his Broadway, and the ship owner shook an angry finger at his niece. Connie ignored him.

"Do you get the point, Miss Padilla?" asked Connie demurely.

"I'm afraid I don't," answered Tanya. "What connection is there between a missing heiress and a waffle-iron?"

"A very close one," said Connie. "You see—when she was just a tiny girl the heiress had wandered into the kitchen. She was climbing to the jam closet when her foot slipped and she fell right square on the hot waffle-iron."

"Connie!" cried Red. "Are you meaning to insinuate that—"

"Insinuate, hell!" snapped Connie. "Why not apply a hot iron where it'll do the most good?" She jumped to her feet and pointed a finger at Tanya.

"If that red-head thinks she's tough, I'll show her what the word really means! Coming around here smashing into people's schooners, shooting at people, sinking freighters—"

"Easy!" cried Red. He grabbed Connie's arm. "Easy, girl!"

"Let me alone," Connie yelled. "I've been working up to this for hours! Suppose we hadn't hauled Mark aboard in time? Suppose the bends had killed him? Suppose—"

She jerked her arm free. "And now you sit here and play footy-footy under the table with that woman—"

SHE reached for a cup and Red wrapped his huge arms about her. For a moment he held her tightly while Connie's heels stamped against the deck and Red's feet alternately. Mark wanted to laugh but didn't dare.

And then, as he thought of what Connie had said, Mark lost all desire to laugh. Tanya was smiling as she sat quietly at the table, watching Red.

At length Connie realized the uselessness of her struggle. She stopped as quickly as she had started. Red dropped his arms and sat down.

"Ah, me!" he said. "Sure, there's nothing like a brisk walk around the park to settle your dinner."

He turned quickly to Connie. "And so you won't be starting another brawl before I've finished me coffee, I'll tell you now that I need no words of Tanya's to let me know what's become of the freighters' cargoes."

"Then why didn't you say so?" Connie demanded.

"It might be that I had no chance," said Flanagan cautiously. "However, the answer is plain as the hair on your head, and that's most certainly red."

"Auburn!"

"*Red!*" said Flanagan. "And don't be reaching for that cup!"

"My hair is auburn!" said Connie. She turned to Mark. "Isn't my hair auburn?"

Mark lifted both hands. "Definitely!"

Connie made a snoot at Red and the big man glanced quickly at Mark. "Traitor," he said from the corner of his mouth, then turned to Connie again.

"If you'll step to that locker just back of your shoulder, you'll find a pair of dividers and a set of charts. Give me the chart that shows the Indies, and in turn I'll show you what's become of the cargoes."

CHAPTER XXIII

NO CORAL BEACH

CONNIE waited until Olsen had cleared the table and lighted the bronze ship's lamp that hung above it. She spread the chart of the Indies before Red and rested one elbow on his shoulder.

Mark leaned forward to see the chart and noticed Tanya was doing the same.

Red put one point of the dividers on the eastern mouth of the Panama Canal and swung the other point in an arc that touched Antigua, Santa Lucia and Trinidad.

"You'll notice," he said, "that each of these three bases which we've acquired from the British is about twelve hundred miles from the Panama Canal. Jamaica is closer, less than half that distance.

"But Jamaica is full in the crossroads of a dozen freighter routes:—a busy place indeed, although an excellent base for the protection of the Canal.

"Add Nassau and Bermuda to the north, and Georgetown to the south, and we find the Canal ringed by a chain of steel."

He put down the dividers and looked wisely at Mark then lifted one eyebrow slightly. "Now if you were a German,

which God forbid, and your job were to destroy the Canal, just how would you go about doing it?"

Mark shook his head slowly. "Offhand, I'd say those new bases would block any attempt. We've started construction of yards and stationed units of our fleet on some of them.

"Then there's the Air Force—bombers and fighters ready to go aloft at a moment's notice. No hostile aircraft carriers could get through that ring; and if they launched their planes from beyond it, our fighters could beat them to the punch."

"Quite true," said Red. "But suppose you, too, had a base in the Indies? Suppose you had a hundred planes safely tucked away on an island less than twelve hundred miles from the Panama Canal?"

"That's impossible!" cried Mark.

"It is, now?" said Red. He chuckled. "Well, maybe so, mate;—but suppose you were offered the choice of the islands to build such a base. As a German, which would you pick?"

Mark glanced at the chart. "I'd take an island here in the group between Aritigua and Trinidad. Let's see—Dominica might be a good one."

"Why?"

"Well, it's only eighty miles from Santa Lucia, and about an equal distance from Antigua. While some of my planes were attacking the Panama Canal, others could take care of those two bases nicely. Trinidad and Georgetown would be an hour's flying time away, and my planes could take a crack at Jamaica on their return from the Canal."

Mark rubbed a quick hand over his chin as he studied the chart and mapped his imaginary campaign.

"It would be a surprise attack, of course. A night attack. The first bomb that landed on the Canal would be the declaration of war."

"And what would the Canal defenses be doing?" asked Red.

"NOTHING," said Mark. "Oh, they'd hear the planes, but that would mean nothing to an army at peace. Besides, our own planes are practicing night flights from the new bases constantly—the setup is perfect! The Panama Canal would be destroyed before the Army knew we were at war!"

"And what of your own planes?"

"The hell with them!" said Mark. "The Canal and the destruction of those bas s is worth a few hundred planes to any country!"

Red Flanagan smiled. "But that island you've picked belongs to the British. I doubt they'd be sleeping while you built your base."

Mark smiled, too. "I agree with you, but you asked which island I'd pick. Dominica seems perfect, except, as you say, it is owned by the British."

"Look north thirty miles, and what do you see?" asked Red.

Again Mark studied the chart. "Marie Galante and the islands about Guadelope—and this one where we're anchored now."

"All owned by the French," said Red quietly.

Mark lifted his eyes to look at Flanagan. "You think—"

"That the Germans are building a base nearby?" finished Red. "I do, mate. And they're using the steel and cement and mining machinery that were in Hugo's freighters.

"The stuff was ordered by the Caceres Mining outfit to fill specifications drawn up for a plane base: a hidden base, cut into the side of a hill.

"In Europe they're known as nests, and hornets' nests they are. A deep shaft to the hanger and machine shops below, and a catapult at the water's edge to launch the planes in a hurry. Germany has dozens of them. So has England. The technique is hardly new."

"But it takes men to build such a nest."

"It does," agreed Red. "They can be landed from submarines, but it's a difficult job to feed them."

He turned and grinned at Tanya. "'Tis for that reason me lady has come to the Indies—she and her beautiful yacht. Food for the workmen, and coarse food at that. Some she bought at Martinique, some more at Kingston or Puerto Rico.

"But Vanity Point was a handy spot and she brought her pitcher to the well once too often."

Mark looked at Tanya. "Is this true?"

TANYA'S smile was one of amusement. "It might be rather difficult to prove." She turned to Flanagan. "You should have been a detective, Red; you make absurdities sound so real."

"Don't I, now?" said Red.

"Of course there is the matter of water," said Tanya casually. "A gang of men large enough to build such a base as you describe would keep the *Sphinx* rather busy."

"It would, "Red agreed. "And for that reason I expected to find none of your friends when I searched this island before breakfast. 'Tis a dry place unless there is rain, and when that comes the trees devour it."

He reached forward and jabbed a wide finger at the chart. "But this neighboring island has a fresh-water stream, and the shore lifts high from a shallow bay—a lovely place for a nest of planes. So lovely that I've decided to visit it directly."

He pushed the chart across the table and got slowly to his feet. Hugo had been listening from the nearby cabin and now the old ship owner laughed.

"Nicely done, Red," he said. "Too bad the *Wanderer* has no radio. Admiral Stackley would be glad to hear that story."

"He'll hear it soon enough. I'll pass it along when we get to Vanity Point." He walked into Hugo's cabin and seated himself near the bunk. "And how goes the ribs, mate? Feeling better?"

"Never mind the ribs," said Hugo slowly. A half dozen lines grew deep in his forehead. "That base, Red—do you know what it means if we find it?"

"I do," said Red. "It means I'll be through with this whole silly business."

He grinned and put a wide hand over his chin. "It means I'll pick up a deep-water schooner such as this *Wanderer* here. I'll stock it well with provisions and beer, then off I'll go across the Pacific to a spot where the black p arls grow.

"A wonderful place, Hugo: a coral beach and waving palms and a warm breeze to ruffle your hair. There I'll stretch at me ease, as nice as you please, and I'll dream of me red-headed girl."

"While your country fights a war?"

"My country? Fights a war?"

Hugo shrugged and winced at the movement. "A German base in the Indies would be an act of war, Red. If the story got out we'd have no choice but to fight."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Flanagan slowly. "Still, 'tis not a bad idea, either. We must tangle with the devils eventually."

"Perhaps not," said the ship owner. "And God forbid that you or I should be the one to light the fire.

"Time is a precious thing, mate. Just now our country needs every moment. Ships are building, and guns and planes. Men must be trained to fight.

"And who knows but what the day may come when the very sight of our armed might will hold our foes in check."

"I doubt it," said Red.

"I doubt it, too; but it's not for us to decide aboard the *Wanderer*. Send your mesage to Admiral Stackley but be careful how you phrase it."

"Have you any suggestions?"

Hugo paused, then he nodded his old gray head. "You might suggest we've found a spot that would serve as an excellent practice range to test our Navy's guns. Admiral Stackley will understand. Give him the bearings and close your key; the rest lies with God and the men in Washington."

"I will," said Red as he walked to the door. "Provided my guess is right."

CHAPTER XXIV

DOUBLE WARNING

THE quarter moon was riding a cloud close down to the eastern horizon when Mark left the cabin to go on deck.

Red was at the wheel. When he saw Mark he called and pointed over the *Wanderer's* crumpled bowsprit.

Mark followed the direction of Red's hand and saw a small island set alone on the dark sea. The schooner eased off a point and the island moved into the moonstreak.

Three languid palms topped a promontory that was black against the moon's silver. Below was the surf, a curling line of phosphorous that rippled against the base of the rock.

"Tanya Island!" called Red. "Do you like the name, mate?"

"It's rather appropriate," said Mark. He walked to the wheel and leaned against the binnacle. "What happens to Tanya if your guess is good?"

"Which Tanya—the island or me red-headed girl?"

"The girl," said Mark. "Does she go back to the States to stand trial?"

"Trial? For what?"

"I don't know the legal term," said Mark. "But as an enemy of the United States she's due for a long stay in some Federal prison."

"Ah, me!" said Flanagan softly. "Enemy she is, I grant you. And as dangerous as she is beautiful. But it troubles me heart to think of Tanya in prison. Like a bird of paradise cooped in a cage, and an ugly cage at that.

"Her eyes would grow dim and her cheeks would grow pale, and before many days she'd pine away completely. She wasn't meant for gray stones and iron bars, mate."

"Would you set her free to start her work all over again?"

Red chuckled. "She'd be quick to do that, would Tanya. Still—"

He eased the wheel a spoke and looked up at the spread of the mains'l. "Ah, well, there's time enough to worry of that when we drop the hook at the edge of the bay. The water is shallow further in so we'll spend the night outside. Come dawn, we'll look at the island."

"If this is really the base," said Mark, "how do you suppose the freighters were unloaded?"

"A barge or two would do the trick. 'Tis a simple matter to sink them."

Mark nodded. "That would do it. Still, I can't understand why the freighters were sunk in that cove, rather than—well, right here, for instance."

RED turned and pointed over the quarter toward the island the *Wanderer* had just left. "There's a series of shoals between the two," he said, "and the water is clear as crystal. A plane overhead can read the bottom as if it were a chart.

"But the ground drops down to twenty fathom when it leaves the lip of yonder island. Sure, you know that yourself; you were down to see. And while you were there you found a hulk of some ancient sailing vessel.

"Others are lost in that tangle of weed, and no plane will ever see them or the freighters. 'Tis a natural basin formed by the tides that flow through the Leeward Islands.

"A graveyard, no less, for sunken ships. There's a dozen like it in the Caribbean."

"But I don't recall any strong tide."

"You went down at the ebb," said Red. "You should have tried in the late afternoon. Sure, it bounced me about like a toy."

He was looking forward as he spoke; and Mark turned to see Tanya coming toward them. She was walking slowly, and she stopped by the rail to glance at the water that washed the ship's side.

Mark looked at Red, then looked at the moon, and his smile was wise as he stepped away from the binnacle.

"You told me there'd be a moon tonight," he said loudly. "There may not be many as nice as this before we get back to the States. Now if my hair were red and if my name were Flanagan, I'd practice what I preached."

He walked forward and Red looked after him with eyes that were wide with surprise. Tanya had heard him and she laughed as he passed, then turned and went to the wheel. She stood next to Red and lowered her head to read the compass card.

"YOU seem to know these waters well," she said quietly. "I've heard they are very shallow for navigation."

"Very," said Red. "It must have been quite a trick to get the freighters in and out again."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"Wouldn't you, now?"

"No."

"'Tis quite a trick to get the *Sphinx* in and out, too," he said gravely. "Would you be knowing about that, me lady?"

"Of course not."

"Ah, me!" said Flanagan. "She lies so sweetly, this red-headed girl, it's a positive joy to hear her. Faith. I wonder what she'll say when the *Wanderer* reaches the bay and I find her friends at work on the air base?"

"You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Very."

Tanya smiled. "Perhaps that's why you keep alive. When I heard you'd started up the Yangtse Kiang with that gunboat I never expected to see Red Flanagan again. But—you made it."

"So you knew of that, eh?"

"Yes."

"And tipped a word to the Japs, no doubt."

Tanya rested a small hand on his shoulder. "We happened to be on the same side that time. I was drawing my pay from Chiang Kai-shek."

"So was I."

"How much?"

"Devil if I know," laughed Red. "I never had time to collect it."

Tanya laughed, too—a silvery laugh that matched the sweetness of the ship's bell. She let her head touch Red's shoulder and one finger moved over the round of the wheel.

"Do you remember the lakes near Yunnanfu, and the river that winds through the mountains?"

"I do—and well."

"Sometimes," said Tanya, "I wonder if there is another place in all the world so beautiful as that. Just above the river on a narrow ledge stands a gray stone Buddhist temple.

"Over the ages the vines have grown thick and they cover the walls like a green dyed mantel that breathes with the touch of the wind.

"Each evening a priest in his woolen robe sounds a single note on a deep-voiced horn. Then a gong of bronze is struck three times and other priests come down the road that leads to the temple gate."

"I mind them well," said Flanagan. "Men who worship a kindly god who taught it is wrong to injure or kill even the lowly beasts. Kill not for pleasure and kill not for food is the law of the great Gautama: he, they call Buddha.

"A sweet law, this, and one that might well heal the wounds of a sorry world."

"There's a crystal spring beyond the temple," Tanya continued. "It empties into a peaceful lake where a house sits near the shore. A pretty house of colored tile with gardens of fruit trees all around it."

She paused and lifted her head to look at Red. "There was a time when I dreamed of peace, so I bought that home from the man who owned it. It's mine, Red—my home. But I'll never see it again."

"Why not?"

"You'll know in a moment," she answered. "But before you do, I'll make a deal. I'll trade you that home to have as your own."

"In return for what?"

Tanya lifted her lips and parted them slightly. "It's yours, Red, for a single kiss."

THE wheel went free as Red gathered her into his arms. He dropped his head and his lips met Tanya's. For a moment he held her so.

Then he lifted his head and looked at the stars. "Ah, me!" he whispered. "'Twas a costly buy. She asked for me lips but forgot to say me heart would go along with them."

He lowered his eyes and looked down into Tanya's. "You've sold me a house I could never use unless you were there to share it."

"That can't be, Red."

"And can't it, now?" said Flanagan. "Then take back your home, and the price is the same; and this is to seal the bargain."

Once more his great arms tightened about her shoulders and he found her lips with his own again. The mains'l

(Please turn to page 49)

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

ONE of our correspondents remarks on the number of ARGOSY writers who have lately appeared in the slicks. It is an interesting point, and someone with more time than we have might very well make a year's survey of the better-known slick magazines, to discover just how many ARGOSY names turned up in that field. Our guess is that the results would be surprising.

But we have never been disturbed by the fact that many of our writers find their way into the pages of our elegant and highly advertised contemporaries. Indeed, we are always delighted to learn of it, for it increases the reputation of the writer and it certainly does not harm ARGOSY. Perhaps the magazine might suffer if these men deserted us as soon as they found new markets, but they don't do that. Their names continue to decorate ARGOSY'S contents page.

So we remain as we are, unclassifiable and proud of it. ARGOSY cannot be set down as a slick or a pulp or a what-have-you; it is itself, and good writers find it a good place to exhibit their wares. That is as it should be.

Here is the letter that started us thinking along these lines.

P. R. TILLEY

I read the slick magazines quite often, but they have never made me give up ARGOSY. While their stories may be a little better ritten than yours—and generally they are not even that—they always seem thin to me, and very much the same. After a heavy dose of young love, it is good to get back to ARGOSY.

It has interested me to notice how many ARGOSY writers turn up in the slicks. Richard Sale, for instance, with his serial in the *Post;* it was a good story but no better than a lot of his in ARGOSY. Allan R. Bosworth, Borden Chase, Hugh Pentecost, Dale Clark, Paul Ernst, Jim Kjelgaard, William Chamberlain, Max Brand, Donald Barr Chidsey, and Samuel Taylor are all names that I have noticed in the slicks. Taylor, by the way, has not appeared in ARGOSY for a long time.

I am glad to see that men like Borden Chase and Richard Sale have not given up ARGOSY entirely. There is more fame and money to be won in the slicks, I suppose; but these men must realize that ARGOSY is not so conventionalized. At any rate, it is true; ARGOSY stories are not just repetitions. That is why I have read the magazine for a good many years and will continue to do so as long as you maintian the same standards. Please do not fail us.

Baltimore, Md.

THE reader below holds Louis C. Goldsmith in high regard, and we are heartily in agreement. Occasionally, however, he is baffled by Mr. Goldsmith's learned discussions of the science of flying. They are awesome, we admit; our policy is simply to accept them at face value. Mr. Goldsmith is a flyer, and we wouldn't for the world get into an argument with him about the behavior of a tachometer.

KENDALL C. DAVIDSON

I have just finished Louis C. Goldsmith's "Fools Fly High," and I want to say that it is one of the finest stories I ever read. Mr. Goldsmith is more or less a newcomer to ARGOSY, and he certainly has clicked.

As a matter of fact, I'm not really an air-story fan. I read them in ARGOSY because I read the magazine from cover to cover. For that reason I read the Goldsmith novelets that preceded the serial, and it is easy to see how he has developed in this last year or so. Take one of his early stories and compare it with "Fools Fly High"; right away you notice the difference.

It's the characters that make the difference. "Fools Fly High" is not just a pulp air story because it has got real people in it—interesting people. Particularly that villain of his, Nagel. A lot of times the villains aren't interesting at all, they're just tough rats. But Nagel is an unusual guy and I feel as if I knew him.

One thing, though, about Mr. Goldsmith. When he starts describing just how the hero flies his plane, half the time I don't know what he is talking about. I suppose the technical stuff is necessary and I suppose a lot of people like it. But I get through it as fast as I can or else I would end up with a headache. People are more interesting to me than mechanical gadgets on a dashboard.

Anyhow, I take my hat off to Mr. Goldsmith.

Buffalo, N. Y.

Now a note from an admirer of Robert Griffith. He wants a serial. You hear, Mr. Griffith?

JOHN DOTELO

Every few months you publish a prize-fighting story by Robert Griffith. The last one was called "Omit Flowers, Kindly" and it was swell, like all the rest of his. Now what I want to know is: if he can write such good stories, why can't he write a serial for ARGOSY? How about it?

You haven't had a prize-fighting serial in a long time. I'll bet there are plenty of readers besides myself who like a good boxing story, and it is about time you did something for us. I think it would be a fine idea if you told Griffith to write one, with plenty of action and humor in it.

Glad to see you had another C. S. Forester story. It was all right, but of course I'd rather read his serials. They were the best stories in ARGOSY since I have been reading the magazine.

Bridgeport, Conn.

IT is very pleasant to hear from a reader down in South America. This gentleman left us for quite a while; but he's back now and rapidly adjusting himself to changes made while he was away.

RAFAEL HERRAN

After a lapse of twenty-five years I am again receiving your very excellent publication, but I have noticed many changes. In the olden times it used to be a monthly publication; now it appears every week.

None of the old writers appear nowadays. Where are my old friends? Are they too old to write now? Where is that prince of writers, Albert Payson Terhune? And Seward W. Hopkins, Edgar Franklin, Marie B. Schrader and so many others?

The present riters are a little different, and I am not well acquainted with them so far. But I hope to become good friends with them. Now the ARGOSY is a "real fiction magazine." This style is rather new to me and I am beginning to like it.

Medellin, Colombia, South America.

MR. HERRAN asks about his old friends. Well, Edgar Franklin died several years ago, and we have had no word from Marie B. Schrader and Seward W. Hopkins in a long time. As for Albert Payson Terhune, Mr. Herran's particular favorite, he seldom does magazine fiction these days.

The next letter is in praise of Robert Carse.

W. WALLITT

. . . I enjoyed Carse's "Stepsons of France" tremendously.

That boy can certainly write! I particularly like his way of describing Delbcit's impressions as he crawled through the grass (Page 20).

When a man can write incidental description as well as exciting action . . . well, he's got my Mark of Merit *** (The stars are Mr. Wallitt's—Ed.)

Let's have a long serial by Carse. . . I still remember with pleasure his story about Haiti.

New York.

I GOT NO SWORD

(Continued from page 41)

So the dragoons ran, every one of them except Captain Dodson and Lieutenant Richard Kennemont and Cuffee. Those dragoons lit out from the fort and into a cornfield, leaving their muskets and their blankets and everything behind them.

Captain Dodson, he was swearing and cussing and Lieutenant Kennemont was fair crying, he was so mad. Cuffee stood there, with his mouth flapping open because he had thought the dragoons would get right up and whup the British, instead of running away.

THEN the lieutenant, he ran for one of the six-pound cannons that were in the fort and Captain Dodson and Cuf-

fee took out after him. The three of them, the two gentlemen and Cuffee, swiveled that cannon around and pointed it right smack at the Britishers that were coming over the front of the fort.

Cuffee, he touched off that gun himself when Lieutenant Kennemont told him to and that gun threw grape and cannister and a twenty-seven-pound lump of scrap iron tied up with rope, right into the middle of those Britishers.

It was awful because those Britishers were almost up to the gun with the young smiling gentleman, Mr. Admiral Cockburn's nephew, in the lead, waving his gold-hilted sword. The grape and cannister and the scrap iron didn't leave hardly anything of those first Britishers.

That was the only shot fired in the battle of Saint Michaels. The Britishers, they drew off to their boats because they thought there really was a ten-gun battery and, besides, the young gentleman that had been commanding them wasn't there to tell them what to do.

They got back in their boats and rowed back to the brigs and Captain Dodson and Lieutenant Kennemont and Cuffee hit out for Royal Oak, seeing it was no use for them to stay in the fort alone without the dragoons coming back.

The British brigs, they moved up and fired a lot of cannon balls into Saint Michaels but they didn't do much hurt except knock some shingles off Mr. Taylor's ordinary. Then the brigs moved down to Royal Oak but Lieutenant Kennemont, he tricked them there. He had his men hang lanterns in the tree-tops and the British, they thought they were lighted windows and they shot high, in all the fog and drizzle. And the cannon balls are still up in those tree-trunks to prove it.

Cuffee, he was a hero and got his name put in the *Democrat*. He never did tell Lieutenant Richard Kennemont that it was on account of what he told the captain of the brig *Saint Domingo* and Mr. Admiral Cockburn's nephew that the British attacked Saint Michaels and were beat off with one gun.

Besides, Cuffee knew by then that his plan wasn't any good because Lieutenant Kennemont and Mistress Mary Dodson were married, right after the battle of Saint Michaels. But the lieutenant stayed in the war, right up to the end. He got Cuffee another mule and that boy was always downright proud.

But he always felt sorry for the young English gentleman, Mr. Admiral Cockburn's nephew. They found his dancing pumps on the beach, outside Fort Stoakes, a couple of days later, with the salt air tarnishing the silver buckles.

FAREWELL TO THE INDIES

(Continued from page 47)

luffed and the wheel spun while the willful schooner walked into the wind.

A moment passed and Red dropped his arms. He grinned at Tanya, grabbed the spokes and swung the *Wanderer* back on her course.

Tanya's hand closed over his. "Your course is wrong, Red," she said quietly. "Come about and run due north."

"But the island's the other way."

"Don't go any closer."

"Why not?"

"There's a three-inch gun on the top of that cliff. I know; I saw them put it there."

Red's lips went round and he whistled softly but his hands were firm on the wheel. "Is that why you sold me your home, lady?"

"Yes."

"And the Germans are using the island?"

"They are," said Tanya. "And now that you know, put about and sail to Vanity Point. There's a radio there. You can call your friends to come and shell the island."

"And what of you?"

TANYA'S shoulders lifted. "A narrow cell for a number of years where I can sit and dream of Red Flanagan."

"You'd do that?"

She nodded. "I love you, Red;—it's simple as that. And I want you to live in that house near the temple. I know each room, each bench in the gardens. I'll see you there as you walk through my dreams. That much, at least, will be real."

"And the rest?"

"I'll manage the rest when I make my dreams. Each night we'll meet on the temple road and after the priests have gone to their prayers we'll walk together through the gardens. Later we'll sit on the terrace for tea until the wind gets cool. Then we'll go into this house of yours and—"

She stopped and looked up at him. "The rest of the dream belongs to me, Red Flanagan."

"They call me a dreamer, too, lady. Shall I finish the story for you?"

Tanya shook her head. "We've talked long enough. Too long. Bring the *Wanderer* about or you'll have her within range of that gun!"

She looked up at him, waiting for the wheel to turn. Red's hands held it steady. Tanya's eyes grew worried.

"Come about, Red! You've found the island; this is it! Don't you believe me?"

"Devil a bit, I do," he laughed. "Your words are sweet and I love the sound of them, Tanya; but believe them? I'd as soon believe Red Flanagan!"

"But why would I lie about this?"

"Merely to keep in practice, perhaps," he said. "Or then, it might be that you'd enjoy watching the look on me face when I'd sent the Navy on a wild goose chase to shell an island that was owned by the gulls.

"'Twould be a cut trick, Tanya. And all the while your German friends would be building their base on some other island, and perhaps getting ready to use it."

"You think I'd do that?"

"I know you would."

Tanya laughed. "You know me too well, I'm afraid. But stop being stubborn and use your mind. You're still out of range of that three-inch gun, so drop the hook and wait until morning. As soon as its light I'll prove what I say is the truth."

"How?"

"A pair of glasses will do the trick. Through them you'll see the changes that have been made in the face of the cliff. They're cleverly camouflaged, but you've seen the island often enough to spot them."

Red spun the wheel and called for the crew. He brought the *Wanderer* sharp about and ordered the anchor down.

Mark came on deck to help with the work and Connie followed to question Flanagan. She looked at Tanya and tilted her nose, then seated herself on a hatch.

The sails came down and the lines were snugged; and within twenty minutes the schooner was tidy.

"Four-hour watches till morning," said Red. "I'll stand the first and you take the next, Mark. Come dawn and we'll know the answer."

(To be concluded next week)

Looking Ahead!

MIDNIGHT TRAIN

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